SMALL-SCALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP ON THE EARLY WEB: SOCIO-ECONOMICAL PRACTICES OF LOCAL/REGIONAL BUSINESSES

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In 2001, on a Dutch television talk show, entrepreneur J. Egmond discussed how he joined the World Wide Web with his then-40-year-old family business selling musical instruments. Initially, Egmond created a homepage containing only general information about his offline shop in Eindhoven. He soon also created an 'internet version of the shop' with the help of a state subsidy meant to stimulate the growth of the national ICT market. Asked about his motivations, Egmond stated that he thought that this decision would have expanded his market reach across Europe and would increase his revenue by a factor of 6000. Unfortunately, his projections failed to materialise and the webshop did not even go 'live'. Egmond lost a total of 800,000 Dutch Guilders and he had to declare bankruptcy for both his on- and offline business. In the interview, he announced that he had made a restart and currently runs a smaller musical instrument store. 'Does this apply to the webshop too, but smaller?' the host asked. Egmond, laughing, replied that 'the web store is always big, you know, it is the internet' (NCRV, 2001).

This episode, aptly titled "The Malaise Among Internet Companies" (NCRV, 2001), featured diverse perspectives on the new dot-com economy of the late 1990s. Amid boundless optimism, internet entrepreneurs and gurus championed the idea that embracing the web was the key to entrepreneurial success. Partaking in the new economy meant embracing the web (van den Boomen, 2000). Egmond's story was not

unique; throughout the mid-1990s, numerous traditional businesses created websites to join the digital revolution, and by the early 2000s, countless startups emerged to capitalize doing internet business (Ackermans, 2003).

This narrative captures many dimensions of what scholars describe as the "new economy," which encompasses both the rise of a digital financial system and a cultural shift towards entrepreneurialism (Lewis, 2000; Löfgren, 2003). Scholars such as Castells (2001) and Turner (2006) situate this phenomenon within broader socio-political contexts like neoliberalism and individualism. Notable, as Castells pointed out, "[t]he proper uses of the Internet have become a key source of productivity and competitiveness for all kinds of business. For all the hype surrounding the dot.com firms, they only represent a small, entrepreneurial vanguard of the new economic world" (2001, p. 64). Following this line of thought, this paper explores how local and regional businesses navigated this new economy, moving beyond dominant success stories to adopt a grassroots cultural-historical perspective. Such an approach sees culture as rooted in everyday practices (Williams, 1983), inherently local (Pratt, 2000; Turner, 2017; Abbate, 2017), and views technological adoption as nonlinear and contingent (Pinch & Bijker, 2012).

The study examines small-scale online entrepreneurship, encompassing regional industry, family businesses, and hobbyists engaged in various types of commerce. This analysis situates their efforts within the ideological and practical context of the Dutch digital transition. The idea that everybody should have access to the internet has always been dominant in the Netherlands; from the earliest, grassroots and hacktivist initiatives sprouting one of the first internet providers XS4ALL (access for all), to government agendas that reflected the country's objective to be at the digital forefront, In an increasingly deregulated society, the private sector was foregrounded in developing the electronic infrastructure. To exemplify, in a true neoliberal vein, the platform Internet voor alledag (Internet for the everyday) connected local and potential web initiatives with the business sector to realise more accessibility, functionality, and usage (Internet voor alledag, 2001). Thus, one can identify an interesting mix of neoliberalism, commercialism, and individualism, as well as everydayness and amateurism that created the backdrop against which local/regional industries took their businesses online for the first time (Fridzema et al., 2024).

We thus argue that the socio-economic context of the new economy was a significant moment for the cultural production of artefacts which are, in our case, the material web sphere. Following Megan Ankerson in her book Dot.com design, we believe that "[m]ore than just describing a zeitgeist of the 1990s, "dot-com" articulates an assemblage of relations into a cultural formation that is both material and semiotic" (2018 p. 8). To study this, the research makes use of the XS4ALL homepage collection 1993-2001 archived at the Dutch Royal Library (De Bode & Teszelsky, 2021). A homepage, from a technical perspective, is one's main page and every subscriber of XS4ALL got to make their own. However, the homepage is a key concept in internet culture and foregrounds both material and affective notions; the idea of one's personal space online (Mallapragada, 2019).

The study adopts a web-minded approach (Brügger, 2018), which considers the unique attributes of web pages, their archival contexts, and contemporary understandings of the web's purpose. Inspired by Aasman et al. (2019), the methodology follows a mixed-method, web-archaeological procedure that combines exploratory qualitative analysis with computational techniques. The qualitative analysis employs a multimodal framework (Pauwels, 2012) to examine the textual, visual, and perceptual elements of webpages.

Some preliminary findings include the identification of themes such as amateurism and everydayness when looking into preliminary websites reflecting small-scale entrepreneurship. Many websites of local/regional businesses are not professionalized but rather playful. We can detect this in the rhetoric used which is, for example, written in a rather personal manner. The purpose of some websites also remains unclear as some do not have proper contact information or anything on the location of the business – one website in particular solely has a picture of a shop's book inventory – whilst other sites look like business cards without any outgoing links. An interesting question arises as to why these businesses went online; did they deliberately want to gain a bigger reach for their commerce, or, from a social perspective, was going online simply a normalized practice in an increasingly digital society? Subsequently, a shift is identified from such mixed socio-economic practices to sites honing e-business strategies, or activities "whose performance (...) takes place predominantly by/on the Internet" (Castells, 2001, p. 66). The latter indicates the increasing influence of the new economic mindset seeping through to local/regional businesses. This finding reflects a paradigm shift in the dominant socio-technical imaginary of the web; from a bottom-up public domain to a networked fertilizer for the new economy depicting a cruel optimist sentiment towards an inevitable commercial utopia (Fridzema et al., 2024).

The study contributes to the field in three key ways. First, it looks at socio-economic practices using a cultural-historical lens to analyse small-scale entrepreneurship during the new economy's rise. Second, it demonstrates a methodological framework for an archival exploration of bottom-up materials through a web-minded approach. Finally, it enriches the historiography of the Dutch public web and complements existing research on the dot-com boom by emphasizing local and regional narratives. This approach challenges dominant interpretations that focus exclusively on large-scale internet businesses, building on work from scholars like Turner (2017) and Driscoll (2022) that foregrounds underexplored, social perspectives in Internet History.

By situating small-scale entrepreneurship within the cultural and economic currents of the new economy, this study opens avenues for comparative analyses and a deeper understanding of how local practices shaped—and were shaped by—the early web.

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