



# THE MAGAZINE THAT MISTOOK ITS READER FOR A HAT!

## Towards a 'Participatory Publishing Model', Part II

(Part I, 'Ceci n'est pas un magazine', Mute 19, May 2001 (<http://www.metamute.com/ceci01.pdf>))

### WHERE ARE WE NOW?

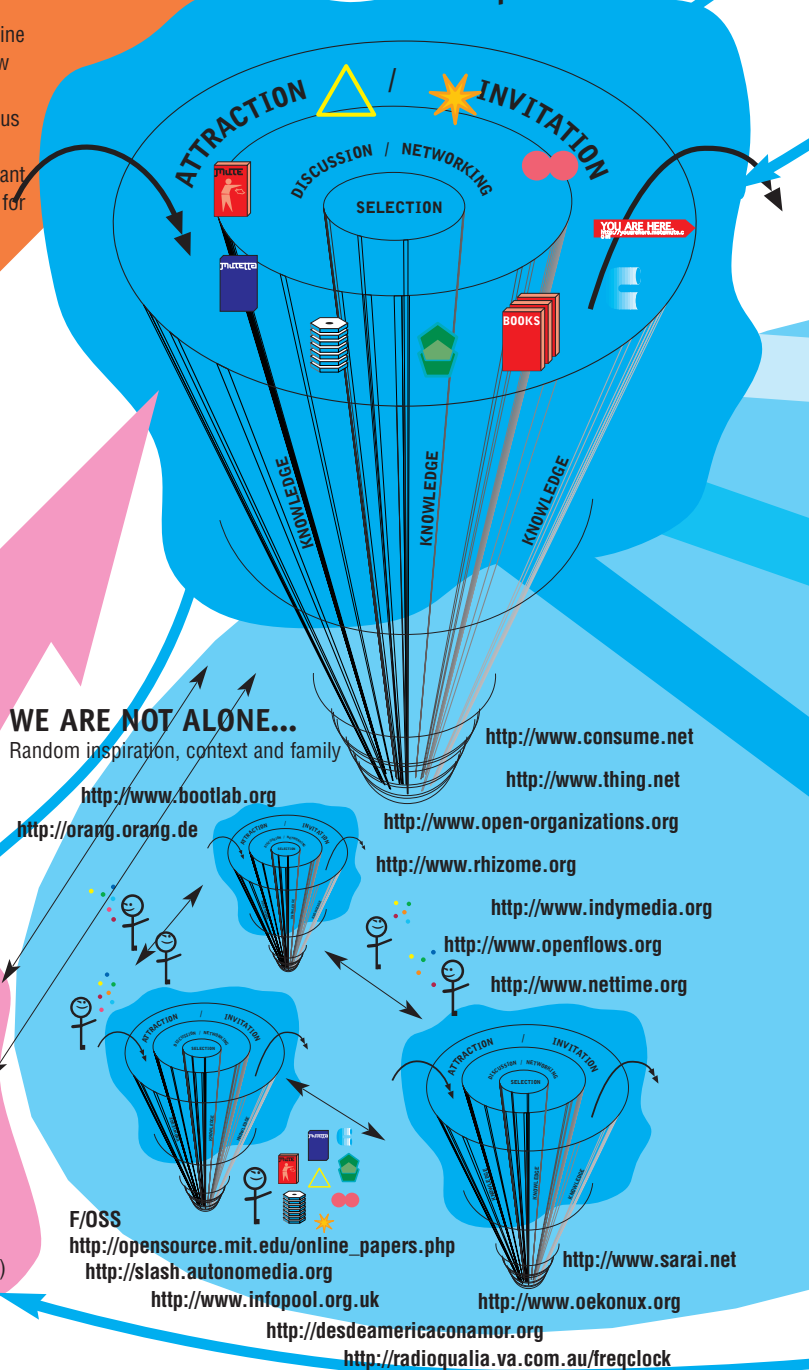
The title of this second part of *Mute's* publishing plan is a play on *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, the title of neurologist Oliver Sacks's anthology of case studies. In his book, Sacks gives compassionate accounts of various neurological disorders and the demands placed on patients forced to reorder their sensoriums after severe accidents. In the cases he selects, these accidents created nearly unbridgeable rifts between the victim and 'reality'. In the most famous one, he relates the experience of patient 'P' whose bearing on reality has been so seriously reshuffled that he... mistakes his wife for a hat.

