A Case Study in Building Communities of Common Interest: How One Website Changed Jazz History

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study of a website project developed by a professor and students in a Web development class that has been in operation for nearly 13 years. It has provided a focal point around which a community of common interest has developed. The paper reviews this history of the website since its introduction and the critical success factors that have led to its success in meeting its original goals. The website provides students with a concrete example of how a Web presence can have an impact that goes well beyond what was originally planned.

Keywords: online communities, website case study, critical success factors, jazz

1. INTRODUCTION

It has often been said that any new techno-logical innovation is first applied to existing tasks in place of an earlier technology, most-ly because the new technology is cheaper, faster, or easier to learn. As the new tech-nology matures, however, it is often used in new ways that were never anticipated by its original pioneers (Weizenbaum, 1976). Many examples can be cited to support this statement. A striking one is the use of radio frequency communications to replace cable-based telegraph systems. The thought of using radio frequency communications, orig-inally known as "wireless telegraph", to broadcast news, entertainment and live cov-erage of sporting events was a good twenty years in the future.

Such has been the case with the Internet and the World Wide Web. In the mid-1990s, there was much speculation about the Web and what its true significance and range of applications might turn out to be. At the time most websites were static and what little interactivity there was tended to in-volve input forms and CGI scripts in support of e-commerce applications. Today's Web 2.0 and its range of applications were not anticipated fifteen years ago.

It was in this context that I began teaching a Web development course at Pace University in 1996. Besides topics such as HTML, the client-server model, and principles of web-site design, there was also an integrative student team project. In many respects, I felt that I was learning along with my class, so I decided to undertake a project of my

own with the assistance of some of my students.

In order to help motivate me to do a good and thorough job, I decided to develop a website around one of my favorite interests, namely jazz music. I had recently noticed that there was no website devoted to the life and music of the great jazz trumpet player, Fats Navarro. I thought it would be fun to do some research about him and perhaps also locate a couple of photographs and even some audio clips of his solos. My plan was to incorporate these elements as part of the project. I thought that adding the elements of graphics and sound in addition to text-based materials would be instructive to me and the class. Besides putting into practice the principles and techniques of designing and implementing a website, my personal objective for the project was to promote and enhance the legacy of Fats Navarro and his music.

After about three months work, the website debuted in the winter of 1997 as a subdirectory of my faculty website. This paper, however, is not about how the website was put together or what my students learned from the experience. Instead, it chronicles what has happened over the past twelve and a half years since it originally debuted on the web, and what lessons have come out of this experience. It has been a thoroughly fascinating journey with many twists and turns that I never could have anticipated arising out of a rather modest website about a largely unknown person who died nearly sixty years ago. The paper also comments on the power of the Web as a vehicle in the formation of communities of common interest and the development of more complete information through collaborative communications.

2. WHO WAS THEODORE "FATS" NAVARRO?

Before I begin charting the effects of the website on the jazz community, I would like to give a brief background on the subject around which the project revolved.

Theodore "Fats" Navarro (1923-50) is generally accepted by jazz critics and historians as being one of the greatest jazz trumpeters of all time. Navarro had a tragically brief career, yet his influence is still being felt. His full sound, brilliant technical command, great articulation and overall creativity are the hallmarks of his style.

Originally from Key West, Florida, he began playing piano and tenor sax before switching to trumpet when he was 13. He started gigging with dance bands when he was 17, played with Andy Kirk during 1943-1944, and replaced Dizzy Gillespie with the Billy Eckstine big band during 1945-1946.

Fats Navarro during a recording session in September, 1947.

During the next three years, Navarro was second only to Dizzy Gillespie among bop trumpeters. Navarro recorded with Kenny Clarke's Be Bop Boys, Coleman Hawkins,

Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, Illinois Jacquet, Dexter Gordon, and most significantly Tadd Dameron during 1947-1949. During this time he had short stints with the big bands of Lionel Hampton and Benny Goodman, continued working with Dameron, made classic recordings with Bud Powell (in a quintet with a young Sonny Rollins), and participated in the 1948 Metronome All-Stars recording session. A few weeks short of his death in July, 1950 he appeared at Birdland, a famous jazz nightclub, in New York City with Charlie Parker, Bud Powell and Miles Davis, which was privately recorded.

