**“Sharing”: *Zeugma* Episode 3**

[Transcript of introductory segment coming soon.]

[First major segment: *Zeugma* members Axel and Michael discuss Car2Go and Couhsurfing.org.]

Michael: This is Michael.

Axel: Hi, and I'm Axel.

M: And we are here to talk more about sharing. I know that sharing is generally a—or a lot of times we think of it as a digital thing, as specifically in this podcast. But sharing actually has a much longer history where you're actually sharing physical things. You might remember when you were a child that you were taught to share.

A: And obviously we're gonna talk about the digital still, and how technology facilitates sharing of material objects, or money, or goods that in principle has existed prior to the Internet.

M: Right. But I think before the Internet it had to be much more of a community-based or friend-based thing. You could share a car, for example, with your friends if your friend doesn't have a car. If you don't have a car, you could borrow a friend's car. But now in our increasingly virtual world that we live in, I think people have found ways to kind of share things with each other that they don't know. Or that, you know, that you aren't connected to personally. Specifically, I'm thinking about my experiences with the Car2Go technology, which is basically a developing technology or developing business model in select cities in the United States—Austin being one of the first—where you can sign up for a membership and just pick up a smart car that's just gonna be somewhere around town, and basically it's a bunch of people that subscribe to this and you can use the car whenever you like for a small fee.

A: You know we talk about how technology facilitates sharing, but when you compare the Car2Go model of sharing a car, I think we should also talk about where it hinders aspects of sharing that used to exist prior to that technological mediation.

M: It's a very individualist, even for something that's sharing, it's a very individualist idea that I can have—and they're smart cars, right?—so you're not gonna have many people, you can fit two people in the car. You can't even fit more than that. I think an interesting comparison would be German *Mitfahrgelegenheit.*

A: Yeah. You know that?

M: It’s like a carpooling website, basically.

A: And legally you're not allowed to advertise on like, to put rides on there that you do just commercially. So the idea is, I'm going from Freiburg to Munich this weekend.

M: This weekend?

A: Well, this hypothetical weekend. [laughter] So I'm renting—so I'm renting a hypothetical car, which has four seats, but I'm on my own. Now, I know there's gonna be a bunch of other people who are gonna want to go there, so I advertise these spots in the car. And they pay, like, 20 euros and come along from Freiburg to Munich. That covers my gas bill and it's much cheaper than taking the train for that.

M: Right, but the difference between that and Car2Go is that you're with, usually, strangers, but you're stuck in a car with them or you're talking to people. You're forming some kind of connection and Car2Go is not—you aren't actually interdependent, besides the fact that you might want to have a car around you. You're relying on that but you're not actually relying on other people in an individual sense.

A: Yeah.

M: Which is very different from what you're going to talk about.

A: Exactly. Because I—I have been a member of Couchsurfing.org for quite a while—since 2006, which was just about the time when the site really took off. The way Couchsurfing works is you create a profile, very much like on a social networking site except it's not—none of it is accessible to anybody except Couchsurfing members. And then whenever you go someplace and you wanna either meet people or spend the night on somebody's couch, you can just browse that city and you get a list of all the members, you write them a message and—ideally—they'll get back to you—

M: Possibly.

A: —and possibly even have a spot for you to crash. Whenever I did get in touch with people and actually surf their couches, or the couple of times I've actually had a couch surfer over, that's pretty much without exception been really great. But I've also had it happen tons of times that I just didn't get responses and things like that.

M: So it's almost like a dating website, kind of? Like an online dating website. You're, like, trying to make connections with people and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

A: Exactly. I think their slogan is, "Making the world a better place one couch at a time." So it's very idealistic and utopian compared to Car2Go. And I think there's a point to it, because it's not something that I would recommend if you just wanted to save money traveling.

M: Right, and it's not really about money. You aren't allowed to exchange money to stay on couches.

A: No. You can't be a commercial host.

M: Right. Because couch surfing, I would say, like sharing, seems to have an ideology. It seems to be about something more than just an economic exchange of goods and services.

