

# Genevieve Bell Addresses the Future of the Internet as a Cultural Institution

by Steve Hardin

## ASIS&T 2008

The opening plenary session at this year's ASIS&T Annual Meeting featured Genevieve Bell with a speech that tied directly into the "People Transforming Information – Information Transforming People" theme. Bell, an ethnographer who works for Intel Corporation, was followed by reaction from two more speakers and the audience.



Bell began by noting the Internet is more than just the technology underpinning it. Democracy, transparency and the accessibility of all information are cultural values. URLs, except for those in the United States, contain a reference to their country. This arrangement shows the perception of where the center and the periphery are – views that aren't necessarily shared globally. Bell says that we are standing at a very interesting and important point in time. What it means to talk about the Internet is about to pivot.

At the first pivot point, the Internet moves off PCs and onto other devices such as phones, TVs, GPSs and gaming consoles. As it does, the types of experiences it affords are transformed. You can't really think of immersive experiences on a cell phone screen. People will look for specific information rather than just surfing.

Steve Hardin is associate librarian in the Cunningham Memorial Library at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN 47809. He can be reached by email at [shardin@indstate.edu](mailto:shardin@indstate.edu)



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These changes, she says, are running parallel with people around the world interacting with the web in ways we couldn't imagine a few years ago. She related a story of a Tanzanian woman who doesn't have a PC or even electricity, but who is using the Internet through her son who uses an Internet café.

The second pivot point, she says, is the "end of the Anglosphere." This year, Chinese users of the Internet surpassed the number of American users. Much of the change is occurring in non-English languages. Languages like Mandarin are filled with different shades of meaning than their English equivalents. How will this difference affect searching? And what if the social practice embedded in a language is very different from the social background of your own language?

And then there are different models of connectivity, some with fat pipes and others with narrow pipes. There is more interaction in systems where download speeds are similar to upload speeds. Because it's getting more expensive to have more services, people may not be able to participate as equals. Experiences and transformations will not always be under our control.

And what about government regulation of the Internet? In 1998, Bell says, Indonesia's prime minister found there was a higher mosque density than phone density; so he decided to put Internet access in mosques for better coverage. It's an interesting way to look at access. Also, there are differing governmental agendas for the Internet. Some want to limit access and regulate practices on it.

Bell's final pivot point involves new and old anxieties. There are concerns about privacy, trust, security, and now, reliability. There are also concerns about access, reputation/image, participation, sustainability, responsibility, authenticity, authorship, ownership, surveillance and control, cultural health (digital literacy), dumbing down and distinctiveness. The list of things we need to worry about, she says, is expanding quickly.

Increasingly, there is no single or fixed notion of "the web." There are new interfaces, user paradigms and expectations. How do we make sense of non-users and ex-users? Ex-users have tried the Internet and found it not compelling. Disconnection and switching off are also interesting

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phenomena. Bell concluded by relating a story of visiting her home town in Australia, where the nearest wireless hot spot is 100 kilometers away. No one had a problem with that.

### Reactions

The first reactor was Howard Rheingold, an expert on the social implications of technology and author of *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*. He teaches at the University of California at Berkeley as well as at Stanford.

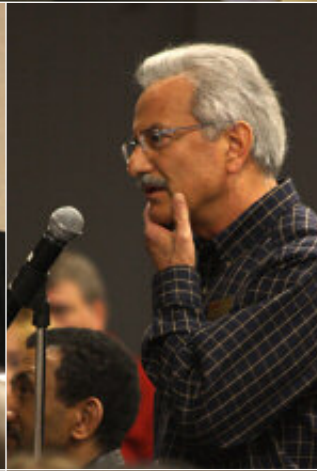
Rheingold began by noting that it is possible that the audience had just heard from the one person who's seen the whole elephant, using the old analogy.

Cultural values are particular, Rheingold said. With things changing as quickly as they are, it's an interesting challenge to imagine how cultural values will be passed along. A great thing about alphabetic literacy is that it's simple to teach, and then you have an assumption that you have a group of people that share a medium, if not a shared understanding. Now you have multiple literacies. What used to be a unified literate community is giving way to multiple literacies and multiple communities. He doesn't know if that's good or bad.