Navarro, however, was a heroin addict, an all too common situation of jazz musicians of the period. This in combination with tuberculosis led to his death at age 26. Sadly, his potential was only partially realized. His playing is well documented during the years 1946-1949 and most of his output is currently available on CD.

For purposes of this paper, the facts of his life are not important, but are included for those who might be interested. It is enough to say that he was a very substantial talent and an important artistic contributor during one of the peak periods of creativity in jazz history.

3. NAVARRO WEBSITE DEBUTS ON WEB

One of the early decisions I made was to keep the website entirely non-commercial. So, there are no solicitations to purchase CDs and no links to record vendors. As mentioned before, the website debuted on the Web in the winter of 1997. At first nothing happened. This was not a disappointment, since I had no anticipation that anyone would take notice. But as the months passed, the various search engines of the period (Yahoo, AltaVista, Excite, InfoSeek, Lycos, WebCrawler, etc.) found the website and added it to their libraries of links. I began to notice that people were visiting the website. Moreover, I began to receive email from a wide variety of people including musicians (usually trumpet players), jazz educators, jazz critics and historians, record company executives, radio disc jockeys, people who had heard Navarro play in person, music school students, jazz record and memorabilia collectors, and jazz enthusiasts just like me. Of particular interest to me were emails from Navarro's family members, including one of his sisters and his only child, a daughter, Linda. These contacts have taken place throughout the life of the website. The volume of emails that I have received has not been great, numbering perhaps about 500 in all, but they are usually interesting and informative. The interactions took a number of forms as follows:

- First, nearly every message has been complimentary about the website including comments such as "thanks for the overdue recognition of a great trumpet player", "very informative", "keep up the good work", and so forth;
- Second, many people have pointed out errors in the details of his life and particularly his "discography", which is the documentation of all the recorded work of a musician or musical group. This meant that over time, the quality of the content of the website has been continually improving;
- Third, some messages offered entirely new information about his life and music. Others offered to send me tapes of rare or even never before released recording sessions. Some others gave me rare photographs. Still others provided me with the addresses and phone numbers of musicians who were still living who had played with Navarro. This led to a series of phone interviews that brought out information that was not documented in the jazz literature.

- Fourth, several people have done scholarship on Navarro and asked if I would post their contribution.

As time went by, I began to notice that an increasing number of other jazz or music sites had links to my Navarro website. This along with fairly frequent visits led to the website being listed first or second on search engine queries for "Fats Navarro." In short, this small place in cyberspace began to function as an unofficial clearinghouse of information about Fats Navarro. As of this writing, it appears second on a Google search after the Wikipedia entry on Navarro, and the Wikipedia website includes a link back to my website.

Over the years I have discussed the case study with students as a way of illustrating the potential power of the Web. On occasion interested students have added features to the website, such as JavaScript code, to enhance the functionality of the website.

4. THE RAISING PROJECT

As the 50th anniversary of Navarro's death was approaching in 2000, I thought that it would be good to take a photograph of his burial site. Unfortunately, no one seemed to know exactly where this was other than "somewhere in New Jersey." A year later, I eventually learned that he is laid to rest at the Rosehill Cemetery in Linden, NJ in what turned out to be the "Negro section" of the cemetery. Apparently cemeteries were still segregated in 1950, even in New Jersey. When I finally visited his grave site, I was surprised to find that he was buried in an unmarked grave. All that one could see was grass. How could this be, I thought? Here lay one of the greats of jazz, America's only truly original art form, and his grave site was unmarked? This could not stand.

