Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution

Jeffrey Barlow
Pacific University

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Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution

By Jeffrey Barlow <barlowj@pacificu.edu>

Howard Rheingold is one of the more noted of commentators who have addressed social issues related to the World Wide Web and the Internet. Probably his most noted book has been The Virtual Community, in which Rheingold noted that the ability to work in an electronic environment was having a profound effect upon community as well as upon individual identities. Rheingold is also one of those optimistic beings who think that on balance the effect of the web on democracy will probably be a positive one.

In this book, Rheingold seems more tempered, and more rooted in his research than is often the case. His subject, “smart mobs”, refers to “… people who can act in concert even if they don’t know each other.” (xii) These interest groups, and Rheingold examines many such, from Finland to Japan, are enabled however, not merely by the Internet, but by mobile means of accessing it. These “smart mobs” Rheingold argues, are a new social phenomenon never before possible. As such, they are relevant to what Rheingold sees as one of the central questions of civilization itself: how can competing individuals act cooperatively?

The book consists largely of interviews with creative thinkers in the field of computer-enabled communication and on-site impressions of places where mobile communications have created “smart mobs”. If only for these interviews and Rheingold’s thoughtful reporting of his impressions, the book is a very useful and thought-provoking one. But beyond that, Rheingold is probably right that the question of competition vs. cooperation is precisely the central dilemma of civilization, and it is, as many have observed, a particularly acute question in the early twenty-first century as nation-states from China to the U.S. struggle to define the line between unlimited access and the needs of national security.

Rheingold’s analysis throws a great deal of light into unexpected corners. Many have observed that the question of reliability or authority is central to the use of the Internet, whether for gathering information or for e-commerce. For Rheingold, these issues can equally be reduced to
one of “reputation.” He examines many fascinating means of solving these problems in electronically mediated environments.

Rheingold ends on a rather dark note as he sums up the possible outcomes: a world wide communications system enabled by mobile devices that might either raise us to a new level of cooperative behavior, or equally likely, might make it possible for oppressive regimes, both private/corporate and public to exercise 24-7 surveillance over large populations.

It is hard to sum up the total impact or value of a book that is at once discursive in that it examines so many aspects of the social issue of the “age of instant access”, and rather narrowly focused in that it keeps returning to the central question of competition vs. cooperation. For me, the value of a book lies in whether or not it makes me think about new issues and to begin to investigate them. I think that Smart Mobs is such a book.

Jeffrey Barlow
Editor, Interface

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Wow, an individual was thinking. A good technique you put in place. I’m sure it’s going to eat plenty of the stress away!

Lódz  
on **February 1, 2014 at 3:41 AM** said:

Hi! That is my 1st comment right here so I just wanted to give a quick shout out and tell you I definitely enjoy reading your articles. Can you suggest any other blogs/websites/forums that go more than the same subjects? Enjoy it!