2015

Preface to "Intertwingled: The Work and Influence of Ted Nelson"

Douglas R. Dechow
Chapman University, dechow@chapman.edu

Daniele C. Struppa
Chapman University, struppa@chapman.edu

Recommended Citation

Douglas R. Dechow
Daniele C. Struppa *Editors*

Intertwingled

The Work and Influence of Ted Nelson

Springer Open

Preface

Over 40 years ago, Ted Nelson published *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*. It was a most unusual piece of writing. Its layout of two books in a single binding—published back-to-back, but reversed so that each had a front cover—was meant to confront the user's notions of text and reading. In the *Computer Lib* portion, Ted wrote, "EVERYTHING IS DEEPLY INTERTWINGLED. In an important sense there are no 'subjects' at all; there is only all knowledge, since the cross-connections among the myriad topics of this world simply cannot be divided up neatly." Ted Nelson wrote these words as a challenge to us all, a call to engage with the interconnected complexity of knowledge. We might say that Ted Nelsons' exhortation is nothing but a clear reflection of what the liberal arts are supposed to teach. Nelson's claim is maybe the strongest call for a renewed attention to what academia likes to call "interdisciplinarity," but as we read in his words, it becomes clear that the point is not to build bridges between disciplines, but rather to realize that the divide between disciplines (or 'subjects' as Nelson calls them) is artificial and intellectually cannot be sustained. Ted Nelson has spent more than 50 years making us aware of the need for and exhorting us to develop the tools that would change the world's way of seeing, accessing, and connecting information. And once we agree that disciplinary barriers need to be taken down, the whole idea behind the worldwide web becomes simply the technological realization of an intellectual decision.

On April 24, 2014, Chapman University hosted "Intertwingled: The Work and Influence of Ted Nelson," a conference to celebrate the anniversary of the publication of *Computer Lib/Dream Machines* and his many contributions to computing and to the generation of knowledge in our world. As a part of that event, Chapman University awarded Ted Nelson an honorary doctorate. We felt that such an award was most appropriate, as Ted's approach to the big questions is a reflection of our university's most esteemed hopes for our students and the embodiment of our mission: to teach our students how to lead inquiring, ethical, and productive lives as global citizens for the rest of their lives. The award citation read in part:

By focusing on the important questions of how people will work with and use information, we honor your curiosity and ingenuity as a media innovator and systems designer. From your early work that led to the creation of *hypertext* and to the *docuverse*—a world-wide network of hypertext documents—that you envisioned first, you laid the groundwork for the information ecosystem that has shaped the 21st century. We honor your perseverance and tenacity in working for nearly fifty years on the Xanadu system, your vision of the docuverse.

In this volume, which takes its name from the conference, *Intertwingled*: *The Work and Influence of Ted Nelson*, Nelson, his colleagues and contemporaries from the computing world and the scholars who continue to examine his work take up those topics that have been the subject of Nelson's frenetic and fluid mind for the past 50 years: hypertext, the docuverse, and Xanadu.

We have organized the seventeen contributed chapters into four parts: I. Artistic Contributions, II. Peer Histories, III. Hypertext & Ted Nelson-influenced Research, and IV. The Last Word. As befits Nelson's wide-ranging and interdisciplinary intellect, the first section includes a cartoon and a sequence of poems; both were created in Nelson's honor. In the section of Peer Histories, readers get a sense of the milieu that resulted from Nelson's ideas. In addition, several of the authors discuss what it is like to collaborate directly with Nelson. The penultimate section, Hypertext & Ted Nelson-influenced Research, wrestles with Nelson's influence and legacy.

The fourth and final section of *Intertwingled,* appropriately enough entitled The Last Word, is comprised of a single contribution from Ted Nelson himself. In it, he tells the reader—just as he did at the Intertwingled conference—that he's spent the day listening to his obituaries. He says, "I feel very lucky to have eavesdropped on these thoughtful pre-mortems." Nothing could be further from the truth. We believe that the world—particularly the technology world—is better off for having Ted alive and kicking at the boundaries of the possible. We can confirm that Nelson's mind is as active as ever—he constantly emails us with his observations of the world—and that his body has barely slowed.

Shortly after the Intertwingled conference, Open Xanadu had its first release, a moment 50 years in the making. Who can tell what will be next from Ted Nelson? We look forward to more years of Nelson's ground-breaking ideas and tireless work. We wish him much success as he pursues his vision of the docuverse.

Acknowledgments

Curiel, Laurie Cussalli, Mando Diaz, Rebecca Green, Sheri Ledbetter, David Lowe, Carl Minor, and Frank Warren. In addition, members of the Chapman University Department of English assisted in producing the Festschrift; graduate students Danny De Maio and Tatiana Servin transcribed several of the talks, and Dr. Anna Leahy provided editing for those talks.

Orange, CA   Douglas R. Dechow
February 7, 2015   Daniele C. Struppa