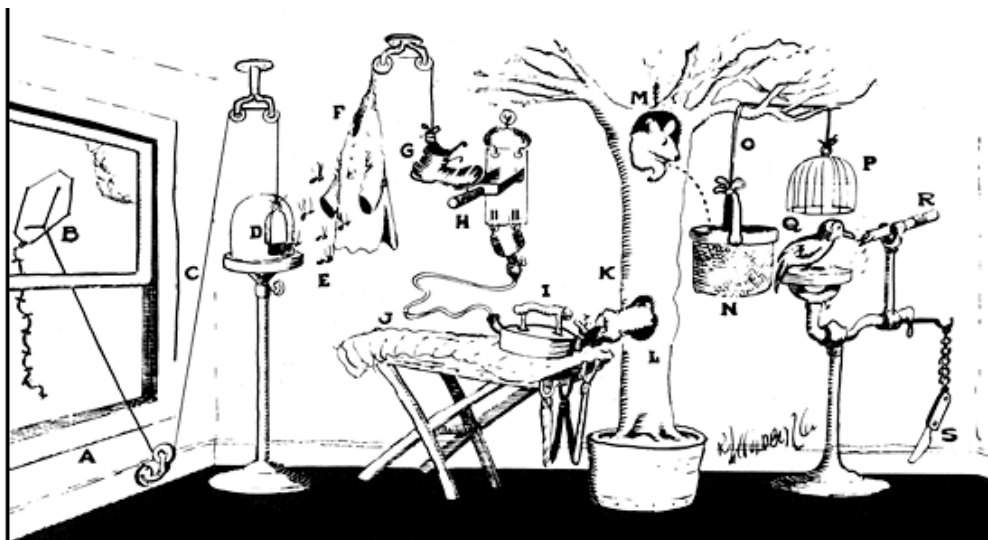


## Technology and Simplicity

A metaphor that I really love with regard to technology is the talking dog metaphor: the fascination with technology being similar to what we might imagine if we were to see a talking dog. In the beginning, we might be fascinated by the fact that there is a dog that can talk—overwhelmed and excited as we imagine all the possibilities of what may come. Once we get used to technology being so new and shiny (the fact that there is a talking dog), we begin to question what the purpose of the technology is and how it might be useful (what the dog is actually saying). After the initial fascination we have with technology, our focus shifts towards what technology is doing, and why. We begin to question the effectiveness and the satisfaction that different technologies can bring into our lives.

Rube Goldberg demonstrates how complicated we can make a pencil sharpener, as seen in his example in the evolution of the “simplified pencil sharpener” (figure 1).<sup>i</sup>



Rube Goldberg gets his think-tank working and evolves the simplified pencil-sharpener.

Open window (A) and fly kite (B). String (C) lifts small door (D) allowing moths (E) to escape and eat red flannel shirt (F). As weight of shirt becomes less, shoe (G) steps on switch (H) which heats electric iron (I) and burns hole in pants (J). Smoke (K) enters hole in tree (L), smoking out opossum (M) which jumps into basket (N), pulling rope (O) and lifting cage (P), allowing woodpecker (Q) to chew wood from pencil (R), exposing lead. Emergency knife (S) is always handy in case opossum or the woodpecker gets sick and can't work.

Online social groups are also at times made to be much more complex than is useful. It is better to have a small crowded bar with people engaged in an activity rather than a huge stadium with three people in the crowd and one person playing a banjo<sup>ii</sup>. Fancy polished marble spaces are stale, lifeless when empty. How much more exciting to be in a space where people gather and connect, and have things to talk about and exchange. The same feeling can be used to describe our experience of some mediated groups. Asset based sites hold much more richness than sites like myspace, where you add friends just to add friends, and every person you forgot you knew from high school requests to have you be added into a neat package of archived friends.<sup>iii</sup>

In this paper, I will study and compare Flickr, MacFilez, and My Barack Obama<sup>iv</sup> with the intention of seeing what works and does not work in mediated groups. I am specifically interested in the level of complexity and simplification, how group focus may change direction over time, and what might contribute to a more useful and engaging group experience that may even lead to physical interaction and exchange. How is it possible to create group experiences that are effective and/or satisfying?

