

## **Fibreculture : Internet: theory + criticism + research**

<b>Title</b>	Fibreculture
<b>Subtitle</b>	Internet: theory + criticism + research
<b>Lead-in / Abstract</b>	<p>fibreculture is about critical and speculative interventions in the debate and discussions concerning information technology, the policy that concerns it, the new media for(u)ms it supports and its sustainable deployment towards a more equitable Australia. fibreculture is a forum for the exchange of articles, ideas and arguments on Australian IT policy in a broad, cultural context. it concerns the philosophy and politics of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>:: new media arts</li><li>:: information and creative industries</li><li>:: national strategies for innovation, research and development</li><li>:: education, and</li><li>:: media and culture</li></ul>

**Participants and speakers**

Bruns, Axel (AU)

*this person is also part of the following presentation(s)*

- **Stuff That Matters: The Rise and Rise of Open News**

**Short biography of participants**

fibreculture is a community of critical thinkers, Australasia-wide, engaged with new media and Internet theory and practice. The list (around 800 and growing) includes: theorists, critics, journalists, academics, artists, activists, and all sorts of media producers, designers and other information-workers. We are people who think, read and write about the applications and cultures of new technology.

**Full text**

Speaking for fibreculture, **Axel Bruns** will talk about crossovers between mailing-lists and other discussion/publishing fora. Fibreculture itself is now involved in a number of other projects (including the fc journal, various resources on the Website, a possible art gallery, and outside publishing projects online and in print). Axel is also general editor of M/C - Media and Culture (<http://www.media-culture.org.au/>) with which fc has also collaborated, and will outline the developments occurring on this end, too.

Fibreculture defines itself as a space for critical and speculative interventions in the debate and discussions concerning information technology, the policy that concerns it, the new media for(u)ms it supports and its sustainable deployment towards a more equitable Australasia. It is a forum for the exchange of articles, ideas and arguments on Australasian IT policy in a broad, cultural context. It was founded by **Geert Lovink** and **David Teh** in 2001 and initially developed mainly around its mailing-list, but has developed well beyond that forum in recent times, especially also by organising annual conferences and publishing edited collections of articles in a print book and newspaper, and an online journal.

This should give us reason to shift the theme of this panel slightly. It is no longer appropriate - and most likely it never was - simply to look at mailing-lists in isolation. While they may have played a special role some years ago, when access to list culture was significantly easier than access to the means of building (collaborative) Website spaces, this is no longer the case: especially blogs, but also other collaborative publishing spaces (Slashdot- and Indymedia-style sites, Wikis) are increasingly infiltrating the 'market' for mailing-lists, and sometimes are able to better deliver on the promise of collaborative communities than mailing-lists themselves.

Of course these other forms do have some significantly different features (more permanence of publication, a mix of temporal and spatial structures of organisation as opposed to the purely temporal structure of mailing-lists) which makes one or the other form more appropriate for different uses - so perhaps there is a need to ask 'whither mailing-lists' here. (And then there is also a certain amount of blending between all of them: postings being forwarded and syndicated from one form to the other.) Another way to pose this question is to ask what a specific community is in fact aiming to achieve, and then to select the appropriate mix of communication forms (mailing-lists, blogs, Wikis, content management systems, streaming media, etc.) to suit those aims. Purists might be horrified, but in essence what is necessary here is market research into the needs and wants of prospective users in the community.

Thus, in this environment, operators of online publishing fora of whatever form - from free-form discussion through to refereed academic publications - need to be able to make choices of publishing technologies and philosophies which are appropriate to their own aims and intentions. To do so, they need to be aware of the full range of publishing models available to them, and choose not only one but a combination of technologies which is most effective for their publication. They need to be able to incorporate new models as they emerge (e.g. syndicating new articles using RSS feeds, or delivering mailing-list content via mobile devices), and most fundamentally should not hesitate to network with other publishers in the field.

Indeed, this is where online community culture and marketing approaches still diverge to some extent: even though time is scarce in the 'attention economy', and different discussion and publishing fora are competing for users, nonetheless at least in the community field they still continue to commercialise and cooperate without a fear to lose users to their collaborators. While commercial sites continue to uphold a policy of 'no outside links', major community publishers like Slashdot and Indymedia as well as most mailing-lists provide links to external resources extensively; as Slashdot editor Jeff Bates puts it, for him "driving readers away [through linking] is a myth - if your content is good, they will always come back" (email interview, 2001).

But what becomes difficult amongst this flexibility and interconnection, then (and especially so for mailing-lists without the visual recognisability of Websites), is to

maintain a strong individual identity for any one publication. Where content is increasingly being shared between various Websites and discussion fora, where users move promiscuously between individual sites, and where contributors are active in any number of lists and Websites, what makes one forum distinct from the other? Answers vary, from the technological (the publishing systems used) to the organisational (the extent of moderation and other interventions) to the social (the sense of community which exists around a particular group).

Prospective site or list operators would do well to assess the market in their field, then - there is no need to replicate what is already out there unless significant shortcomings exist, while at the same time in the mix of media forms for an one topic of interest, geographic or other community, gaps may still wait to be filled.

The fibreculture-M/C Journal collaboration makes for a useful case study here: M/C Journal has been a well-known refereed academic publication (with the aim of providing material of interest to a wider, more general audience) in the field of media and cultural studies since 1998, and M/C also runs M/C Reviews, an ongoing series of reviews of events in culture and the media. Its own mailing-list efforts were never significant, however, and except for guest editors its administration remains centred around Brisbane. Fibreculture, on the other hand, spans Australia and New Zealand, and also includes some overseas contributors, but (at the time of the collaboration between both entities) remained mainly focussed on its mailing-list and face-to-face conferences.

Collaboration between the two (by publishing a 'fibre' issue in M/C Journal which was edited by fc members) enabled M/C Journal to tap into fibreculture's pool of subscribers as content contributors and editors, while allowing fibreculture to develop some of the thoughts expressed on the list into fully formed, reviewed and published articles. Both sides profitted without losing their own identity or subscribers. Subsequently, either forum has also continued to expand its own range of offerings - fibreculture has published the first two issues of its own fibreculture journal, while M/C will launch its M/Cyclopedia of New Media in a Wiki format at the end of the year.

Finally, then, it should be noted that of course there is nothing wrong with running only a Website or only a mailing-list. However, as operators of such fora we should be aware that our users are now highly unlikely to spend their time exclusively in our forum, however valuable our information or engaging our discussion. Users and information move quickly now - interesting postings are forwarded from one list to the other (and to Websites), links to articles on one site are featured on another and in postings in mailing-lists. The emergence of RSS syndication, GoogleNews-style news aggregators, and mobile access to email and Websites only speeds up this content exchange further. No one site can capture and hold its audience any more - it is only through maintaining good quality at home and collaborating effectively with the sites next door that we can manage to remain relevant.

#### Related internet addresses

<http://www.faces-l.org>  
<http://www.fibreculture.org>  
<http://www.subtle.net/empyre>