

The trouble with the media Cloud: If we can have everything, does it mean anything?

October 21 2011, By Christopher Borrelli

Why did they call it "The Cloud"? Couldn't they have chosen a better metaphor? Clouds burst. Clouds darken. Clouds disappear.

But then, I have a problem with The Cloud - with that vague digital ether where our books and music and movies increasingly reside, always available, unshackled from the bonds of physicality, hard format or even a [home computer](#). It doesn't matter if it's Apple's new iCloud, Amazon's cloud-based media storage, or the streaming service offered by Netflix. Each does basically the same thing - they provide me with digital real estate to store music, movies and books I own, freeing up space on my hard drive. And each has undermined how much I actually care about watching, listening and reading those same bits of media.

A few years ago, while cleaning out my grandparents' basement, I found a large, old, cardboard box that had been gnawed on by field mice, the kind of box that once held a dishwasher or refrigerator. It was crammed with music cassettes and VHS tapes and Marvel comics and copies of Famous Monsters of Filmland - a chaotic landfill of tangible stuff, a mess of touchstones from a childhood of pop culture consumption, the kind of stuff I once lingered over, ran fingers across, coveted, then likely tired of and forgot about. The box was so big, the pile so dense, I imagined a diamond at the bottom, fused by a crush of videotapes of "Late Night with David Letterman," issues of "Black Panther" and junked Styx records.

At the bottom, instead, there was a Memorex cassette. Its case had

probably been lost for decades and the thing itself, the audio cassette, carried only the crumbling yellowed remains of a label once stuck to its side.

I clicked it into the tape deck of my 10-year old car. The sound wobbled around for a moment, screeching and murmuring before coalescing. It was a cassette of songs I had taped off the radio, circa 1979. If you were born before the Reagan administration, you remember when this was necessary, an affordable music-owning option for an adolescent, albeit it an imperfect and frustrating solution - every tune on that cassette was choppy and began a few moments into the song, often with a wildly excited DJ announcing the song's title, and every song ended abruptly after the first few seconds of the next song or a car commercial.

Listening, I was reminded of a time before our appetites were scattered to the wind, when there were songs that everyone knew and TV shows that everyone watched. (These days, if you grow exhausted of hearing the same songs, or watching the same TV shows, you have no one to blame but your iPod shuffle.)

And listening to that tape again, it seemed even more poignant, and more vital. No longer did it remind me that people were becoming hyper-focused information islands and mass experience was dead; that war's been fought and lost. Instead, now it simply felt like a reminder of a time when I cared about the music I owned, when I was engaged enough to literally sit by the radio and grasp at it. Because lately, though I am no less interested in music, excited by movies or anxious to read books, I don't know what that enthusiasm means when I can access all of those things on a few digital files: Do I appreciate my music, movies and books less when the format is digital? When there's nothing more concrete than a binary code?

If I've opted for convenience over shelf space, why don't I listen to

music more often, watch more movies?

The other day I was telling Theaster Gates about this, because No. 1, he is a Chicago artist whose work is centered on the reclamation of old media, No. 2, he is 38 (about my age), and No. 3, he remembers a time before every song ever recorded was available via mouse click, every film ever made could be ordered through an online service and every book ever published in the history of man was moments from reading.

"Of course I would tape songs off the radio as a kid," he said. "It was a way to cheat the system. You grabbed it off the air. You captured it. And something about that process made music less ephemeral."

Yes, I said, ephemeral, that's how I feel about the media I download. And it doesn't matter if I love it or hate it, anxiously await it or ignore it - and it certainly doesn't matter if the work is a classic or a hot of-the-moment property. The ease of that download generally lessens its impact and makes it more disposable.

"Because that's how we are about the things we possess," Gates said. "It's always the woman you want who isn't available, right? Something about the unavailability of stuff, music, art, books, makes me value it more."

Of course, there's a touch of financial anxiety in this - as Paul Buckley, creative director at the Penguin publishing house, the guy who plans the art and design on print editions, told me: "The Cloud is the black cloud over my head. It's the black cloud hanging over everybody I know in print media and book publishing. Do I want to even be digital? I assume there will always be something tangible to hold, right? Or maybe I'm just a narcissist in this new world? Either way, your Cloud issue: This is something I worry about hourly."

But much worse than losing a job, I think, is losing a connection with the arts that made life more vibrant. And unquestionably, the Cloud has flattened my relationship with music and movies. It's given me the gift of instant gratification and endless access, but inadvertently reminded me that appreciation and availability are closely joined at the hip. To be specific, I have several thousand songs on my hard drive at home but I seem to listen to music less and less now; I often download new music from blogs, iTunes, Amazon, and usually, forget to listen to it. Last month, I bought the new Wilco album the day it was released. I haven't listened to it. In fact, I doubt I have listened much to any of the albums I have bought in the past six months.

Erik Hall is a Chicago musician, a staple of the indie scene, leader of bands such as In Tall Buildings, all of which still release CDs and vinyl records - partly, because "MP3s are a wash." It may be how he finds new listeners, "through music blogs and Spotify or Bandcamp or whatever, but it's still seen as just an MP3, one of a billion, easier to ignore. That's true for myself, too. Music is music, right? I should appreciate it no matter the format. Then why am I much less interested in playing a file than pulling a record off my shelf?"

At one time I would hunt through plastic cases and record sleeves for what I wanted; it was a pain. But the simple act of scrawling through a list on iTunes - or even simpler, typing in the title - is bloodless, dreary. There is no ceremony to the click, no connection. Likewise, once I would disrupt weekends just to see a movie - if it was leaving a theater and down to a few showtimes, I would cancel whatever I had planned, just to ensure that I did not miss it. And now, when that same scenario pops up, I have the security of my Netflix queue to fall back on. Which means, to scrawl through my queue is to scrawl through a graveyard of titles that I had to see and now feel no rush to actually watch; even worse is that many of those same titles can stream through my Xbox 360, and since they will always be there presumably, I rarely stream a new movie.

I sample, I dip in, but rarely watch.

I am like that Walt Whitman child, going forth, "and the first object he look'd upon, that object he became/ And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day." Or like, 10 seconds of a day.

Of course this is not lost on media companies.

Executives at Rhapsody, for instance, the music [streaming service](#), recently began asking itself a question as simple as this: What does it mean to listen to music now? Are our notions of listening antiquated? It's well established that iPods have pushed us from an album-listening to a single-listening culture, what does it mean that Rhapsody users, with access to a vast library, often listen to less than two minutes of anything?

"What we found," said Jon Maples, Rhapsody's director of product development, "is more of a sampling culture, less of a depth culture. (Digitally streaming music) have been great in many respects, but it leaves something on the cutting room floor. We've come a long way in providing access to all of the media in the world. We haven't done a great job providing the relevance that should come with it.

"As my boss says, we give people a bulldozer and let them pull up to the warehouse, then we say 'Get it.'"

Meaning, something is missing, a connection that people feel with their music, their movies, their books.

Or as Jaron Lanier, the computer scientist and author of the manifesto "You Are Not a Gadget," puts it: "Information systems need to have information in order to run. But information underrepresents reality."

"Look, I'm not a Luddite," Gates said. "And I bet you're not, either."

He's right, I'm not. I bought an iPod 10 years ago, the week the original device hit stores. I bought an iPhone the week that device debuted. I have an iPad and a Mac laptop and TiVo and three video game systems that will stream Netflix; in the mid 1980s I had an early version of the Mac and my family even had CompuServe, the first commercial online service, and I remembering buying a CD from its crude music store, mostly because of the novelty of digital transactions (it cost about \$20, in '80s dollars).

"No, you're not a Luddite at all," Gates said. "Just as I don't, in collecting all the stuff I collect, imagine myself a hard-core materialist. I like to text message. I tweet. Those things are conveniences, but it's just fraudulent for people to suggest that those vehicles, or any digital vehicles, contain as much historical value or memory or meaning as my things, my books my music, whatever. It's wrong to say my stuff is being replaced by things I can't touch. It isn't being replaced, because it isn't the same stuff anymore."

Have you seen that TV commercial for the Apple iPad? You know the one, with Peter Coyote's wizened, folksy voice, narrating images of people poking around digital copies of their family photos on an iPad and curling up at the end of a couch beside a window and turning a digital page. "We'll never stop sharing our memories," he says, "or getting lost in a good book." A twinkling, nostalgic piano score runs throughout.

I can't help think of the giant, evil teddy bear in "Toy Story 3," warm and friendly and disingenuous.

Perhaps because, at the moment, my relationship with books is pretty solid. It hasn't changed that much. I download some, but I still buy plenty

of print editions, and though I am constantly in need of new shelves, it feels like no bother. That Apple ad reminds me of something the writer Susan Orlean recently said to me: "Ten years from now, a digital format will be standard and I don't even say that with regret but because that's the way technology has moved, and it doesn't really matter if I approve or disapprove, that's just inevitable.

"The upside is that it gives a writer eternal life."

Like a vampire, I thought. Virile, but soulless. And here's Apple, gently reminding me I have no choice but to join them. My long-term fear, I suppose, is that my tastes become nothing more than a clickable line on a file; or as the novelist Zadie Smith wrote in a recent essay, about the way that Facebook undermines, "To (Mark) Zuckerberg, sharing your choices with everybody is being somebody." But in the short term, choosing a digital book over a real book feels like a false choice. "That may be nostalgic of you, in the sense you can't do anything about a drive toward digital media," said Sherry Turkle, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor who specializes in technology and alienation. "But what is so nostalgic about reminding yourself there was something valuable in our relationship with our objects? I think that is the next challenge of technology, to recapture that relationship, instead of just repeating, that's how things are."

She told me about a woman she knows who hands down every book she reads to one of her adult children. It's a family tradition, and her kids have come to expect it. But the woman recently bought a Kindle, and now she downloads her books. So, to avoid fraying that relationship with her children, she now buys most books twice - one digital copy and one hard copy, "because there's no meaning in passing along a file."

Indeed, MIT itself has a small department, the Tangible Media Group, tasked with "researching how we can bring some of the feeling of a

physical object to our digital bits," explained its founder, professor Hiroshi Ishii. That goes some way to solving one problem - the need for a piece of tangible media to carry a soul, "to provide you with that little pang you feel for a writer when you can clearly see that no one has checked his book out of the library in 37 years," said Richard Todd, author of "The Thing Itself: On the Search for Authenticity."

Which, if you believe Rob Sevier, co-founder of the Chicago-based Numero Group record label, known for its elaborate reissues of obscurities, is not a problem at all: The more availability there is, he said, the harder it is to find anything, digital or not, "which leads to the real problem with the Cloud, that there is a threshold to comprehension and you can only have a personal relationship with a certain number of your things anyway."

To borrow from Susan Sontag's 1977 book, "On Photography," and its prescient essay on collecting: We live in a world "on its way to becoming one vast quarry." And yet what is the value of a quarry with no bottom, inexhaustible and plundered without much effort and available for mining every day, at all hours?

There was a time when Laurie Anderson, the experimental artist, lamented not having recordings of her early shows - films of herself performing on the street, concert recordings. "But I can no longer say how I feel about having hard media versus nothing. Sometimes I wish that it wasn't such a blown-away world," she said. "And now I think I'm happy to be the medium myself, that people watch me doing whatever I do and it goes into their memories, and maybe gets lost in there. Or maybe they savor it."

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