

# Dr. Livingstone, I Prosume?

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A tiny complaint I have about writing on technology for print is that several weeks pass before an article finds its ways into people’s hands. Because publishing takes time. Problem is, insights can go stale in this brief period, and you wind up looking a month *behind* the times instead of a month *ahead* of them. In journalism, ahead is always better than behind.

I am ruined by the Internet, where I can publish my thoughts instantly on my weblog and short-circuit the entire paper-publishing infrastructure, and save thousands. Nobody would read me, and everything would be misspelled, and I would quickly starve. But it would be so pure.

And I think that must be how David Livingstone felt, the Scottish missionary and explorer (1813-1873) who vanished into the heart of Africa, sometimes for years at a time. While in, he learned things that no other European knew. He “discovered” Lake Nyasa and Victoria Falls. In his numerous expeditions he walked 29,000 miles across the continent.

But once you vanish into the bush, it’s hard to dwell in the regular world again. *Ahead* in your head, you quickly fall *behind* the rest of the world. So it was with Livingstone, heading off time and again into the wild, placating hippopotami and mollifying xenophobic tribesmen. In 1844 a cattle-killing lion picked Livingstone up and “shook him like a terrier,” rendering his right arm useless for the rest of his life. But it beat going back to Glasgow.

He was a remarkable linguist, learning over a score of languages as he traveled, as a sign of respect. Over time he also became a genius at logistics, paring all the functions of a 40-porter expedition down to a critical handful. Toward the end he was virtually a one-man discovering and proselytizing machine.

Like my visit this past winter to the grocery store, where I encountered my first self-serve checkout line. Instead of having a register clerk check all the barcodes, you do it yourself. It’s a tricky process because grocery stores have to make sure people aren’t stealing their groceries. So the system weighs each item after you place it in the grocery bag. And a real breathing person is still standing by, in case some problem paralyzes you.

I kind of like the self-serve, because it’s less boring than watching the clerk do it. After all, you *care* about your mayonnaise and vegetables; it’s seldom that the clerk, making \$7.38 per hour, does. Of course, by doing it yourself, you’re putting that clerk out of business. But isn’t that what technology is about?

This dynamic was given a name some years ago by digital prophet Don Tapscott, coiner of many phrases (including the dreaded *paradigm shift*), and that particular name is *prosumption* – combining two words, production and consumption. In a presumptive

process, the consumer of goods or services also does the work of producing or delivering those goods and services.

It's a major trend:

- When you step up to an ATM and “disintermediate” your banking processes by being your own teller, you are presuming big time.
- At Amazon you not only sell yourself books, but you sell others books as well, by reviewing them and creating lists.
- When you configure a new PC from Dell online, that's presumption. Tapscott talks about designing bread online that is baked just for you – “Don Tapscott's 31-Grain Prairie Bread.” (Mind the thistle.)
- When you buy an e-product online, like software, and download it and install it yourself, you are taking upon yourself tasks that used to belong to delivery trucks and IT professionals.

Businesses love presumption because it lowers cost. Customers like it because it is engaging and empowering. Downsized employees – well, they don't like it so much.

When you run a home business, as I do, you disintermediate scores of functions a larger business would distribute among specialists. You wind up doing your own advertising, design, marketing, planning, production, accounting and customer follow-up.

Not especially well, I don't think. Who can be good at all those things, I sometimes remind myself, and each one mission-critical, so that a slip here, or a stumble there could lose a customer forever. In this sense presumption carries exquisite risks. It is where self-serving and self-screwing converge.

Now, I happened to be in an auditorium with Don Tapscott on that bright September morning in 2001 when the jets hit the glass in downtown Manhattan. Talk about paradigm shifts. While Tapscott stood onstage, the hopeful universe he described, in which accepted global standards drove a techno-friendly economy, went up in putrid black smoke.

And the question I have is, where are we now? We appear to be living in a world where technological advances have blessed the wealthy nations, and especially the wealthy within those nations, but grievously alienated the nations left behind.

It's a world where people as prosumers are given every conceivable break and convenience, where armies clash on desert plains to keep the cost of a tank of gas within reason for the middle-class family – but people as wage-earners, like the tellers and cashiers and sales personnel, are being squeezed out of the system.

It's a world in which 19 men with 79-cent boxcutters, by disintermediating the conventional processes of warfare, can reduce a great nation to quivering Jell-o. And it is an open question whether technology will save us or whether it will administer the final blow to our aspirations. Prosumers can make producers obsolete. But it is from the ranks of producers that prosumers spring. Paradox alert!

I wonder too about David Livingstone. When I was a kid in the 1950s, he was still famous, mainly because of the catch-phrase, “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?” uttered by

Henry Stanley, sent to Africa to find Livingstone as a marketing gimmick by the New York Herald.

But Livingstone was no caricature. He had fashioned a paradigm of his own, rooted in his native Christianity, but magnified by an intense love of the people he encountered, and his hatred of injustice.

At the end he was still searching for the source of the Nile. When his followers, some them former slaves, found him dead in his tent, they buried his heart at the foot of a giant tree. Then they mummified his body and carried it on foot 1100 miles to the coast.

Livingstone had traced the slave trade to its roots, to a region by Lake Nyasa that had become completely depopulated by slavers. Like clear-cutting foresters, they had eliminated every twig and branch. All dragged away and harvested to make life easier for that generation's comfortable class.

On the other hand, to stand in the shadow of Victoria Falls (they must have been even more beautiful minus Livingstone's name for them) and feel the cold spray on one's face. Then everything must have felt possible and free.

Which vision is the true one? The great thing is, the prosumer – that's you – gets to choose.

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