

Sharing Stories of Faith in Media Culture: Web 2.0 promises and contradictions

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Introduction:

Let me begin by noting that I am a Roman Catholic layperson who teaches full time in practical theology and religious education at a Lutheran seminary in the middle west of the US. The challenges that I face within theological education and the research that I do in the service of that arena are focused on the tensions and conflicting dynamics of religious experience and religious identity formation within media cultures. Perhaps my biggest professional challenge has to do with helping specific people to develop specific religious competence in a world of many religions and many cultures. Digital media make the definition of what “religious competence” is, very complicated, and they also make it immediately obvious that Christianity is only one option amongst many.

While in the past it might have been possible in my context to believe that Christianity is the only true way to God, now we might venture that claim as an assertion, but it is clearly no longer a “given,” a way of life that is assumed and not questioned. Religious educators live, learn and lead in a world in which “dialogues in diversity” are at the core of our being, not simply a pretty bumper sticker. There is no way to live in this world and *not* be aware that there are multiple religions. I would go several steps further: there is no legitimate way to be a Christian in the very specific communities within which I live and teach, and not know how to be a good dialogue partner with other people of faith from religions beyond Christianity.

But what do I mean when I say that?

Let me give you a concrete example. Eboo Patel is the executive director of the Interfaith Youth Corps, based in Chicago. Recently, at a talk in the Twin Cities, he noted a headline -- “Muslim extremist murders Christian pilgrim” – and pointed out that most people read that headline as Muslim | Christian. Patel believes that people need to start reading that line extremist | pilgrim. “If we read the line Muslims against Christians...” said Patel. “We are all going to be lost.”¹ I would note that the opposite is true as well, for it could just as easily been the headline “Christian extremist murders Muslim pilgrim.”

¹ <http://pushthefuture.wordpress.com/2008/06/17/youth-religious-pluralism-ebboo-patel/>

Religious education – at least in my context -- involves shaping people for community, introducing them to the ways of the community, and helping them to claim an identity within that community. Yet any such community is already embedded in multiple other communities. We speak, within my seminary, about helping our students to bridge the “Sunday/Monday divide” – by which we mean that religious practice needs to be about far more than Sunday morning worship. If, in that context, we educate for exclusive, extremist identity then we are creating major problems. If we educate for open, searching identity on the other hand – that of a pilgrim, a seeker on a journey – we are instead participating in God’s creation.

This shift in how we think about, prepare for, educate in, and nurture beyond specific Christian identity is thus the focus of my work, and in this context I want to talk about how that process is embedded in media cultures, and how that embeddedness carries new opportunities, as well as old dilemmas.

ICT and the flattening of authority

The first step in this story is to talk about some of the ways in which key elements of religious identity construction, of religious formation, are changing in the wake of the impact of new digital tools. Let me list just three: authority, authenticity, agency.

That ICT (internet communication technologies) contribute to a flattening of authority structures is a fairly straightforward claim, and one that has been echoed recently in a variety of publications. Perhaps the most vivid example I could share from within the US Roman Catholic church can be found in Clay Shirky’s book *Here Comes Everybody*. In Chapter Six of that book Shirky tells the story of two separate waves of outrage over child sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic church in Boston. In the first wave, in the early 1990’s, the outcry did not spread widely, and Cardinal Law – the presiding bishop at that time – could ignore it. By 2002, however, when the next wave of outrage erupted, new tools – online newspapers, email, and social networking to name just three – resulted in sustained and tangible opposition which eventually led to Cardinal Law leaving Boston for good. Shirky’s argument – one for which I could provide numerous additional examples from other contexts – describes the ways in which these digital tools flattened authority structures, and created the possibility of coordinated opposition.²

The Roman Catholic church is a very visibly hierarchical church, and its documentary polity makes these tools particularly effective, but similar stories could be told in other religious contexts. What is happening politically with young evangelicals in the US would be another concrete example, where previous generations of evangelicals looked to the specific, almost charismatic authority of certain leaders, and now younger evangelicals are building a variety of looser, more organic institutions using web-based tools.³

² Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (Penguin Press, 1008).

