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By Felix Stalder

Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody* is reputed to be the best book ever written on Web 2.0. But why the strange silence on questions of copyright, privacy and ownership? Felix Stalder delves beneath the slick prose and upbeat message

cover

Image: cover of Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody*

“Communication tools don't get socially interesting until they get technologically boring.” If a single sentence can represent the entire book, it must be this one. For one, it's great writing. Precise, condensed, clear. Shirky's book is full of it. It shifts attention to the right level, away from the tools and to what people do with them. It also contains the dilemma that the entire book grapples with: how to write about technology once that technology has become mundane. Lastly, it leaves a lot of things out. How do technologies become mundane? Which ones are legitimate and which ones are not? Why are some providers of “boring technologies” worth billions (e.g. YouTube) while others subject to high-pressure litigation (e.g. ThePirateBay)? But Shirky doesn't want to go there, he prefers to keep the message safe and positive.

But let's start at the beginning. Shirky's core argument is a riff on an old theme. There are limits to the scale particular forms of organisation can handle efficiently. Ever since the publication of Roland Coase's seminal article “The Nature of the Firm” in 1937, economists and organisational theorists have been analysing the “Coasian ceiling”. It indicates the maximum size an organisation can grow to before the costs of managing its internal complexity rise beyond the gains the increased size can offer. At that point, it becomes more efficient to acquire a resource externally (e.g. to buy it) than to produce it internally. This has to do with the relative transaction costs generated by each way of securing that resource. If these costs decline in general (e.g. due to new communication technologies and management techniques), two things can take place. On the one hand, the ceiling rises, meaning large firms can grow even larger without becoming inefficient. On the other hand, small firms are becoming more competitive because they can handle the complexities of larger markets. This decline in transaction costs is a key element in the organisational transformations of the last three decades, creating today's environment where very large global players and relatively small companies can compete in global markets. Yet, a moderate decline does not affect the basic structure of production as being organised through firms and markets.

In 2002, Yochai Benkler was the first to argue that production was no longer bound to the old dichotomy between firms and markets. Rather, a third mode of production had emerged which he called “commons-based peer production”.¹ Here, the central mode of coordination was neither command (as it is inside the firm) nor price (as it is in the market) but self-assigned volunteer contributions to a common pool of resources. This new mode of production, Benkler points out, relies on the dramatic decline in transaction costs made possible by the internet. Shirky develops this idea into a different direction, by introducing the concept of the “Coasian floor”. Organised efforts underneath this floor are, as Shirky writes,

valuable to someone but too expensive to be taken on in any institutional way, because the basic and unsheddable costs of being an institution in the first place make those activities not worth pursuing.

Until recently, life underneath that floor was necessarily small scale, because scaling up required building up an organisation and this was prohibitively expensive. Now, and this is Shirky's central claim, even large group efforts are no longer dependent on the existence of a formal organisation with its overheads. Or, as he memorably puts it, we are used to a world where little things happen for love, and big things happen for money. ... Now, though, we can do big things for love.

The technologies that allow love to scale are relatively old and even the newer ones are technologically mundane by now (from a user perspective): email, web forums, blogs, wikis and open publication platforms such as Blogger, Flickr and YouTube. But that is precisely the point. Only now that they are well understood and can be taken for granted are they beginning to unfold their full social potential. For Shirky, what distinguishes Web2.0 from Web1.0 is not functionality but accessibility. What only geeks could do 10-15 years ago, (nearly) everybody can do today. The empowering potential of these tools is being felt now, precisely because they allow everyone or more precisely every (latent) group to organise itself without running into limits of scale. These newly organisable groups create post-managerial organizations, based on ad-hoc coordination of a potentially large number of volunteers with very low overheads. Thus Shirky claims, without really substantiating it, that we are seeing the erosion of the power differential between formally and informally organised interests.

For Shirky, organising without organisations has become much easier for three main reasons, all connected to the internet. First, failure is cheap. If all it takes is five minutes to start a new blog, there is little risk involved in setting one up. Indeed, it's often easier to try something out than to evaluate it beforehand. This invites experimentations which sometimes pay off. If a project does take off, there is no hard limit to how large it can grow. There is little difference between a blog read by 10 or 10 thousand people. Second, since everyone can publish their own stuff, it's comparatively easy for people with common interests to find and trust each other. Perhaps most importantly, it takes only a relatively small number of highly committed people to create a context where large numbers of people who care only a little can act efficiently, be it that they file a single bug report, do a small edit on a wiki, or donate a small sum to the project.

So far so good. For those who followed Web2.0 discussions there is not terribly much new here, though Shirky's talent for crisp writing brings many aspects into sharper relief than they were before. All of this makes it probably the best Web2.0 book published so far. Yet, being just a book about Web2.0 is also its greatest weakness. Despite pronouncing that technology has become boring, it remains squarely focused on it. Beyond technology, we get not much more than a number of journalistic case studies, some of them well known (Wikipedia, open source software), others more interesting. For example, the Bishop of Boston could more or less ignore the paedophilia cases in 1992, but not in 2002. The reason, Shirky explains, is that in the early '90s, the Bishop still controlled the means of organisation, the church institutions, so he could make it hard for the outraged parishioners to act. Ten years later, the Bishop no longer had a monopoly on the means of organisation. Now, the parishioners could organise outside the institution with ease and their protest, instead of fizzling out quickly, gathered force and changed the church.

For a book that claims to analyse a revolution that cannot be contained in the institutional structure of society, we get extremely little on politics or power. But, if we are witnessing the largest increase in expressive capabilities in human history, can it really be that the main consequence is an explosion of disjointed volunteer projects? This lack of depth is the result of the single most problematic aspect of the book. It focuses almost exclusively on aspects that are entirely uncontroversial. Parishioners organising against the cover-up of priestly paedophilia? Who could be against that! Sharing photos of the Mermaid Parade on Flickr? How cute!