A: Yeah, it's definitely ideologically driven.

M: Yeah, it's about trying to connect—using technology, basically—to connect individuals and make them interconnected in a way. And it seems to think that the Internet is a good way to kind of make people more connected.

A: The question is what is it ultimately that you're sharing, right?

M: Or what does sharing mean?

A: Exactly. And with couch surfing, it's really about sharing experience, sharing a kind of—even sharing as creating. Bringing together two people in a way that'll create new shared experience. Much in the same way as file sharing, data sharing, you know, making academic work publicly accessible kind of contributes to the emergence of new ideas.

M: Yeah. So that it becomes less of a material thing. It's less about, "Oh, I have some cake, you can have some of my cake."

A: Exactly.

M: And it's more about creating community through some kind of shared experience. Which, I think Car2Go is much more of what—we might call it old-fashioned sharing. Where it's really just kind of having a single commodity that is being used by multiple parties.

A: Although if you go back to old-fashioned sharing, there might be more of, you know, the experiential, interpersonal dimension in that than in some of the newer, technologically mediated versions of sharing, right? So the cake: I have a cake, you have a cake, we're probably going to eat it together, we're gonna talk about stuff.

M: Right, yeah, eat it together—I think we see technology kind of moving two different ways. One in trying to kind of create more community, and one in trying to remove the need to community.

A: It's a tool and it can be put to various uses.

M: Okay, I guess that's all the time we have to share!

[11:22]

[Second major segment: Axel interviews a couch surfer named Stephan.]

[ambient coffee shop background noises]

A: All right, I am sitting here at Spider House with Stephan, who is a couchsurfer I am hosting tonight.

Stephan: Yes, hello.

A: But Stephan has described himself earlier on as a veteran of couchsurfing to me.

S: I’ve been on the homepage for about six years now, and I’ve couchsurfed on about a hundred different couches in forty countries.

A: You consider yourself very much part of the couchsurfing community as well.

S: Yes, I do. It is a lot more than just staying on people’s couches to be honest. I have, there’s a lot of things I have… for example, when I was traveling in southern Africa and I didn’t have enough money to buy a car myself, I was looking for like-minded travelers on couchsurfing and I found an Israeli guy with whom I bought a car and we traveled through southern Africa for three months together. And he trusted me enough at the end to leave me with the car for a month more and send him the money once I sold the car.

A: That’s a pretty amazing story

S: But I also, in India I bought a motorcycle from a couchsurfer, I sold it to a couchsurfer in the end again, and I’ve also taken part in a lot of, couchsurfing has a lot of meetings in bigger cities. They meet once a month or whatever, and it’s also a great way to meet locals. If you’re new to a city, you’re new to a country, you don’t always want to hang out with the same people, or maybe you’re in a certain program that’s a bit of a bubble. It’s a good way to get out and meet other people.

The structure that they have built up is, in bigger places there is these things called ambassadors. And the way it works with the ambassadors is, it’s just people who have been living in a city or a country or somewhere for a long time, have hosted a lot, you have to have been active for a certain amount of time. But the ambassadors are really only there for, only if there’s problems. There’s not really a lot needed outside the reference system that they do have in place, which works in a way that if you do surf with somebody you leave them a reference and they leave you a reference and you can’t delete it from your profile. And it says if it’s positive or negative. The system cleans itself very well and it makes sure that the people that you surf with or host are genuine and friendly.

The way I travel is, I like a lot of randomness and I like a lot of room in my travels. So I normally only do write people like a couple of days in advance. Which eventually leads to problems because not everybody is online the whole time. Even though in today’s society, let’s be honest: most of us who work a lot online or are in university or what, we are online pretty much every day. But you can definitely write people a month in advance or whatever but I’m normally just, I’m like three days before and then I write like four people. And normally one or two will answer. And if nobody answers, in a lot of bigger cities, there’s this thing called emergency couch request. There’s like groups, a bit like on facebook you can join different groups with different interests. So for example Austin has an emergency couch one. And then you’re not writing one person anymore, you’re writing the whole community in a city and you’re like: “hey, I’m coming to your city. This is who I am. Is anybody willing to host me?”

