

***Here Comes Everybody* by Clay Shirkey: Review**

In *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, author Clay Shirky examines the effect of the Internet on the ability of people to form groups without traditional institutions. Shirky, a telecommunications professor at New York University, uses a combination of anecdotes and social and economic theories to highlight how online social tools have changed the way humans converse and interact. The book, one of the first explorations of this phenomenon, is written in an easy, narrative style, and is appealing to anyone interested in the effects of new technologies on modern culture.

Shirky points out three levels of group activity that are made easier by online social tools: sharing, collaboration, and collective action. Shirky demonstrates, by referring to real life examples, how groups take advantage of social media to engage in increasingly complex interactions with relative ease, little consideration for managerial functions, and at minimal cost. Organization is achieved through the use of various online platforms such as MySpace, Flickr, Del.icio.us, and Ning. Although the popularity of these sites has diminished since the book was written in 2008, newer sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have replaced them, and Shirky's examples still underline the powerful potential of online communities. The collaborative group efforts in developing Wikipedia and Linux illustrate a new process by which groups participate, with no financial incentive, in the development of a product for the public good.

The book addresses the mass amateurism occurring in journalism and the arts due to the ease of publication on the Internet. A lack of "gatekeepers" has led to the collapse of professionalism as a barrier of entry to these fields, but it remains to be seen whether the desire by the masses to be heard will give rise to a concomitant interest in their amateur productions. It

is also yet to be determined if the old gatekeepers will merely be replaced by new ones, possibly with less expertise and integrity, and more questionable goals.

Shirky argues that modern society is in a period of transition, as it assimilates to new technologies. The retrieval of a mobile phone lost in a New York City cab exemplifies how online social media can be used by a group to achieve a common goal. He believes that in time, the ease of organizing through online technologies will lead to more focused, meaningful and massive activism. Shirky documents the actions of one online community united against child abuse, and others who protested against repressive political regimes or outrageous airline policies. His claim that collective action will progress from petty pursuits, such as the retrieval of a cellphone, to more significant undertakings is based on a handful of anecdotes and stories, and not substantiated by persuasive evidence. The use of social media tools, after all, can be used to equal effect by traditional institutions, as well as repressive political regimes and other harmful groups. Perhaps future studies will be able to trace this progression, and Shirky will be proved correct.

Shirky does not address the issue of the “digital divide,” which increasingly separates the haves from the have-nots (Freeman & Peace, 2005, p. 7). “Everybody” does not apparently include those who do not have Internet access, or who lack information literacy in the age of technology. It is this aspect of the book that is of most concern to library and information professionals. Information leads to better decision-making, which in turn generates power (Mason, 1995, pp. 40-41, 47). Without equal access to information, the economically disadvantaged and the information illiterate are at risk of being left behind. The core values of library professionals, as stated in the American Library Association’s (ALA) Core Values of Librarianship, include the provision of equal access and lifelong learning services to their

communities (ALA Core Values, 2004). The ALA recognizes its social responsibility, and is particularly dedicated to serving the information needs of socially and economically marginalized groups, in an effort to close this frightening divide.

Here Comes Everybody is a thought provoking look at how society is changing as a result of our Internet interactions. It will provide a perspective for future historians on our perceptions of the infinite potential offered by new online social tools, and the accompanying challenges and pitfalls, as these new resources are being explored and exploited for the first time.

References

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