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Shared spaces

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When I've recently stayed at a youth hostel in Paranaguá, Paraná, Brazil, I was struck by a sign in one of the rooms. It reads "Sala de Convivência" with the English translation underneath: "Room to coexist." Featuring a number of sofas and three computers connected to the Internet, the room serves those who like to share the same physical space and at the same time those who want to stay "in touch" -- the touch of a keyboard -- with friends in their mailbox, on Orkut, Facebook, Twitter or anywhere else on the Internet.

The Michaelis English-Portuguese dictionary translates "coexistence" with "coexistência," while the entry on "convivência" says: "1 act or result of living in society. 2 company, companionship. 3 acquaintanceship. 4 familiarity, intimacy. 5 sociability."

It thus spans the whole range of relations from the intimacy of a couple via the companionship of friends to living together in society. While the first two can share the sofas, society by Benedict Anderson's definition is an "Imagined Community" (1983) stitched together by newspapers and symbols of empire. Thanks to the Internet, all three have become truly global. I can share intimate moments with my loved ones over Skype, wherever they are on the planet, excluding touch, but including the inflection of our voices and glances that say



more than a thousand words. Companions, colleagues and acquaintances afar are also part of my daily life, from the traces they leave on my social network pages to extended and heated online debates. No human is an island.

Anderson's imagined community is the nation-state that emerged in the 19th century. Millions of individuals imagining themselves as part of the same fraternity is quintessentially a media effect. Print-capitalism output a flood of vernacular publications, thus for the first time unifying a national language below the elitist lingua franca Latin and above local dialects, constituting a common discourse. Remarkably, Anderson's essential sign of nationhood is the willingness to die for it. Thus it is constituted in contrast and conflict with other nations.

Scanning the global knowledge space for the usage of the word "coexistence" immediately leads to its opposite: hostile antagonism, like in class struggle and in the Cold War. In 1953, China and India proposed the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence that include mutual non-aggression and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. Tibet was the issue then and is so until today. Che Guevara, in his 1964 speech to the United Nations proclaimed: "As Marxists we have maintained that peaceful coexistence among nations does not encompass coexistence between the exploiters and the exploited, between the oppressors and the oppressed." Calls for "peaceful coexistence" are made where there is none, e.g. in the Middle East.¹

Today, the nation-state remains an important unit, just as the city or the neighbourhood. But above it, globality has emerged. The United Nations, the coordination of the global financial system, international air travel -- many elements feed it. But just as the media technology of the 19th century brought about the nation state, the telecommunications technologies of the 20th and specifically the Internet of the 21st century are decisive in constituting a global society. It make us imagine ourselves as sharing the planet with the other seven billion individuals. And it makes us realize that we are all faced by the same global challenges, from man-made global warming and peak oil to [the digital knowledge system](#) whose current territorial regulation is increasingly out of synch with its global realities.

How then does one design coexistence? Two examples. Living in São Paulo I can't help perceiving the antagonism between car drivers and pedestrians. Counting the times I had a close escape from being run over, it's a deadly antagonism.

One impressive solution was designed by Dutch traffic engineer Hans Monderman. Common Sense tells us that people who are armed with 100 horse power vehicles and often think that they own the right of way and sometimes even a licence to kill, need to be civilized by rules and controls. Monderman was faced with traffic

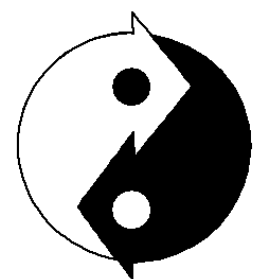


¹E.g., the exhibition "Coexistence" brings the universal message of diversity and acceptance of the other to the world community: <http://www.coexistence.art.museum/Coex/Index.asp>

accident hotspots where all the usual instruments were in place already: separate lanes for cars, bicycles and pedestrians, signs, traffic lights etc. Common sense tells us that if the existing instruments are not sufficient to prevent accidents, then more of them are needed. Monderman did the opposite. He removed all of them and called it "Shared Space."² This entirely counter-intuitive measure had surprising effects. Without external rules, traffic participants have to make eye-contact and negotiate ad hoc who goes first. The result is: more consideration of each other, more politeness and civility, and -- no more accidents. Insecurity creates security. His maxim was: "If you treat people like idiots, they will behave like idiots. Always assume they have intelligence." After having been ridiculed by those unable to think out of the box, Monderman's Shared Spaces are now being implemented across Europe and the world. Would it work in Brazil? I'm not sure, but it's certainly worth a try.

My second example is from copyright. The antagonism here is between an industry that generates its revenues by preventing access to its author's works and granting it only under condition of payment, and audiences that the digital revolution has empowered to re-distribute published works to each other globally without the need for industry. The decline of the music CD coincides with the emergence of peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing. Intuition suggests that the second is the cause for the first. Driven by this intuition, industry has been demanding ever more instruments of repression, and politicians have granted them.

As I am writing this, the first warnings are being sent to alleged copyright infringers in France. This is the first step in the "three strikes and you are out" scheme formally known as the HADOPI law. It is to be followed by a second warning, and if the person continues to file-share, he will be excluded from the Internet for up to one year.³ The model was invented by the international association of the four major music labels (IFPI) in 2005 and has been transposed into law first in France then in South Korea and Taiwan and is being called for in many countries, including Brazil, as well as in the highly controversial multi-lateral Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA). Law suits against more than 100,000 individuals world-wide, seizure of the domain names of allegedly infringing sites and technical measures like Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) and Internet filtering are further strategies in the 'war on sharing.'



Compartilhamento legal!

As nearly all experts agree, this repression is futile. The only way to end this war is legalizing file-sharing in exchange for a levy on broadband Internet access. Under the motto "Legalize File-Sharing! R\$3,00 from all for everything" an initiative from academia, law, music and culture has advanced this proposal in Brazil.⁴ We have submitted the Sharing Licence in the copyright law reform and started to campaign for it. It refers not only to file-sharing. More importantly, it recognizes the Internet as a global shared space. A space

²http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shared_space

³<http://torrentfreak.com/france-starts-reporting-millions-of-file-sharers-100921/>

⁴<http://www.compartilhamentolegal.org/>

where artists freely share their works with all, and all share a small amount of money with artists to enable them to create more.

In short, we need to question our intuitions that were formed in the analogue age. More often than not they do not apply in the digital one. We need to stop designing systems that treat people as idiots and antagonists. We need to switch from common sense to a Commons Sense. If we tread each other as partners, we will behave as partners. "Coexistence" says: "I exist here, you exist there, let's agree not to kill each other." In contrast, "sharing" says: "We have something to give to each other. When we cooperate, we can achieve something much greater than if we try on our own."