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THE RED AND WHITE HEAT OF TECHNOLOGY

The Internet has already transformed the way we engage with wine in myriad ways. But what happens next? **Ben Weinberg** speculates on how we will consume, discuss, and buy fine wine in a fully wired future

The past 30 years have seen worldwide upgrades in the science of wine. In some wineries, simply cleaning out accumulated grime has resulted in demonstrably better juice, while in others, switching to alternative closures has helped prolong the shelf life of even moderately priced bottles. I could list dozens of other examples of revolutions in wine's production, quality control, and storage that share one additional trait: Their effects have already largely been incorporated into the wine gestalt. This, however, is only half the story.

Recent innovations in social technologies, such as Facebook and Twitter, have allowed all sorts of affinity-based aficionados—that is, targetable bloggers and consumers—to communicate, and perhaps even to profit from, their passions. In addition, non-traditional distribution systems have evolved considerably since the early days of the Internet, increasing exponentially in speed and reliability.

Sadly, the wine world (particularly in the United States) is not at the forefront of these movements. In fact, Jeff Carroll of ShipCompliant (which supplies automated shipping and distribution compliance software for the wine and spirits industries) told me that, in terms of technology, the selling of wine has lagged behind most industries by at least five years. Five years! In today's digital world, that's a lifetime—at least two or three generations of innovation.

That's the bad news. The good news is that wine lovers are finally catching up to our affinity-based brethren. Those with grape aspirations can now scream their opinions into the ether on sites such as eRobertParker, Wine Spectator, Grape Stories, and even my own blog at Unfiltered, Unfined. What's more, wines with no three-tier distribution in a particular US state can often be purchased by consumers via winery permits and other non-traditional means.

These seemingly unconnected upgrades are evidence of continuing seismic shifts that will further shake wine's foundations. They are rumblings, warnings of upcoming quakes that will drastically affect how we talk about and sell

wine for years to come. The consequences of these tremors will be profound—for buyers, sellers, and commentators alike—and those who can't ride the resulting tidal waves will surely be sucked into the undertow.