I soon contacted Linda Navarro in Seattle, Washington. Upon discovering that she too did not know that her father's grave site was unmarked, we decided to join forces to seek funding for a proper headstone. I could think of no better means than to use the website to solicit funds, so over the course of about six months, we raised a sum of $3,140 through donations ranging from $5 to $500. Our original goal had been $2,500. I maintained a small bar chart on the website so that visitors could check the status of our fundraising efforts. We had the welcome assistance of a third person – another avid Navarro fan – who lived in New Jersey not too far from the cemetery. He worked with the cemetery officials, got the appropriate permit forms, designed the headstone, made arrangements with a Vermont-based headstone company, and in general handled all the local arrangements.

Our plan was to have a simple dedication of the new headstone attended by a handful of people on September 24th, 2002, which would have been Navarro's 79th birthday. As we were moving forward with our fundraising efforts, however, the larger jazz community and local Linden, NJ officials got wind of the coming dedication. Soon after that, the whole headstone and dedication project took on a life of its own.

5. FATS NAVARRO DAY

In the spring of 2002, Maxine Gordon, widow of tenor sax great Dexter Gordon who had played with Navarro, called Bruce Lundvall, President of Blue Note Records and Board Chairman of Jazz Alliance International (JAI), for help with the project. Navarro had recorded for Blue Note on several occasions in the late 1940s, and being a sponsor of the event would also promote one of Blue Note's artists whose records continue to sell to this day.

In addition, JAI, a subsidiary of the International Association of Jazz Educators, was approached by Lundvall to get involved. JAI is dedicated to expanding the audience and visibility of jazz by raising the profile of the

art form and by fostering better working relationships within the global jazz community through advocacy, education and research. Lending support to the project was consistent with their mission.

JAI's response was not only to become involved with the headstone dedication ceremony, but also to establish a Fats Navarro Scholarship. The Fats Navarro Scholarship pays tribute to Navarro's Cuban heritage by recognizing and funding the education of exceptional young Cuban music students. JAI also decided to sponsor a reception following the dedication at Amici's Restaurant in Linden.

This brought the Town Fathers of Linden and Mayor John Gregorio to proclaim that September 24, 2002 would be "Fats Navarro Day" in Linden. A bit later the Linden High School Madrigal Singers asked if they could perform "Amazing Grace" as part of the dedication ceremony.

Finally, to help raise funds in support of the Fats Navarro Scholarship, a Fats Navarro Tribute Concert in which today's top jazz trumpet players would play at no charge compositions either written by Navarro or closely associated with him. The concert would take place at the Jazz Standard on East 27th Street in Manhattan on the same evening as the dedication ceremony.

Thus, our original plan of a quiet little dedication ceremony of half an hour at most had turned into nearly a full day of activities.

6. THE BIG DAY ARRIVES

September 24, 2002 turned out to be a lovely early fall day with temperatures in the 70s. I arrived early for the dedication ceremony that was to start at noon. There were about forty folding chairs in place in front of the headstone that had been provided by the high school. As the gathering arrived, I met in person for the first time Navarro's

daughter, Linda, and Elizabeth Navarro Carr, Navarro's younger sister, as well as many others whom I knew only by email. Altogether there would be about fifty in attendance, including Linden town officials, JAI board members, other Navarro relatives, the famous jazz trumpeter players, Donald Byrd and Jon Faddis, my friend from Denmark, members of the jazz press, and a collection of jazz fans. One fan flew in from Los Angles just for this occasion. The Linden High School Madrigal Singers performed "Amazing Grace" as planned and several people made remarks, including myself, about the legacy of Navarro's music and life.

After the dedication program had concluded, the group went to the reception at Amici's

Linden High School Madrigal Singers perform "Amazing Grace."

Restaurant. Later that afternoon there was a presentation at the high school auditorium about the nature of jazz music and how it evolved. A six-piece jazz group gave demonstrations of the jazz styles – ragtime, Dixieland, swing, bebop, afro-Cuban, fusion – before a receptive audience of several hundred students. While driving to Manhattan where the tribute concert would take place, I listened to WBGO-FM radio, which has an all-jazz format. The station was playing Navarro's music and made frequent announcements of the details regarding the concert. So, the media had become involved as well.

I won't review further how the rest of the day unfolded other than to say that it was a beautifully realized day that met, and in many ways exceeded, every expectation that I might have had.