I never straight-out had a negative experience. There was a couple where it was a bit sketchy. I was surfing with a guy in Uganda, local guy in the South-West of Uganda. He had kind of built up a little bit of his own NGO. You have to be aware that there’s a lot of people in places like Uganda, in countries like that who are very genuine and who really want to help people. But there is also a lot of foreign money and people think “Okay if I just build, I make my own NGO, I can get a lot of foreign money and get a decent living and all that. And this guy, he seemed like a pretty nice guy, but the whole time he was trying to show me things as in, like, he was trying to get me to sponsor stuff. And that gave me a bit of a bitter taste. And it was not only that, but at one point he had to measure part of his land and I helped him. And he wanted photos of me doing it, so it could look like he had more international people involved in it. And so I wasn’t very comfortable with that. But then, I was supposed to stay three days with him, and I ended up just staying one because I just didn’t feel very comfortable with it. But he was still nice to me. It was just that I felt like he was expecting, by showing me all these things, that I would provide a lot of money or find him funding and all that, and I just wasn’t able to do that.

A: What is the biggest thing, or are the biggest things you take away from being part of the couchsurfing community?

S: There’s a couple. One of them is it makes me believe in humanity. I know that sounds cheesy as hell. But it’s somewhat true. You’re literally meeting people from, if you travel a lot, from different continents, from different cultural backgrounds, that have never met you, that have nothing to do with you. And they really go out of their way. I’ve had people come pick me up two hours from where they lived because a bus broke down. So this dude drives two hours one direction to pick me up, to drive two hours back home., and then to show me around his town and share his food with me and his apartment. Why? Just because he’s a friendly person and he thinks I’m probably a friendly person and we are interested in intercultural exchange. I mean, I hope a lot of times they got something back from it, but they don’t expect, a lot of them don’t expect much. So it’s really about doing good, being nice to people.

The other thing I normally get out of it… there’s a couple. One of them is, it’s a much more cultural experience to travel this way. You tend to not have that much interaction with the local people when you’re staying in hostels or hotels. You kind of hang out in the same places that other tourists or travelers hang out. Well, with couchsurfing you’re often at the source. You meet people directly who live there, you can ask them about their culture, you can ask them about the politics, you’re much more…. You become part of daily life in these cities rather than just being an outsider who just sees things there.

So that would be that, and the third biggest one is, if I’m in a country where they speak a different language, and I do speak the language somewhat, it’s a great way to make sure that you speak that language. When I was traveling in South America, at all the hostels everybody would be speaking English. Even though a lot of people spoke Spanish, there would always be someone in the group who didn’t, so everybody switched to English. When I was couchsurfing in South America I made sure that I was couchsurfing with local people, which gave me the great opportunity to speak Spanish with them and to all their friends and better my Spanish a lot, and use it there rather than me speaking English all the time.

A: I think it’s time to wrap this up and let you drink some more of your beer. But, do you have like one amazing episode to tell, like, your greatest moment or whatever. Not to put you on the spot, but…

S: No, no, I mean there is really a handful of incredible experiences. I think one of the most interesting, crazy ones was in Johannesburg, South Africa. It was a couple of us. It was me, my ex girlfriend and the Israeli guy I had bought the car with and an American who we picked up on the way in Botswana somewhere. [laughs]. And we got back into South Africa and we were staying in Johannesburg with this forty-five-year-old, white, South African guy, who lived in the middle of downtown of Johannesburg. Now, that is considered a very, very unsafe area. He was living in the place where most of the white South Africans don’t even like to go when it’s daylight because they’re that scared of it. And he lived straight downtown in an old storage building. Everything around it was quite run down. He lived in an old nightclub.

