Issues in Social Media for the Arts 2019
Blueskying a Social Media Platform for the Arts

Hosted by
the Social Media Narratives Class
Art and Technology Studies
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Facebook and Google Groups, November 7-12

Google Docs Transcript: George Fifield

 Social Media and the Arts

George Fifield

I never had much truck with social media although I had to maintain a professional presence on much of it. I was an early explorer of the internet. When the world wide web came along, I had an early AOL account but ignored it to explore the ungated parts of the web and am still shocked to find out all the social media groups that cropped since Facebook, that I have never been a part of.

My first internet social media experience was Usenet. It really was like a giant bookstore that one could serendipitously discover all sorts of thing of interest.

Judy Malloy
1:45 PM Nov 10

Hi George,

Welcome to the Issues in Social Media for the Arts Panel!

I am reminded -- as I work on reconstructing the BASIC version of its name was Penelope -- that in 1993. a show you curated at The Space in Boston, was one of the first places the Eastgate version of this work was exhibited! Twenty-six years later, exhibiting AR projects as public art, you continue at forefront of new media exhibition!

Here is George's bio:
George Fifield is the founding director of Boston Cyberarts Inc., a nonprofit arts organization, which programs numerous art and technology projects, including Art on the Marquee on a large public LED screen in front of the South Boston Convention Center, and running the Boston Cyberarts Gallery in Jamaica Plain. The Boston Cyberarts Festival (1999-2011) was an international biennial Festival of artists working in new technologies involves exhibitions of visual arts; music, dance, and theatrical performances; film and video presentations and symposia throughout Greater Boston. He is an independent curator of New Media with numerous projects here and abroad. For thirteen years until 2006, Fifield was Curator of New Media at the DeCordova Sculpture park and Museum in Lincoln, MA. He was executive co-producer for The Electronic Canvas, an hour-long documentary on the history of the media arts that aired on PBS in 2000. Fifield writes on a variety of media, technology and art topics for numerous publications. In 2006, the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) Boston Chapter honored Fifield with the First Annual Special Award for Distinguished Contribution to the Arts Community. In 2007 the Boston Cyberarts Festival was the recipient of the Commonwealth Award in the category of Creative Economy.

Here for example is the beginning of the FAQ for the Usenet group *Alt.Magic* from 1995.

"alt.magic is a public newsgroup with an estimated readership of 41,000+
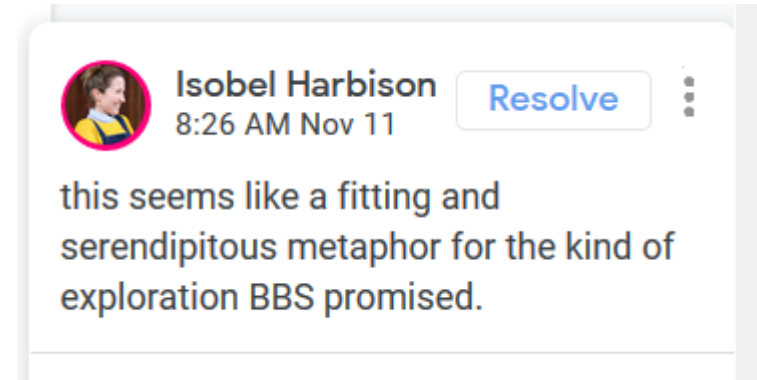ALL postings should be made with this in mind.

Q) What is the purpose of this group?
A) This group is for the discussion of magic as entertainment, including but not limited to close-up, sleight of hand, platform, stage, and illusion magic. For discussions of pagan, occult, and spiritual magic try alt.magick (note the "k"), alt.paranormal, alt.divination, or alt.pagan. There are also alt.skeptic, alt.hypnosis, and alt.paranormal for other non-magic discussions. It is also not for discussing Magic the card game...."