While attending the Fats Navarro Tribute Concert that evening, I could not help but wonder how all this had happened. One thing, however, was clear; without the Navarro website, none of the events of the day would have taken place. A reporter from Down Beat was on hand to cover the event (Down Beat Magazine, 2002).

Fats Navarro Tribute Concert at the Jazz Standard

7. A FATS NAVARRO BIOGRAPHY

Perhaps the crowning outcome of this entire Fats Navarro website saga is the recent publication of the first full length biography on Navarro. The authors, Leif Bo Petersen and Theo Rehak, were introduced to one another through the Navarro website. Their biography, *The Music and Life of Theodore "Fats" Navarro*, published by Scarecrow Press, fully realizes the original objectives of the website project of promoting and enhancing the legacy of Fats Navarro and his music (Petersen & Rehak, 2009).

8. WHAT MADE THE WEBSITE WORK AND WHERE DID IT FALL SHORT?

One could divide websites of communities of common interest into two broad categories: (1) websites whose primary objective is to provide a forum for participants to learn, and share views and information about some subject of interest to the participants, and (2) websites that are designed to motivate participants to some type of action that takes place outside of the context of the website. In the first case, the focus of action is on what happens on the website itself, while in the second case the focus of action is what participants do in the "real world" that is related to the subject of common interest. An example of the first category is a blog in which participants air their views on gossip, politics, or social issues of the day. They "vent" as they see fit, but there is no particular expectation that they should do anything except return to the blog the next day. This might be called a "web-centric" website. An example of the second category is a website that offers advice or a forum for participants to share informative experiences that will lead other participants to change their behavior in some way. Examples range from websites about cooking, gardening, parenting, prudent financial management, how to select a good college that meets your needs, and so forth. This might be called a "practice-centric" website.

In the case study of the Fats Navarro website, the original purpose falls into the first category, that is, to inform participants (visitors to the website), and to be informed by participants as well, regarding the music and legacy of Fats Navarro. Thus, contributions in the form of corrections to the Web content, new information, critical analyses, musical transcriptions of Navarro solos designed for advanced students, and so forth were welcome, but nothing further was expected of website visitors. However, when a need arose – the funding of the headstone project – the website changed temporarily its focus

toward active support of the project. I see a connection between these two categories. The first focus, which was successfully realized, helped set up the second focus of directed action. This conclusion is in large part supported by the literature on action-oriented community building. At the same time, the literature also reveals certain potential opportunities to strengthen community support that was not capitalized upon by the Navarro website.

9. COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Wenger defines "communities of practice" as groups of people who share information, insights, experience, and tools about an area of common interest (Wenger, 1998). A community's focus could be on a professional discipline, such as reservoir engineering or biology, a skill such as machine repair, or a topic such as a technology, an industry, or a segment of a production process. I argue that an artistic endeavor also falls well into this definition. Based in Wenger's definition and various empirical studies, McDermott has identified ten critical success factors in building communities of practice (McDermott, 2000). Wenger and McDermott do not specifically address online communities, but I think that their ideas can readily be applied to them.

10. MCDERMOTT'S CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS IN BUILDING COMMUNITY

These ten factors are broken down into four categories as shown below:

Management Challenges

1. Focus on topics important to the business and community members.
2. Find a well-respected community member to coordinate the community.
3. Make sure people have time and encouragement to participate.
4. Build on the core values of the organization.

Community Challenges

5. Get key thought leaders involved.
6. Build personal relationships among community members.
7. Develop an active passionate core group.
8. Create forums for thinking together as well as systems for sharing information.

Technical Challenge

9. Make it easy to contribute and access the community's knowledge and practices.

Personal Challenge

10. Create dialogue about cutting edge issues.

11. RELATING MCDERMOTT'S CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS TO THE WEBSITE PROJECT

Let's briefly review these critical success factors in relation to the website project and see how they might apply or not apply.

Focus on topics important to the business and community members.

