

## Serendipity casts a very wide net

### **It is no accident that technology commentator Bill Thompson believes that the web does a lot to promote chance discovery**

One of those rumbling arguments that betrays a deeper discontent is going on within the loose collection of blogs, newspapers and academic websites that has replaced public lectures and university common rooms as the space for public debate on matters of intellectual significance.

The question is whether the online information sources we use today limit our potential to find material by accident, and so reduce the chance of inadvertently discovering wonderful things or life-changing facts.

#### **Accidental empire**

For some, like journalism teacher William McKeen, we are losing the space within which serendipity can guide us to those ideas that will change our world.

Writing in the St Petersburg Times, which comes from Florida rather than Russia, he argues that modern technology reduces the space within which we can "make fortunate discoveries accidentally".

He believes that today we "put a couple of key words into a search engine and you find, with an irritating hit or miss here and there, exactly what you're looking for. It's efficient, but dull."

**It may not make sense to try to create machines which enhance serendipity, but we can certainly do much more to encourage our children to be open to its possibility, whether they are online or offline**

He hates the practice of downloading just the music you like instead of listening to the radio because "we miss the element of the chance encounter with musical genius".

And he forces his students to read newspapers in print rather than online because that way they are exposed to stories that they would have missed on the screen.

It's an interesting and provocative argument which promoted the expected response from Steven Johnson, the author of *Everything Bad is Good for You* and a consistent advocate of the value of net culture.

Johnson's post, which he titled *Can we please kill this meme now*, called McKeen's argument infuriating, demolished the argument that browsing books in libraries is any good at promoting accidental discovery, and ended up with a paean to BoingBoing and other weblogs that elevate randomness into an art form.

It was an impressive rant, and of course it provoked its own response, most notably from net curmudgeon Nicholas Carr who, while claiming to agree with both Johnson and McKeen went on to side with the anti-web faction and mourned the lack of "surprise" he found while surfing the web.

"Once you create an engine, a machine, to produce serendipity, you destroy the essence of serendipity",

he pronounced, as if that settled it.

### **Music man**

It doesn't, because the hypertextual web is no more a machine for producing serendipity than the Dewey decimal system was.

Just because Dewey puts books on similar but not identical topics together doesn't mean that it is intentionally encouraging the sort of browsing along the shelves that is so often used as the standard example of serendipity.

Just because the web allows links from any page to any page does not mean that it is concerned with serendipity. The potential for serendipity emerges from the nature of linking, it was not a design goal.

When McKeen criticises music downloading because it means that "we have to be told of such genius or hear about it second-hand" he betrays his lack of understanding of online culture and the new forms of conversation it permits.

Listening to John Peel under the covers late at night and hearing bands that my parents and friends would never know about was the only way to be "told of such genius" available to me as a child. But my daughter can get her recommendations and even sample the music directly from her friends or, on a good day, me.

The potential for discovery is enhanced, but it doesn't rely on formal channels or on large institutions like libraries. On the web, every link and every page of search results can lead to the same sort of serendipitous discoveries that used to be the province of library shelves or conversations in musty common rooms.

And those links are available to all, not just the privileged few granted access to the university library or the academic world.

### **Clue train**

Perhaps the best argument in favour of the argument that today's richly interlinked web is as much a promoter of serendipity as the library, the bookstore or the radio is simply that the discussion is happening at all.

I came across Steven Johnson's first post, a response to McKeen's article, because I subscribe to the feed from Johnson's blog through the Bloglines service. I can see whenever he writes something new, and because I like his style I generally read his stuff.

He linked to the original article so I read that, but there were also a range of comments already posted on Johnson's website, so I followed them up too.

My serendipitous discovery of McKeen's piece demonstrates clearly not only that he is wrong but that the potential for accidental discovery is greatly enhanced by the net and the web. The chance of me stumbling across the St Petersburg Times in my local library is rather small, since it doesn't actually keep copies of it.

Once I came across the argument about serendipity I focused on it, searched specifically for people engaged in the debate, and ignored many interesting sidelines, like an old post from Jason Kottke about why Macs used to be rubbish, as a result.

Not all of the things we find online are useful, but not every book stumbled across in a library is the one that changes your world view and prompts a new scientific revolution.

But every time I do a search, every time I read someone's blog, and every time I engage in an online conversation with a friend, I'm entering a space where the possibility for a serendipitous discovery exists, and to a far greater degree than in most other areas of my life.

The real danger to serendipity is not the technology we use but our attitude towards it and the opportunities it offers. If all our searches at school are guided and the range of answers we are open to is limited by a prescriptive curriculum, then we will learn to ignore the interesting sidebar and the unexpected link.

It may not make sense to try to create machines which enhance serendipity, but we can certainly do much more to encourage our children to be open to its possibility, whether they are online or offline.  
*Bill Thompson is a regular commentator on the BBC World Service programme Digital Planet*

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