Without wishing to venture a completely untenable analogy, the perceptual change involved in moving from a traditional magazine (with plans, pitches and commissions), to a hybrid publishing model (where a network of readers, contributors and editors starts to co-determine the publishing process), could be said to force a comparably radical shift in perception. How do you turn your wife from a hat into a woman?

Behind the scenes of the psychiatric ward that is *Mute*, we've been going through momentous changes, taking important preliminary steps towards decentralisation. We've implemented a content management system to fully automate our web publishing and allow for multiple, distant contributors. We've started working internally and externally with a 'Wiki' (a collaborative tool for working asynchronously across the net) – for instance on the production of this issue. And we've readied our network architecture for a host of different types of decentralised communication (ranging from lists to webforums) and media.

But none of this matters if there is no reason to participate: as we said in our previous 'manifesto' ('Ceci n'est pas un magazine'), decentralisation for its own sake – or, worse, for the sake of product expansion – is one of the most suspect phenomena to have emerged in online culture. Opening up the relationships between producer and consumer as often as not stands for some form of direct technocracy and the co-optation of individuals' freely given productivity for private gain. In such cases, the hat remains stubbornly a hat. But to shift the perception of the production process to turn felt into flesh, or a closed creative process into an open one, it must of course be based on something more than a mere conjuring trick. Metaphors aside, below is a description of how and what we propose to achieve – a proposal that blends one part unrepentant optimism with two parts practical engineering.

### B. THE MUTE PROJECT CLUSTER More than the sum of its parts



### A. WHAT'S THIS BUG BRAIN THINKING ABOUT?

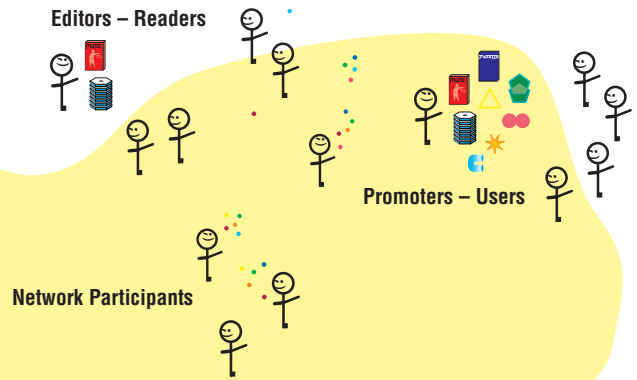
While opening up *Mute's* brain to collective tinkering, and having learnt from the experience of building our complementary platforms, we have recognised the importance of making clear our key areas of interest (as they stand at present).

- New forms of cultural expression
- The impact of technologically-driven change on culture and society
- Participatory and decentralised publishing and communications models
- Sustainable and alternative economies of cultural production
- The anti-capitalist movement
- Community owned and run wireless networks
- Alternative means of visualising cultural/political/social systems (e.g. cartography)
- Autonomous modes of organisation

