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The Shrinking Knowledge Divide: The Internet Redefining Work

Less than 140 letter characters on *Twitter* put Travis Kalanick and Ryan Graves on a path that would transform their lives in ways they never anticipated. Travis, a computer engineer, sent out a tweet looking for an entrepreneurial product manager. Ryan, an unemployed economics graduate, casually replied with no more than six words, and his email address. Remarkably, this merger of cooperation between two people from different fields was the foundation from which a multibillion dollar business known as Uber was created. A feat that was made possible only through the internet. Ever since its advent, the internet has gradually become the most influential technology of the 21st century. This prevalence has been aided by other great technological advancements, which have created sophisticated devices that facilitate ubiquitous internet access. Howard Rheingold, a former editor of the *Whole Earth Review*, and one of the earliest writers about the influence of online communities, writes about how such sophisticated devices have initiated the reconstruction of social practices in his essay “How to Recognize the Future When It Lands on You.” Rheingold points out that technology has connected people from all walks of life across the world, therefore generating possibilities for greater cooperation and collective action. Consequently, this conglomeration of people has fostered an environment for learning that goes beyond the traditional pathways for acquiring knowledge. In fact, Nicholas Negroponte, in his essay, “Creating Culture of Ideas,” points out that divulging knowledge on channels that are not traditional cultivates innovation. Negroponte, who is a computer scientist and founder and chairman of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s media lab, argues that perspective, rather than expertise, is more rewarding, and therefore interdisciplinary cooperation should be celebrated for fostering creativity. Like Rheingold and Negroponte, Michael Lewis illustrates how the easy availability of knowledge has challenged the traditional social constructs, especially the conceptions of professional work, in his essay “Pyramids and Pancakes.” Lewis, a columnist for Bloomberg and a frequent contributor to the *New York Times Magazine*, claims that the internet has made available the power of knowledge that was once exclusive to professionals. Indeed, the shrinking knowledge divide is being perpetuated by the coevolution of societal practices and the world of technology. However, this coevolution has been challenged by some traditional concepts that have been the speed bumps of a progressive and an inclusive 21st century society. Specifically, the concept of work has become a fluid phenomenon that allows one to find greater meaning in work and promote collective wisdom. As a result, the monopolization of knowledge by a dictated few has gradually lost its esteemed hierarchical power because ‘licensed knowledge’ is now being disseminated freely through the internet.

Educational institutions are losing their positions as the primary hub and disseminators of knowledge due to the growing use of popular sophisticated devices, which are constantly connected to information on the internet. This is to say, lines that have defined the options for work available based on the education received from higher learning institutions have, with time, been blurred. Indeed, such is the power of these devices that the physical world is progressively being transformed as more people use them. Consequently, Rheingold argues that the devices cease then to become just hardware and software programs, but rather staple components of society. Eventually, this blend leads to the creation of smart mobs whom he describes as, “people who are able to act in concert even if they don’t know each other […] [They also] cooperate in ways never before possible because they carry devices that possess both communication and computing capabilities. […] People using these tools gain new forms of social power” (Rheingold 121). In other words, people are no longer inflexibly dependent on traditional channels that have for a long time dictated the kind of information they could obtain. The devices connect them to other people and other information devices, which creates boundless possibilities that are neither limited by time or place. For this reason, the internet connected devices have caused a transference of power from traditional institutions, such as the education system, to the people. For instance, smart mobs are now able to connect through social media sites, such as *YouTube,* where they can freely learn how to play a musical instrument from an individual unbeknownst to them, who may or may not have gone to a musical school. In such a case, the educational system’s power that would have defined someone as a musician by virtue of gaining a music degree, or ‘licensed knowledge,’ is overturned. Likewise, Lewis provides an example that demonstrates the power that was once afforded to legal experts by virtue of their education as shrinking because of the internet. He states, “By its nature the internet has undermined anyone whose status depended on privileged access to information” (Lewis 102). To put it another way, licensed information that once gave social power to those holding licensed privileges is now available to smart mobs. Lewis discusses a smart mob participant named Marcus Arnold who was only fifteen years old, but yet posed and passed as an attorney on a website called AskMe.com. Upon investigating further, Lewis finds out that Marcus gained his legal knowledge by watching court T.V. and through the internet. And though he operated on a false persona in the beginning, Marcus regained his prominence as a top-rated legal expert, which he had lost after posting his real age on his profile. Not only does this show that knowledge need not be licensed to be validated, but also, ironically, the internet possesses the ability to validate someone no matter their background. Certainly, the internet has empowered individuals by providing information freely that was once inaccessible or confined in institutions. By so doing, licensed knowledge is no longer monopolized by a few.