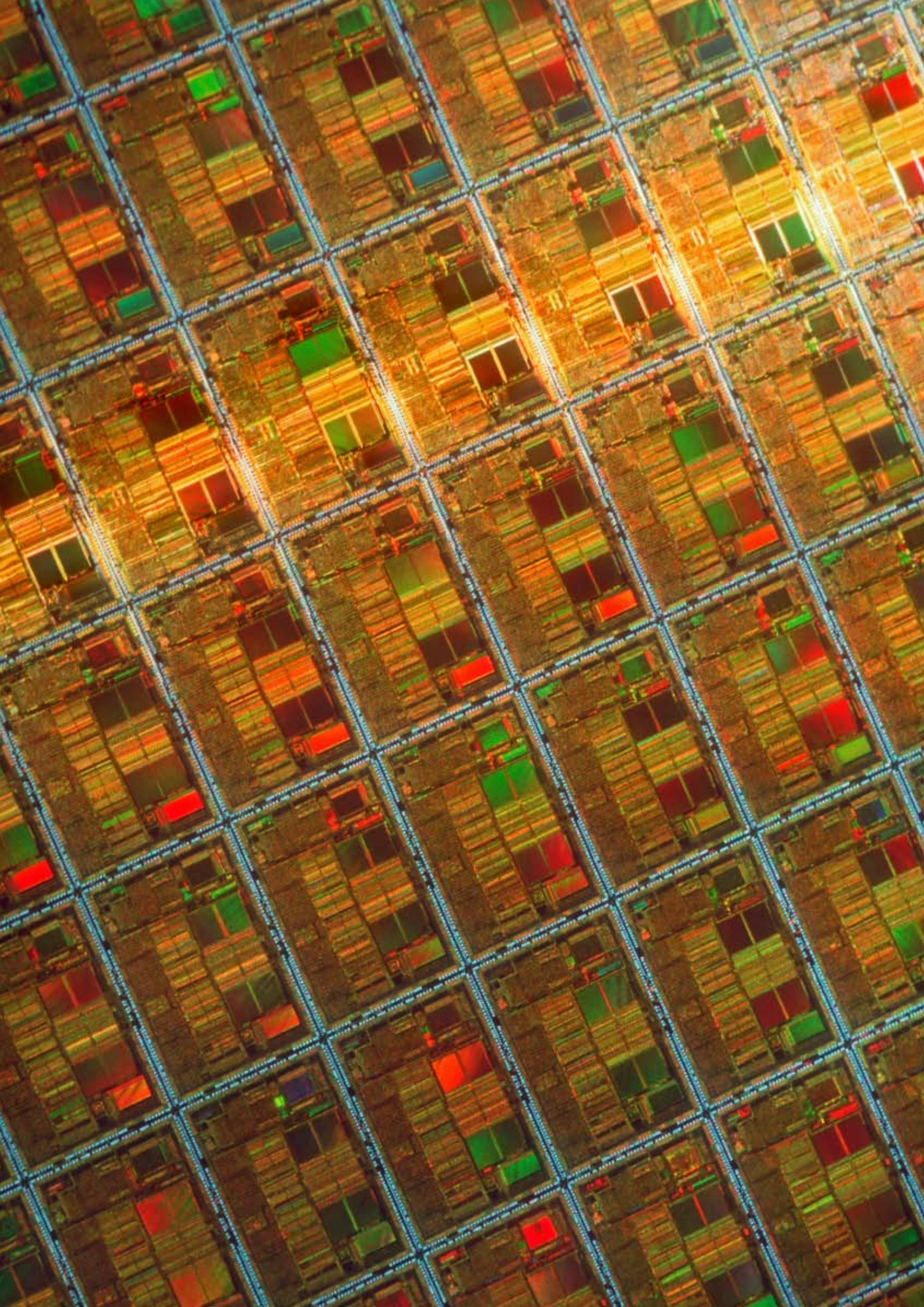
In previous issues of this publication, Michael Steinberger (*WFW* 19, pp.130–35) and Jamie Goode (*WFW* 24, pp.106–9) set the table for a discussion of the next evolution of the wine Web. This article will focus first on Web 2.0 realities and then on Web 3.0 possibilities—though a clear transition between these states is as evanescent as a teenager's opinion. As such, some parts of this piece are inherently speculative, and I beg prior forgiveness in that I'll inevitably be proven false in some respect. I have no time machine. I know not how all of this will actually shake out. Some trends are, however, becoming clear.

Wine 2.0: social climbing

Steinberger's article focused on the future (or perhaps lack thereof) of professional wine criticism, with particular reference to the success of Robert Parker, and the issue of phenomenal repeatability in the modern world. It is true that there are now many more wine writers wandering through the world's vineyards and also that most of us could never afford the bottles we routinely taste for our vocation. But as Steinberger so deftly pointed out, figuring how all (or even more than a few) of us can make a sufficient wage doing what we love is still quite uncertain.

One industry that has already faced this issue head-on (remember wine's five-year trailing position) is that of mainstream news. The gathering and distribution of news is completely fragmented, with much of the traditional print media in serious financial trouble as a result. Even many of those with significant online influence still wonder how to monetize their expertise.

I was once a print journalist with a weekly wine column in the *Rocky Mountain News*, one of two daily newspapers in my hometown of Denver, Colorado. An inevitable turf



war for shrinking revenues assured its demise in February 2009, and at that point it was absorbed by the rival *Denver Post*. Most of us immediately lost our jobs.

Several former staffers then decided to publish an online, subscription-based version and asked me if I'd write the wine column. I said I was willing if they'd tell me exactly how I'd get paid. I didn't hear another word. In fact, this venture and its successors didn't receive even a small fraction of the support needed to survive, and within six months it was all over—not surprising when the extant business model charged consumers for something they could get from other outlets for free.