Robert Putnam distinguishes two kinds of social capital: bonding and bridging capital. Bonding capital is what happens when we socialize with people that are already like us, people who share the same age, race, religion, and interests. This is often something common to people who use sites like myspace. However, much of the myspace experience is dyadic, or between pairs. Though personal satisfaction may be gained through comments, there is no effectiveness as part of a larger group. Bridging capital is what happens between cultures, and with people that are not like you. I am investigating how technology can facilitate the formation of bridging capital between people that normally do not share any form of political, religious, or cultural exchange.

Social groups have a number of factors that are important to their development: scale, a diversity of skills, distance, and time.<sup>v</sup> As groups grow, new complexities emerge. With the growth of the Internet, the dislocated group emerges as a new phenomenon: we can now study how groups that do not share the same space may actually come in contact. Are the groups

annotating real-world groups, or can they possibly create entirely new groups? What is the basis for groups that connect and maintain connection, attachment, or emotional investment? I will explore each of these areas in more detail in the following sections.

### **Flickr**

Group participation through Flickr is useful for many reasons. People join “pools” and add their photos and images to these pools. The individual has a number of reasons for personal satisfaction: I know that by adding an image of Iran to the Iran Pool, people will see my photo—which is the whole point (unless, of course, it is set to private). I went out of my way and took some photographs, some that I really love—and what better than to share what you already love with others? The added benefit of Flickr is that you additionally have a place to backup and store your files—there are many individual benefits. One can learn about tips and tricks from other photographers (how did you do that? Also, for some there is a thrill of the voyeurism—we want to see and be seen. There is the attention that your images will have, and that you have as a photographer. There is also the benefit of contributing to a community that you are a part of—rather than simply being a spectator, you can be a part of it. People just like you are adding, uploading, and sharing on the site. What a great place to search other people’s tags for what you are trying to research or learn more about?

On Flickr, the issue of identity is handled by its users in a number of ways. Users are accountable for the images they upload—of course, they may choose anonymity, or to be partially anonymous—these people would never post a picture of themselves with the title or tag, “me” or “at my house with mom”. Some people will have links from their profile page to their personal websites, which links to their phone number, address, or their location of work or business. Some people will have pseudonyms, and some pseudonyms are so specific that one can only imagine if that person has a number of other pseudonyms that they keep hidden as being from the same person or account (for example, “foot\_fetish”, “i\_love\_shoes” or “stocking\_lover”). Is the hypothetical stocking lover also someone who has an anonymous “i\_love\_cooking” pseudonym?

We will never know, unless someone has one account with the groups that they are a part of displayed on their “groups”, or their multiple accounts linked to one another on their profile page.

*Flickr: Diversifying content*

I imagine how Flickr would change if the site diversified its content to include design documents and text files. People would begin to use Flickr for more purposes, and this would destroy Flickr’s power. If too much is happening in one place, things can be confusing. Focus is a good thing. We like to have one place for video, one place for files, one place for messaging, another for photos. A site for file exchange should be a separate site.

*Flickr: More emphasis on the levels of accessibility*

The façade a site maintains has more to do with its content than what it has to say about itself (as seen in the Stickam site, which says it is for professionals and business relationships, yet looks like it is for 12-17 year olds)<sup>vi</sup>. I know that friends of mine from ITP currently will not display images from a night out partying on their Flickr account, because they have their real name on their Flickr account, and/or links to their Flickr account linked from their personal website—this means that they are not using the privacy settings. However, this same friend of mine will post those pictures on Facebook. The reason being how the site feels in terms of accessibility. On Flickr, anyone can see what is not set to the “private” or “only friends and family will see” setting—however, this friend of mine is not using those settings regardless. He is relying on the security of the enclosed network of Facebook, and it’s the fact that his profile is not accessible to strangers. Perhaps Flickr needs to do a better job of marketing this aspect the site. However, here the problem lies in how much one site can do without confusing/losing its audience, as with its diversification it risks being specific and as such, having the same amount of clarity and purpose.

