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## Something is Happening Here



BY JEFF DEGRAFF

“Something is happening here and you don’t know what it is, do you Mister Jones?” Bob Dylan sang in a rough and menacing voice. It is easy now to look back and see that the “Ballad of a Thin Man” was a portent of coming attractions for America and beyond: Civil Rights, the Great Society, Women’s Liberation, man on the moon, the death of our heroes and the demise of a president. Dylan is revered by my generation because he always seemed to know when the winds were shifting,

but never told us where they would lead us. In some vaguely familiar way, it feels like it’s all happening again but we will need a new soundtrack for this one.

The go-go years have now gone the way of cheap money and oil. The U.S. recession has triggered the collapse of several European economies along with the financial meltdown in Asia. In a twist of fate, the banks that foreclosed on houses are now themselves being foreclosed. Traditional enemies are now partners in peace, and countries that flew below the radar for decades are the new areas of “concern.” Perhaps most improbable, against all odds, the U.S. now has elected an African American President who brilliantly blogged, Twittered, and ultimately enrolled both the disaffected and the powerful, and in a single instant turned the wheel of history in a new direction. It feels like the changes that occurred in 2008 will rival those of 1968, but not without their share of confusion and conflict.

There is no data on the future, where innovation and growth will happen. That’s what separates the better from the new. In times of punctuated equilibrium, the most adaptable of the species prosper while the least wane. When the environment changes, biodiversity flourishes and optimization becomes a fast road to ruin.

There are three basic paradoxes that will in some way inform what happens next. This does not suggest that these are the only ones, or that they are mutually exclusive. Indeed, these tensions will

produce innovative hybrids, but it does suppose that incumbents and upstarts, the old and the new, will vie for prominence.

### Collaborative vs. Individualized

It is frequently suggested that in the age of Wikinomics we will all have part in someone else’s movie. Open Source, Crowdsourcing, Collaborative Innovation Networks (CoINS) and Idea Markets are to this generation what program management, stage-gate systems and portfolio processes were to the last. The crowd brings wisdom and a wide range of abilities, but the crowd also has the attention span of a gnat and has an irritating tendency to produce crap.

The vestiges of the Brand You and Free Agent Nation that emerged during the halcyon days of the dot.com boom are still with us. They are cornerstones of the American “you-can-do-it” culture that emerged during the previous centuries and have been exported like Disney characters around the world.

We can see these views collide in the recent headlines announcing, “Facebook Owns Your Face,” alluding to the change in the terms of service at the popular social networking site. Innocentive and other collaborative innovation service providers are all facing disturbing yet predictable dilemmas regarding who owns user-generated content. Similarly, Google’s famous “Do No Evil,” an enviable mission statement, has begged numerous questions about what it re-

### Inside this Issue:

Student Updates	2
Profile: Andi Lobdell	3
Announcements	4

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 2]

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## SOMETHING'S HAPPENING

ally means—what's evil? Who decides? Although all three firms have been named in class action lawsuits, this is so much more than an intellectual property dispute. How does a business function when everyone works for themselves with everyone else in the workplace?

### Global vs. Local

The stock markets of the world now resemble an elementary school class, where one kid gets the bug and they all have it by the end of the week. That's what makes this recession so miserable—everyone caught the crud. We are globally connected through multinational corporations, importation of technologies and natural resources, financial markets, institutions of higher education, and the ubiquitous web of converging media. The Internet site with the cute puppies falling asleep is a hit in both Bangkok and Chicago.

Conversely, there is a trend gripping Europe, and now the States, toward sourcing food from local suppliers. It's more than just the old "buy American" play, which is being dusted off just in time for the uber-stimulus package, but more about identifying with and valuing your community and environs. While there is considerable consolidation where we interact on the Net, our connections are becoming increasingly local and vertical: past places of employment, the university where you did your undergraduate work, and folks who like to vacation in the Florida Keys.

From charitable giving to selecting a place to retire, people are staying closer to home.

So which is it? How do we really think globally and act locally?

### Security vs. Freedom

The litany of trigger events that have ushered in the Age of Security are so powerful that they can conjure up all manner of demons with a single word: 9/11, Madrid, and Mumbai. Constitutions are modified, regulations are rewritten and passengers are seen as potential weapons, all to spare us from the dangers of the human condition. In addition, now many are losing jobs and homes, and what seemed placid has been all stirred up by all manner of storm. As they say in the trade, "Make for safe harbor."

On the other hand, over 25% of Americans are currently self-employed, and the ranks are growing in the emerging juggernauts of Eastern Europe and Latin America. Fewer constraints and taxes is their battle cry! In the face of the Renaissance of Big Government, there is a strong backlash for the autonomous, free thinking, and self-reliant that would make Ayn Rand proud. After all, capitalism requires capitalists.

The Clear card, which lets you "fly through airport security," may be a sign of things to come. Perhaps it should be renamed the "I'm not a terrorist" card. To those who have the means and the right profile, they remain both free and

secure. For everyone else, well, that still needs to be worked out. How do we keep our cherished freedoms and liberties, the core of our most sacred beliefs, while functioning in an ever more concealed and dangerous world?

While many might see these paradoxes as problematic, they represent enormous opportunities to the imaginative, resourceful, and optimistic. OK, let's acknowledge that ambiguity brings anxiety, and that it's been a while since the "times they are a-changin'" like they are now. But inevitably, the new way becomes the middle way—the road becomes familiar, and we come to master its turns. So let's all take a deep breath and a higher point of view for just a moment. Turn-off and drop out of the "I know how this story ends" discussion. That's for fortune tellers, talk show pretenders, and other assorted weasels. There are no simple rules or "do these three things and it will all get better" remedies when history is dragging you along for the ride. As the wiggy-cool Søren Kierkegaard put it, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." Something is indeed happening here and you don't know what it is...none of us do...but at least we are taking the ride together.

*Jeff DeGraff, Clinical Associate Professor of Management Education, teaches innovation and leadership in the EMBA Program.*

*Visit [www.innovatrium.org](http://www.innovatrium.org) to learn more about Jeff's collaborative innovation community.*

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## Student Updates

**Lt. Col. William A. Hargrove (EMBA10)** is currently taking a USAF transition training course at **Barksdale Air Force Base** in Bossier City, Louisiana. He is learning to fly the A-10 Thunderbolt II (aka "The Hog"). Bill has been flying the F-16 for the past 18 years, constituting 2,400 hours of flight time and four combat tours.

**Manuel Clausen (EMBA11)** started a new position on February 2, 2009 as Director Central de Gestión Institucional (Institutional Managing Director) for **Jurado Nacional de Elecciones (JNE)**. JNE is a governmental agency that monitors all elections in Peru and establishes jurisprudence for the entire Peruvian electoral system.

**Scott Brinker (EMBA12)** was promoted to Senior Vice President for **Healthcare REIT, Inc.** at the end of 2008.