

Narratives around Bits in Context of the Early City

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“the domestic living room is emerging as a major site at which digitally displaced activities are recombining and re-grounding themselves in the physical world”.... “a reversal of the gradual divorce of the home from the workplace.”

(William J. Mitchell, City of Bits)

The question that the above statement brings forth, for me, is the possibility of similarity between trends seen with the rise of ICTs to the changes that came alongside the emergence of cities. It seems to me an interesting exercise to imagine the contents of *The Long Tail*, *Democratizing Innovation* or *The Wisdom of Crowds*, as they would have been written at the time of Stonehenge (3000 BC onwards), or Mohenjo-Daro (2600 BCE). There is much literature that highlights that the function (and use) of cities is similar in many ways to that of contemporary ICTs (Graham, S 2004). This has led to various accounts of the end of the urban environment as a consequence of emerging information technologies. Most empirical data however points to a strong co-relation between the use (and higher density) of ICTs and urban regions (DiMaggio et al 2001). Re-imagining these bestsellers as historical texts, apart from fulfilling a personal whim, could help to place changes brought about in relation with the growth of the Internet as part of a broader timeline. Also repositioning can help highlight some of the issues packed into the arguments presented.

These comparisons can be critiqued as being over generalizing, but my attempt is not to construct these as a déjà-vu. It is rather a mini thought experiment, and also a trial to understand the pressures under which much ethnographic studies must operate. The review of studies relating to 'Information sharing online' does not include or ask for much qualitative studies in the vein of 'Beamtimes and lifetimes'. Rather it seems to set up variables and hypothesis to be tested for correlations. The readings in the last couple of weeks, however, have led me to think about the use of situated qualitative studies to create opportunities for new categories of questions. For instance, the design of sidewalks for the visually disabled also provide support to people using mobile phones, bringing to focus certain sensory deprivations and providing insightful design directions. The juxtaposition of contemporary bestsellers with ethnographic (or historical) research emphasizes its importance in an active process to uncover policy and design directions.

The operation and dynamics of markets (or exchange structures) is central to most of the ideas presented in the above-mentioned books. Markets can be conceptualized as structures that support people to efficiently obtain an answer to some basic questions – a) is there anyone who wants (needs) what I have b) is there someone who can provide what I need. There is also the need to support the reliability of information provided by buyers and sellers, as is usually provided by reputations. The Long Tail argument rests on the greatly reduced cost of people to exchange information about the questions mentioned above. The

Internet provides a way for easier advertisement of products by circumventing the cost of physical storage, transportation and through wider accessibility (e.g. search). This, coupled with the lowering barriers for production tools in various contexts, allows more groups (individuals, teams or organizations) to participate. Let us try to look at changes brought about by congregations of people from distant places (e.g. all of Europe) at certain market sites.

The market cities offered a much wider audience allowing for specialization and increased profitability for niche products. Historical accounts (Mumford, *The City in History* p.70) reconstructed from archeological and anthropological studies present the market and the road system as central factors for emergence of cities. Urban markets presented visions of infinite availability and low costs (somewhat suggestive of flea markets today). Cities became more permanent as they allowed for easier access to goods, leading in turn to an explosion in the types of products available. The long tail therefore, can only be seen as a shifting phenomenon. The tail celebrated by Chris Anderson could soon expose¹ further market segments not supported by current market models, and need fundamental socio-technological changes (e.g. attention is seen as an important limiting factor). The comparison also highlights that newer socio-economic structures emerged in cities to create different dimensions of standardization than what were seen as important in early markets. The number of products on offer

grew, but massification of the specific products. This is can now be seen in the form of the growth of mass-customization.

Similarly, the examples mentioned in *The Wisdom of Crowds* can be likened to those that would have been observed with the growth of urban settlements. More importantly the growth of cities help bring forth some shortcomings in the Surowiecki's argument. The city radically reduced the costs of coordination and collaboration (through a more anonymous social structure and co-location). This also led to groups, crowds and teams to more strongly coordinate their activities, increased sharing of information that affect the notions of independence and decentralization. In more recent times, similar concepts have been explored in relation to collective action (labor unions, farm organizations by Olson, 1971) and media studies (e.g. ego-casting and narrowcasting by Rosen C 2005).

As part of this exercise, my attempt seems to be to draw focus away from the uniqueness that the authors attribute to contemporary information technologies. They categorize things before today, as different from everything tomorrow with slight assumptions of zeitgeist as the pinnacle of evolution (and invention). There is much prior literature that dwells on understanding on changes in social and economic market structures in relation to technological progress. Evaluating the current changes (pointed out by *The Long Tail*, *Wisdom of Crowds* and *Democratizing Innovation* etc) in isolation to similar changes in the past, leave various holes in the analysis and could lead to the imagining a lack of agency.