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Framing the Net

Essay by Doc Searls, January 31, 2009

We're always talking about something else. Regardless of the subject at hand, we have other subjects in mind that help us say what we mean. According to cognitive science, *all* of our thought and speech is metaphorical. That is, we understand everything in terms of something else.

For example, time is not money, but it is *like* money, so we speak about time *in terms of* money. That's why we "save," "waste," "spend," "lose," "throw away" and "invest" time. Another example is life. When we say birth is "arrival," death is "departure," careers are "paths" and choices are "crossroads," we think and speak about life in terms of travel. In fact, it is almost impossible to avoid raiding the vocabularies of money and travel when talking about time and life.

The embodied nature of our conceptual systems — our frames — is profound. Why do we say happy is "up" and sad is "down"? Why do we compare knowledge with "light" and ignorance with "dark"? The answer is that we are diurnal animals that walk upright. If bats could talk, they might say good is dark and bad is light.

Of course, one subject might have many metaphors, and it is easy to mix them. In Metaphors We Live By, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson point out that *ideas* are framed in all the following ways: *fashion* ("old hat," "in style," "in vogue"), *money* ("wealth," "two cents worth, "treasure trove"), *resources* ("mined a vein," "pool," "ran out of"), *products* ("produced," "turning out," "generated"), *plants* ("came to fruition," "in flower," "budding"), and *people* ("gave birth to," "brainchild," "died off").

Yet none of those frames is as essential to *ideas* as what Michael Reddy calls the *conduit metaphor*. When we say we need to "get an idea across," or "that sentence carries little meaning," we are saying that *ideas are objects*, *expressions are containers*, and *communications is sending*.

Which brings us to the Internet.

Given the primacy of the conduit metaphor, it only makes sense that we speak of the the Internet as a "medium" through which "content" can be "uploaded," "downloaded" and "delivered" to "consumer" through "pipes." Dig deeper and we find transport language in TCP/IP (for Transmission Control Protocol/Internetworking Protocol), in "packets," in the "transport layer," in the File Transport Protocol (FTP) and in all the mail protocols.

Not surprisingly, those we call "carriers" frame the Net in terms of *transport* and *property*. They do that because they own "pipes" and sell use of them. In a 2005 Business Week interview, Ed Whiteacre, then the CEO of SBC (now AT&T) said of Google and other companies, "Now what they would like to do is use my pipes free, but I ain't going to let them do that because we have spent this capital and we have to have a return on it. So there's going to have to be some mechanism for these people who use these pipes to pay for the portion they're using."

Another common frame for the Net — and especially the Web — is *real estate*. That's why we

say we have "sites" with "domains" and "locations" that we "architect," "design," "build" and "construct" for "visitors" and "traffic." We talk about going "on" the Net, and call it a "world," a "sphere," a "place," a "space" and an "environment" with an "ecology."

A third frame is *publishing*. This grows from Tim Berners-Lee's founding concept of the Web as an assortment of *documents*, connected by hyper*text*. Today we have "pages" that we "write," "author," "edit," "put up," "post" and "syndicate." When Dave Winer, one of blogging's inventors, improved its technology and practices with RSS — Really Simple Syndication — the Web became even more of a publishing platform.

Yet the Net is not a physical thing. It has no first costs. Its core protocols are barely encumbered by the concept of ownership. In fact, those who developed those protocols mostly operated on virtues which the open source community today characterizes as NEA:

1. **1. Nobody owns it**
2. **2. Everybody can use it**
3. **3. Anybody can improve it**

In the first two respects, the Net is like the periodic table. In the third respect the Net resembles only the free and open goods that grow in its own environment. Steve Larsen, CEO of the code source engine Krugle, estimates that the number of open source code bases now exceeds half a million.

Craig Burton characterizes the end-to-end architecture of the Net as a giant hollow sphere: the only geometric shape in which all "ends" are visible to all other ends. I've been calling this "the giant zero," because one of the Net's founding ideals is reducing toward zero the functional distance between any two people, or any two devices. Also the cost.

Unlike phone and cable systems, the Net was never meant to be understood, much less charged out, as minutes or channels. Those are mechanisms for organizing scarcity. The Net was built to support abundance. The closer it gets to zero in the middle, the more what it supports at the ends approaches the infinite.

The Net's *use value* so far exceeds its *sale value* that it's silly to subordinate the former to the frame of the latter. Yet that's what the carriers do with pricing and provisioning policies that prevent far more business than they enable. This is a legacy of what Bob Frankston calls The Regulatorium.

"As we establish the principle of neutrality," Bob writes, "we challenge the fundamental concept that the carriers own the transport for their own use in delivering services. We now create the services ourselves and it must be our infrastructure — not the carriers' private asset."

I'm not sure how we should frame that. But I am sure that we need to.

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