

2010

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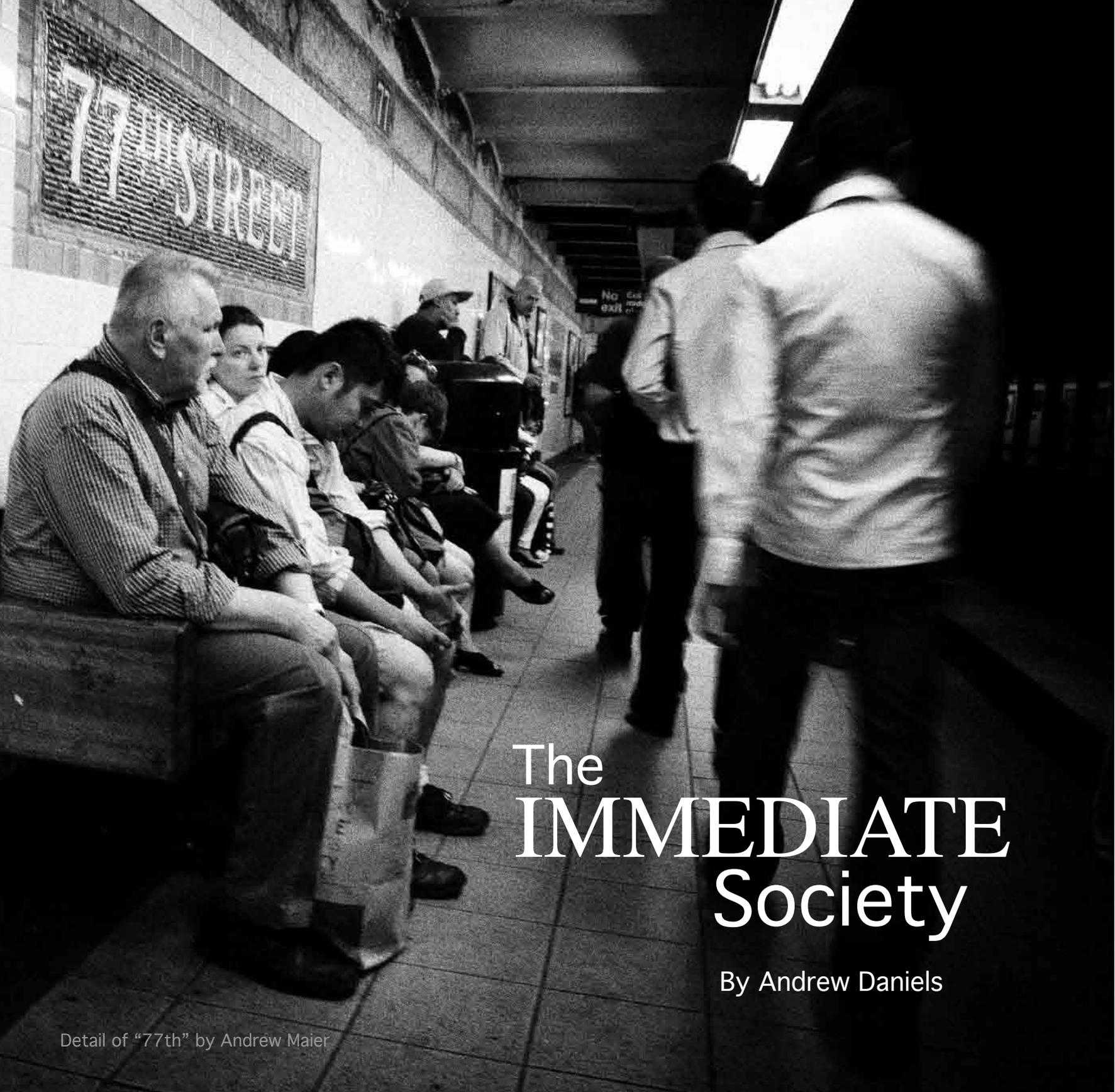
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Recommended Citation

Daniels, Andrew, "The Immediate Society" (2010). *Volume 18 - 2010*. Paper 13.
<http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-18/13>

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The IMMEDIATE Society

By Andrew Daniels

Detail of "77th" by Andrew Maier

In modern American society, people don't just prefer their information exchange and connection with each other to be immediate and constant. They have grown to expect it. Thanks to the ever-expanding nature of technology, media convergence, competition, and basic societal needs, we live in a media ecosystem. We are all producers and consumers of content, and feed off of each other instantaneously. This essay examines how society got to this point, and what it means for the future of communication.

