



We-Think

Mass Innovation, Not Mass Production

by Charles Leadbeater
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Focus

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Take-Aways

- The Internet radically increases your level of connection with others.
- When you become more connected, you increase your chances for collaboration.
- But by becoming more connected you also increase your vulnerability.
- “We-Think” is a term for Internet-enabled collective thinking: “We think, therefore we are.”
- This collaboration will transform some industries completely, change some industries somewhat and touch some industries almost not at all.
- We-Think offers powerful new potential for political action and social justice.
- It offers greater economic equality because it freely shares pivotal economic tools.
- We-Think combines innovative, collective aspects of the counterculture, academia and geek experimentation.
- It democratizes the world, widely spreading access to media and information.
- The broader collaboration enabled by the Internet increases freedom by multiplying individual choices.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall

7

Applicability

8

Innovation

6

Style

8

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) What “We-Think” is; 2) How this broad opportunity for collaboration via the Internet is changing society; and 3) What principles govern We-Think.

Recommendation

Charles Leadbeater offers a breezy, pleasant discussion of the Internet’s possibilities for collaboration. Much of his commentary will seem familiar to those who know the area. However, his predictions of widespread social transformation give readers more meaty ideas to consider. While he clearly looks forward to many of these changes, he explains just how and when they don’t work, and why this powerful transformation in collaboration via the Internet hasn’t affected many pockets of society. His awareness of the Web’s limits lends weight to his discussion of its upside potential. The book’s clarity and style make it accessible to the casual observer, but *getAbstract* recommends it even more to those who already are somewhat grounded in this topic and who want to consider all aspects of the World Wide Web’s real future potential.

Abstract

“The Web’s extreme openness, its capacity to allow anyone to connect to virtually anyone else, generates untold possibilities for collaboration.”

Web Connection Defines Today’s World

The Internet is transforming the world in good and bad ways. It opens access to information and the media, and allows people to network, despite geographic distance. Yet, the Web expands the chance that onlookers can monitor individual actions; it exposes you to unprecedented, unexpected intrusions. The Web is above all open – a place where barriers are missing or porous; that means both risk and opportunity. Now the Internet is reaching a crucial point in its development. Use has spread so widely that the Web has begun to influence everything people do. The core issue is not how many individuals use the Web, but what happens when they “share and then combine” their thoughts. The Internet matters most as a platform for sharing.

This sharing provokes a fundamental shift in self-definition. Philosopher René Descartes’ famous line about identity and self-knowledge, “I think, therefore I am,” is changing amid this connection and collaboration. Today’s motto might be “We think, therefore we are.” That’s the essence of “We-Think.” Projects like Wikipedia show its possibilities, negative and positive. “Wikipedia is prone to more errors” than usual encyclopedias, and took several iterations to come into being. But the voluntary contributors who write it fix its errors faster than traditional reference works fix theirs, and it is growing at a tremendous rate, including entries on odd or obscure topics.

We-Think Principles

We-Think’s changes are immense and widespread, but not absolute. The collaborative principles that define We-Think will not apply in every circumstance. Rather, expect to see a tremendous clash over the next few years, as collaboration and the traditional hierarchy push and pull at one another. Expect the results to fall along a spectrum, with We-Think endeavors at one end and traditionally hierarchical organizations at the other.

“The Web matters because it allows people to share ideas with more people in more ways.”

“If you are not perplexed, you should be. As the Web becomes ever more widespread, infiltrating our lives and shaping what we think is possible, we are increasingly unnerved about what we may have unleashed.”

“We-Think’s organizational recipe rests on a balance of three ingredients: participation, recognition and collaboration.”

“The Web’s critics argue that it will corrode much of what is valuable in our culture, which rests on learning and expertise, professionalism and specialism.”

“Social-networking sites work when they foster a spirit of collaborative self-governance: Friendster suffered a catastrophic loss of members through heavy-handed top-down management.”

And that’s fine. We-Think is founded on voluntary collaboration and choices, not on dictating any one mode of organization.

We-Think doesn’t require anyone to buy into a specific ideology. It is being adapted where it works. Take the mapping of the “worm-genome” as an example of We-Think in action. Nobel laureate Sydney Brenner started mapping the genome of *C. elegans* in 1965, but the project was too big for his lab, and too complex for any lab at the time. Therefore, Brenner shared what he and his team were learning, and other researchers began to voluntarily take on different aspects of it. As this far-flung community grew, the technology radically advanced. The *Worm Breeder’s Gazette* shared the results with the community, as face-to-face meetings provided direction and group identity.