[A laughs]

S: The story of how he got the nightclub is too long to tell here. But it had to do with him being a programmer and writing a program for chip cards to get into buildings. And this guy who owned the nightclub didn’t pay him so he just like, kind of, took it over. He went in and was like: “Until you’re not paying me I’m not leaving the nightclub.” And the guy never paid him so he’s been living in the nightclub for five years. And he left all the original lighting in it. It’s not a nightclub anymore, but he has all the original lights, he has the original sound system. The VIP lounge is just where his couchsurfers can sleep because he’s got massive, huge couches there. He was in love with techno. So he was blasting techno 24/7. There was nobody who lived in the proximity, so he could be as loud as he wanted. He was on like the fifth floor and whole walls could just be opened because it used to be an old storage building.

And it’s literally a place… we used to walk around the neighborhood at 10pm and go grab a beer around the corner. And this is in a part of town where, seriously, I took two of my South African friends there, and they were scared shitless. They were like “wow, I never thought I would come here at night. This is crazy.” But it was such a great experience because I also thought this place to be dangerous or whatever and here I was with this guy who had been living here, white South African guy who had been living here for ten years. Never got stolen from, never got any problems with his car. He parked his car outside and he went around the neighborhood, had a couple of beers with some rough-looking fellows, but very warm at heart.

This host ended up taking us to the Drakenberg Mountains. He was very generous. We were on a bit of a small budget, but he paid for food, he paid for drinks when we couldn’t afford it. Crazy guy, but such a huge heart. Great stories, and that is exactly that kind of randomness. Like, before we were couchsurfing with him I was like “he looks a bit sketchy,” but he had some amazing refrences and he was maybe a bit socially awkward but he was such a great guy and we just came out of there thinking “wow, what the hell just happened? This is like out of a movie.” [laughs]

[Ends at 22:28]

[Third major segment: *Zeugma*’s Lisa Gulesserian interviews Hype Machine’s Anthony Volodkin.]

AV: Hi, I’m Anthony Volodkin. I am the founder of Hype Machine. Hype Machine is a music website that’s been around for over 7 years that looks at the most blogged music on the web. We track about 800 music blogs out there and we see what they post, just about every hour, and then we compile a set of charts from their posts, to figure out what are the new, most interesting up-coming bands out there on the web.

LG: Hype machine is about sharing music and getting people to discover new music. But how did it get started? How did you decide that something was missing on the Internet? Something was missing, you could fill that niche?

AV: The Hype Machine was started in 2005 when I was attending Hunter College in New York. What I was thinking about, I started having a problem when I could find—I didn’t know how to find new music. And the places that I would normally turned to just seemed outdated and stale. So picking up a magazine felt like, either everyone already knows about this music or it’s there for some unknown reason, like maybe promotion agent wouldn’t get off the phone with someone at the magazine, and they, just to get them off the phone, they would write something, or maybe they bought a lot of pages of ads, something like that. And you know, the radio plays about 40 songs per station. So, that’s not a good place to turn for new music either. Still isn’t actually. And so at the same I stumbled onto music blogs. And, you know, at the time it was still quite new, and people were just posting up music that they were excited about, and they would write a paragraph or so, maybe a little bit more, depending on who was writing about it. And I would just find all kinds of really strange, nerdy things to talk about. One of my earliest finds was a post about a soundtrack for a super Nintendo game called “Killer Instinct.”

SOUNDTRACK

Which is a fighting game, that, you know if you purchased a premium version of the game at the time, you received a cd with the soundtrack for the game, since it was kind of produced at a higher level than a lot of games—a lot of games’ soundtracks. And it was just so cool to see someone post that. Because—it was a very special kind of special moment for me to discover that, back when I was playing those games. But it was also such a commitment to, like—esoteric and interesting—that it kind of really made it clear to me that there was some special people out there writing about music. I just didn’t want to miss any of it. So, I realized I couldn’t read like a few 100 websites at once in any meaningful amount of time. So I thought what if I make a single page where all their new postings are brought together. So that’s how the very first hype machine came about. It was just very raw, very simple. Just one page of what was posted today.

LG: So it was kind of more of an aggregation service.

AV: Absolutely. Yeah, the goal was to gather together what happens on a variety different places on the web. So that in the gathering together the sum is greater than each of the parts.

