

SMART MOBS: THE NEXT SOCIAL REVOLUTION: TRANSFORMING CULTURES AND COMMUNITIES IN THE AGE OF INSTANT ACCESS

The title is a pun. Smart mobs are smart mobile networks (mobs) that enable groups of people (mobs) to work together.

Wireless networks, wearable computers, location sensors, and supercomputing community collectives “enable people to act together in new ways and in situations where collective action was not possible before” (xi). Rheingold began to realize this in a “Shibuya Epiphany,” when he noticed during a visit to Japan that people weren’t talking into their cell phones; they were typing text into them to broadcast asynchronous messages. Next, in Helsinki, he noticed clusters of people in sidewalk conversations passing around a handheld device, including it as part of their discussion. Suddenly, Rheingold says in his introduction, “How to Recognize the Future when It Lands on You,” he connected the dots to glimpse a future in which the internet is understood as the neurological system of the global brain. Technological and economic forces will make possible human actions not possible before, yet Rheingold emphasizes:

The “killer apps” of tomorrow’s infocom industry won’t be won’t be hardware devices or software programs but social practices. The most far-reaching changes will come, as they often do, from the kinds of relationships, enterprises, communities, and markets that the infrastructure makes possible (xii).

Civilization’s founding question, according to Rheingold, is: “How can competing individuals learn to work cooperatively?”

Anthropology and biology suggest some answers. Language itself may have evolved from grooming behaviors in which individuals win prestige by performing the service of grooming each other, literally “you scratch my back and I will scratch yours.” As societies became so large that it was impossible to gain prestige and signal cooperation by grooming everybody, more complex signification evolved to spread the word about who was willing to help. Reputation, a feature of relationships, will evolve in important new ways online. Evolving through altruistic and punitive social behaviors, the development of reputation draws on these principles:

- People tend to exhibit more generosity than a strategy of rational self-interest predicts.
- People will penalize cheaters, even at some expense to themselves.
- These tendencies and the emotions that accompany them influence individuals to behave in ways that benefit the group. (129)

An example of information technology employs reputation for virtual community building is “SOaP” social filtering or recommending service, software agents that search and report results and negotiate transactions:

Agents . . . use knowledge about users, groups of users, the topics that are relevant to a user, the URLs that a user considers relevant to a topic, and the user’s assessments of a

URL, e.g. his or her ratings and annotations, in the context of particular groups or in connection with a particular topic. According to our design principle, this knowledge should be obtained without effort on the part of the user, or else it should be optional. (118)

Swarms are characterized by the absence of imposed centralized control, autonomous subunits with high connectivity and peer influence (178). Not altogether benign, smart mobs or swarming technologies pose threats to liberty, quality of life and dignity as we turn more of ourselves over to interaction with machines. So Rheingold asks us to imagine what could have happened if the citizens of the early 20th century had asked themselves how horseless carriages would change their lives: "Could they have found ways to embrace the freedom, power, and convenience of automobiles without reordering their grandchildren's habitat in ugly ways (184)?"

Smart Mobs is loaded with information about innovations and fascinating speculations. Rheingold would like to see an innovations commons rather than a passive centrally controlled mass medium.

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