

Chapter XLVIII

The Myth of the E-Commerce Serf to Sovereign Powershift

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ABSTRACT

As a social activity, the shopping experience can not be recreated or improved through technical design alone. This chapter proposes that there is incongruence in online retail provision and the needs or requirements of customers. It argues that a greater social awareness or sense of “audience” is required by retailers who adopt E-Commerce. Web sites and service provision need to be more closely related to social requirements to reduce the socio-technical gap. This chapter will attempt to deconstruct the belief that E-Commerce in its current format is bringing about a power shift. It focuses on five of the most prevalent strands of the myth that E-Commerce empowers customers. A critical social theory (CST) epistemology is adopted. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with consumers and consideration of the wider empirical evidence the myths are deconstructed. The chapter raises the question “how far can commercial enterprises afford to empower consumers” and reflects that rather than a “power shift” there has been a “responsibility shift”.

If Web 2.0 for you is blogs and wikis, then that is people to people. But that was what the Web was supposed to be all along.

—Tim Berners-Lee, 2006

INTRODUCTION

It is frequently suggested that e-commerce facilitates a new consumer experience, and brings about

“true” consumer empowerment. Levine et al. (2000) state that “the Internet invites participation. It is genuinely empowering”. The idea that technology in general, and more specifically the Internet will

bring about a social revolution is not new (Howcroft, 1998). It is particularly prevalent in both academic and journalistic writings on consumers and the Internet. Professional literature suggests that customers empowered through the Internet bring benefits to the organization (Stewart, 1997). While academic literature (Wathieu et al. 2002) and consumer rights groups welcome the power that the Internet bestows upon consumers (Pitt et al. 2002; Office of Fair Trading, 2003). With few exceptions, conceptual and empirical literature in the field is normative, presenting e-commerce as beneficial to business and empowering to customers. For example, the proliferation of literature on creating and building trust in e-commerce stands in stark contrast to the neglect of its counterparts of fraud and deception (Wareham et al 2005). The majority of existing literature fails to explore the 'real' experience of customers interacting in this new electronic channel in any depth.

Despite a growing body of 'sociology of technology' literature highlighting the *evolutionary* rather than *revolutionary* effect of technology and its adoption (Bijker, 1999), the utopian / dystopian duality of technology (Kling, 1996; Howcroft and Fitzgerald, 1998) and the recognition of people's natural resistance to technology (Venkatesh et al, 2003; Markus, 1983), each new application that emerges is heralded from a discourse of technological rationality. Through hyperbole and the creation of myths (Barthes, 1973) surrounding the revolutionary, transformative effect of the technology under study an illusion or *promise*, which falls short of the practice, is created and maintained. In academic and popular literature, news reports, and government rhetoric e-commerce has been hailed as the emancipator of customers from the power of commercial enterprises. The 'reality' suggests that e-commerce in its current form is unable to deliver on this promise, or to live up to the myth which enshrouds it.

This chapter will attempt to critically analyse (or deconstruct) five of the most prevalent myths surrounding e-commerce and the benefits it is claimed to bring, namely; e-commerce will revolutionise

retailing, offers greater choice and convenience, offers greater access to information, enables better communication (C2B and C2C), brings about personalisation of services to customers.

It will show the incongruence between the myths of e-commerce and the experiences of customers, and argue that a greater sense of "audience" is required by retailers who adopt e-commerce. The deconstruction (Derrida, 1978) (taking apart of a narrative, hypothesis, or theme to reveal the underlying vested ideology) of myths is a relatively well established technique in both information systems and marketing research (Hirschheim R. and Newman, 1991; Grover and Ramanlal, 1999; Howcroft, 2001). Myths promote a consensus view of solidarity and cohesion and often perpetuate a shared misconception of the phenomena they describe (Bolman and Deal, 1984). For example, (Howcroft, 2001) explores the myths of the "dot.com share bubble" questioning why investors were drawn into financially supporting Internet start-up companies with no attempt at a traditional evaluation. This chapter will explore and deconstruct five myths that continue to perpetuate the justifications for the claim that e-commerce is empowering customers. Through this, it will highlight the socio-technical gap, or deficit between what online retailers provide and what customers need or want.

Much of the focus for the assertions that the Internet *will* bring about consumer empowerment has been on the *potential* of the Internet, and the *opportunities* for communication and social interaction. The needs, attitudes and experiences of the consumer, whom the advocates of consumer empowerment through the Internet claim it serves, have generally been neglected, if not ignored. The commonly held belief is that if information is power then through product and company information available over the Internet, consumers *must* be empowered (Pitt et al. 2002; Office of Fair Trading, 2003). Experiences recounted to the researcher in the preliminary stages of this research appeared to challenge that assumption. This challenge to what was increasingly becoming the *status quo* influenced the design of the study as it evolved and began to take a Critical Social Theory (CST) approach.

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