It isn't hard for me to pinpoint the exact moment that I became a changed man. On a July night this past summer, I hurried home from work and found the sleek box waiting for me on my dining room table. It was still wrapped tight in plastic, almost as if to warn me that once I opened it, there was no looking back; I would forever lose my innocence if I proceeded with unwrapping. Wasting no time to think about it, I threw out any moral dilemmas I had as I held the shiny, beautiful new toy in my hands. I was now the proud owner of an iPhone.

In a matter of hours, I could testify firsthand about the wonderful and wonderfully evil product that has revolutionized the world since its inception in 2007. Wonderful because with the device, you essentially have the entire world at your fingertips, and global communication knows no bounds. The phone is wonderfully evil for the exact same reason: because you're able to communicate with others and gain knowledge and information with unparalleled ease, it almost eliminates the need for any other resources,

including human interaction. It happened to me during my first few days with the phone; I hardly had any face-to-face communication with anyone in my honeymoon period, instead relying on the powerful network that lay in my palms for all my basic needs. While I shortly snapped out of my iPhone zombie state and regained a social life, the damage had already been done. My world hasn't been the same since.

The iPhone and other smart devices with similar capabilities present their users with infinite possibilities to acquire information and connect with each other, and whether the social implications of that power are good or bad is to be debated and irrelevant to this discussion. What can't be denied is the power itself. We can take the fundamental appeal of smart phones, along with the Internet and other social media—immediacy—and use it to define the current American society. We're part of a culture where immediacy isn't just preferred, it's expected. We want our media to keep us in the loop twenty-four hours a day, and anything less than up-to-date breaking news isn't good enough. We want to receive 140-character

SMS messages containing information that we can relay to each other instantaneously and expect a reply or response within seconds. That's the kind of media ecosystem we have: one in which we're all producers and consumers of content, and one that finds us feeding off of each other at a rapid pace. The growth of technology and the evolution of several criteria for success in America have led us to this point, and we're never going back.

The Growth of Technology

Without a doubt, the ever-expanding nature of technology is the primary reason we live in an immediate and hyper-connected society. Though I spent the first decade of my life without the Internet and only acquired a personal cell phone within the last five years, it seems downright foreign to think of a time when these accessories weren't necessities. Technological advancements are so commonplace today that it's easy to forget just how primitive life is before the next great development gets introduced. I use smart phones as the most recent example of unprecedented technological change, but we can climb down

the tower to see a history of these developments. One of the first pages in Shirley Biagi's "Media/Impact" is in fact a time frame from 3500 B.C. to today of revolutions in information communications: the first revolution was phonetic writing in 1000 B.C., the second was the invention of movable type in 1455, and the third was the introduction of digital computers that can process, store, and retrieve information in 1951.¹

Though technology is bred from many things—necessity, discovery, and competition, in particular—it's really just another word for evolution. With each new technological advancement throughout history, our media has evolved, and in turn, so has our society. For example, when the printing press was introduced in 1440, it was a partial catalyst for remarkable social change. The press printed books more quickly, made them cheaper to produce and more portable, which meant that people in all classes had a

The events leading up to and following Michael Jackson's sudden death in June unfolded in real time so rapidly on Twitter and Facebook that both social networking sites crashed, well before the news broke on television.

reason to pursue literacy with books being more affordable and more widely available. As a result, increased literacy and the wide spread of information helped lead to the Protestant Reformation, the rise of a market-based economy and the American and French revolutions.² Ever since television evolved from radio and became a commodity for most families in the 1950s, it's transformed daily life, for good and bad: TV has been blamed for everything from declines in literacy to rises in violent crime to trivializing national politics, and praised for giving viewers instant access to world events and uniting audiences amidst national crises.³

The Internet truly became the central technological medium and effectively began to power society at the turn of the twenty-first century. It's impossible to count the ways in which the net has affected everyone, from middle-class citizens to world leaders. Social media like public blogs have triggered political change—from millions of online grassroots supporters working for Barack Obama's U.S. presidential campaign in 2008 to Ohmy-News.com helping elect Roh Moo Hyun as president of South Korea in 2002—in more effective ways than traditional media outlets.⁴

The more instantaneous social media—Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, for example—have turned attention to international affairs. During last summer's Iranian election protests, spectators captured footage of the death of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young Persian woman who was shot and killed in public by militiamen. After being uploaded to the

