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## The unrevolution

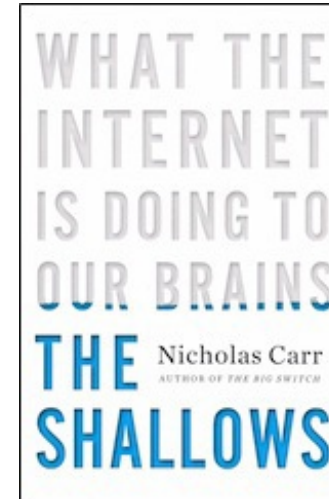
N O V E M B E R 0 8 , 2 0 1 0

"I am not a Communist," declared the author-entrepreneur Steven Johnson in a recent [column](#) in the business section of the *New York Times*. Johnson made his disclaimer in the course of celebrating the creativity of "open networks," the groups of volunteers who gather on the net to share ideas and produce digital goods of one stripe or another. Because they exist outside the marketplace and don't operate in response to the profit motive, one might think that such collaboratives would represent a threat to traditional markets. After all, what could be more subversive to consumer capitalism than a mass movement of people working without pay to create free stuff for other people? But capitalists shouldn't worry, says Johnson; they should rejoice. The innovations of the unpaid web-enabled masses may be "conceived in nonmarket environments," but they ultimately create "new platforms" that "support commercial ventures." What appears to excite Johnson is not the intrinsic value of volunteerism as an alternative to consumerism, but the way the net allows the efforts of volunteers to be turned into the raw material for profit-making ventures.



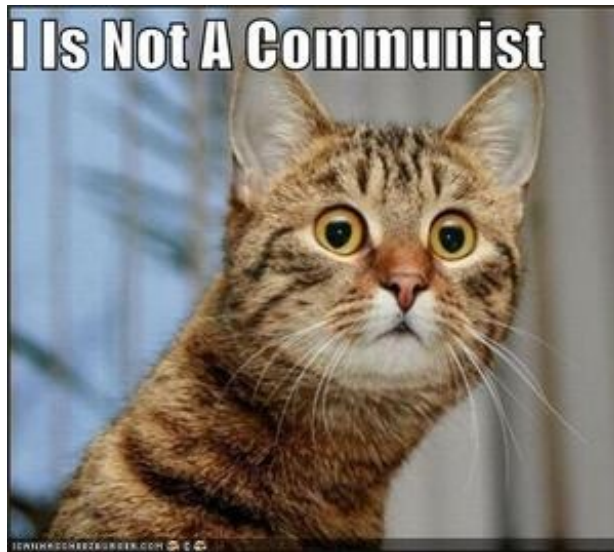
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“ . . . ”



Johnson's view is typical of many of the web's most enthusiastic promoters, the Corporate Communalists who feel compelled to distance themselves from, if not ignore entirely, the more radical implications of the trends they describe with starry-eyed avidity. In a new book with a Marx-tinged title, *What's Mine Is Yours*, the business consultants Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers begin by describing the onset of what sounds like an anti-market revolution. "The convergence of social networks, a renewed belief in the importance of community, pressing environmental concerns, and cost consciousness," they write, "are moving us away from the old, top-heavy, centralized, and controlled forms of consumerism toward one of sharing, aggregation, openness, and cooperation." Indeed, we are at a moment of transition from "the twentieth century of hyper-consumption," during which "we were defined by credit, advertising, and what we owned," to "the twenty-first century of Collaborative Consumption," in which "we will be defined by reputation, by community, and by what we can access and how we share and what we give away."

But, having raised the specter of an anti-consumerist explosion, Botsman and Rogers immediately defuse the revolution they herald. Like Johnson, they turn out

"A measured manifesto"  
-*New York Times Book Review*

"Riveting" - *San Francisco Chronicle*

"Rewarding" - *Financial Times*

"Revelatory" - *Booklist*

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to be more interested in the way online sharing feeds into profit-making ventures. "Perhaps what is most exciting about Collaborative Consumption," they write, with charming naiveté, "is that it fulfills the hardened expectations on both sides of the socialist and capitalist ideological spectrum without being an ideology in itself." In fact, "For the most part, the people participating in Collaborative Consumption are not Pollyannaish do-gooders and still very much believe in the principles of capitalist markets and self-interest ... Collaborative Consumption is by no means antibusiness, antiproduct or anticonsumer." Whew!

As Rob Horning notes in his [review](#) of the book, Botsman and Rogers are more interested in co-opting anti-consumerist energies than unleashing them.