LG: So, what are some of the reactions you’ve gotten from record labels, bands, bloggers, music lovers—what are some reactions you’ve gotten to the service that you’ve created with Hype Machine?

AV: Initially, some of the bloggers expressed concerns you know that the bringing together of what they are posting about takes away from some of their identity or individuality. And I also really wasn’t that good at explaining kind of the goal and the thinking at the time. I think some of that got in the way for them too. But over time, pretty quickly, they noticed that Hype Machine sends them a lot of new visitors that they weren’t seeing otherwise. And I was better able to articulate about what my thinking was, about what the project, that it wasn’t about like having a link dump of mp3s or something. But it’s actually, about, kind of giving people a way to navigate this crazy array of writers.

LG: so the bloggers have initially gave you, maybe, a hesitant ok, but have embraced it since because you have brought so many readers to their blogs. But what about bands and record labels, how do you think you’ve navigated that landscape? Which is quite different now from the days where all you could do was go out and buy a cd. Now you can listen to mp3s, listen on people’s web sites. How have they reacted to Hype Machine? Have you seen a positive reaction from them? Has it been kind of a fraught relationship?

AV: It really evolved in the past 7 years. We never had any problems with them, but initially it definitely took a lot of explaining what it is that Hype Machine does and what are music blogs. Music blogs aren’t about downloading random songs, and how, it’s this other thing entirely. At this point, some of the bloggers have kind of become almost like small publishers, their own mini magazines, so they are fully in, working with, promotional agents of labels. And they are kind of fully integrated into the industry. So, I no longer need to explain very much, they just appreciate the service because it makes their job a lot easier to see like who wrote about their bands that they are working on and who else they can ask tow rite about, because one easy way is you search for bands that are maybe similar to what you’re working with and maybe those people will write about your band too. A lot of that utility is just baked into that service, because we just try to make it as easy as possible for people to both find blogs and new music, so a lot of those are also tasks that people preform professionally.

LG: I’m seeing a type of community you are building with you’re service. You know with Hype Machine kind of aggregating these different music blogs and their posts. What’s popular, what’s in the specific genre, I’ve noticed you are trying to build a community for people who love music. And what’s that kind of community that you are envisioning with Hype Machine? How would you describe that community?

AV: So, I think a lot of self-selection takes place with Hype Machine, because I don’t think Hype Machine makes sense for everyone out there. And, the people who it makes the most sense to are, they are sort of seekers. They kind of like the search, the chase of new things, and not necessarily in the sense of novelty, but in the sense of just new things to them. So sometimes those are musicians that have been around for a long time but they just never heard. It lets you hear things in a new context. Instead of clicking a genre you wouldn’t click otherwise, it kind of may come up in the popular page, for instance. It exits in some cases outside of contexts of genre. The community of people on Hype Machine are people who keep a certain kind of open mind to a lot of these new things. Maybe they just want to keep up or maybe they are just really curious to see what’s going on. I think that’s the people to who hype machine makes the most sense.

LG: And would you think that kind of community would be built without the internet? Would we have been able to have that sort of community that you have with Hype Machine had we not had the web. Has it changed the way that we can share music with one another and how do you think it’s changed?

AV: Well, I think we have had these kinds of communities on a certain micro level in the past, but these communities would form around different things. Maybe these communities would form around a record store, or around a certain promoter’s set of live events. For instance, there is this guy who does something called Art 5 productions in Philadelphia, which is a set of DIY concerts.

[CONCERT SOUND]

AV: I’m sure that at certain, at many times during it’s existence, there have been communities of people who just regularly come out to the shows there. So stuff like that I think there was were a lot of this was happening and something like hype machine just let’s all those people get together in a more global way. Which I mean I think is important because the whole thing about Hype Machine is that it lets you step outside of the people that are either next to you, or your friends, and see what else is out there. Because in some ways just only knowing what your friends listen to is very limiting, because what if you don’t have as many friends that are like really exploring stuff.

LG: That’s true.

AV: Then it would really be difficult for you to step outside. Something like Hype Machine lets you kind of take that jump.