Furthermore, the traditional concepts of work have gradually been reformed in ways that empower smart mobs, because work on the basis of finding meaning has now been made conceivable with increasing advancements in technology. Specifically, the general view of work as a ‘getting ahead’ social practice, which was devoid of consideration of true satisfaction from work, has now been revolutionized to prioritize interest and passion. This model of approaching work is what bell hooks describes as right livelihood in her essay, “Work Makes Life Sweet.” Hooks, a distinguished professor of English at city college of New York, points out that for a long time the society has not promoted this model of work, but rather has socialized people to approach work in a one dimensional view point: how to get money first and fast. However, with the internet becoming a source of unbounded knowledge and information, a person’s choice of career has drastically increased, and with it a chance for right livelihood. Hooks describes right livelihood, a concept having its origins from Buddha’s teachings, as “work consciously chosen, done with full awareness and care, and leading to enlightenment” (Sinetar qtd. 28). That is to say, when one chooses a line of work to pursue that is aligned with their true values, whether menial or white collar, they become healthily invested in their work because of the intrinsic satisfaction gained. Often times in the past, however, certain factors such as formal training, licensure, sexism, and opportunities have prevented one from choosing the type work he or she desires. Nonetheless, with the internet, Lewis claims some barriers have been gradually broken down as a result of easy access to knowledge that is necessary to perform a desired profession. Moreover, the internet has also provided the avenue for one to apply the expertise learned, albeit in only some professions. Lewis continues:“Technology [has] put afterburners on the egalitarian notion that anyone-can-do-anything, by enabling pretty much anyone to try anything—especially in fields in which ‘expertise’ [has] always been a dubious proposition” (102). In other words, work is transcending beyond the parameters that strengthen licensed professionals, while undermining anyone who lacks the traditional credentials. This is exemplified in professional fields such as videography, photography, fashion design, and a few others, whereby anyone desiring to enter the profession could easily get the expertise through the internet with no red tape. Further, the opportunity for one to showcase their expertise to a larger pool of people increases through social media cites and personal websites. In effect, the internet has levelled the playing field for smart mobs by creating an avenue whereby they can now gain access to information and knowledge. As a result, they are increasingly finding it possible to find meaning in work, because they are empowered to seek out careers that are of genuine interest to them.

Not only, does the internet provide new found social power to the individual, but also offers a leg up to societies or institutions that value the greater collective power. Specifically, the internet’s unparalleled ability to connect people has allowed for effective change in cooperating, which goes beyond the rigid lines that have existed between professional disciplines. Needless to say, because of these formerly stratified lines of knowledge maintained by a false notion of autonomy and authority, development of greater breakthroughs have been sluggishly realized. However, the ubiquitous nature of the internet has gradually bridged these divide, and provided a medium for idea exchange and an avenue for multiple points of views to flow. It is in such kind of an environment that Negroponte claims that innovation thrives as a result of broken down parameters of compartmentalization. Ultimately, according to Negroponte, cooperation beyond the stratified lines is important and necessary, because “Interdisciplinary approaches can bring enormous value to some very small problems and [ . . .] interdisciplinary environments can also stimulate creativity” (136). To put it in another way, maximizing the different aspects of age, culture, profession and knowledge not only increases the probability of solving interdisciplinary challenges, buts also stimulates imagination needed for a progressive society. Essentially, perspective proves to be an invaluable resource since it offers more than simple IQ. In light of this, the work world is gradually being redefined to facilitate collective perception, while also creating new careers. An is example is the creation of the fairly new and growing nursing informatics field, which blends the knowledge from healthcare and information technology to promote cooperation between the different health disciplines. In the long run, this is increasingly generating quality patient care that is a result of informative decision making. Additionally, the benefits of collective wisdom are only fully realized when the tight grip of authority is loosened, because this grip hinders cooperation by requiring decisions and expertise to flow from the top. What this means is that hierarchal institutions gain less from the unidirectional flow of knowledge and flatten the institution’s progress. For example, Lewis illustrates how companies benefitted when they adopted a software created by AskMe Corporation, known as “knowledge exchange.” The software operated as a private web for the companies and allowed for: “Knowledge [to come] from the strangest places; employees knew a lot more than they thought they did; and the gains in the collective wisdom outweighed any losses to the boss’s authority. In short, the software […] bestowed new rewards on the egalitarian spirit” (Lewis 95). That is to say, a dynamic approach to authority enabled a free-flow of expertise from different types of disciplines in the workplace, and as a result, the collective wisdom gave advantage to the non-hierarchical institution. Furthermore, hierarchal authority in traditional workplace settings preserve environments that are toxic to creativity. It follows, then, that the internet has provided an antidote to such canalization of knowledge and consolidation of power to a single entity. As a result, the institutions and societies that celebrate collective wisdom have progressed while enjoying better returns, and most importantly, they have become relevant.

Indeed, there is great optimism surrounding the future of work due to the constant advancements of technology. Contrary to the naysayers, benefits that come with technology positively affect both the individual and the community. For instance, Travis Kalanick and Ryan Graves, both smart mob participants, benefitted from the cooperation that was instigated by connecting two people who did not know each other. Eventually, these two individuals from different work disciplines collaborated to form an organization that would benefit the community by providing employment for many drivers and other professionals. Indeed, such is the power of these sophisticated devices that even strong social institutions existence is under threat. Notably, the dwindling power of the education system to validate individuals for success or for certain careers. As a result, many are finding careers that are intrinsically satisfying to them through the internet. However, the full potential of the internet has not been realized since some areas of the world are not yet equipped. Nevertheless, it is only a matter of time, and when this happens, the world will become an even smaller place. Unbounded possibilities do indeed lie on the horizon.

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