

Rambles in Providence and Online  
by Mark Binder

In Providence, there are two cities, one is tangible and the other is virtual. In the tangible city, people meet and talk, they work face to face and have cups of coffee. In the virtual world people type and chat, they work online and spend hours deleting spam and filtering information.

For years, the virtual world was a science fiction writer's playground. Now it is a part of our city, and it has shifted the landscape.

Local newspapers have lost their edge in retaining subscribers. The free job listings on craigslist are more accurate, up-to-date, and far more useful. Local television programming is almost non-existent. A few local news shows and some public-access cable programs are all that remain.

We order books on Amazon, videos through Netflix, and pay our bills online. Local bricks and mortar book stores, video stores and banks become fewer and fewer.

Young people make videos and computer animation, they create podcasts and play in virtual worlds, meeting people all around the world more easily than they can those who live half a mile away.

Older folk, the kind who are likely to attend a meeting like "A Year in Providence" can sense this shift, but we are lost. Do we keep doing what we've been doing? Gather together, build new buildings, create community?

Do we dig into the virtual world and forge relationships that are not locally dependent?

There must be a middle ground.

Or perhaps there must be a counter-internet-revolution. This neo-luddite movement could be a counterbalance to the shift toward a Starbucks-Verizon-Cheesecake Factory world.

Providence is rich in local creativity. We sell it in our tourist brochures. We have the Coffee Exchange and Trinity Rep and WaterFire, but as the cost of doing business continues to rise, and the cookie-cutter retailers push us into more strip malls and shopping malls, and as WalMarts open and drive prices down, what the hell can we do?

Buy local is a slogan, but can the local community sustain itself on its own? Can it resist the pressures to conform to the rest of the country?

And if we do manage to create great new enterprises here, how can we reach the people who are our neighbors? They aren't reading the newspapers. They're listening to an Internet radio in New Jersey. They're watching vid-clips on YouTube and searching for everything in Google. Everyone seems to be checking their email every ten minutes and hoping for something redemptive.

We live in Providence. We walk the streets and eat in the restaurants.

We live online, plugged into our laptops and cell phones and PDAs.

Can we live off-line and online at the same time? And even if we do how shall we manage the world our children live in and are still creating?

I don't think there's an answer. I think that there can only be a stand.

If we don't, it all becomes just another part of Generic America, where the avatars we use to represent ourselves are more interesting than the faces we see in the mirror. It is no wonder that our politicians are so bland. In the virtual world, anything that passes as real is too easy to dismiss.

The vision is to create an offline world that is as real as the online world. To create a place that is both beautiful and gritty, honest and real. We get to re-invent Providence (or any part of this region) as the world shifts around it.

As they urged in the sixties, "Be Here Now."

Why not. What else are we going to do?

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