Economically speaking, they're radical conservatives:

Were the emphasis of *What's Mine Is Yours* strictly on giving things away, as opposed to reselling them or mediating the exchanges, it might have been a different sort of book, a far more utopian investigation into practical ways to shrink the consumer economy. It would have had to wrestle with the ramifications of advocating a steady-state economy in a society geared to rely on endless growth. But instead, the authors are more interested in the new crop of businesses that have sprung up to reorient some of the anti-capitalistic practices that have emerged online — file sharing, intellectual property theft, amateur samizdat distribution, gift economies, fluid activist groups that are easy to form and fund, and so on — and make them benign compliments [sic] to mainstream retail markets. Indeed, conspicuously absent from the book is any indication that any business entities would suffer if we all embraced the new consumerism, a gap that seems dictated by the book's intended audience: the usual management-level types who consume business books.

A similar tension, between revolutionary rhetoric and counterrevolutionary message, runs through the popular "wkinomics" writings of Don Tapscott and

The ubiquity of IPv6  
2.0

Twitter dot dash

The engine of  
serendipity

The editor and the  
crowd

Avatars consume as  
much electricity as  
Brazilians

The great unread

The love song of J.  
Alfred Prufrock's avatar

Flight of the wingless  
coffin fly

Sharecropping the long  
tail

The social graft

Steve's devices

MySpace's vacancy

The dingo stole my  
avatar

Excuse me while I blog

Other writing

Is Google Making Us  
Stupid?

The ignorance of  
crowds

The recorded life

The end of corporate  
computing

IT doesn't matter

The parasitic blogger

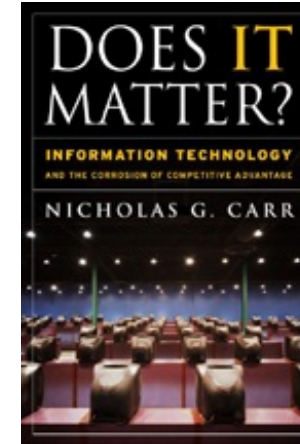
Anthony D. Williams. In their new book, *Macrowikinomics*, they once again promote the net as, to quote from Tom Slee's [review](#), "a revolutionary force for change, carrying us to a radically different future." And yet the blurbs on the back of the book come from a who's who of big company CEOs. The revolution that Tapscott and Williams describe is one that bears, explicitly, the imprimatur of Davos billionaires. For them, too, the ultimate promise of open networks, of wikis, lies in providing new opportunities, or "platforms," for profiteers. Slee notes some of the contradictions inherent in their argument:

On one side, *Macrowikinomics* exaggerates the political and economic possibilities of digital collaboration as well as the discontinuity between today's digital culture and the activities of previous generations. On the other side, it ignores the unsavoury possibilities that seem to accompany each and every inspiring initiative on the Internet (every technology has its spam) and inspirational initiatives for change that take place away from the digital world. Most importantly, it does not register the corrosive effect of money (and particularly large amounts of money) on the social production and voluntary networked activity that they are so taken with.

What most characterizes today's web revolutionaries is their rigorously apolitical and ahistorical perspectives - their fear of actually being revolutionary. To them, the technological upheaval of the web ends in a reinforcement of the status quo. There's nothing wrong with that view, I suppose - these are all writers who court business audiences - but their writings do testify to just how far we've come from the idealism of the early days of cyberspace, when online communities were proudly uncommercial and the free exchanges of the web stood in opposition to what John Perry Barlow dismissively [termed](#) "the Industrial World." By encouraging us to think of sharing as "collaborative consumption" and of our intellectual capacities as "cognitive surplus," the technologies of the web now look like they will have, as their ultimate legacy, the spread of market forces into the most intimate spheres of human activity.

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**Rough Type is:**

Written and published by  
[Nicholas Carr](#)

Designed by [Tim Swan](#)

[What?](#)



PS These are the first lolcats I've created. Pretty good, huh?

Posted by nick at November 8, 2010 03:07 PM

**Advertisement:** Now available: Nicholas Carr's new book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. [Order now](#) from Amazon.

## Comments

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Nick, smart stuff as always. (By the way, I have been praising *The Shallows* throughout the book tour, even while voicing some of my disagreements with it.)

In this post, I would quibble with this characterization of my attitude: "What appears to excite Johnson is not the intrinsic value of volunteerism as an alternative to consumerism, but the way the net allows the efforts of volunteers to be turned into the raw material for profit-making ventures."