**My Barack Obama**

As of now, the My Barack Obama site looks like a huge technical apparatus that lacks substance and has the feel of an airy, stale public space, begging for people.<sup>vii</sup> Participation may

be useful to users who want to organize fundraising or meetings with other Obama fans. Beyond this element of creating a large social network of fans, I do not really see it as being particularly useful. The agenda for this group is political, and the possibility for the establishment of real-life relationships is present. It feels like a tool for the Obama campaign to gain access for its own purposes. It is a bonding site, rather than a bridging site. From someone's blog:

\$5 to Obama every Friday! Be part of this. Please make a \$5 pledge every Friday. Invite all your friends both near and far, friends on your email list and on Facebook, family, neighbors, everyone, to be a part of this group. We want to demonstrate that there is power in small giving. Contributing \$5 every Friday to help Obama may seem insignificant to you, but collectively Yes We Can make a huge difference in this campaign. Join \$5 Friday For Obama here: [Link](#)

Students for Barack Obama has 1942 members, and there are also groups for people of different religions, sexual preferences, and even people who liked "The Secret" movie. There is a way to learn about the issues, such as Obama's plan to end the Iraq war, where one can download and read relevant speeches. There is also a newsroom, a section on getting to know Barack, and even his wife Michelle—along with a video of who she is. One can learn about what Barack has been doing, where he has been most recently on the "blog", and you can even start your own blog. In addition, there is a link in the "get involved" section of the site where one is directed to [govote.org](#). Some people put their addresses and personal information on their profiles, while others have very simple and bare profiles. I only joined so that I could see what the site was about. There are a large number of people with pictures in their profile, their location, and more.

I feel that this site is very shiny, as in the dog metaphor in the beginning: shiny, open to everyone, anything to anyone. The site seemed to me a good way to bring people with similar interests together (bonding), yet it also has elements of the Rube Goldberg analogy—adding more complexity to things that do not need to be so complicated. Why "teachers for Barack Obama"? Does this group need validation? I wonder if this is actually helping people—and if people get any satisfaction from it. There may be effectiveness in terms of organization for large groups and fundraising, in addition to its ability to provide a concentrated network of Obama enthusiasts for people who want to find, locate, and contact this group of people. I would eliminate the friends

element of the network. I do not see adding someone as a “friend” as a useful element of the site. However, the groups are bit more useful, especially if they have meetings that are not on “cyberspace” (as they call the location for some of the meetings).

### **MacFilez on IRC Chat**

Macfilez is a group on IRC chat<sup>viii</sup>. As one person described the site, it is a place for “witty banter but real caring and love for all users.” It is mainly designed for group (many-to-many) communication in discussion forums called channels, but also allows one-to-one communication and data transfers via private message. The discussion ranges from technical specifications, links for technical advice and help and even personal and detailed discussion between the regular users, or Operators.

This group has a purpose—like Flickr, it is first about the assets: the illegal sharing of files between members—then it is about the people. This group works extremely well—it has a goal, a project, and a central theme. Reading between the lines of bots<sup>ix</sup> displaying what files are available, group members talk about any number of things they feel like—I personally felt intimidated saying anything that would get me booted. From their site rules, it is important to offer assistance, give assistance for people looking for information and files, to show respect and gratitude to offerers, to use smart bots, and to advertise sites that you own and operate. There is also an encouragement to “share any programs you have leeched”.<sup>x</sup>

It is NOT okay to ask for operator status, even with “exaggerated courtesy. Do not even ask in jest, your humor will probably be one sided and welcomed with a swift kick.” Challenging the channel security (or pretending to be another user, since it is so easy to simply pretend that you are—just sign in with their pseudonym) is also not tolerated. I really love how the operators are all moderators, all can kick people off—it seems like they have a true community that is keeping each others backs. I certainly never felt that I was a member, as I was simply a newbie and a visitor, but I sense the love in the group. ASCII art is seriously looked down upon, and their tone is hilarious: “Annoy us and you will be removed”. Ha! They also say not to advertise

other channels or websites. I find their seriousness and manner of writing particularly descriptive and humorous:

- DO NOT ask questions about your programs. We will not be your technical support hotline. If you are having problems contact the product's technical support line or seek help elsewhere online.
- DO NOT repeat yourself; if no one replies, they either don't know or don't care. If you feel the need to repeat yourself to a 'new' crowd, keep the requests to no more than once per 15 minutes. If no one is responding.. take the hint.. Do not use a timer to automatically repeat your request. If you are looking for something then stay alive in the channel and pay attention to those answering you; don't leave requests then go to sleep. Continued annoyance is usually a quick ticket to a vacation.
- DO NOT converse in the public channel in non-english languages or in cryptic text For the most part we are egotistical North American bastards who think English is the only language in the world. Please respect the ability of all to read your text. If you don't want everyone to see what you are saying, don't say it in a public channel.