In particular, the closing letter to their small cadre of subscribers was quite revealing. "Our experiment has ended, and we would like to thank all of you who became members of the website to support us," said the note, signed Rocky Mountain Independent owners. "We have put everything we've made into producing content, but the economic reality is that we cannot produce enough content on that budget to justify charging a membership fee."

Every day, it seems, another newspaper or magazine closes its doors, still blind to the possibilities of the Internet. But media outlets continue to exist, and some are even profitable. How have they plotted a course around this storm?

The Huffington Post is a hugely successful website and aggregated blog that applies standard Web 2.0 technologies and practices to the business of mainstream news. In addition to columns by Arianna Huffington and a core group of contributors in a wide range of fields (Alice Waters on food, Jacob Appel on ethics, and so on), it has more than 3,000 bloggers on board—from politicians and celebrities, to academics and policy experts—who contribute in real time on a wide range of topics. Among those who have written blog posts are Barack Obama, Madonna, Norman Mailer, Robert Redford, Donatella Versace, and Bill Maher.

"HuffPo" is a true Internet success, launched in 2005 during a window of opportunity after the mainstream media took their eyes off the ball. (Quick quiz: What killed the newspaper? Answer: Craigslist. Newspapers are mostly supported by ad revenue, but why pay for print when the message can be published and placed in front of interested parties much more quickly online? Did I mention that Craigslist is usually free?)

What's interesting about HuffPo's business model is that, in the main, contributors are not directly compensated. Rather, it is the editors who are salaried employees, while just about everyone else vies for an unpaid opportunity to

post on such an influential site. How influential? According to Compete.com, The Huffington Post had 9.7 million unique visitors in January 2010. (The Drudge Report, a top politically conservative alternative, had 2.7 million in the same period.) Technorati has ranked it as the most linked-to blog on the Internet, and *The Observer* has said it's the most powerful blog in the world.

The cream of this freely submitted crop of content rises to the top, there to be skimmed by competent, professional, well-paid editors. I think this trend will intensify as we head toward Web 3.0, but even Ms Huffington can't yet require her readers to pay for the privilege of reading well-written and edited content delivered by a passionate, professional staff. The site is still supported by standard Web 2.0 revenue streams such as ads and click-throughs.

I believe that ever-sharper divisions of affinity-based consumers will soon be willing to spend for content unavailable elsewhere—content that will provide information and opinions on the subjects about which they have passion. Don't get me wrong: I don't think that most of the Internet's consumers will suddenly pay for

most content. But HuffPo and its ilk aside, much of the general-interest, freely available content currently online (and most of it is free) is clearly inferior in quality to that produced by professional writers and editors. For many consumers, this is sufficient, but affinity markets work differently from those for the masses.

Why is affinity-based information so different?

General news is a commodity, but nuanced opinion on subjects of great personal expertise and passion is not. During hard times, followers of a sport or other interest will surely give up a latte per week instead of their cherished subscriptions to *Golf Digest*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *The Wine Advocate*. As the recent demise of iconic affinity magazines such as *Gourmet* shows, however, one of the consequences of exploiting a niche is that, by definition, the target audience is small. Eventually those consumers become saturated, leading to inevitable cycles of boom and bust.

Blogospheric models

A model perhaps better suited to a blogospheric orientation was exposed during *Vino 2010*, an Italian Trade Association-sponsored event in New York City this past February. One highlight was a panel discussion on the interaction of wine and social media, led by wine critic Anthony Dias Blue and featuring Doug Cook, director of search at Twitter; Alder Yarrow, *Vinography*; Susanna Gold, *Vigneto Communications*; Steve Raye, *Brand Action*

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Team; and Susanna Crociani, Azienda Agricola Crociani in Montepulciano.