³ A good example here is Barry Taylor’s *Entertainment Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

These tools carry with them the authority of the environments within which they function, and much of that authority rests in what certain commentators have called the “authenticity of experience.” Contrary to some claims that the web is a disembodied context, David Weinberger notes:

What is the greatest betrayer of a lack of authenticity? A voice without affect, without passion: a computer program. The knowledge worth listening to – that is worth developing together – comes from bodies, for only bodies (as far as we can tell) are capable of passionate attention, and only embodied creatures, their brains and sinews swaddled in fat and covered with skin, can write the truth in a way worth reading. The bodiless Web is fat with embodied knowledge that could only come from the particular people – smart, wise, opinionated, funny, provocative, outrageous, interestingly wrong – to whom we’re listening. Indeed, that’s why we’re listening.⁴

There is a growing recognition within various parts of the Christian community⁵ that this concern for authenticity, far from being a negligible or trivial claim is indeed one of the more pressing challenges facing churches. Ask a professor of Christian worship what constitutes “authentic worship” and they will likely give you a nuanced and lengthy response, some significant portion of which will depend upon the appropriate and proper utilization of specific ritual elements. Ask a layperson what constitutes “authentic worship,” and you will elicit a vast array of responses, often the common element being some kind of affective dynamic.

The further and further we venture into a world such as this one, with its multiple digital tools, many of which now found in miniature form in handheld devices such as the iPhone and other versions of mobile computing, the more people of faith within Christian contexts (and I would venture to speculate, other religious contexts as well), will desire, search for, and even need to find, ways to inscribe their authenticity using those tools. One key to that performance is to recognize the shared and participatory nature of cultural production.

As Sheila Greeve Davaney notes:

‘the people’ are not just passive consumers or meaning, values, and practices devised by the powerful. They are the producers of culture on multiple levels, including through their resistance to elites, their creative appropriation and reconfiguration of the cultural productions of the powerful, and, not the least, through the creation of cultural meanings, practices and identities that are their own. In all this, popular culture has emerged no longer as that to be disdained or overcome but as the domain of creative cultural contestation and construction.⁶

⁴ David Weinberger, *Small Pieces, Loosely Joined: A Unified Theory of the Web* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Press, 2002) p. 145.

⁵ Let me note that when I use the terminology “the Christian community” it is more for convenience than anything else, as there are a vast array of Christian communities, many of whom would not necessarily recognize each other as being part of the same community, no matter how broadly construed.

⁶ Sheila Greeve Davaney, “Theology and the turn to cultural analysis,” in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Culture Analysis*, Brown, D., Davaney, S., and Tanner, K. eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 6.

It is this recognition of production and performance that has given rise to a fertile new arena of theological study, that of the “practices” mode within practical theology. It is also the nub of the third element I’d lift up here, that of “agency” within religious practice.

But while much of the “practices” literature is particularly compelling in its voicing of theological engagement with daily life within the US context it has often neglected to interrogate media culture practices, a rather striking omission. Other theologians from around the world, on the other hand, have ventured into that set of practices in interesting ways, to which I will return later in this paper.

For now, note that authority, authenticity and agency are shifting, and that agency in particular can be found, and is lent urgency, via the new digital tools.

Web 2.0 and social media

The collaborative opportunities that Web 2.0 tools make possible – particularly those of social media – provide multiple means for people to communicate and organize. The best description of social media that I know of is a little piece of video that describes them in terms of ice cream sales.⁷ In a print essay such as this I can only reference the video, but at the heart of its argument is the depiction of the impact of individual home ice cream makers on a village whose primary industry was an ice cream factory. The one factory dominated production, and in doing so produced only three flavors. The advent of individual home ice cream makers led to a flourishing of different flavors, many of which only one or two people found palatable (think pickle ice cream), while others found small and loyal markets. Eventually the townspeople discover ways to share their individual opinions on specific flavors, and new communities emerge around them, with membership shifting such that many people find themselves active in multiple, loosely joined affiliations.

The video makes its argument using the example of ice cream, but it’s fairly easy for me to draw analogies to processes such as the creation and publication of religious curriculum materials – a central concern in my arena. In the US religious materials used to be produced by big, central church publishing houses – some of which still exist. Local churches were a kind of captive market, and purchased the materials produced by those institutions, whether or not the materials worked well locally, were in the languages necessary, represented people well, and so on. Now all of that has begun to change. Just about every church is creating their own materials to some extent, and recently new digital tools have made it possible for people to share them widely.