This project took place as computers were really just emerging, and well before many people were using the Internet. Yet computers, the Web and other modes of connectivity that define the information age (cell phones, text messaging) have allowed similar projects, like Linux and the open source code movement, to succeed even faster. These projects start with “a good core” of dedicated people who provide expertise and initial direction. Then they blossom as the core “creators give away the material on which others can work.” This opens the community, providing ways for new members to take part and supplying much-needed conceptual tools. As people connect, a self-regulating social structure emerges. The core often remains influential, due to its greater knowledge, but not due to a need to control the project.

We-Think projects function like working cities. A diverse population allows more perspectives to emerge; trust and respect provide a frame for interaction. This population then collaborates, not just in creating new things but also in organizing them. The various elements of a We-Think community may work independently on different portions of a shared project (mapping a genome, writing code). People work on these projects for the joy of it and for recognition from the community. Often this means hashing out ideas in discussion forums.

Market forces don’t drive pure We-Think projects. Instead, these projects, like Wikipedia, offer alternatives to products created by the market. This happens, in part, because market forces tend to focus investigation and creativity too narrowly, shutting down real creativeness. That said, We-Think offers some alternative business models with options that are not available in a traditional hierarchy. We-Think thrives on open-ended conversations. It both offers and depends on a sense of community, which large corporations often lack. Rather than using a model in which products flow from producers to consumers, We-Think engages consumers in co-creation and welcomes product modifications. For example, take the video game *World of Warcraft*, where players’ social interaction fleshes out and partially creates the game’s structure. We-Think redistributes ownership and leadership fluidly according to individual contributions, not hierarchy.

Where Does We-Think Come From?

You might see We-Think as a collaboration among “a computer nerd, an academic, a hippie and a peasant.” Actually, its history blends many attitudes that these groups articulate. The first public discussions of networked computers happened in the late 1960s, as the counterculture was flourishing and many Americans lived on communes. The movements became directly connected when Fred Moore – part of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, which provided a range of tools for counterculture activities – started organizations to explore “the social impact of computers.”

*“We-Think
revives the idea
that sharing and
mutuality can be
as effective a base
for productive
activity as
private ownership.”*

*“Innovation
thrives when ideas
can be shared
among consumers,
developers,
suppliers.”*

*“Who could be
against more
communication
and conversation,
participation and
collaboration,
transparency and
free speech?”*

*“If the Internet
is good for
democracy in the
developing world, it
should then also be
good as a check on
the abuse of power
that entrenches
inequality.”*

Numerous 20th century thinkers called for the increased citizen involvement you now see online. Marshall McLuhan advocated “a retribalization of society” to counter mass culture. Ivan Illich and Guy Debord supported shifting away from consumption and spectacle, and toward dialogue and action. Finally, E. F. Schumacher, who wrote *Small is Beautiful*, called for “production by the masses, not for the masses.”

These qualities abound in online activity. Social networking sites (for example, MySpace) create connections. Blogs and wikis let passive spectators become active producers. South Korea’s OhmyNews uses “55,000 citizen journalists” to provide alternative news coverage. Media-sharing sites (YouTube for videos; Flickr for photos), let individuals share and enjoy media that once was available only through mass corporate or government venues. The most successful sites operate with “a spirit of collaborative self-government,” like the way traditional peasant groups governed the use of the commons. A Web of expectations emerges through repeated community interactions that happen with little top-down adjudication, though small-scale negotiations may continue. While community governance of a commons can break down, especially if the community collapses, the Web’s conceptual resources are less vulnerable. Shared use is often strengthening. Taking too many fish from a lake can deplete it, but taking ideas from a shared pool multiplies their power, rather than sapping it. The result is a bit like folk music, where people borrow musical structures from a shared tradition without concern for ownership.

The Implications of We-Think

We-Think won’t move through all areas of the economy equally or at equal speed, but it is already transforming professions that organize and distribute information. Librarians face huge change as they try to decide what happens when they no longer shepherd physical collections of books, but rather conduct access to a digital collection. Moving academic journals online, and letting manuscripts circulate is speeding up the spread of information. Journalism, music, publishing...any information-processing venue will change quickly and immediately; that’s roughly 20% of the Western economy.