Yarrow, perhaps the most successful wine blogger, was asked by a bewildered audience member how anyone profits from a blog. “You don’t,” Yarrow replied and then went on to explain how he actually made a living. While his blog is now popular enough to generate some income via Web 2.0 advertising revenues, he also owns Hydrant, a marketing and public-relations firm. He’s a very clever and thoughtful businessman, as well as a blogger. Hydrant is one of the great PR names, and fans of his blog naturally become clients of his primary business. In other words, virally generated word of mouth about his writing (and the associated content, of course) leads wine-passionate, interested parties to his blog and then his services.

Unlike The Huffington Post and many affinity publications, Yarrow has successfully bridged the monetary gap between social media and social marketing. Passion is a key—something I’ve also found in my own work. Socially branding any product, much less one so experiential as wine, requires passion for the subject matter. Otherwise it just takes too much time and effort to be worth the expenditure. My business model is different from Yarrow’s in that I’m a wine writer by profession. I’ve found, however, that expertise as a writer and editor have naturally led me back to PR, because there is always a market for passionately voiced, well-written material.

My revelation in this regard came to me a couple of years ago when I crafted my first Tweet. Because Twitter is a broadcast text-messaging service, all communications are limited to 140 characters. This particular note ended up exceeding that limit by something like 100 characters. Frustrated, I started honing my message, exchanging “and” for “&,” deleting vowels—all the little tricks texters use to compress maximum information into minimum space. It soon dawned on me that what I was doing was writing as if I were composing an article for *The World of Fine Wine*, but in miniature, sort of like a wine-based haiku.

Social branding

Another recent business innovation has been the hiring by curve-leading companies of full-time social-branding specialists. Other industries have already experimented with this, and several wineries (Murphy-Goode and St Supery come to mind) have also taken the plunge. So far, the results are mixed. Murphy-Goode has been criticized for running its early-2009 search for a social brander in

a less-than-transparent way: by not including the top vote-getter in the final list and including finalists who were sourced by recruiters. As a result, the winery has a socially generated black eye that may take years to heal.

But St Supery’s experience has been quite different. For one thing, there was no time limit on the social-marketing position. Rick Bakas—who manages consumer and social interactions at St Supery, a man who virtually walks the walk—understands that amateurs will always control most social interaction on the Internet.

“Of course, the Web will become even more social,” Bakas says, “which will allow wine consumers to share their passion without the aid of professionals. Look at wine labels, which will soon be searchable by region, vintage, country, and grape. The consumer can then filter data on a mobile device to access reviews, articles, videos, even connecting live with winemakers in the vineyard.”

There is no doubt that focusing on wine’s social elements brings benefits to wine consumers, and there’s a lot of interest in the wine community in socially oriented jobs, probably because it seems like a really cool thing

to do for a living. Even the titles of the listings on Winejobs.com are changing. Though there are still plenty of openings for forklift supervisors and wine managers, some are now titled Internet marketing manager or compliance and accounting manager (more on this in the next section). And what about direct-to-consumer sales manager or even e-commerce

member relations associate? These are jobs that didn’t exist five years ago.

Another social-marketing technique that is growing in importance is paid interaction (via tools such as Twitter and Facebook) by professionals, as well as by amateurs hoping to be noticed and promoted to paid status. These trends will continue increasingly to affect traditional forms of marketing and transparency, by pushing the boundaries of what it means to segment and focus. Unfortunately for most consumers (including the average wine drinker), separating stems from berries in this Web-based tower of opinionated Babel can be problematic. There’s just so much poor and/or biased information out there. So, how does one get the unshaded truth about one’s favorite affinity-based drink?

Steinberger was prescient in his article when describing Eric LeVine’s CellarTracker (now Grape Stories) as a model for how to profit from passion without selling one’s soul in an increasingly atomized online world. Grape Stories started as a way for LeVine to keep track of his cellar without spreadsheets, and it has now grown into a full-time job with

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more than 100,000 registered members, all of whom have free access to most of the site's capabilities. Approximately half voluntarily pay an annual fee for access to certain advanced applications and because they appreciate the quality of the experience.