Imagine the confusion and apprehension of the large publishing houses – most of which are arms of national denominations. How could these materials be theologically appropriate? How can local churches shun their officially approved materials in favor of

⁷ Available via YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpIOCIX1jPE>

others? And perhaps more deeply but more quietly, how will we survive if we no longer have a captive market?

On the one hand, these concerns could be heard/read as the concerns of a dying industry, particularly common to print publishing. But on the other hand, it has been the publishing arms of the national denominations that have traditionally supported religious educators in a variety of ways, not simply by writing curriculum, but also through training, networking, and other forms of institutional support. Increasingly a wide group of pastoral leaders (religious educators and pastors among them) are also raising questions about the theological and process content of locally produced materials. What kinds of options exist to mitigate or manage these concerns? Are there processes to reinscribe authority in way that do not violate the authenticity or agency of local church folk?

Similar kinds of issues were once raised by the advent of television, and at the time religious communities tended towards one of two responses: either to wholeheartedly embrace the new medium, simply “porting over” their existing content, or to work at “inoculating” people against content in the new medium. Think “Christian broadcasting” and “media literacy” (in the older forms of it). Neither response was particularly helpful in the long run, but both are still being tried today in relation to Web 2.0 media. Another option based more organically on the Web2.0 tools, however, is also emerging, with two distinct approaches to the issue of authority – namely, publishing/sharing sites such as GodTube and FeAutor.⁸

Both of these are sites that take advantage of software that makes it possible for people to quite easily upload files, and then for others to find and download files. In other words, the process that used to be managed via a variety of “file transfer protocols” requiring rather arcane knowledge of code, has continued to be streamlined in such a way that anyone who can find a file on their own computer and select it, can likely publish files using these sites and thus making them available widely. Given the ease with which people can manage files in this way, a key question that emerges is who will control what kinds of content is published in a given space. In other words, issues of authority become once again very relevant in architectural terms – that is, in the very structure of the coding of the site – as well as in more general terms. GodTube and FeAutor manage this question very differently.

GodTube.com was, at least in 2007, the “fastest-growing new site on the web” in the US context.⁹ While it appears to share a lot in common with YouTube, in many ways it is very different for it is actually a closed space with a specific set of theological commitments. Every contribution published there is first “vetted” by human beings, who apply an explicit theological policy. Indeed, part of its attraction is that it is a “safe” space for Christians – by which it means a space in which Christians do not need to encounter conflicting interpretations, plausible challenges to their identity, or pretty much anything

⁸ www.godtube.com, www.feautor.org

⁹ As reported by comScore (<http://www.physorg.com/news113153071.html>, 11/1/07). Such designations are notoriously unreliable, as web metrics are still being figured out. Nevertheless, this site clearly is growing rapidly enough that various news organizations are taking note.

else that might contradict a very specific understanding of Christianity. This site manages the question of authority by offering a theological statement, and a team of editors who ensure that any content published is congruent with that statement.

FeAutor.org, on the other hand, is a relatively new site that few people have found and few are using yet (at last check, there were only 132 users registered, although people have registered to contribute to the site from 23 different countries). Like GodTube.com, FeAutor.org accepts video contributions, but it also accepts contributions in a variety of other formats – text files, powerpoint files, audio files, software, and so on. Unlike GodTube, FeAutor automatically publishes any contribution offered – reserving only the right to take down entries that violate specific laws. FeAutor also very explicitly attaches a Creative Commons license to each contribution published there.

Let me pause for a moment here and explain that *Creative Commons* licenses are legal licenses that function within existing copyright regimes, while automatically granting certain kinds of uses. They exist in a variety of formulations along the spectrum between “all rights reserved” (what we traditionally have understood as copyright) and the public domain (where no rights are reserved). They are also electronically linked, so that it is a trivial task to attach one to a given piece of work and in doing so, also make the piece more easily accessible to net-wide search mechanisms. These licenses are not as radical as the work that is currently being done on free culture (free as in “freedom,” not as in “free beer”), but they do create a proactive mechanism within existing law for artists to promote the sharing of their materials. In that way they support a notion of agency that is both closely linked with a creative artist’s individual creativity, but which also recognizes the integral element of community, of audience, of sharing that is bound up with creation. FeAutor – in choosing to use these licenses – is very deliberately seeking to promote such collaboration, an intent further evidenced by the use of tagging folksonomies, review mechanisms and other elements of the site’s architecture.

To reiterate: while in some ways people believe these sites to be similar, their architecture is actually very different, with the first one seeking to implement a closed space with every entry viewed by a human person and judged as to whether or not it is appropriate to publish, and the second seeking to build a collaborative and open space of sharing. These are clearly structural decisions the sites’ creators have made, which are then implemented in the software coding.¹⁰ But they are also decisions that carry clear theological implications. I believe that the theological distinctions between these two sites are even more dramatic and distinctive than their technical specs, and that while GodTube not only lends itself to more fundamentalist forms of identity-construction, it also vitiates Christian witness; while the second, although it is far from perfect, has at least the potential to breathe fresh life into Christian theology, and to support pilgrims on their journeys.

¹⁰ Let me note, by way of disclaimer, that I have been very involved with the group of volunteers across the Americas that are developing FeAutor.

Practical theology and Christian identity

Let me turn now to these claims, which I make not to assert that they are definitive or prescriptive for people beyond Christian community, but rather as an example of the ways in which Christian theology is challenged by digital technologies and can be renewed by them.

This is a fairly specialized form of inquiry, and an all too often abstract form of discourse. All that I can do in this short paper is to begin to lay out more generally the issues, with footnoting sufficient, I hope, to lead you to the longer arguments.

Let me begin by noting that the most recent decade of Christian theological research has been particularly rich in the arena known as “practical theology” or the theology that grows out of and is deeply embedded in human practices. As Christian Scharen notes, this is a theology which must “develop, sustain and legitimize reflection on Christian faith not simply as a set of propositions to believe, commandments to obey, or rituals to perform, but as an orienting force that impacts every aspect of daily life.”¹¹

As such, practical theology is particularly interested in the ways in which popular *practices* – including those shaped by media cultures – shed light on faith, and the God who draws human beings into relationship through faith. This recent flowering has in turn focused attention on the ways in which Christians have contributed to culture, and in particular on the frequent attempts on the parts of many Christians to paint a “bold dividing line between the sinful world and the holy church, between saved persons and those who are lost.”¹²

Much ink has been spilled on describing the vast Christian publishing and broadcasting industries in sociological and media studies ways, but much less has appeared on what I would argue is the more potent theological dilemma such industries raise. That is, there has been much admiration for the concrete strength and financial and political role of such industries, but few have raised their voices in critique of a theological challenge at their heart: that is, their understanding of sin and grace. Here again Christian Scharen is instructive:

The view of sin such a position depends upon suggests that sin manifests itself in sinful acts, acts that a Christian does not commit because of the gift of grace. In order to seek a context in which one can live this new life of holiness, such Christians eschew the world and create their own subculture with versions of ‘worldly’ activities now baptized by explicit Christian values. One can easily see the whole world of contemporary Christian music as such a reaction: the baptized can still embrace the sound of electric guitars, but with wholesome lyrics that teach of Christ and his benefits. This view totters on the edge of making the claim, ‘You are saved by grace, now go and prove it.’ With this view comes the ever present danger of ‘backsliding’ into the life of sin and the sinful acts that accompany it.¹³

¹¹ Christian Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life: A Vision for Pastoral Leadership* (Eerdmans, 2008) 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 102.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 102-103.

Further

The problem is that in this view, too much depends on our ability, and too little on the power of evil and of God. On the one hand, if sins are merely acts, we don't take proper notice of the basic fault of human life that the Reformers of the 16th century called *incurvatus in se* or the self curved in on itself. Misunderstanding the deeply sinful nature of our human existence then allows an overly optimistic sense of how easily such a fault can be overcome simply by trying to hide from bad things. On the other hand, if grace merely gives Christians the power to act rightly, then it limits grace to both a sort of shallow 'motivation for doing good' and to a help for Christians alone.¹⁴

Let me see if I can make this point even more clearly: the notion that we, as Christians, ought to be producing and living in Christian enclosures oriented to "safe" Christian materials not only denies a deeply Christian understanding of the sinful nature of human being itself – a sinfulness we confess Christ died to redeem us from – but it also denies the transcendence of God, and God's very ability to create and transform the world. The move towards a Christian identity based on exclusivity, a move that all too easily becomes extremism, ultimately is a move that denies God, and God's presence in Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Christian Scharen again:

The idea is not that we simply baptize popular culture as filled with God; some of it is truly awful. Rather, we should simply trust that God's grace is broad enough to be working in the world, in and through arts and culture, and our ability to see the depth present there should allow us to sit and listen fully, deeply, with a generous spirit. C. S. Lewis put it this way: 'The first demand of any world of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way...

Finding the connections between faith, art, and culture comes not from narrowing, but from expanding and deepening, our engagement with worlds beyond our own.¹⁵

This is why a site like GodTube is so pernicious, and a site like FeAutor holds out such hope. It is also why I made the claim at the beginning of this paper that the digital tools of a Web 2.0 world hold enormous potential for renewing and refreshing faith.

Of course, there are ways to use materials found at GodTube to open people up, to expand and deepen engagement with worlds beyond our own, and no doubt ways to use materials from the FeAutor site to opposite effect. That is why I want to make the final element of my argument, which is also a theological one: namely, Christians confess a Trinitarian God – that is, a God who is at one and the same time Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, three in one -- and in doing so we must take very seriously the deeply relational and communicative elements of such a description, such a confession, of God. The very ways in which we look, in which we listen, in which we receive, in which we "get ourselves out of the way" – to use C. S. Lewis's words – are constitutive of

¹⁴ Ibid., 103.

¹⁵ Ibid., 104-105.

theology, and if we are to live into the 21st world of digital technologies in ways that live and breath and move with God we must do so theologically. It is these claims that also, finally, come fully to the forefront in engaging dialogue and diversity.

TCI and communicative theology

The best articulation I have found of a way of doing theology that is sensitive both to the challenges of rapid change in digital cultures, and to the necessity of keeping a pilgrim stance, comes from the work of a group of theologians who are doing what they call “communicative theology.” This is a form of theology that begins from a clear affirmation that the Christian God, the God that those of us who claim to be Christians confess, is a Trinitarian God who is deeply relational and communicative *in Godself*.

Communicative theology argues that the *process* by which, or in which, one does theology is both intimately and integrally connected to the content and substance of that theology. Communicative theologians are playing with, learning with, living into a process that they have borrowed from educators that is entitled “theme-centered interaction” or “TCI.”

Here again, there is more to be said about TCI and communicative theology than can be articulated in a short paper. Here let me simply note a very few elements of communicative theology, a “teaser” if you will, pointing to their work.

To begin with, communicative theology is a

a method where the source of its assertions can be identified... there is a critical correlation between content and form in communicative theology, that is highly relevant to context as well...

form, medium, and content of communication must not be separated...

theology is a critical reflection on and understanding of the communication event... there are processes of communication that draw on the skills of everyone, where expertise remote from real life has no place, but where people cooperate in striving to find a theological practice that answers the needs of the community...

communicative theology can be understood as a process that directs its ‘gaze’ – in the sense of theological hermeneutics – toward the communication event... [it is] shared and participatory...¹⁶

There are some important implications to such a process, among them:

moving from ‘assent to truth’ to entrusting oneself to God’s ‘communicatio’ and ‘communio’¹⁷

¹⁶ Matthias Schärer and Bernd Jochen Hilberath, *The Practice of Communicative Theology: An Introduction to a New Theological Culture* (Crossroad, 2008) 20-23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

there is a dynamic process engaged in TCI that moves from the I, the We, and the It to form a triangle encompassed in a Globe... the individual subjects – the “I” factor – participate in the We and are oriented toward faith (It) as their response to the communication of God in the ambivalent situation marked by the Globe...¹⁸

the authentic *theological* places where God shows God’s self to human beings in history include not only their biographies but also their interaction and communication...¹⁹

thus the processes shaped towards eliciting and identifying this revelation must of necessity be open, communicative and oriented towards the borders, the edges, the spaces in which disturbance, perplexity and conflict arise...²⁰

There is far more that could – and should – be said about the process of communicative theology. While these theologians are articulating a very specific way of doing theology that relies on TCI, their underlying assumptions have resonance with a number of differing theologies over the years and around the globe. They mention Gustavo Gutierrez as one such theologian, and I would note that Jolyon Mitchell’s recent book on media violence is another excellent contribution to this way of doing theology.

These implications map beautifully onto the structures of communication that Web 2.0 tools make possible. Sherry Turkle wrote once that postmodern theories didn’t make much sense to her students until she could show them how the theories were well illustrated by the experiences her students were having with MUD’s and MOO’s online, with massively multi-player role playing games, and so on. So, too, communicative theology and modern digital discourses.

As long as my students – who, it is important to note, are training to be pastors and lay pastoral leaders -- stay caught up in images of religious education that are bound into hierarchically oriented notions of teaching and learning, as long as they seek to create “safe” Christian spaces for their youth to inhabit, rather than imagining what is possible through collaboration and participation, they can’t quite “get” what communicative theology is about. But consider the kinds of interactions that FeAutor, as just one example, makes possible.

Here is a space where people are free to share, invited and welcomed even, to share their creative articulations of where and how and why they are finding God. They are invited to listen to and to look at other articulations, and in doing so to tag and review them thus participating in a larger conversation. Users of the site can bookmark their favorites using social bookmarking services with which they are familiar in other contexts, and they can “listen in,” even apprentice to, other guides. They can lurk on the site, observing the “edges” if you will, and then they can dive in and create in those spaces.

¹⁸ Ibid., 92.

¹⁹ Ibid., 147.

²⁰ Ibid., 155-156.

I have no idea if this particular space will “catch on” enough to be popular, but its very architecture conveys something of the religious commitments of the people who created it. FeAutor says that it is a “free, multilingual and open space to share religious resources.” It does not specify further what any of those terms mean. The people who created and to date have populated the site with content, are Christians, but the site in no way assumes that one must be a Christian to use it, or that the content published there is Christian. In sharp contrast to GodTube, there is no up front editorial board eyeing every contribution to determine if it matches the theological norms of the site. Instead anyone can publish there, and the minute a contribution is received it is publically available. The only exception to that rule are the pieces that are published through groups, where the group exercises editorial control over what goes up in its name (groups like *RedCreate*, for instance, which has a space on the site).

At the same time, however, there are very clear theological commitments that led to its creation – commitments articulated both in a theological statement that is being worked at the site, as well as the recent document *Love to Share: Intellectual Property Rights, Copyright and Christian Churches* which came out of the World Council of Churches.

I want to close by reiterating the quote from David Weinberger, a thoroughly secular philosopher of the web, that I used early in this paper:

What is the greatest betrayer of a lack of authenticity? A voice without affect, without passion: a computer program. The knowledge worth listening to – that is worth developing together – comes from bodies, for only bodies (as far as we can tell) are capable of passionate attention, and only embodied creatures, their brains and sinews swaddled in fat and covered with skin, can write the truth in a way worth reading. The bodiless Web is fat with embodied knowledge that could only come from the particular people – smart, wise, opinionated, funny, provocative, outrageous, interestingly wrong – to whom we’re listening. Indeed, that’s why we’re listening.²¹

There is a greater claim embedded in such a statement that a communicative theologian would lift up – that is, that the only theology worth attending to is that worth developing together in these bodies which are capable of passionate attention and which are embodied through the creative gift of God, who grants us our creaturely selves.

Web 2.0 tools now make the possibility of such development more globally accessible, and do so in ways unimaginable just a few short years ago. Rather than vitiating our Christian truth claims by hiding in so-called “safe” spaces that render us vulnerable to extremism, we need to move outward as pilgrims on a search for God in the midst of communities and communication, in the midst of differences and tensions, seeking amidst the dynamic dance of the I and the We, the IT which we confess, all the while conscious of the globe in which we dance.

²¹ David Weinberger, *Small Pieces Loosely Joined: A Unified Theory of the Web* (Basic Books, 2002) 145.

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