Against the Machine: Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob

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Lee Siegel's Against the Machine: Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob

Review by Jeffrey Barlow


For our Berglund 2008 Summer Institute, "The Wisdom and Madness of Crowds, Web 2.0" we found it much easier to find speakers and materials dealing with the wisdom of crowds rather than with their madness. One conspicuous exception was Against the Machine by Lee Siegel. Our group's discussion of his work was animated and often highly critical. But as we study the impact of the Internet in all of its aspects at the Berglund Center, Siegel is a good balance for the many highly positive and laudatory works available. It is just about as distant from the views of Palfrey and Gasser, the authors of the second work reviewed in this issue, Born Digital (see pg. 248), as is possible. It would be ideal if the two books reviewed this month could be read together to present a roughly balanced view, as they both deal with those who can be called the Web 2.0 population. But, unfortunately, they are quite different in tone and content.

Siegel's perspective can be summed up with these words:

What I have been describing is the surreal world of Web 2.0, where the rhetoric of democracy, freedom, and access is often fig leaf for antidemocratic and coercive rhetoric; where commercial ambitions dress up in the sheep's clothing of humanistic values; and where, ironically, technology has turned back the clock from disinterested enjoyment of high and popular art to a primitive culture of crude, grasping self-interest. [1]

Many readers may find Against the Machine more of a rant than an analysis; if, however, you find it an attractive rant, this may be the book
you are seeking to bring to a head all of your own doubts and fears about the impact of the Internet.

While ostensibly intended as a criticism of Internet 2.0, usually defined as the interactive portions of the Internet, *Against the Machine* reprises all the familiar criticisms of Internet 1.0, the Internet, as we once knew it. These include:

- The Internet destroys community.
- It creates an illusory space which ill prepares us for "the untamed, undigested, unrationlized [2], uncontrolled world..." [3]
- It destroys privacy.
- It has commercialized pornography and made it commonplace and less objectionable.

While we merely list these elements here, Siegel has a gift for inflammatory critical prose, sometimes openly *ad hominem* in its focus, and the impact of his arguments is significantly more heated than this list, if not always more persuasive.

The causes of these adverse impacts, as Siegel views them, are perhaps less familiar:

- The Internet commercializes culture.
- The Internet encourages and abets uninformed amateurs in pushing out of the public discourse thoughtful professionals.
- This group of uninformed amateurs can be thought of as the "electronic mob" especially when acting as bloggers and Internet enabled cranks.
- This group grabs whatever is popular, regardless of its quality, and spreads it through the culture by means of web 2.0 publications.

Another major cause of the failures of the Internet are "Internet Boosters," intellectuals who write about the web and praise it
uncritically, writing in "Internetese, this new, strangely robotic, automatic-pilot style of writing." [4] The result is that critical values give way to a very uncritical search for popularity, measured above all as "clicks."

And these effects of the Internet are more than just a minor annoyance. This process is destroying classical Western culture, which has always answered the question of what it means to be human.

In leveling these many charges about the cultural threat of the Internet Siegel relies upon a very restricted definition of "culture." Although he references "mass culture," he insists on maintaining a distinction between culture created for the masses (film, especially black and white film) and culture created by the masses (YouTube). The former is classical, appropriate, even enduring; the latter is a lot of stupid film clips created by people earnestly endeavoring not to create something new and valuable, but to copy trash in an endless drive to be popular.

The perpetrators of these cultural crimes, the new Web 2.0 masses, are driven by resentment of their betters. Siegel at no point uses the language of "class" in a Marxist or even sociological sense, but draws a distinction something like that between "high culture" and "low culture." As Siegel says this crowd is motivated by a "...universal impatience with authority, with any kind of superiority conferred by excellence and expertise." [5]

In Siegel's perspective, "What the new crude egalitarianism is doing, in the name of democracy, is allowing the strongest assertion to edge out the most conscientious talent." Thus the downward spiral of Western culture.

This process was sufficiently dangerous earlier. But now Web 2.0 has multiplied that threat. He defines Web 2.0 as "...the Internet's characteristically mechanistic term for the participatory culture that it has now consummated and established as a social reality." [6]
We might conclude this anti-diatribe with Siegel's list of "Five Open Secrets," fatal weaknesses in the Internet:

1. Not everyone has something meaningful to say.
2. Few people have anything original to say.
3. Only a handful of people know how to write well. [7]
4. Most people will do almost anything to be liked.
5. "Customers" are always right, but "people" aren't. [8]

This book could be useful to many, but it is the sort of work that will divide any audience into fiercely partisan groups, either "for" or "against" the Internet. While he has some of the same concerns as do Palfrey and Gasser, unlike them, he rarely suggests solutions to the problems he raises, but rather condemns the alleged perpetrators with angry blasts of rhetoric.

[1] Siegel 134

[2] "Unrationalized" does not make the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/unrationalized though it is in common usage, so I won't add a snide "sic" at this point to the quotation, though given that one of Siegel's complaints about the www is that "Only a handful of people know how to write well," I am strongly tempted.

[3] Siegel, 17

[4] Siegel, 126

[5] Siegel 141

[6] Siegel, 126

[7] While I have successfully resisted many impulses to lampoon Siegel, this latter list, and particularly the hubristic #3, "Only a handful of people know how to write well." cannot be over looked. So many
questions come to mind: Does this mean then, that most books are badly written and that the bad writing of the Internet is not all that much of a departure? The little phrase "know how to" is particularly evocative. While clearly resisting "Internetese," Siegel leaves some ambiguity here: Why did he not simply say: "Only a handful of people write well?" Does he mean to imply that there are people who know how to write well but choose not to do so? Or does he mean that some people do not know how to write well, but nonetheless do? Or is he simply trying to make a rather short work as lengthy as possible by introducing extraneous prose at every opportunity? But that would be a rank commercial purpose, found largely among Internet boosters.

[8] Siegel 161