LeVine has succeeded in monetizing his relationships with a subset of wine lovers who love to keep track of their cellars and share the results of their tastings with others. His newest innovations involve partnerships with wine publications such as Allen Meadows/Burghound.com, Jancis Robinson MW/Purple Pages, and *The World of Fine Wine*. He's also incorporating more social technology into the mix, and even the new URL is affinity-friendly. Grape Stories is clearly trying to become one of the arbiters of online wine discussion for the foreseeable future.

You'll have noticed that keeping track of a cellar becomes only one reason to visit. Another is informative social contact with other wine lovers. As for selling tasting notes, well, LeVine's site has millions of posted notes and tracked bottles, with most related information and opinions available for free. From a purely selfish point of view, this has made me realize that per-word payment will not be a valid business model much longer, at least in reference to notes, because more and more gifted amateurs supply their equally valid opinions for free.

Wine 2.0: how wine is sold

In his article in *WFW* 24, Jamie Goode was quite correct in stating that current Web 2.0 technologies have already drastically affected how wine and wine-focused content are sold. His examples included the creation of functional divisions between free, often general-interest content spheres supported by advertising and other sorts of more focused sharing on a subscription basis. He also mentioned the growth of wine-search technologies and online auction sites. To this I'd like to add the increasing use by wineries, at least in the United States, of direct-shipping permits and the birth of a new breed of low-overhead, wine-focused distribution systems. These may eventually lead to the demise of wine wholesaling and the three-tier system in the USA, perhaps just in time for the dawn of Web 3.0.

The current US system is not set up for efficient placement of fine wine, because a patchwork of federal and state laws treats it in much the same manner as hard alcohol. While many of these so-called blue laws were enacted to prevent alcohol acquisition by minors, the idea that some random 16-year-old in Dubuque, Iowa, would go online to buy \$100 bottles of Burgundy is obviously ridiculous.

Even so, middlemen such as wholesalers are ensured a legally mandated share of most liquor business, including wine. Much of this legislation prohibits shipping by other than licensed entities and dates from more than a century prior to the invention of the Internet. High-volume, low-margin items are perfect for these ancient procedures, in which efficiency and quantity of sales are important determinants. Thus, interstate shipping restrictions have only further empowered traditional wine distribution in the United States.

Many of my dearest friends in the wine business work for wholesalers. They are generally decent folk who, like me, are only trying to make a living in wine. Elimination of the three-tier system would dislocate many, but clearly these rules will have to change for this archaic oligopoly to be challenged properly when it comes to fine wine. Only consumer demand will facilitate the flow of wine in a way that is not controlled by entrenched, legislatively influential middlemen.

One trend that I'm quite certain is disturbing to these wholesalers is the increasing amount of online competition

Tom Wark of the Specialty Wine Retailers Association, a champion of free trade, told me that traditional wine distribution will soon be radically altered by direct connections to consumers, as has already happened with specialty foods

at both the small, value-added and the large, commodity-based ends of the wine marketplace. Tom Wark of the Specialty Wine Retailers Association, a champion of free trade, told me that traditional wine distribution will soon be radically altered by direct connections to consumers, as has already happened with specialty foods. As previously mentioned, there is a system in place in the

United States in which individual wineries can ship on a state-by-state basis. There's obviously a lot of record-keeping involved, but that can always be outsourced to companies such as ShipCompliant.

"Distributing wine within the labyrinth of state laws can be extremely daunting if you try to do it yourself," says Carroll. "However, automation and innovation in distribution compliance continue to make it easier to connect consumers with the products that they are looking for. Our software allows suppliers to focus on making great wines while, at the same time, marketing and selling them to consumers."

Even with logistical help, in the face of the 800lb, three-tier gorilla, how successful can such a system be? One answer can be found at Hartford Court Winery in Sonoma, California, in part owned by Kendall-Jackson founder Jess Jackson. Hartford Court sells 70 percent of its wine—approximately 14,000 out of 20,000 cases annually—via a large wine club and other permit-type

shipping. Mr Jackson is no fool, and his investment in such a winery is quite telling.