LG: I’m seeing here the connection between our world outside, this physical world outside the internet, and then this other community here in Hype Machine that’s online. And it’s allowing you to explore and broaden your horizons musically. But you now I’m also interested in this connection between the physical world and the web. And I’m thinking specifically of the types of community events or activates that you have participated in over the years. Like, I have to say, your fantastic yearly Hype Machine party during South By Southwest. Which honestly listeners if you haven’t attended you really should. But I’m thinking you know How does the work that you are doing here with Hype Machine, which is web based, connect to these other activities you have also been involved in that are outside of Hype Machine on the web?

AV: Well it’s not something people talk about frequently, for any web-brand, or anyone doing anything on the web, connecting to something in the real world is actually super important. There are a couple of ways that Hype Machine interacts with the physical. One simple way is on every single page there are concert listings in your area. Which is a very basic feature. It actually helps a lot of people stumble into shows because as they are browsing they glance on the right side of the site and they are like, “oh man that artist is playing here, I didn’t know that.” I have met people who have found things this way and they have gone to shows. I am really happy we helped them get outside and go see some music. But as far as real events that we have created, the last year, we did something really special for South By Southwest. Which is where we had bloggers curate day and night shows at a venue that we have taken over in Austin. And it was sort of like a physical representation of everything that hype machine stands for. Which is this kind of set of people that are selecting music brought together, that was a lot of fun. And all of the bloggers who were participating really had an amazing time. Because we had—the venue worked, everything worked. It was very intense to put it together. We have never done anything like that before.

LG: You know these wonderful ways that you get out into the community are really important and I think you are right, maybe it isn’t as talked about with web based communities or web based services, but it has to be, if it’s going to be this successful, important community. There has to be these physical ventures into the world. I’m also thinking are there other things that you do? So you have these parties for South By, different other musical festivals. Are there other outreach programs that you have started, that are allowing you to share Hype Machine with other people that maybe might not have stumbled upon it in their web adventures?

AV: I mean one thing we do is we produce a monthly radio show that is kind of like a summary of what has been popular on blogs for a particular month. And we found that the audience for that really differs from the audience of the actual site. Because some people just prefer to experience music in this different way, they just listen to a podcast once a month and maybe they listen to a few sources, so it’s not just once a month. But it’s kind of this more leaned back approach rather than the more active type of experience that Hype Machine is designed for.

LG: So that seems to me to plug into this idea of a kind of sharing economy. There are different scales of sharing, there are people who come to Hype Machine the site and troll through the different posts that you have got listed there. And then there are people who are coming through and listening to that radio show that you do. So I seem to be hearing something about access, maybe like different types of access. And access being more important maybe than ownership, so people sharing of these different bands that they like, things they have heard recently. A great remix or something like that. And it seems to be access might be potentially more important than the ownership of that song. Could you speak to this idea of accessing information about a new band, information about a concert in your area, as being important to Hype Machine, or maybe potentially connected to this idea of access over ownership.

AV: Well, there is a lot here. So there are a couple of things. One is that access over ownership is a thing that has been definitely happening with a lot of digital music and other types of media. Just because of the sheer overwhelming volume of potential music you could have. So, software like Spotify and Ardio, there sort of—the entire premise of those business is based on people preferring access over ownership, simply because then if they have access to many millions of tracks, they don’t have to worry about buying specific files and managing the files and storing the files and backing the files up and whatever else that can happen with files. The convenience factor is huge there. But in the case of Hype Machine, there is another thing in play too, where once you have access to this number of tracks, how do you actually figure out what to listen to? It’s actually very overwhelming if you have access to a million tracks, because how do you start? In the way that bloggers do and what Hype Machine brings together, it kind of gives you a starting point. Which is super important in not making you feel overwhelmed and frustrated with this sort of infinity—infinite nature of what these services have made available. Because you really can’t listen to everything. There is just not enough time.

LG: You are kind of curators of great music online. And I think just that service on its own is just so useful and so necessary, because we have access to everything now. And now we need people to help us, to guide us though everything. So I think as a service, Hype Machine—thank you, it is awesome!