## C. PARTICIPATION?

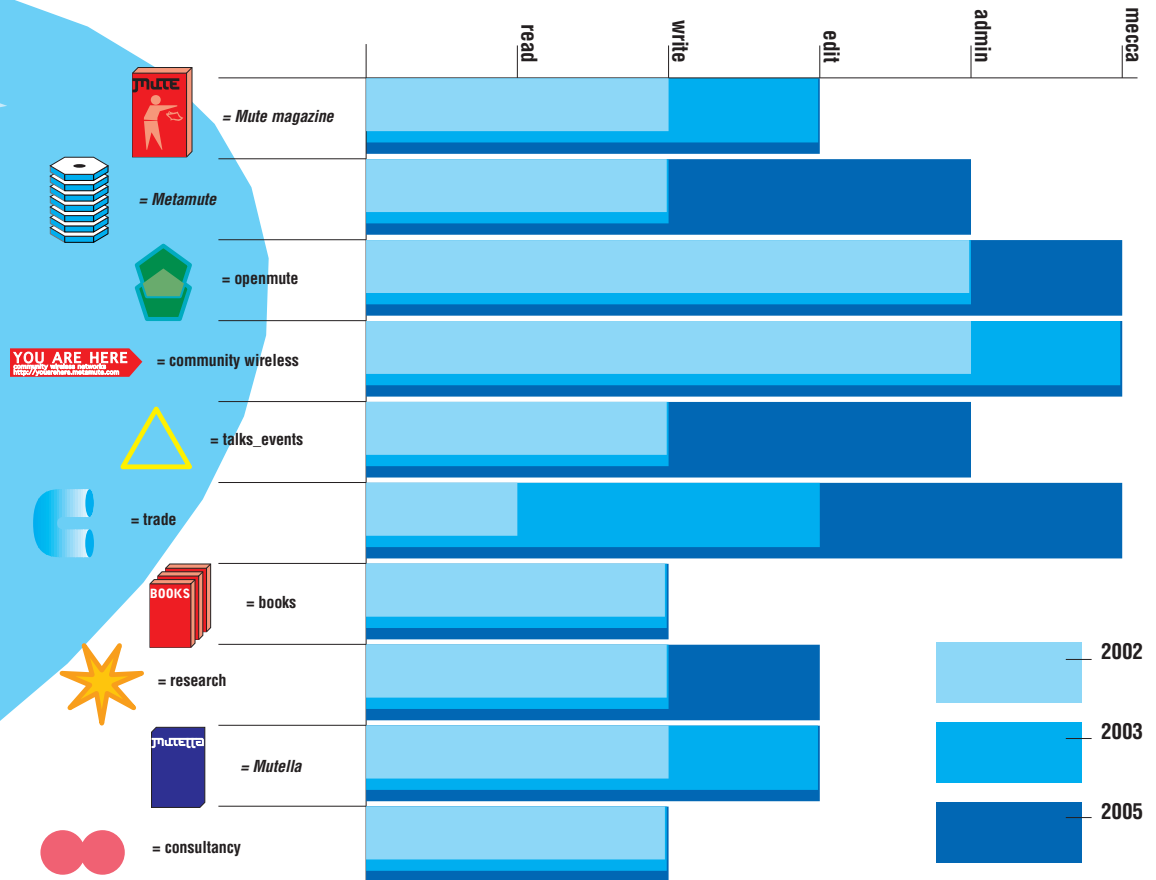
Before giving some of our current thoughts on openness and participation, it is important to acknowledge even at this stage that we intend to create different degrees of participation for different areas of our activities. For instance, some aspects of the editorial process will never be totally open. We value old-style editorial as much as new style multitudinous love-ins!

1. Firstly, we recognise the need for high levels of organisational transparency and accountability (although an organisation can claim to do this without, in fact, permitting any really open participation, e.g. governments or the new 'socially responsible' corporations)
2. It is important to state which elements of a process are completely open and which are not, and for what reasons
3. The culture of complete transparency implies a universal language which everyone can understand. This can belittle the significance of local contexts and languages and their relevance to their constituencies. Think before you universalise
4. It is vital, when soliciting participation, to show the intended path of development. However, at a certain stage (usually when things are more developed) the terms of engagement need to be thrown open for re-negotiation
5. Learning from the knowledge-sharing ethos exemplified by the Free Software movement, a wide ranging debate on these issues provides the all important fuel for the fire



## Mute's Present and Future Perfect

Mute has initiated a complementary set of publishing and communication projects whose levels of openness to participation are described below, in their current and ideal future forms



A copy of this document can be found at [<http://www.metamute.com/ceci02.pdf>]

*The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* // Oliver Sacks // 1985 // Touchstone Books // ISBN 0-684-85394-9 // [<http://www.oliversacks.com/>]

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<http://www.metamute.com/mfiles/ceci02.pdf>  
[mute@metamute.com](mailto:mute@metamute.com)