Antigonish 2.0: A Way for Higher Ed to Help Save the Web

I remember when the World Wide Web was going to revolutionize everything. I don't mean the techno-centric narrative of automation and *The Jetsons* that bursts repeatedly out of our culture, like a pimple, every generation or so. I mean the web that was going to connect us to each other. The one that was going to allow us all to produce and contribute to a shared world of digital artifacts. One without gatekeepers.

More than a decade after Web 2.0 heralded a connected, participatory world and three decades after Richard Stallman's "GNU Manifesto,"[1] the web has instead become, in far too many of its corners, a fetid stream of ugliness and sensationalism. The web has become media. Attention—not voice or connection—is the currency of media.

Mike Caulfield, director of blended and networked learning at Washington State University, talks about the structures behind the current state of the web in the opening column[2] in this *EDUCAUSE Review* New Horizons series: how the social media model of stream communications amplified decontextualization and reactive response on the web.[3] Technology entrepreneur Anil Dash also laments the web we lost.[4]

Meanwhile, I wander around in a social sphere increasingly calibrated for constant hits of scandal and outrage, and like a frog boiling in a pot, I wonder what to do. Hyperpartisan sites—run on business models that profit from both sides of the binary[5]—fuel an attention economy bent to the purposes of autocratic governance. Facebook algorithms and 24-hour news and platforms that privilege retweets over replies[6] feed out a steady diet of toxic narratives that encourage polarization and anger and lashing out.

If the web was indeed a revolution, it sometimes seems to have entered its Reign of Terror phase. But the resolution doesn't lie in a return to the equivalent of the monarchy—the old gatekeepers of institutional knowledge and power. *That* path leads to another Napoleon. Rather, the same higher education institutions whose hierarchy and gatekeeping the web was supposed to open up and democratize[7] are increasingly necessary partners in building *any* kind of democratic future for society, full stop.

That's because the web is a big part of where we live now. But we neither understand it nor know how to use it for learning. What we need is not a revolution, but a way to develop the local and global literacies needed to foster functional democratic participation. This won't just spontaneously generate out there on online platforms such as Reddit or Instagram. Neither will it happen in classrooms. Or community halls. But if we can find a way to weave all three together into a functional model, maybe there's a possibility.

The model I'm interested in was developed nearly a hundred years ago, on the North Atlantic coast of North America, in a landscape populated with fishing villages and hard-luck mining towns. Called "The Antigonish Movement,"[8] this renowned adult education experiment of the 1920s–1940s based in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, led to the development of local credit unions that still dot the landscape around Maritime Canada. Its vision was as education-focused as it was economic, with an emphasis on building literacy as an avenue toward civic participation. The Antigonish Movement addressed people's poverty and lack of agency by creating collaborative capacity for pushing back on the structures of their disenfranchisement.

I want to try it again. But I want to focus on a different sort of poverty and disenfranchisement: our current, widespread incapacity to deal with our contemporary information ecosystem and what the web has become.[9] The attention economy and the rising specter of "alternative facts" create demographic and ideological divides that operate to keep all of us disenfranchised and disempowered. Antigonish 2.0, therefore, is a community capacity-building project about media literacy and civic engagement.[10] In this era of profound political polarization, disinformation, and fake news, the project aims to frame and foster narratives of democracy and contribution. Antigonish 2.0 revisions the cooperative adult education tradition of the Antigonish Movement for a digitized world.

The original Antigonish Movement focused on

1. reframing people's understanding of the structures shaping their lives and prospects, and
2. exerting collective action within and on those structures.

It did so through three key structural components: mass meetings, a school for leaders, and study clubs. Antigonish 2.0 draws on that three-layer infrastructure to galvanize collective action at global, regional, and local levels.