Internet, the story and footage instantly went viral as users discussed the death on Twitter. Neda became an international martyr for the protests, almost exclusively propagated by regular citizens on Twitter.⁵ The events leading up to and following Michael Jackson's sudden death in June unfolded in real time so rapidly on Twitter and Facebook that both social networking sites crashed, well before the news broke on television. These examples are unique for two reasons: one, because citizens acted as *producers* of the news in addition to consumers, and two, because the instantaneous spread of news and discussion as a replacement to traditional

media wouldn't have been possible a mere couple of years ago, before the technology of social networking was introduced. This is how our society functions today. It, like the Internet, is a modern feedback system. It works in real time and captures the ideas and realities we can individually offer to each other.⁶ Simply put, it's never been more possible or more exciting to be smack dab in the middle of news.

The Role of Competition

One of the definitive components of the "American dream," and, subsequently, capitalism, is the opportunity and expectancy to beat your competitors. Americans have always adhered to that spirit, and it remains one of the driving factors for the immediate society we live in today. Producers at both ends of the spectrum—the traditional producers (heads of media corporations, networks and publishers) and the "former audience" at the bottom that Dan Gillmor often refers to (amateur citizen journalists)—strive to outdo their competition. That could mean bloggers competing with other bloggers and traditional media for the most up-to-date scoop. In "We The Media," Gillmor says the rules for journalists have changed, thanks to everyone's ability to make the news. Once someone finds out something, he or she can spread the word globally.⁷ Recent Internet conjecture on Tiger Woods' marital affairs led to a flurry of amateur sleuthing, and once these new newsmakers found any tidbits, they spread the news via their blogs or through social networking. It was just one of many cases where new media beat traditional media on a story.

The "old guard" of traditional media—print publications, television networks, publishers, advertisers, etc.—is no stranger to competition. Those producers have had to compete with each other for the same audiences for much of the twentieth century, but ever since the Internet entered the fold, old media have faced a particularly big challenge together against a new common foe. Online

media offer vastly superior functional advantages compared to their traditional counterparts, and can create more direct relationships with consumers for advertisers.⁸ When people stopped reading physical newspapers in favor of free online content, newspapers shifted their efforts to creating and promoting multimedia online. When people stopped reading long-form stories online in favor of receiving 140-character tweets to get their breaking news not long ago, virtually every newspaper created a Twitter account and focused more efforts on social networking. In the last decade, we've gone from preferring immediacy and convenience—choosing to read news online on our laptops instead of waiting to read it the next morning in print—to expecting it to come in quick text messages on our portable phones, only minutes after occurring. An early resistance to change has cost traditional media outlets dearly. Now they're doing everything they can to play catch up, but it might not be enough to survive in a new media world.

The Digital Divide

One of the drawbacks of living in this immediate society is that the "haves" again triumph over the "have-nots." That is, society gives inherent advantages to those who are first; those who have the tools to be good "digital citizens" have a strategic advantage over those who do not.⁹ About twenty-seven percent of all Americans still do not go online, because they can't afford it or they're afraid of it or they don't have access.¹⁰ This gap is referred to as the "digital divide"—the rift between those with and without online access. For the "have-nots," competition is fierce: without access to the Internet and the newest forms of media, these people lack information and computer technology skills, which means there's less likelihood for them of landing a decent job. Those with more information also tend to participate more in democracy, giving them disproportionate sway over elected officials.¹¹ We might see another digital divide independent of socioeco-



"Metro Downtown" by Andrew Maier

omic status in the form of social networking. In this situation, the "haves" (the ones who actively network on sites like Facebook and LinkedIn) trump the "have-nots" (those who have online access but do not participate in social networks) when they find better jobs via better networking.¹² There are obvious implications to living in a society where most people are constantly connected.

Convergence and Direct Advertising

In their 2005 short film *EPIC 2015*, Robin Sloan and Matt Thompson document the recent history of media convergence (i.e. news aggregators, social networking) and proceed to hypothetically predict what state the news media will occupy in the year 2015.¹³ Sloan and Thompson predict a merger in 2008 between Google and Amazon (dubbed "GoogleZon"), which creates an algorithm allowing computers to construct news stories dynamically tailored to each individual user. Then in 2014, Googlezon

unleashes EPIC, the Evolving Personalized Information Construct, which collects and filters media of all types to consumers.¹⁴ We're not exactly at the level of an EPIC in society, but we're not far off. Bloated news aggregators like Google News already exist, which only reaffirms the state of the "now" society in America. If we want our news right now and tailored to our interests and needs, then Google's aggregator takes care of that for us. Advertisers apply the same idea. On sites like Gmail and Facebook, there are built-in advertisements for products that would most likely appeal to us, based on the content of our e-mail or the interests we have listed in our profiles. Some might consider this an invasion of privacy, but it's been proven that younger generations like mine prefer this method of direct advertising.¹⁵ The American government recognizes this, too. In the last presidential campaign, teenagers reported that they had gained knowledge via traditional news deliv-

ery (professional media) but *empowerment* via direct-to-consumer messages (candidate ads and personal Web sites.)¹⁶