As for traditional retailing, online wine distribution is not just the focus of large retailers. But in terms of access to US consumers, the trend is going in the wrong direction. "It's really tough for retailers," Carroll says. "Currently they only have access to 12 states for direct shipping. It's hard to build a business plan around a dozen states, especially when they don't include California, New York, Illinois, and Texas. The retailers that are doing it right now are mostly illegal, and so wholesalers are digging in for a fight. Winery self-distribution is another of their targets."

In spite of such roadblocks, as Goode said in his article, the Internet is finally beginning to bring worthy, small-production wines, which currently don't fit into traditional distribution schemes, to a dispersed audience. It's just happening in unexpected ways.

Paul David is the owner of Winepairings (www.winepairings.biz), a wine concierge service. Winepairings specializes in providing personalized wine choices for everyday consumption and cellaring, as well as wine catering for major events. Paul operates a very lean business, with minimal store front and a word-of-mouth-generated client list. He keeps track of his clients' personal tastes and uses this information to send out targeted emails to various sublists of potentially interested purchasers.

"Ten years ago, you couldn't support such a business model," David told me. "Winepairings was established in 2003, and by 2005 it was obvious that the Internet was a key to our growth. Establishing a vibrant social presence that complements our intensely personal approach to wine sales will be one of our major challenges over the next year. They say social networking is free, but what it really costs is time, which is always in short supply for independent businesspeople."

No doubt the increasing abilities of wineries and specialty retailers to communicate with each other via social platforms will provide many new breeds of business. But as David says, there are only so many hours in the day. "Product knowledge and personal service within a given geographical area, combined with the leverage inherent in social media, will definitely allow us to reach our audiences. The question is whether all this can happen economically and without dominating our time to such an extent that we can't deal with the other important elements of the business—things like controlling inventory costs and continuing education."

As for large Internet-based retailers like Gary Vaynerchuk's Wine Library (not to mention the likes of Amazon and Costco), LeVine thinks that wine consumers will eventually revolt against institutionalized inefficiencies in distribution. "High-end wine lovers are atypical in being willing to pay for specialized services. One way this revolt will happen is when giant aggregators and other sellers eventually make buying wine from artisanal producers as easy as any other Web-based purchase." As previously mentioned, this may be happening right under our noses.

The convergence of increasingly available wine information, the high end of which may be restricted to paying users, with the ability to purchase ever-more specific choices outside of traditional distribution will forever change the wine landscape. I believe such combinations will be so powerful that they will lay the foundations of the next steps in wine's online evolution.

Wine 3.0: the next generation

What does it all mean for the next iterations of the Web? In reference to wine journalism, I don't think that selling facts and opinions will necessarily die. Monetization of value-added content will certainly be a key to survival for most wine writers and editors, perhaps via the reemergence of editorial control aided by click-tracing applets that track who is reading and being read. Advances in other technologies, such as cloud computing and software as a service, will also affect the discussion

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and sales of wine, as more and more informational nuggets reside online, available to anyone with the minimal resources necessary to access and manipulate them.

Think back to Paul David's question about having the time to market his business properly in the social context. As demonstrated by The Huffington Post in a different space and my own observations while building a socially driven wine business, when it comes to affinity-based products such as wine, having passion for the subject matter is crucial to success. It's simply not feasible for a general-purpose marketer, especially if he or she isn't a wino, to spend the hours necessary to become utterly familiar with wine's niche players and themes. This in-depth knowledge is critical for the proper social marketing of any product or brand—and particularly with something so driven by opinion as wine.

I feel it is here that the professional writer and/or editor will soon reenter the scene, though we'll probably be calling this person by a different title. (Social branding engineer?)

Too obtuse. Web manager? Too limiting. What about editor-in-chief?) These abilities will soon become crucially valuable in cyberspace, as the quantity of data continues to flood our senses in ever-more-complicated ways. Affinity-based businesses will increasingly incorporate these subject-matter-specialist, social-media-literate, able-to-write-well fanatics into their marketing budgets in whatever ways make fiscal sense, whether as employees or independent contractors.