AV: Thank you.

LG: So I am really, really happy we got to do this interview. I have one last question, and it’s actually about the future of Hype Machine. So, to close up our interview, could you speak about the possible future you are imaging for Hype Machine, what’s on the horizon for the site?

AV: What we’re mostly busy with now is figuring out the right mobile experience for people that are curious about new things. In the context of music blogs, people that are publishing about new things. What does that look like on your phone, to hear the new songs, that these people have selected? What does it mean to provide the right amount of context for the viewer and the listener? So that it works on their phone. Just because the way that people look at information on their phone is so different from their normal computer and you have to prioritize and design things very carefully. The future for us is figuring out what’s the best experience around that so that you can take Hype Machine in your pocket or on your iPhone or android, and still have a really rich experience that doesn’t overwhelm you, but still has a lot of meaning to that context around—that the bloggers have built around the music allows for. Because if you take the context away, it’s just a bunch of random songs and that just not very interesting at all.

LG: The mobile communication seems to be the future for Hype Machine.

AV: Absolutely. It’s the hardest stuff, everyone’s been—We recently made a big update to our iPhone app. We are just working on more updates to that, to refine it some more. Even so far the response has been really amazing. So I am very happy about that.

LG: Well, I’m looking forward to it. When I finally get an iPhone, which is going to happen soon, I’m going to definitely download the Hype Machine.

AV: That’s great.

LG: Thanks Anthony. This has been wonderful. Thank you so much for really showing us what the Hype Machine can do.

[Fourth major segment: UT gradute students Trevor Hoag and Ryan Murphy talk about the sharing of academic texts and grad student work. *Zeugma*’s Eric Detweiler introduces the segment; Lisa G. narrates.]

[40:11]

Eric: For our next segment, the Zeugma team talked about the digital sharing of writing with two writers who have connections to UT Austin. One is Trevor Hoag, a doctoral candidate in UT’s department of Rhetoric and Writing. Trevor is specifically interested in rhetoric and digital literacies, and his research focuses on the intersections of rhetorical theory, pedagogy, digital studies, and continental philosophy. He is currently finishing his dissertation, which is titled “Occupying Memory: Rhetorical Studies for the 99%.” Our other guest, Ryan Murphy, is a poet who recently received his MFA in creative writing from UT. We’ll get to hear a bit more about Ryan’s current projects at the end of the segment.

[40:56]

Lisa: As early as kindergarten, Ryan Murphy learned that sharing is caring. To this day, he thinks that sharing is a good thing. Ryan Murphy is not against sharing. But when UT Austin asked him to publish his master’s thesis online, the 24 year old said no. He did not want to share his poetry with the world—at least, not online.

Ryan: My master’s report, like all the other creative writing students’, is that you write a creative thesis. So since it was that we had to do creative works, I guess UT now has a rule, or it’s just a part of the process that all the theses have to be on the Internet. And so, when it’s on the Internet, that means it’s already published, people can see it very easily, and so I don’t think it’s usually a problem for most students because the MA report is kind of like a stepping-stone into Ph.D land, but for creative writing students, it’s more of a problem because it’s our final product, and usually it’s like a manuscript for the book that we’ll probably shop around at some point. So that makes it a problem if it’s online because a lot of publishers don’t like the idea of work being pre-published in any format.

Lisa: And it’s not only traditional publishers who are skeptical about scholars putting their work online. Trevor Hoag, who is currently writing his dissertation on rhetorics in the digital age, has heard similar advice from his professors and peers.

Trevor: When it comes to scholarship that isn’t sort of, you’re doing it for a degree, but scholarship that is for tenure, and things like that—I mean I’ve encountered multiple times where, from well known scholars and important people in the field who basically say, they still would contend that it’s academic suicide to publish your work online. And sadly, a lot of people still maintain that attitude.