Yet, there are a lot of things that are less cute about the newly boring technologies which Shirky chooses to ignore. Shirky stresses the decentralised, ad-hoc mode of new organisations, yet they are based on very complex infrastructures that are highly centralised and that create near infinite potential to manipulate the social interactions that take place through them. These are not neutral enabling devices. For example, Flickr recently deleted a picture by the Dutch photographer Maartin Dors that showed a Romanian street kid . Why? Because it violated a previously unknown, unpublished rule against depicting children smoking! What's the rationale of this rule? As a spokesperson explained, Flickr and Yahoo! "must craft and enforce guidelines that go beyond legal requirements to protect their brands and foster safe, enjoyable communities". Jonathan Zittrain points out that the "ever-increasing usability [of Web 2.0] has been accompanied by the deliberalising of user rights".² Of course, users can revolt against overt manipulation, as they did when the aggregation site digg.com tried to suppress postings with the code to crack HD DVD encryption in May 2007. The management had to reverse its policy, though I wonder if they would have had they been a subsidiary of a large conglomerate.³

Thus, there is a tension at the core of the Web2.0 phenomenon created by the uneasy (mis)match of the commercial interests of the companies and social interests of their users. All this social interaction takes place within privately owned spaces so that users are basically faced with a take-it-or-leave-it decision that few of them are really aware of. There is a structural imbalance between the service providers, who have a tangible incentive to expand their manipulative capacities and the average users, who will barely notice what's going on, since it would require a lot of effort to find out. To believe that competitive pressures will lead providers to offer more freedoms is like expecting the commercialisation of news to improve the quality of reporting.

This tension between commercial and social interests points to another dimension of Web2.0 that is completely missing from Shirky's book: the new division of labour, this time between paid and unpaid. He rightly points out that we are witnessing a "mass amateurisation", and explains this by way of an example. Racing car driving is difficult, so we have professionals for whom driving is not a means but an end. However, driving a normal car is so easy that amateurs can do it while trying to achieve other things (like arriving at work on time). So, through a combination of new technological tools and new cooperative strategies certain professions "photography, publishing, journalism, etc." are becoming amateurised and their professional products find themselves in competition with "user generated content". Is this pointing the way to a 'post-capitalist' society, as envisioned by the Oekonux project? You might think so, given the total absence of economic dimensions in this book. But, I suspect that Shirky would laugh at such a notion all the way to the bank. As a consultant to many media companies, he must be keenly aware of the strategies to extract, concentrate and appropriate value from all this user generated content. I would love to hear more about it "and I'm sure Shirky knows a lot about it but, unfortunately, he is not telling us.

If he were to, he might have to mention another aspect that is deeply troubling, even though he'd say that this is inevitable (and I would probably agree): the loss of privacy. Or, to be more precise, the gathering of a lot of data on individual actions and interactions in the hands of a very small number of old school organisations which can process and turn it into actionable knowledge. What kind of activities they are going to derive from the data, we don't know. Commercial manipulation (the shaping of services to be more advertiser-friendly) is a given. Strong interest from governments' security apparatus should be expected, as should all kinds of random abuses. Frequent scandals about lost data, strategic leaks and corporate snooping indicate the tip of an iceberg.

Depending how the current tussle over copyright evolves, we can expect much more, and more repressive use of all of this information. Viacom recently managed to force Google to hand over all user data relating to all the videos ever published on YouTube. Tussle over copyright? Reading

Shirky, you wouldn't know there is one. This is probably the most glaring absence. Number of entries for copyright in the index of the book? Zero! In my view, this is inexcusable because it cuts right to the core of why 'boring technologies' are currently so socially interesting. File sharing, in particular, demonstrates most clearly the power of organizing without organization so radical that, for the moment, nobody knows how to contain it within current institutional structures. Number of entries on P2P or file sharing in the index? Again, zero!

Of course, Shirky knows about it, so the omission must be deliberate. To me, this is an indication of how constrained discourse has become, particularly in the US and particularly for the set of activist academics who like to think of themselves as progressives, yet covet their positions as consultants to conservative business and government. To them, P2P poses an ugly challenge. It is clearly one of the most potent mass movements driving the deep transformation of the media industry and contributing considerably to the fabled increase in individuals' expressive capacities. But coming out against file sharing makes you sound like a dork on the payroll of the mafia. Very unprogressive. Yet, the media conglomerates and their surrogates have succeeded in establishing such a climate of copyright maximalism that even appearing in favour of copyright infringement removes you from the mainstream. Thus, if you want to play it both ways - be part of the revolution and earn money as a consultant - you better avoid the whole issue. That, at least, would explain why neither Shirky nor anyone else in the US mainstream even dares to talk about file sharing anymore, with the exception of the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Self-censorship at work.

The total absence of controversial issues creates the narrow scope typical of books written by consultants. This is unfortunate since Shirky is clearly very bright. If you want to glean some of his many insights, you could do worse than simply watching his lecture on the book's main themes.⁴ In just 42 minutes you get a good sense of what he has to offer.

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Info

Clay Shirky. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, New York: Penguin Press, February, 2008

Footnotes

1 Yochai Benkler, 'Coase's Penguin, or, Linux and The Nature of the Firm', *Yale Law Journal*. No. 112, 2002, <http://www.benkler.com>

2 <http://reason.com/blog/show/127444.html>

3<http://blog.digg.com/?p=74>

4<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFgRKsqQU>