


"We Think": more thinking needed (book review)

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 The idea that the Internet offers unique and world-changing opportunities for interactive intellectual innovation is not new. [We Think](#) by Charles Leadbeater is an attempt to make it accessible and suggest that it is more widespread than just mainstream Web 2.0 businesses. Leadbeater has dabbled in these ideas before. He was an early apostle of the [information economy](#) and an optimist on [globalisation](#) when everyone else was taking to the barricades in Seattle. Dan Gillmor's [We The Media](#) set the agenda for new media/citizen journalism a few years ago, too. I agree with much of what Leadbeater [says](#). My book [SuperMedia](#) (Blackwell, 2008) draws on similar ideas to set out the agenda for a more connected and participatory news media that I call [Networked Journalism](#). But how new are these new media trends and what are their effects?

Leadbeater worked hard to live the idea. He consulted about his book with an interactive [website](#) and he has put parts of it [online](#) for free. He has some good examples of how new technology can be used to share ideas and to collect positive thinking. He talks about global online Gaming, about politically-motivated flash mobs in China and the [Encyclopedia Of Life project](#). He points out how commercial companies are using crowd-sourcing techniques and how scientists are sharing their research online. It all leads to an optimistic claim:



"We are just at the start of exploring how we can be organised without the hierarchy of top-down organisations. There will be many false turns and failures. But there is also huge potential to create new stores of knowledge to the benefit of all, innovate more effectively, strengthen democracy and give more people the opportunity to make the most of their creativity."

He gives some good examples of "We-Think" at work:

"Nothing better embodies the confused character of participant consumerism than [The Sims](#) the most successful coputer game ever...player-developers have created at least 60 per cent of the content... [The Sims](#) is a platform that supports a vast do-it-yourself community of gamers who develop and share their ideas. [The Sims](#) community built on the exchange of peer recognition makes vast sums of money for Electronic Arts."

Where I am less convinced is when he turns away from economic enterprise to social policy:

"Imagine how a town might apply the logic of We-Think to education. An eBay for learning, a city-wide learning exchange could match learners with people with the skills to teach...A We-Think approach would offer learning all over, all the time, in a wide variety of settings, from a wide range of people, more tailored to small groups and individual needs."

That's a positive and possible vision. But it's not very different from conventional ideas about educational reform. We all want smaller classes and more choice. And Leadbeater tends to ignore counter arguments. Some [people](#), for example, argue that a Google education world actually encourages group-think, superficiality and plagiarism.

Leadbeater acknowledges that We-Think can "increase group pressures on people to conform" but still asserts the

Web as a force for freedom:

“The freedom to think what we like, to form and express ideas independently; the freedom to shape our identities, to be who we want to be; the freedom as consumers to choose and buy what we want; and the freedom to express ourselves through creating things that matter to us”.

It seems to me that there is a contradiction here, which reflects a genuine tension at the heart of We-Think and networked social participation. It works most effectively when driven by individual motives, especially when related to leisure activities. Any positive political or social impact for the public sphere is far harder to identify – yet. There is also a danger of over-claiming. Not everything collaborative is We-Think. Just because something happens Online does not make it Networked. But this is a highly accessible and stimulating introduction to a set of trends that are still very much in their early stages. We should all be thinking a lot harder about where they will lead.

[We Think: Charles Leadbeater \(Profile Books\)](#)

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