Another 50% of the economy is involved in “medium-impact” enterprises, where We-Think will proceed unevenly. These are fields, like mining, that still employ some major component directly from the industrial age, or industries that use little digitized information, such as service companies. Even these areas will come to incorporate We-Think in surprising ways.

More generally, proprietors are distributing “open-source designs” to do-it-yourself enthusiasts who want to modify mass products. Various scientists are ambitiously working on mobile fabrication units that could make anything that matched stored plans. One version, the “Fab Lab” developed by MIT’s Neil Gershenfeld, is already in limited use. A few medical communities are experimenting with involving patients more in their own care by training people with chronic conditions to monitor themselves and share the results with their medical teams, all electronically.

Online you have access to more open market choices. The combination of cyber-stores’ lower overhead costs and the consumer’s ability to search for any possible purchase creates countless market niches. The Internet also provides tools that multiply creativity, allowing you to make art more quickly and spread self-expression more widely.

In politics, increased connectivity and communication have mixed effects. Some critics say that the Web makes a crowded, noisy world more so. While most political participants in democratic countries can use the Web, “fundamentalist populist movements” get a

“A mass of contributions does not amount to anything, unless together they create something ordered and complex.”

“An idea is set in motion by being shared.”

“You are not defined simply by what you own. You are also what you share. That should be our credo for the century to come.”

disproportionate amount of online attention. Even terrorists use the Internet to stay in contact. In general, the Web has contributed to the disruption of hierarchical order. Even when democratic movements use the Web ethically, for instance, to organize for the civic good, it has not yet produced more reflective debate, as its champions hoped. Instead, most people connect with like-minded cohorts.

On the positive side, the Internet brings youth into the political process. In the Philippines, protestors have used multiple routes (the Internet, mobile phones) to share messages, circulate petitions, organize demonstrations, spread information and expose corruption. Many bloggers move faster than the mainstream media to catch cover-ups and distortions. While China is trying to censor the Internet, even there, activists show online how the government acts. The Web also enables “ultra-local politics,” letting neighbors connect in new ways; in some cities, including Boston and Toronto, people in social networks are getting deeper into politics. Overall, the Web benefits democracy.

The Internet may have some negative effect on equality, in that it connects the already connected, thus increasing the influence of the few who are already socially and economically ahead. More basically, many online perks don’t address the needs of the poor: Shared music doesn’t feed the hungry. Yet, as Yochai Benkler argues in *The Wealth of Networks*, “information, knowledge and culture” are essential factors for “human welfare.” The Web makes it possible to share scientific breakthroughs and mass reference works (i.e., Wikipedia) with the emerging world.

A tug-of-war between traditional models and We-Think is emerging in several areas. For example, Cambia, an Australian nonprofit organization, discovered a bacteria that can replace patented biotechnology, solving some agricultural challenges for poor countries that can’t afford patent fees. When Alwyn Noronha tried to introduce computers to schools in the Indian state of Goa, the educational system couldn’t afford Microsoft licensing and maintenance, so the schools turned to “Linux and other open-source” software. We-Think leads to the use of “mobile phones to connect borrowers and lenders” for “microfinance” loans, giving small businesses access to previously unavailable investment dollars.

Skeptics have legitimate reasons to worry about the Internet’s impact on freedom. The same electronic Web that lets you connect voluntarily can be turned against a free society: Technology could enable someone to track your actions or expose your secrets. Instead of fostering collaboration, participating in an online community could create “group-think,” where everyone follows the herd and individual creativity gives way to derivative thinking. While those concerns are genuine, electronic connectivity ultimately enhances your freedom in some key areas. By offering alternatives to mass media, the Web provides more chances to think freely, to speak back to the media or even to start your own media outlet at little cost.

Individual identity is not swamped in continual online contact, but rather negotiated, in a sort of dialogue. Young people who have grown up online are adept at shifting personas and finding comfortable contacts. Yes, they need skills to do so, but that’s true in the physical world, too.

About the Author

Charles Leadbeater wrote for *Financial Times* for 10 years. He is also the author of *Living on Thin Air* and *Up the Down Escalator*.