As for consumers, in wine as in other areas, they'll continue to look for experts to make sense of topics that matter in unique ways, and at the far end of the market they'll be willing to pay for that advice (but only if it's really good). In this, our niche will be following other, more prescient industries that have already learned these rubrics.

Interestingly, much of *Vino 2010's* buzz was created when some of the social media panelists gave their predictions on the evolution of their industry over the next ten years.

"Better and more editing, amalgamation, measurement of reach and response," was Cook's response.

"Larger companies will purchase smaller outlets," Yarrow said, "leading to a reaggregation of media that was disaggregated by the Internet."

Yarrow seems to be directly contradicting Rick Bakas here (reaggregation vs disintegration), but I think that the social-marketing space has room for at least this many different strategies, particularly when segmented according to the level of consumer interest. In 2008, The Huffington Post launched its first local version, HuffPost Chicago; New York went live in June 2009, Denver in September 2009, and Los Angeles in December 2009. Would media reaggregation work in the world of fine wine? If we're five years behind, then we'll probably soon see the first glimmerings of the sorts of amalgamation discussed by Cook and Yarrow. Perhaps, in Eric LeVine of Grape Stories and others of his ilk, we already have.

Full disclosure

Another element that is, I think, essential to any further development of social marketing—particularly within the media's sphere of influence—will be at least some level of mandatory disclosure of business ties. This may be on a communication-by-communication basis and/or perhaps permanently and prominently shown on all pages of associated websites. (For the record, and as every page of my website states, I accept all wine writing-related paraphernalia, including samples, tours, and lodging, but unless otherwise noted it is always with the understanding that nothing has been promised in exchange: no columns, no articles, no endorsements, no recommendations, not a single mention anywhere.)

How many times have you gone to Google, typed in a particular wine, browsed the top search results, read some reviews, and then been presented with an opportunity to purchase that exact wine? Rarely is there any disclosure of

the business ties between the various parties who have presented and sold the product. Granted, this is not a problem unique to wine.

In October 2009, the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) announced approval of final revisions to the guidance it gives to advertisers on how to keep their ads in line with current law. The notice incorporates several changes to the FTC's "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising," which address endorsements by consumers, experts, organizations, and celebrities, as well as the disclosure of important connections between advertisers and endorsers. By the way, the guides were last updated in 1980. Just for perspective, that's two years before IBM sold its first PC and well prior to the World Wide Web becoming Tim Berners-Lee's special dream.

Among other items, the revised guides add new examples to illustrate the long-standing principle that material connections—payments or free/discounted product—between advertisers and endorsers must be disclosed. They also specify that the post of a blogger or other word-of-mouth marketer who receives cash or in-kind payment to review a product is considered an endorsement. It is now clear that bloggers and other celebrities have a duty to disclose their relationships with advertisers when making endorsements outside the context of traditional ads, such as on talk shows or in social media.

Since these are guidelines and not law, such disclosure practices are still embryonic. No one can really force another to reveal business ties, even if such actions are in the best interest of the consumer, unless there is immense social pressure or governmental action with harsh consequences for not obeying the rules. I believe that either the marketplace will soon require such disclosure as a cost of doing business, or legislators, perhaps on an international basis because of the Internet's nature, will step in to create a disclosure-based accountability system for all online, affinity-focused writing and editing.

While much legislation is currently in bad odor, especially in the USA, that won't always be the case. If those of us who use the Internet to ply our business models don't get our acts together soon, then governments will make our choices for us. It bears repeating that only with full disclosure can true informational democracy take root, so that all consumers know exactly who is in bed with whom. It is well past time for this to happen in the online world, including that corner devoted to wine.

Wine 3.0: new ways of selling

I recently received a press release about a business called Winery Insider (www.wineryinsider.com), which is what the organizers call "the first members-only, private sale company to focus exclusively on the wine category." They intend to offer members access to hundreds of wines from all over the world, including many brands that are well known to wine lovers and aficionados (there's that word again).