Another place we I spent way too much time was a dial-up BBS, (Bulletin Board System) called the *Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link,* normally shortened to *The WELL.* A problem was that it was it was based in San Francisco and I was in Boston. The long distance phone charges (remember them) were killer. But it was here I first found out about Patrick O'Brian's novels, for example.

There was much I missed. I wish I had been aware of the net art site, *The Thing,* started as a BBS in Cologne by Wolfgang Staehle in 1991 or the original *äda'web* curated by Benjamin Weil when it went up in May 1995 before the Walker preserved it.

Of course, by this point, I had whole-heartedly bought the "information should be free," Kool-Aid. The WELL's slogan was Steward Brand line, "You Own Your Own Words." But I and most others were fooled by the concept of the "free" web. Facebook figured out as well as all the others that they could be "free," because they could monetized themselves by selling the information we freely gave them.

Isobel Harbison 8:26 AM Nov 11 — Resolve

this seems like a fitting and serendipitous metaphor for the kind of exploration BBS promised.

And then Ning came along. On Ning I could create my own custom social networks. Ning was co-founded by Marc Andreessen and Gina Bianchini and launched in October 2005. And until 2010 it was free. By June 2011 there were over 90,000 social websites running on the Ning Platform. So I created a dozen social networks for all the important groups on my life. I had all these separate groups I was a part of, since I was organizing the Boston Cyberarts Festival then. And here I learned my greatest social network lesson. Out of all these social networks I built only one ever took off. Everyone I invited to the others ignored it. Or they joined for a few posts and never came back.

Wayne P. Tate
3:57 PM Nov 10

Hi George!

Welcome to the Issues in Social Media for the Arts Panel! Thanks for joining us! I really found your statement enlightening. My first experiences with the internet was as a young child exploring online games that people made and exploring several very early on social media websites such as xanga and myspace. These early ages of social media as smaller-scale social networking sites are wildly different in my later experience growing up with the expansion and development of Facebook, Instagram, and other networks. The way you speak on the ways in which our "free" voice and words are given freely to Facebook to be sold as data was phrased in a way that I had never really considered before. I really appreciated reading that as a young artist who continues to feel entrapped in these hyper-capitalist digital media spaces where our right to our content and data is theoretically our own, but legally and ethically perhaps not.

Isobel Harbison
8:27 AM Nov 11

I agree, this is a fascinating account of alternative social media platforms.

Building community was a great deal harder than I thought it would be. What is the secret for that? I think before a new social network for the arts comes along, the secret of building community should be addressed. One focused art community to look at is NEW-MEDIA-CURATING or CRUMB (Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss.) It is a social media site for curators of new media founded by Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook in England. It has been a huge success in attacking a loyal community of participants.

Adriene Jenik
9:35 AM Nov 11

great observation and question.

Deanne Achong
12:09 PM Nov 11

(Side note: I'm supposed to be a "techie" and yet I find it challenging navigating the google docs,:) So I am selecting another line, rather than the pre-selected highlight to comment on.) This is an excellent question - "The secret of building community" and of course that addresses the larger question of that there is no single community, therefore no one platform. I also think there's this question of fatigue. I have been in and out of so many e-list groups, so many apps, that after a while, it's just too much to track. Which is why I was musing upon a solution that would allow tools for silence:)

Judy Malloy
1:58 PM Nov 12

Building community is an important issue. But what will work is not always predictable.

In 1986, on Art Com Electronic Network on the Well, we built community with interactive content and with the excitement of meeting colleagues in a new field. In 1989, when Leonardo went online, via ISAST and the Leonardo journal, there was already an existing community. and we used the Leonardo journal to attract members to the online environment. Arts Wire began with the offline community that formed at the Orcas Island Conference, but as the platform grew, it was often a one-on-one process of staff working with artists and arts organizations.

Looking at commercial platforms, Chris DeWolfe and Tom Anderson brought musicians to MySpace by showing up in person in places like the Viper Room. Conversely, Twitter grew when tweets dominated the hallway screens at the South by Southwest (SxSW) film/media conference.

So, yes building community for a new social media platform is not easy. but it can be done!