Three Basic Needs

Dan Gillmor makes an interesting point in “We The Media” when he says that modern communications have become history’s greatest soapbox, gossip factory, and, in a very real sense, spreader of genuine news.¹⁷

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He cites two excellent examples of bloggers and citizen journalists spreading the word about two completely different situations. In the first instance, a blogger found a flaw in Pepsi bottles that allowed people to see codes in the bottle for free song downloads without having to buy the bottle. He then published the tip and urged readers to exploit the campaign. In the second instance, in 2003, news began to leak in China about the local SARS epidemic, which the government tried to keep under wraps. The news didn’t leak through newspapers or television, but through SMS messages on mobile phones.¹⁸ In my opinion, the spread of this information from the bottom up can be attributed to three social desires: the need for truth (getting the right message out there in the face of corporate or government lies), the need to help others (letting people know of a cool, free opportunity and a serious health risk), and the flawed—but still very human—need to gossip (spreading both stories). Another desire that Gillmor touches on is the need to create, which can definitely

be applied to the free-flow of information that we as amateur producers generate and circulate in our “now” society. I like the term he comes up with to describe the creation of media in new and crucially less expensive ways: “ransom-note media.”¹⁹ Gillmor derives the term from the typographical mish-mash that resulted from people using too many different typefaces in the early days of desktop publishing, but I interpret it as

endearing. Yes, maybe a lack of aesthetics was a drawback to having so much power in the hands of non-professionals, but the creation and movement that followed is what counted. We constantly create new information, however haphazardly, and distribute it to others with hopes of quickly getting the same in return: text messages, tweets, and videos from cellular devices, for example. It’s all part of the cycle of our media ecosystem.

Conclusion

At the time of this writing—December 14, 2009, around 7:30 p.m.—there is a blockbuster trade in Major League Baseball that’s close to completion, pending physicals and final contract negotiations. In the centerpiece of the three-team deal, the Philadelphia Phillies will receive Toronto Blue Jays starting pitcher Roy Halladay, a perennial All Star and former Cy Young Award winner. Even though I’m a die-hard Phillies fan who is beyond ecstatic that the best pitcher in baseball is joining his team, I don’t write of the trade to gloat. Instead, I’d like to use the

circumstances of it as the final example of our immediate society in action.

I was finishing this paper earlier this afternoon when I decided to check my Twitter feed online to catch up with the news I had missed over the previous few hours of the day. The very first status update I saw came courtesy of Andy Martino, Phillies beat writer for the Philadelphia Inquirer, around 2:30 p.m.: “Roy Halladay and agent currently in Philadelphia, multiple sources say.” Positively stunned and jubilant at this shocking news, I quickly scoured Twitter for any other news regarding the team or Halladay by searching for relevant terms like #phillies and #halladay. I was instantly given hundreds of real-time tweets about the potential trade—many of which were retweets circulated within seconds of each other—by everyone from baseball insiders to average fans. I kept refreshing the page as time passed and more information came out, and within an hour the results numbered in the thousands, and “Roy Halladay” and “Cliff Lee” (the Phillies’ pitcher in this trade) were actual trending topics in the late afternoon. I was watching this massive trade unfold in real time through social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, on the bottom tickers of ESPN and MLB Network, and through frantic text messages and eager phone calls. We were all satisfying each other’s needs by updating everyone as soon as we had any new details on the trade. It was a pretty special thing to witness, not just as an excited baseball fan, but also as an active media user.

I end with the trade example to underscore one last time just how powerful our immediate society has quickly become, and how the possibilities for living and functioning in an even more connected way are virtually endless. We’re on the footsteps of the next major revolution in information communications. From this point forward, constant technological growth, increased competition, and the fulfillment of basic needs will continue to attribute to the immediate American society.



Detail of “Metro Station, Paris” by Jessica Bandy