The first factor fits rather well as long as you substitute "business and community members" with those who are interested in jazz and Fats Navarro in particular. Without some strong focal point of interest to draw participants, a community of common interest will not form.

Find a well-respected community member to coordinate the community.

Second, I had no particular standing in the jazz community as the website debuted in 1997, but being a "professor" did lend a certain authenticity to the website. Many visitors assumed that my academic field was music or jazz studies. I also believe that the non-commercial nature of the website made it more credible. There was and remains no financial motive to the website. As time passed, the website – my alter-ego – gained

respect due to the polite and even-handed matter in which I interacted with members of the community.

Make sure people have time and encouragement to participate.

Three, being that this is a website, participants have an unlimited time to read and react to all of the Web content that is available. The website continued to grow as more and more materials were contributed and added. Participants were encouraged to share experiences related to Fats Navarro and many contributions have been made over the years.

Build on the core values of the organization.

Fourth, although there was no stated set of "core values" for the website, it was clear what its purpose was and that there was a commitment to providing accurate and reliable information, and a willingness to correct and add new information when it became available.

Get key thought leaders involved.

Fifth, when the time came for action, key participants in leadership positions became involved to move the project forward as described earlier. Included in this list were the President of Blue Note records, the Executive Director of JAI, the mayor of Linden, NJ, the Linden High School music director, the owners of the Jazz Standard Jazz Club who made the club available at no charge for the tribute concert, and the major jazz performers who donated their time to help raise funds to start the Fats Navarro Scholarship. It would be interesting to do a stakeholder analysis of the key people and the motives behind their active participation, but I will leave that for another paper.

Build personal relationships among community members.

Sixth, several people were frequent contributors to the website and over time I communicated with them personally, including in person meetings. This was also the case with several Navarro family members. Ini-

tially some family members were suspicious of my motives, particularly when I would ask questions about Navarro family history and early influences on Navarro during his formative years in Key West, FL. I was able to overcome these suspicions to some degree, but not fully. There always seemed to be the lingering thought that I somehow was trying to capitalize financially on the legacy of their famous family member and that I would cheat them out of their share. It was understandable, but a bit disappointing.

Develop an active passionate core group.

Seventh, over most of the life of the website, the core group has been the Navarro biographers, Navarro's daughter Linda, and me. We have worked together for years and have drawn in others where needed. The larger group that developed to put on the Fats Navarro Day event seemed to emerge on its own. Most everyone involved is passionate about the music and feels that it should be more widely recognized and appreciated.

Create forums for thinking together as well as systems for sharing information.

Eighth, here is an area where improvements might have brought more solidarity to the community. The website never had a discussion board or blog, so all interactions with the website went through me. I in turn would connect like-minded people to one another when it seemed to make sense to do so. On the other hand, unpleasant comments and disagreements can occur in an unmediated discussion board that could undermine community solidarity. Perhaps a mediated discussion group would have been the best approach to foster a stronger sense of community. I did, however, maintain an email address list of all those who sent me notes, and on occasion I would send a broadcast email to this core group to inform them of some recent development. I refer to them as a core group since they took the time to send me an email note.

Make it easy to contribute and access the community's knowledge and practices.

Ninth, this was realized by encouraging contributions to the content of the website. I estimate the size of the website has at least tripled since its debut as a result of all the additional content that has been contributed. And at least half of this is entirely new material that had not come to light in the literature.

Create dialogue about cutting edge issues.

Tenth, I doubt that this success factor applies to the website project. There is nothing that is "cutting edge" about it.

12. CONCLUSIONS

The experience of this case study that has turned into a 13 year saga is one of the most satisfying to me at both a professional and personal level. I believe that it illustrates beautifully the power of the Internet and the Web to foster and promote online communities of common interest and to empower the community to take positive action in the real world. It helps to bring together people from all over the world who were largely unaware of each other and who didn't realize that there are so many like-minded people.

If this project were initiated today, it might take the form of a blog, a Facebook page, a wiki, or some other Web 2.0 technology. Still the principles and success factors identified in the paper would apply equally well today.

13. REFERENCES

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