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<p align="center">Marketing: a Bad Business Practice?</p>

As technology rapidly evolves, its users follow suit. Such a phenomena changes the way people, communities, organizations, and businesses function. Authors Eric Gordon and Adriana de Souza e Silva discuss this trend in their book *Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World.* Throughout the text they develop their theory of net locality; in summary it is a locational awareness based on the use of mobile technologies. Net locality is a byproduct of resources like digital media, mobile phones, and online maps. Their writings seek to study how such a phenomena comes into play with community and society, neighborhood connectivity, designing engagement, hyperlocal news and the government.

This article was particularly interesting to me as a business student. In my studies I have learned that perhaps the single most contributing factor to an organization's success is its marketing strategy. Every aspect of an online identity must be purposeful; small decisions like font, word choice, design, photos, networking associations, and resources all add up to create the an online identity. This presence yields one of two possible outcomes: it either grows the customer base or dissolves it. *Net Locality* forces me to critically consider the ways in which various organizations establish an online identity of community service or involvement for the purpose of furthering the ultimate goal of business: increasing shareholder value. The authors introduce their theory by establishing the effects of technological developments on the concept of community: "The telephone, the telegraph, the automobile, the elevator, and the mobile phone have all played some part in reorganizing social life- connecting people through physical and

virtual space *and* providing justification for disconnection. They have, each to a certain extent, increased social connectivity *and* social isolation at the same time" (Gordon 107). Technology is often bashed for its hand in increasing the isolation of an individual, but at the same time, it offers the opportunity of increased connectivity. In a similar fashion, I used to only credit a business that used digital resources to announce their efforts within a community. Now however, Gordon and de Souza e Silva invite me to uncover the negative aspects of online marketing. *Net Locality* makes me reconsider my previous assumptions by analyzing the motivations behind creating an online identity of a business, how accurate said identity is, and how the widespread nature of this establishment effect its integrity.

First and foremost, it is important to consider that this phenomenon of net locality has emerged because online identities are relatively simple for businesses to establish. Gordon and de Souza e Silva expand on this argument: "There are very low transaction costs associated with connecting with neighbors, One does not need to pay dues, or potentially confront someone face-to-face…the content of the exchanges is not ultimately what is important; rather, the mere presence of communication" (Gordon 109). Online media is perhaps the cheapest way for a business to market itself and has the potential to reach an indefinite number of people. Furthermore, it is a low-stakes means of marketing. If affords the opportunity to be overly broad, and make sweeping generalizations, all without really having to be accountable for the information. In fact, most viewers take the information on a page as truth and will never question it. Thus businesses have gravitated towards emphasizing community involvement on their webpage: it is not uncommon to find numerous pictures of their employees volunteering, lists of all the organizations they choose to donate profits to, and quite a bit of text establishing service as an integral part of their business, typically in some sort of mission statement. The ease and

simplicity surrounding the creation of online identities clearly has fashioned an attractive

marketing tactic for businesses, which is thereby leveraged by various organizations seek to

identify with values the public holds in high esteem, especially that of community service.

After establishing the practical nature of net locality, Gordon and de Souza e Silva seek

to inform readers on how it can be misused:

> The ability to cut, paste, and share online is a digital literacy with a wide range of
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> competencies and how these competencies are used to mobilize and foster
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> community is contingent on how well they are designed and supported by an
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> existing social infrastructure…Context often gets left out of design decisions
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> because it is commonly believed that the development of a platform for
>
> communication is enough to foster social and political engagement. (Gordon 111-
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> 112)

It is extremely easy for a company to create an online presence, however, the nature of the

practice makes it easy to misuse or misrepresent an organization's efforts. This point sparked my

interest and led me to look at the online presence of The Boeing Company, I where have been

working for the past year. Under the first tab on their homepage "About Us" there is a

"Corporate Citizenship" section. Boeing highlights itself as being "a responsible partner,

neighbor, and citizen" (Boeing). The section also emphasizes humanitarian efforts, nutritional

education, environmental stewardship, and an extensive involvement with the "diverse

communities and customers we serve" (Boeing). I am acutely aware that Boeing is an extremely

large company and I am still learning about what resources it offers, but over the past year I have

not seen these efforts play out quite to the extent Boeing depicts on its webpage. While interning

I only remember seeing one email from my employer about community service: it was a

voluntary service shift, called "Boeing Day of Service." To participate in this event employees must self-select themselves, go through a lengthy online registration process, and serve a couple hours over the weekend without pay. Does once annual opportunity really afford them the credentials of being active investors in the community? Furthermore, I have seen an overwhelming amount of office materials, like paper and office supplies, wasted at the expense of the environment. Is Boeing really committed to environmental stewardship in a holistic sense? Thus, I have learned to take everything with a grain of salt. When interpreting a company's online identity one must critically analyze the information being presented to them. Do glossy photos merely capture the volunteering endeavors of Boeing employees, or does the fact that each subject is in a Boeing shirt hint at a different agenda? Moreover, should I be alarmed to find common business jargon used in descriptions of corporate citizenship: "investing," "partnering," "pays off," "delivering," "innovated," and "efficient" have the potential to question their true motives. It seems Boeing might be, intentionally or unintentially, manipulating their efforts to increase goodwill- a tactic that is surely echoed by countless other organizations.

Knowing that the establishment of community involvement has become a fundamental method for businesses, whether accurately or inaccurately, to market themselves, we must examine if this practice is sustainable. Gordon and de Souza e Silva offer some perspective regarding net locality when it comes to overusing digital resources:

As this deluge of data reaches the average web or smart phone user, other challenges emerge that have to do with coordination of users and agencies and the interoperability of redundant applications. There is perhaps such a thing as too much of a good thing when it comes to data accessibility…If some of these tools

fail to work together, if there is too much redundancy, the whole system will shut down. (Gordon 125-126)

As this practice expands across the business world, its uniqueness is diluted; it becomes commonplace for businesses to promote their community endeavors, and as such, these efforts become less beneficial to a company. Therefore, the question must be asked whether or not this is a sustainable process: will companies still be willing to devote time, money, employee incentive, webspace, and performance goals to the practice of community service if, someday, it no longer serves to increase shareholder value?

Net Locality calls into question my previous assumptions with regards to the motivation behind creating an online identity of a business, the accuracy of this identity, and whether or not such a practice is sustainable. These ideas are particularly compelling for me as a business student seeking a successful career track in the professional world. I want to work for a company that not only advertises my values but instills them in the core of its being. If I am to spend upwards of forty hours a week at some job for the rest of my life, I want it to mean something. Furthermore, my active partnership with the Food Bank this quarter has made me particularly invested with the organization. I know how hard the staff works to actively serve the U-District community. I hate the idea that some business might write a single check or send a handful of employees to sort food for one afternoon and then claim on its website actively fighting hunger. Such an action would not be community service but an injustice. As I move forward with my studies and job I will critically consider whether an organization actually shares my values or is merely seeking to broadly identify with them in cyberspace for the purpose of growing its customer pool.

Works Cited

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Corresponding Links:

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http://www.boeing.com/boeing/companyoffices/aboutus/community/index.page

Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World (ebook):

http://uwashington.worldcat.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/title/net-locality-why-location-

matters-in-a-networked-world/oclc/694396548&referer=brief_results