The accidental coexistence of the cathode ray tube and the computer led to computers with visual interfaces. The merger of the telephone, Internet and PC resulted in the lowering of barriers to collective action, for better or worse. We need to teach people how they can find an answer to a question on the web by posing it properly, and how they can learn whether the answer they get is true.

Rheingold concluded by recommending *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* by Maryanne Wolf. The years we spend learning to read are a rewiring of our brain. They affect how we see the world. How are our brains being changed by the Internet?

The second reactor was Andrew Keen, a world-renowned critic of



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today's Internet and author of *The Cult of the Amateur*, whose premise is that the public, open nature of the Internet is hurting us by permitting mob rule over expertise.

Keen disagrees with Rheingold's comment that Bell presented the whole elephant. He maintains she presented only the good-looking half. He agreed with her that the Internet is a philosophical movement. He recommends a book by Fred Turner of Stanford, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*. Keen says Turner suggests the Internet is driven by counter-culture. It's a series of ideological assumptions about technology being liberating. The idea is that we're really free on the Internet – an idea especially well articulated on Second Life. We can invent many things about ourselves there. It's an idealized version of the world.

Keen said his problem is with the other half of the elephant: the Internet is not the real world. The real world is a world of economic exploitation. The individualism of the Internet is incorporated into hostility toward any elephant that looks different, whether seen from the Internet or the real world. So we should beware of digital fascism. Keen says he's not a Luddite, but he's concerned we're not ready for this technology. He's concerned, he concluded, that the Internet is unable to talk to real life.

Bell responded that she wanted her talk to be a provocation. It seems unlikely to her that this ideology is sustainable. Internet users have very different ideas about what the ideal society looks like. We may have conflicts, but the resolutions will look like the conversations we have offline – how could they not? The conditions that created the Internet, as Keen says, won't be the conditions that carry it forward.

Keen responded that the idea of the Internet as a global medium, as a place that brings people together, is powerful and seductive. It's also ideological. There's clearly very little dialog between left and right – it's just an echo chamber, he says.

Bell says the Internet is just the latest in a long line of social and technological innovations that have impacted society. Consider the printing press and the bound book.

Rheingold says he's learned to be careful about deterministic language. The printing press was invented in China several centuries before it appeared



Standing, left to right, Genevieve Bell, Howard Rheingold and Andrew Keen. Seated from left, panel questioners Brenda Dervin and Jose-Marie Griffiths, who also served as session moderator.

in Europe, but various factors determined that it didn't have as great an impact in China. The Internet was not invented to do what it does; the same goes for the telephone.

The session was opened to audience participation. Jenna Hartel of the University of Toronto told Bell that she seemed to look at the Internet through rose-colored glasses. She added that she thinks it is dangerous because life is bigger than the Internet. Bell answered that people should not leave the session feeling the Internet is the most important thing. It's not. She's equally interested in life offline. Keen said when he gives his anti-Internet speeches, teachers come up and thank him. But in reality, for teens, the Internet is becoming their source of information and knowledge. Bell disagreed, saying there are many places where people don't encounter the Internet until they get to the university, if at all. And many questions,

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such as “should I get married on Friday or Tuesday?” don’t have answers on the Internet. Rheingold noted the three speakers were located up on the platform, with most of the audience looking silently up at them. There are some assumptions inherent in that.

Gary Marchionini of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (and ASIS&T president-elect) said he is interested in the speakers’ thoughts about identity. Rheingold says the degree to which we cannot control what’s said about us on the Internet is a problem. Bell says we’ve never had a single identity anyway – who you are at the office is different from who you

are with your spouse, children, friends, etc. And Keen notes we’ll have to learn how to manage all this.

Then the session ended, but it’s safe to say the discussion continues! ■

Genevieve Bell is an ethnographic researcher in Intel’s Digital Home Group.

Howard Rheingold is an author, editor and lecturer at the University of California Berkeley and Stanford University. His website is <http://www.rheingold.com/>

Andrew Keen is a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and host of After TV. He blogs at <http://andrewkeen.typepad.com/>

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