Layer One. This distributed international network—already

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By BONNIE STEWART

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populated with 100-plus media and education leaders from around the world—will be our web-based equivalent to "mass meetings." Network members will develop, curate, and maintain an up-to-date resource hub, build presence and belonging using the Twitter hashtag #Antigonish2, and mentor other layers in their local communities. The network is the core of the model and how it will adapt its domain knowledge as the information ecosystem changes and shifts.[11]

Layer Two. Focused on institutional capacity-building and inclusive citizenship in K–12 and higher ed classrooms, this layer will develop regional hubs of expertise, resources, and conversation. These hubs will be institutional and centered around professional development events, as well as around a July 2018 summer institute—our "school for leaders"—in the founding town of Antigonish, Nova Scotia. The institute will bring together leaders from widespread institutional contexts to explore how the web can be utilized to combat digital and democratic polarization in the workplace and classroom.

Layer Three. This layer consists of the "study clubs": localized workshops for people in their own communities. These outreach events are the heart of Antigonish 2.0: hands-on opportunities to develop the practices and literacies needed by critical citizens and consumers in an attention economy. These coordinated local gatherings—workshops at libraries, discussion series in community halls, even kitchen parties—will aim to engage citizens in collective action based on local interests. These events will teach core media literacy—how to identify fake news—but will also encourage people to work together to build narratives and skills for thriving in an age of information and misinformation. Facilitators for this layer of the project will be trained at Layers One and Two but will work in their local communities.

Amy Collier, associate provost for digital learning at Middlebury College, speaks of the current juncture in our collective society as one in which "the work of education . . . cannot look like it did before."[12] I think she's right. Antigonish 2.0 offers a call to colleges and universities around the globe to consider how their

resources—staff, faculty, students, space, digital infrastructures, brands—can be deployed at all three layers of the initiative.

But in order to *do* that, higher ed has to be willing *not* to look the way it has always looked. It has to be willing to lend a portion of its infrastructure and its time and its endowments to this integrated model of network plus institution plus community, even though this model does not factor in prestige rankings or research dollars. It has to be willing to look to people both in and *beyond* classroom walls as part of its purview.

Higher ed has done this before, in Antigonish and in many other renowned community and adult education projects. This time its success demands the cohering factor of the network layer, because the domain knowledge and web literacies required to turn this ship of state and social media around are not present at the helm of most classrooms today. Success also demands looking out to communities to build, together, the kind of civil society that can value what higher ed has to offer, beyond just credentials.

Higher ed is the key source of the cognitive surplus that will build Antigonish 2.0's resources and knowledge hubs. Most of the volunteers for the project's Layer One network are higher ed employees, volunteering personal time that's nonetheless based in expertise and knowledge they've built through higher ed programs, higher ed jobs, higher ed grant projects, and higher ed Internet infrastructure.

The web was supposed to open up higher ed. In a model like Antigonish 2.0, higher ed may be the lever needed to reopen the web to its participatory, democratic potential.

I believe *that* would be a revolution worth aiming for. ∎

Notes

1. Richard Stallman, "The GNU Manifesto" (1985), GNU Operating System (website), last updated February 17, 2017.
2. Michael Caulfield, "Can Higher Education Save the Web?" *EDUCAUSE Review* 52, no. 1 (January/February 2017).
3. Mike Caulfield, "The Garden and the Stream: A Technopastoral," *Hapgood*, October 17, 2015.
4. Anil Dash, "The Web We Lost," *Anil Dash*, December 13, 2012.
5. Craig Silverman, "This Is How Your Hyperpartisan Political News Gets Made," *BuzzFeed News*, February 27, 2017.
6. Jay McGregor, "Retweets Are Up, Replies Are Down: How Twitter Has Evolved in the Last Seven Years," *Forbes*, March 31, 2014.
7. John Seely Brown, "Growing Up Digital: How the Web Changes Work, Education, and the Ways People Learn," *Change* (March/April 2000).
8. M. M. Coady, *Masters of Their Own Destiny: The Story of the Antigonish Movement of Adult Education through Economic Cooperation* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939).
9. Bonnie Stewart, "Temporarily Embarrassed Millionaires," *The Theoryblog*, November 30, 2016.
10. "Media Literacy, Community, Citizenship," *Antigonish 2.0*, March 14, 2017.
11. Mike Caulfield, "Yes, Digital Literacy: But Which One?" *Hapgood*, December 19, 2016.
12. Amy Collier, "'It Should Be Necessary to Start': Critical Digital Pedagogy in Troubled Political Times," *The Red Pincushion*, March 3, 2017.

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