Lisa: It is surprising that scholars would be so hesitant to share their work online. After all, sharing, or publishing as it’s called in academia, is central to modern science. It might not sound like a big deal to us, but when the Royal Society of London published the first scientific journal in 1655, this was a major breakthrough. For the first time, scientists had a venue to share their work with their peers. Their colleagues could replicate and build on their findings. The idea caught on quickly. In the decades to follow, academic print journals were established for every field imaginable, from ballet dance to quantum physics. The UT Austin library, for example, subscribes to almost 7,000 journals. Since scholars are apparently so keen on sharing their knowledge with the world, you would expect them to be excited about the internet. Online, they can reach a much wider audience at lower cost. After all, printing and shipping of printed journals would be a thing of the past. Trevor can think of even more advantages.

Trevor: Obviously just a different amount of readership, right, because you don’t have the traditional problem of limited space. So, in a print journal, you can have three to five articles. But you really can’t do much more than that for reasons of money and other things like that. But in an online journal, you hypothetically could have as many articles as you wanted to. Like when we published the sound oriented issue of currents a couple years back, we had fourteen pieces in that. And some people would say that was excessive, but I felt like it would have been arbitrary to start cutting them. And I felt like we had this infinite space, why not? And I feel like the benefits of that were really apparent. It was probably the most popular issue the journal maybe has ever had. There are other really important reasons for doing it too. One is not only the accessibility of the broader audience, which allows young scholars to get their work read, allows more people in the academic conversation especially outside the academy, because you never know who’s going to read your stuff if it’s in an online journal. There’s also the accessibility issues related to disability. If you’re not sighted, for example, you can’t read a print journal. That’s the bottom line. But if you have an online journal, and you have a screen reader, boom, suddenly that whole world is opened up to someone it wouldn’t have been open to before. Content is another big reason to make a shift, or to at least value the digital too. Like, you read a traditional print article, and that’s it. You’ve got print. No videos, no audio, no links. It’s a very static environment. It’s not terribly dynamic.

Lisa: Then why is the shift to online publications not happening? Trevor thinks that the academic establishment is skeptical of online publications for simple reasons.

Trevor: I think that the biggest thing people are worried about with digital publishing is probably the vetting process. People are terrified that if you leave things up to a broader audience, that all the garbage will get through. And historically, people, say, were resistant to democracy for exactly the same reason, right? “We can’t trust the unwashed masses to make these decisions.” It’s no different than the academic publishing world. You look at a journal, you say, “what, we can’t let the unwashed graduate students choose what’s in this journal, or we can’t let the larger community choose what goes in this journal, because they’re incapable.” It’s a fear of democracy.

Lisa: After all, the shift to digital has much broader implications. He says:

Trevor: There’s a specifically digital commons, which is essentially just a segment about larger common rights. So it’s all of the vast archive, the vast repository of all the knowledges, codes, affects, images, languages, that are all now inhabiting digital networks, and that we’re all producing it, we’re building it, and we’re also at the same time using it to exchange information with each other to produce further, and to come up with innovations and things like that. And so, that kind of space that’s opened up in that way, it’s a revolutionary space for a couple of different reasons. It’s revolutionary politically, because it resists commodification, it resists ownership of intellectual property, and then it’s revolutionary in the sense of innovation, too. Because if you have this vast repository of all the knowledges, languages, images, affects, codes, you name it, that are out there, then anyone can draw on them to synthesize them, and come up with something new. That’s a different kind of revolution. That’s a revolution in thought. So these kind of commons, or the common in both cases just have endless potential for that reason.

Lisa: But eventually, Trevor and Ryan agree, academia will have to, and will, adapt. Which does not mean we have to get rid of printed books.

Ryan: Everything can be, should be online. I mean, it doesn’t mean we should eliminate the library or physical books, just put them all in a fire or something, but I think that we should have online equivalents for many of the things that we have physical copies for. I mean, online presents its own issues, but if we’re just simply talking about having access to data, then yes online would make a lot of sense.

Lisa: And Ryan will get to share his work with the world after all. One week after the interview, he signed a publishing contract for his collection of poems, Called “First Man on Mars.” The book will be out in fall of 2013.

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