Winery Insider is modeled after similar e-commerce businesses in fashion, home decorating, and music downloads, where consumers apply for free membership to obtain access to exclusive offerings. Winery Insider intends to post 45–60 offers a month, with durations ranging from 24 to 72 hours. Thus, all offers are time- and inventory-limited, and members receive a \$20 store credit if they refer someone who then makes a purchase. Will such a business plan work? It's hard to tell from the press release whether the company transacts business under its own licenses, but storms roil this horizon, as well.

In 2009, the state of California announced a policy that amounts to limiting the Internet activities of unlicensed “marketplace sites” to informational speech directing consumers to licensee sites; it also prohibits soliciting an order from the visitor and passing it along to the licensee. Most First Amendment protection of commercial speech has involved informational material, and it remains uncertain whether the more active communication involved in order taking or transaction facilitating will be constitutionally protected.

Perhaps in response, the California State Department of Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) has recently issued its own advisory, which Jeff Carroll of ShipCompliant says may prevent wine imports from being distributed to consumers in that state. “The ABC wants new legislation but is hamstrung by the fact that it's an administrative agency without legislative powers. So right now, the three-tier clearing system seems to be illegal in California!” Even with proper licensing, US Congressional initiative HR5034 may ban otherwise legal direct shipments.

As an avid consumer, I'd like to think that much of the current system will eventually transform into something that is at the same time more informational and, most importantly, less enamored of transaction costs. Toward that end, I think that both small, niche-based alternative wine retailers and large Internet stores may soon provide more choice and information than most consumers will know what to do with. Wholesalers are right to feel threatened by these alternative channels of distribution. Interested aficionados, however, will probably revel in the coming data flood.

Wine 4.0?

Extending the discussion to ten or more years out is obviously an increasingly speculative exercise. A decade ago, the quaint idea of paying for software was technology's business model. But here goes...

Technology will, of course, continue to advance. “Key tools will filter noise and make sense of ever more enormous amounts of data,” says John Temple, former editor and publisher of my beloved *Rocky Mountain News*. “Readers will expect writers to tell them about wines in specific stores and restaurants and how to pair them with foods they'll be eating that day. This could be hard on the experts but great for their audiences!”

Mobile apps will continue to accelerate in importance (iPhone-enabled wine reviews and purchases, anyone?). Voice-recognition software will make a quantum leap, and the music-download model of combining subscriptions with product access will make further inroads into the distribution of wine. These technologies will further ease wine-business transactions into the mobile world.

Distinctions between advertising and editorial content will be mostly obliterated. Cooperative ventures will become seamless, and without mandatory disclosure rules you probably won't ever know who sold you that bottle of Chianti you read about on a website. Perhaps it doesn't really matter, as long as you paid a fair price and the wine

arrived in good condition. But how can you be sure without the disclosure of relationships?

I also believe—despite HR5034—that the winery permit-based distribution systems will continue to expand, particularly in the US. Someday, there may no longer be a need for permits, but even if they persist, at least the wines will usually be available.

As the Buddha taught, the first point on the path

to liberation is “right view.” This involves minimizing our expectations about how we hope things will be or about how we are afraid events might turn out. Right view occurs when we see things simply and as they are. It is an open and accommodating attitude, abandoning hope and fear and taking joy in a simple, straightforward approach to life. Ethically based social branding and fair, efficient distribution systems can, in the end, only simplify a wine lover's life. When it comes together—as I believe it will—then passionate lovers of wine will finally fully share in the benefits of a wired society.

Technology will soon enable us to talk about, analyze, and purchase wine in ways that seem qualitatively different. So, as for even longer-term projections, five decades ago Sputnik was beeping its way across the sky, signaling a seminal change in the way we looked at the world. Perhaps our brains will one day directly connect to the grid, allowing us to exchange information and contemplate the wine universe with wholly new perspectives. It's an exciting time in the winosphere, and it's only just begun. ■

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