Did Everybody Come?


> Our social tools remove older obstacles to public expression, and thus remove the bottlenecks that characterized mass media. The result is the mass amateurization of efforts previously reserved for media professionals.

When Shirky wrote the book, only 5 percent of US households had a smartphone. Geolocation, which makes ride-sharing apps like Uber possible, was in its infancy. Most Netflix customers opted to receive movies via mailed envelopes rather than the company’s new streaming service.

Still, many of the current features of our digital lives were already in place 10 years ago. Facebook opened to the general public in 2006. By 2008, it had 100 million users. Twitter and MySpace were also on the scene. Online magazine *Slate* was 12 years old. Personal blogging was flourishing.

So, to what extent did everybody come? Perhaps the biggest validation of the nascent trends that Shirky spotted was the Women’s March on Washington, DC. The day after Donald Trump was elected US President, Teresa Shook, a retiree living on the Hawaiian island of Maui, took to Facebook to urge her friends to march on the nation’s capital in protest. Other individuals made the same plea on social media. And so on 20 January 2017, half a million people joined Shook in Washington, and an estimated three million marched in similar events around the world.

On the other hand, it’s harder to claim that mass amateurization of journalism and other media is truly with us. Granted, YouTube has made stars of the likes of Joseph Garrett, who, in the persona of an orange cartoon cat called Stampylonghead, posts daily Minecraft videos for his six million subscribers. But for every Stampylonghead, there are legions of YouTubers like Anti, whose physics-themed Minecraft videos garner a few hundred views. The ease with which content can be created, discovered, and shared has increased the premium on quality. Garrett is successful because he’s talented enough to stand out amid the 400 hours of content that gets uploaded to YouTube every minute.

The mainstreaming of blogging also seems to contradict mass amateurization. What Nate Silver and Ezra Klein—two prominent bloggers—publish now looks just like online journalism.

A final trend that contradicts *Here Comes Everybody* is how digital technology is making people less social. Thanks to Internet-mediated home delivery, staying at home is more attractive.

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Cloud-based streaming services give us access to vast libraries of audio and video content that we consume with solitary enjoyment.

In my view, Shirky overestimated how much people, campaigning aside, really do want to come together. In the end, most technology, be it vacuum cleaners or voice-activated assistants, makes it easier for individuals to do what they want.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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