I feel quite strongly that this is not the attitude that the book takes -- while I think the commercial applications of open platforms are interesting, it's not nearly as interesting to me as the non-market side. The whole last chapter of the book is basically a love song to the university system, amateur scientists, and open source

movements. There's even a paragraph where I clearly say that I'm less interested in the market opportunities, and then: "it is the public sector that I find more interesting, because governments and other non-market institutions have long suffered from the innovation malaise of top-heavy bureaucracies. Today, these institutions have an opportunity to fundamentally alter the way they cultivate and promote good ideas. The more the government thinks of itself as an open platform instead of a centralized bureaucracy, the better it will be for all of us, citizens and activists and entrepreneurs alike."

I realize that you're not responding to the book, just the article, but thought it was a point worth clarifying.

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Posted by: [stevenberlinjohnson](#)  at November 8, 2010 04:06 PM

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Absolutely worth clarifying. Thanks, Steven. I wonder, though, whether you see any tension in the use of "nonmarket environments" as "platforms for commercial ventures"? You seem to imply (in the article, anyway) that there's a kind of seamlessly complementary relationship between the two, which I have some trouble with.

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Posted by: [Nick Carr](#)  at November 8, 2010 04:59 PM

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The "government as platform" initiative is one that seems to illustrate the "complementarity" problem. Some parts of that initiative seem inspirational, but others seem more like a form of privatisation - a way for private companies to make money off public data, and a way for government to offload its responsibilities (see some of the "Big Society" moves in the UK).

I have a difficult time reconciling my conflicting attitudes to these two entangled developments.

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Posted by: [tomslee](#)  at November 8, 2010 08:55 PM

I prefer Яolcats.

<http://rolcats.com/19>

Posted by: Charles  at November 8, 2010 10:32 PM

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One of the current universal psychoses associated with consumerism is the irrepressible desire to explain all human phenomena in terms of an economic theory. Since most of the economic theories seem to be quite poor at predicting much of anything, I tend to discount this kind of analysis. Let's face it - in the most recent election the majority of Americans probably voted against their interests as an economist would measure them. Why? - because there is something that economists can not measure that is more important. One of the many things that the economists can not measure is the value of the "spirit" as in the "spirit of cooperation". Right now its not just business that is infected with consumerism. Academics and the government are also infatuated. So I would not look to either of them to figure out how to channel this energy. But I am not that pessimistic, so far the human "spirit" has always found some kind of outlet.

PS: You made a typo on the last cat - you meant I. Kant Has Revolution - right.

Posted by: Grizzlymarmot  at November 8, 2010 10:43 PM

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It seems obvious that the volunteer Internet culture is "shrinking" the consumer economy in much the same way Walmart has: not by shrinking consumption, of course--quite the opposite--but by reducing the number of people who can make a living in the economy.

Posted by: Mike  at November 8, 2010 11:47 PM

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Nick, it's great to see you back to old stomping grounds! Excellent post.

I would only take a very slight issue with the following sentence "What most characterizes today's web revolutionaries is their rigorously apolitical and ahistorical perspectives - their fear of actually being revolutionary." These are not *revolutionaries*, but marketers adopting a manipulative pose - hence their fear that their intended customers might not recognize it as a merely a sales-pitch for public, err, consumption.

Note also my discussion of "corporate collectivism" in "[Wikipedia isn't about human potential, whatever Jimmy Wales says](#)" ("Beware corporate executives posing as social visionaries")

Posted by: [Seth Finkelstein](#)  at November 8, 2010 11:51 PM

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[sigh...] I expect more intelligent, less sensationalist comments from a decent NYT writer. Brilliant points, Mr. Carr. Except you seem to miss that the cornerstone of a sharing economy is capitalism, not socialism. It's all about the Benjamins, baby. I wouldn't expect you to understand the finer points, such as caring for the environment or your community.


I run a peer-to-peer carsharing service called RelayRides. We're like Zipcar in that we provide on demand access to cars in your neighborhood, except instead of owning a fleet of vehicles, we're a platform to allow car owners to rent out their vehicles to neighbors when they would otherwise be idle.

People enroll for two reasons: 1) because it satisfies a need or solves a problem. They either have extra capacity on their vehicle (car owner) or they need to get around, and 2) because it makes financial sense. Car owners can make money off of an idle asset, and those that don't own a car can save hundreds of dollar per month (\$500 on average) compared to car ownership. Other benefits, such as lending a helping hand to a neighbor or caring about the environment, are just



icing on the cake.

It's bewildering to me how people would argue against this movement. RelayRides puts money in people's pockets, leads to fewer cars on the road, reduced vehicle emissions, and stronger communities - all of this fueled by capitalism. So remind me again how this is bad for society, or in any way "communist"?

Posted by: Shelby Clark  at November 9, 2010 12:19 AM

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Nicholas,

Thanks for the post and the posts you prompted. I'm glad for the variety: Most of the charges of naivete that get thrown at the book and the growing movement of collaborative consumption come from opposite ends of the political spectrum. Taking the same behavior – sharing - conservatives have mocked the book as a communist manifesto [checkout the comments on my recent CNN post] while liberals have ridiculed the book as a cynical sop to capitalism [e.g. Horning Review]. The fact that the book has attracted criticism from both ends of the political spectrum should be comforting because I'm not sure which charge of naivete stings more: that coming from conservatives who cynically contend that their wealth will “trickle down”(!) or that coming from liberals who evidently think that centuries of economic evolution has no inertia(!). But actually, it's frustrating. From my perspective, and in this respect I'll happily admit to being naive! What matters is whether an idea or possibility being put forward represents an improvement. (I just finished reading Kelly's new book and take the view he posits that progress is creating “just 1 percent more possibilities than you destroy.”) Whether it goes too far, or not far enough, should not be allowed to obscure the merit of the underlying idea.

Of those two possible approaches, it is the approach of critiquing an idea for not going far enough/too far that seems to me to be unhelpful because it serves only to consolidate the views of the converted and antagonize ideological adversaries.

It is in an effort to avoid that result I deliberately targeted the business community. Not to make money (the blurbs on the jacket are from other authors and Craig Newmark, the inside design features a library card that encourages people to share, swap or trade the book, yes, a fun negotiation with the publishers, I am focusing on applying the principles to the public sector etc) but because it is in the mainstream business community (the “management-level types who consume business books”) where change is fundamentally required.

In terms of detail, my reaction to the comment (“...having raised the specter of an anti-consumerist explosion, Botsman and Rogers immediately defuse the revolution they herald”) is to say that it depends on what you mean by “immediately”. In case your comments on What’s Mine is Yours seem to be based entirely on the Horning review, the first section of the book takes a heavy swipe at the current unsustainable model of consumerism. Elsewhere, the book devotes considerable attention to non-profit ventures like Landshare, Freecycle and Timebanking that are using technology to facilitate sharing and that collectively represent the nascent (I emphasize nascent) stages of a redefinition of the relationship between citizens and society.

One of the key strands examined in the book is the promise that collaborative consumption will ultimately drive the life-cycle of products to extend in ways that will eventually force companies to drastically reposition the longevity vs. obsolescence fulcrum in the products they produce. Personally, I welcome this promise. If collaborative consumption helps to bring forward the day when a light bulb lasts for 1000 days instead of 500 hours, I’ll be happy. If collaborative consumption helps a new generation of designers to think differently about how shared products can be personalized, upgraded, repaired etc or how products are not required at all to fulfill a need, I will be VERY happy.

On that note, can I make a plea? If we (especially fellow authors) are going to take the time and trouble to write such thoughtful critiques, perhaps we could take

the time to engage the person being reviewed. That way, substantive differences would still abound, but we might be less inclined to make the worst assumptions about each others personal motivations. [My email is Rachel@rachelbotsman.com)

Posted by: rachel botsman  at November 9, 2010 06:26 AM

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Johnson seems to have some problems with his premises. For example, he describes "the Internet" and "the Web" as "groundbreaking innovations not owned by anyone".

Can anyone tell me what it would actually mean to "own the Internet" or "own the Web"? What would I own? The computers hosting it? The network hardware? Copyrights on standards documents? What? What is "the Internet" that can be owned but for which ownership was forsaken?

There is, actually a lot of "ownership" around the (continuous) process of designing both the Internet generally and the Web. IETF and W3C lawfully own key choke-points of those processes and leverage that ownership to charge rent for participation at the highest levels. The most one could say is that, as non-profits, the rights of ownership are -- different -- from those of for-profit entities.

Certainly there is a lot of ownership around software and hardware that implements the Internet.

There is nothing there that could be owned but that is not owned. Johnson's fourth quadrant is empty.

Johnson writes:

*The conventional wisdom, of course, is that market forces drive innovation, with businesses propelled to new ideas by the promise of*

*financial reward. And yet even in the heyday of industrial and consumer capitalism over the last two centuries, the fourth quadrant turns out to have generated more world-changing ideas than the competitive sphere of the marketplace. Batteries, bifocals, neonatal incubators, birth control pills — all originated either in amateur labs or in academic environments.*

I hardly know where to start. Has Johnson not noticed the role of venture capital, the importance of business/academic partnerships, the closeness of governmental research grant giving to the needs of business and government spending?

What part of this mysterious fourth quadrant is not being driven by proprietary control over some critical aspect or other of innovation?

Thus, when Johnson gets around to saying things like: *"satellites themselves, or the atomic clocks that let them coordinate their signals so precisely — were first conceived in nonmarket environments."* we can just stop. They were not in any way conceived in nonmarket environments. They were conceived in market environments that Johnson doesn't understand or, if he does, doesn't want to acknowledge.

There being no economic mystery or paradox left to explain, the analysis and conclusions refer to a purely imaginary problem.

No surprise that some say "communist!" and others say "greedy capitalist!" or whatever ... the analysis and conclusions are necessarily just a kind of rhetorical Rorschach test given the failure to identify a real phenomenon that presents a puzzle.

Posted by: Tom Lord  at November 10, 2010 01:01 PM

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My name is Micki Krimmel and as founder & CEO of NeighborGoods.net, I'm a proud member of the Collaborative Consumption movement. Our company connects friends and neighbors to lend and borrow household goods and was one

of the many startups featured in What's Mine is Yours. I'm perplexed by what Rachel points out as the "criticism from both ends of the political spectrum" as I have heard similar charges put toward my own work. Conservatives accuse NeighborGoods of being anti-capitalist while extreme lefties throw stones because we're trying to build a profitable company.

Basically, I see it like this. The job of the entrepreneur is to see a need or an opportunity and then to build a product or a service to fill that need or capitalize on the opportunity. Those of us building companies in the collaborative consumption space are no different. As Rachel's book outlines (You should really read it.), we are currently living in a time that is ripe for sharing services. There is a clear need for tools that help us save money in the face of an unstable economy. As our society becomes increasingly concerned about our environmental footprint as well as the health of our local communities, services that address these concerns have a great opportunity to thrive. And of course, the technology to connect people is getting simpler and more ubiquitous by the minute - making it easier than ever before to organize offline sharing activities.


Given the need and the opportunity, we crafty entrepreneurs are doing what we've always done. We're participating in our capitalist society by building businesses, creating jobs, and hopefully turning a profit.

By making it easier for people to get more use out of physical goods, we're also participating in what I believe is a very important movement. Collaborative consumption conserves resources, connects local neighborhoods, and reinvigorates the dearly held and sorely missed American values of thrift, sustainability and community. Are those values anti-market? Of course not! The market shifts around the values of the people. As consumers make smarter (and yes, possibly fewer) purchasing decisions, new needs and opportunities will take shape and the next crop of entrepreneurs will surely be ready to serve those needs. (Again, there are lots of examples of this in Rachel's book.) I would argue

that resisting change in markets and throwing stones at innovation is anti-market. The entrepreneurs working to respond to evolving consumer demand should be applauded as the best hope we have for reinvigorating our stagnant economy.

As entrepreneurs in this space, our desire to build profitable businesses is not at odds with our concern for the environment and community. In fact, it will be our commitment to our values that will guide our companies to success. Henry Ford said, "Business must be run at a profit, else it will die. But when anyone tries to run a business solely for profit... then the business must die as well, for it no longer has a reason for existence."

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Posted by: [Micki Krimmel](#)  at November 10, 2010 01:59 PM

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"the technologies of the web now look like they will have, as their ultimate legacy, the spread of market forces into the most intimate spheres of human activity"

you sound as though you are surprised by this?

But i can't imagine you are.

has not all technology has functioned in this way?

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Posted by: [Dougiedd Dougiedd](#)  at November 10, 2010 08:52 PM

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People like Steven Johnson, Lawrence Lessig, Kevin Kelly, either claim that the corporate Internet is socialism or that it is not. But they do not have a clue about what Marx and Engels were writing about socialism, communism, and capitalism. In my view it would be time for many, who write about the Internet, to read Marx and Engels. Unfortunately, it is quite uncommon, and in the USA was always rather uncommon, to read Capital, Grundrisse, etc.

I have just finished proof-reading the manuscript of my book "Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies" that tries to show how to think with Marx about the contemporary Internet and contemporary society... Engaging with Marx

is crucial for understanding the Internet and capitalism. If you do not, but use terms that have a left-leaning background, the result will be strange and simple-minded assessments of Marxist theory like the ones provided by Lessig, Johnson, and Kelly (who all have different positions on what socialism is about, but all have simply false conceptions of how Marx thought about socialism, communism, and capitalism...).

So Internet scholars - read Marx!

Posted by: [Christian Fuchs](#)  at November 11, 2010 09:36 AM

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