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started it.

I also think that there's something very fun and provocative about the way flash mobs disrupt urban space. Y'know, this was not so long after September 11, and there was definitely a sense in New York that public gatherings were somehow risky, that there was potential danger involved in crowds and unplanned activities, and flash mobs were kind of a light-hearted defusing of that idea.

And I think people liked it because flash mobs make physical the virtual connections that exist between people — in terms of your friends and acquaintances that you maybe don't see very often but you know them via email. And this was before Facebook. So you would suddenly see, made manifest in this very present, physical way, this kind of email network that goes from person to person to person.

R.R.: You wrote that the flash mob started because you were bored.

B.W.: Well, yeah! [Laughs.] I'm not going to be apologetic about that. I think a lot of great creative energies come out of boredom. You disagree?

R.R.: No, I don't. You wrote about having all kinds of ideas and waiting for that one that ignites your passion. So I agree that boredom can lead to a great creative concept. What I was trying to get at was, do you think boredom is involved in all nanostories?

B.W.: No, no. One of the ideas I'm trying to get across with nanostories is that they just come up very naturally as a byproduct of our media environment, coming up somewhat organically out of the culture. We get nanostories out of news or public affairs, or a band might suddenly become popular and they're what I'd call a nanostory. I don't think there's a grand unified theory as to how all of these things start.

I do think that boredom, or the perception of boredom, does play a role in why people shift their attention away from one thing to the next big thing. As a culture we have an orientation towards novelty. The media essentially exists — and I would now say the new media exists as well — to continually feed us new and exciting and supposedly revolutionary things. You pick up [a] newspaper and every day there's somebody with some new trend story about some hot, new exciting thing that you didn't know about before. I think it's become true online, where various blogs and even amateur media that's dedicated to trying to hold up something new and say, "Hey, aren't you sick of all this tired old stuff? Here's something new!"

R.R.: I think a great example of a nanostory is Susan Boyle (the YouTube sensation, known for her voice and her non-glossy appearance).

B.W.: Absolutely right. And I think it's funny: So many people in the non-media universe were forwarding that video around and talking about her and she became this brief national obsession. And now you look



Participants in the growing flash mob craze gaze at the roaring dinosaur in the Toys 'R' Us Times Square store in New York in 2003. The flash mob one in a string that popped up around the globe as part of the Mob Project, a Web-enabled movement in which a group of people all show up at a place at an assigned time, act out a loose script, and then take off.

REUTERS/SHANNON STAPLETON

back on that and sort of say, "Well, where can it possibly go from here?" The cultural industry isn't structured in such a way that Susan Boyle is going to become some Britney Spears — And that's part of the reason people loved her so much and why they were so intrigued by her. But even as everybody was getting so excited about her, you could almost sense that of course this can't last, of course we can't stay focused on Susan Boyle for much longer.

R.R.: In your book, you wrote about Malcolm Gladwell and "The Tipping Point." What do you think stands behind the success of that book?

B.W.: I feel like there has been a phenomenon — and someone might lump my book into this category — of social science porn — [Laughs.] — By which I mean that journalists and popularizers will go to the world of social science for some sort of new or interesting result, and then they'll package them to the general reader in such a way where all of the world's problems are going to be magically solved through some new and exciting and unexpected social science insight.

I have a lot of respect for social science and advances in social science and what they can tell us about the way the world works. But I do also feel like some of these problems that we're trying to solve through social science — like happiness, or why some things become successful and some things don't — these are age-old questions that have animated literature and religion for

millennia.

I think that Gladwell's book was a very well written, innovative example of that. I really admire a lot of his work. In my book I mention "The Tipping Point" and "Freakonomics" [by Steven Levitt and New York Times journalist Stephen J. Dubner] as examples of this type of book where a certain kind of insight about success is being sold to the general reader. And in general, I guess I find those kinds of books a little bit distasteful, where essentially what's being sold is a very numbers-based and manipulative way of thinking about other people.

R.R.: When I read Malcolm Gladwell, I almost always feel good at the end of it. He makes me think, "Oh wow, I make it."

B.W.: Yeah, well I'm here to tell you you can't. [Laughs.]

R.R.: But people, they making it. For 15 seconds.

B.W.: That's right. The Internet has made it very seductive. There's a new kind of viral fame that's very real. There's a sense that the best thing to aspire to right now is to become a short-lived Internet sensation.

R.R.: You used the word viral. So is there an anti-viral for this culture?

B.W.: [Laughs.] Well, I don't think that there's an anti-viral in the sense that we can shut down the kind of nanostory machine,

that we can shut down the frenetic nature of our digital culture. Nor do I think we'd want to do that, because I do think that we get lots of great benefits from the new ways that we are able to communicate with each other. It is great to be able to connect with so many people and to find other people who share the same interests. But for a lot of reasons, I think that we should be wary of giving ourselves over entirely to surfing the latest wave of internet hysteria.

I think that one really important thing is to carve out time in the day for longer-term thoughts, for bigger pursuits, for not being interrupted by e-mail and constantly refreshing the blogs. I think it's important to live in such a way that we cordon off space away from information and informational distraction, in order to work on the projects that are bigger and more important to us, and even just to sit and think about nothing for a while.

R.R.: Do you have any fears that your book will be a blip? I'm not saying that your book is going to be one.

B.W.: I would say that, sadly, my book would be lucky to be a blip. These days, even when a book or a band or a movie is really successful, usually it means that they're going to have a brief little moment in the sun, where people talk about you and take you seriously and then you're forgotten. So that's the sort of best-case scenario. [Chuckles.] I'm being somewhat facetious.

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