Capitalization, bold, inverse, underline, or any text styling, is highly frowned upon. It is reserved for specific types of offerer communication. Capitalization and punctuation is “annoying, mindless and unnecessary”. Sites or servers that require login information are not allowed to be advertised. Offerers are not to be “bugged” and one should not “*intervene with channel offering*”. A *channel offering*—this sounds holy. I find this ritualistic notion to be particularly fascinating—I have never felt this degree of emotional investment for a group of people that is entirely mediated. I wonder how the users came up with this list—I can just imagine them creating a wiki of what the rules should be.

Heated arguments about religion, politics, race, color and sex are not to be initiated or participated in, though one can “feel free” to take it into a private chat mode. It is not ok to refer to MacFilez as a room<sup>xi</sup>, announcing a/s/l<sup>xii</sup>, or using annoying signoff messages, to ask for porn, mp3's, or credit card numbers, or to try and “trade” files. “MacFilez is about giving. The more I think about this mediated group, I love them more than all the other ones I looked at. They are so careful of one another. They even do not like for you to complain about an offerbot. Respect and consideration are a major part of this community. Granted there was some teenage boy-like

swearing and silly conversation, there was a group of people that spoke with one another about topics they wanted to talk about. They even mourned the loss a dear friend.

### *Changing MacFilez: I think not*

Due to the sake of its simplicity, I propose not to change anything about this group. I have seen the ramifications of the change through yahoo chat rooms, other types of chat environments. Some are great (skype, gmail chat, etc), but I do not want to corrupt the vigin simplicity of a group that considers their bots with a feeling of holy *channel offerings*. After my analysis of this group, I feel connected to them, I want to know why they like each other, why they are a group, and their respect for one another is something I find to be comforting and whole. The #MacFilez group embodies the simplicity of a pencil sharpener, before it was changed in the Rube Goldberg example (figure 1). It does the trick: send out your files, get other files, meet people in the chat room, talk to them, go to bed, wake up, repeat. What keeps them going back is the fact that they have a purpose—to download files. If they are not going to download files, they may not go on for some time, maybe two weeks (like Tristan), but they inevitably return.

Why do they return?

People return to the MacFilez group because they can get files. This changes the nature of the group—not just for chatting, dating, etc., but for doing exchanging files that people own with one another.

### *How our group worked*

James, Tristan and I worked together the study the MacFilez group. The group was proposed by Tristan, and knowing Tristan helped me to understand the people in the group, and in a sense to respect the group from the start. Knowing Tristan influences me to feel like I like the group, and that I even want to partake in the groups activities. I imagine the people are like Tristan, thoughtful, intelligent, and creative, and tech-savvy intellectuals. We spoke initially about how we would work together. We picked a time to meet, and verified the meeting through email. If we knew we would be late to the meeting we emailed each other. We planned out our ideas, and

sent presentations via email for others in the group to modify and edit. When we could not meet the night before the presentation, we tried to meet on AIM. Two of us spoke on AIM to briefly exchange some thoughts.

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.rube-goldberg.com/>

<sup>ii</sup> Social Facts with Clay Shirky (ITP/NYU). For an assignment looking at and comparing mediated social networks, Dan Phiffer made this comparison while talking about the current state of mybarackobama.com

<sup>iii</sup> That being said, I still have a myspace account. I do not use it much, really, so I am not a good demographic. However, Flickr is a site I like to use, as it is based around something I care about: photographs from everyone I know and don't know, and of course my photos too!

<sup>iv</sup> <http://flickr.com/>; /join #macfilez on irc chat, or <http://macfilez.org>; and <http://www.barackobama.com/>.

<sup>v</sup> Clay Shirky, Social Facts

<sup>vi</sup> <http://stickam.com>

<sup>vii</sup> As of today, the site has this feeling.

<sup>viii</sup> IRC stands for Internet Relay Chat, which is many to many synchronous conferencing

<sup>ix</sup> A "bot" is a computer program that automates the file-sharing task. Because of these bots, the conversation can take place on multiple layers: Bots communicate to the channel what files are available, and people communicate with one another about anything they want.

<sup>x</sup> <http://macfilez.org/>

<sup>xi</sup> I am guilty of this crime.

<sup>xii</sup> a/s/l stands for age, sex, location