

Introduction

We live in an environment with behavioral codes and conventions that often run counter to our personal desires and needs. Technology can heighten that tension by blurring the boundaries between public conventions and private needs. Our ability to customize public web sites—in effect to privatize the interaction—can create meaning and lend additional value to our online experiences.

This paper examines the promises implied to those who privatize their digital interactions by choosing interaction aids, visual languages, and specific content (text and/or images). When such choices are not merely strategic components of client agendas but meaningful user options, they can be a form of personal empowerment and of value to society at large.

Premises of Privatizing

The need to privatize is based on the following premises:

- A desire to express one's identity in public spaces
 - A need to create private buffers in public spaces
 - A call to identify and mark one's territory in public spaces
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In *Public Places and Private Spaces*, Albert Mehrabian writes that particular environments cause emotional reactions that fall into one of two categories: approach or avoid.¹ Similarly, privatization can be a form of approaching interaction (setting the stage and defining the terms) or avoiding interaction (choosing not to participate with others or to acknowledge one's surroundings). Either way, privatizing in public can foster personal empowerment or be viewed as social disobedience when collective conventions are disregarded.

Promises of Privatizing

In publicly accessible web sites that target broad audiences, a number of privatization options are increasingly available. These include scaling (enlarging fonts and images), selecting (choosing screen interfaces and "skins"), comparing (choosing between HTML or Flash, high or low bandwidth versions of a web site), and editing (prioritizing, categorizing, and positioning screen components and content such as types of news). Many of these features are part of the Web 2.0 movement, which encourages people to use the web as a platform for building and distributing software and for sharing images, videos, and bookmarks.

Privatizing experiences is akin to customizing and individualizing, but on a more deliberate, personal, and deeper level. When something is identified as private, there is a sense of ownership and confidentiality. Although privatizing in virtual space is largely anonymous and not subject to the pressures of social conformity, the user may receive a sense of inclusion simply through the presentation of choice.

Joshua Meyrowitz writes that "Media can create a sense of sharing and belonging or a feeling of exclusion and isolation."² Through privatization, users become active and engaged participants. Choice encourages participation, which in turn suggests shared power, broadened access, and a more meaningful experience.

The primary ways that privatizing shapes experience and implies promises are listed in the table below.

Privatizing Experience	Implied Promise
Framing: The user is given choices that address functional and psychological needs.	Framing: Honoring of individuality. Needs are addressed and real choices are presented.
Enhancing: Opportunities to foster comprehension through text scaling.	Enhancing: Improved interaction as a result of the interaction aid or interface choice.
Differentiating: Expressing individuality through screen interface choices.	Differentiating: Uniqueness and sense of ownership. Users become editors if not authors of content.

Noam Chomsky states that many media-controlled choices are largely illusory.³ He suggests that such choices have underlying agendas and strategies, and are forms of control designed to build product loyalty.

When viewed in this light, a more critical examination of digital interactive choices might suggest that predetermined choices (widely disseminated, benign, and familiar to most) seem "good" yet actually provide limited enhanced functionality. This is particularly evident in screen interface designs; available colors and patterns typically express a narrow visual language. Other customization options, such as content editing, can encourage passivity by limiting inquiry or exposure to alternative points of view.

Conclusion

Privatizing digital experiences expresses the struggle between private needs and public boundaries. When interactive choices are designed to add true value and meaning, designers move from being owners of experiences to facilitators, and users move from being the recipients of designer and client decisions to participants. When users share control of content and access methods, their choices become expressions of individuality and values. Privatizing a public experience can become an act of affirmation.

End Notes

¹ Albert Mehrabian, *Public Places and Private Spaces*. (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 9.

²

Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 7.

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Noam Chomsky, *The Prosperous Few and the Restless Many*. (Tucson: Odonian Press, 1994), 83.