ANDREW KEEN

The Foolishness of Crowds

Importing the wiki model to policymaking will mean less democracy, not more. A response to Beth Simone Noveck.

Without a trace of irony, Beth Simone Noveck, a law professor and thus paragon of the professional elite, favorably quotes the George Bernard Shaw adage that "all professions are conspiracies against the laity" ["Wiki-Government," Issue #7]. Does Shaw really mean to indict all professions? In addition to medical doctors (against whom Shaw ran his own vendetta), that must include civil engineers, librarians, architects, nuclear scientists, high-school teachers, and nanotechnologists. When it comes to politics, would Shaw include the professional bureaucrats who successfully engineered the New Deal programs? Is Shaw saying that self-interested professionals consciously conspire against "ordinary people"? Maybe, maybe not. But Noveck does indeed appear to be straight-faced in her concurrence, particularly since she adds that "nowhere is this more the case than in a democracy."

Noveck offers a radical solution to what she believes is the problem of

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ANDREW KEEN *is a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and the author of* The Cult of the Amateur: How the Internet Is Killing Our Culture.

professional expertise in a democracy. She calls this "wiki-government," and it represents the revenge of the laity against the professions. Through open-source technologies like wikis, Noveck's solution empowers the laity to collectively participate in government. By enabling ordinary citizens to collectivize their wisdom, Noveck says that wiki-government will not only make decision-making more democratic, but also more expert.

There is more than a trace of postmodern epistemological anarchism here, a not-so-implicit rejection of what Noveck calls Max Weber's "detached and strictly objective expert" who, we are left to assume, can never truly be either detached or objective. And if all human deployment of knowledge is unavoidably biased, then what? Doesn't that make government—one of the most authoritative purveyors of expert knowledge—a self-evident racket, the ultimate conspiracy?

Noveck's purportedly progressive vision of twenty-first century American government revolves around the latest cult of the crowd—a communitarian romanticism representing the second coming of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Rousseau 2.0, in the binary geek-speak of Silicon Valley). Like the proto-totalitarian Rousseau, Noveck thinks that groups of people are both politically wiser and braver than individuals: "Speaking truth to power is easiest to do—and more accurate—when spoken not as an individual but as a group," she argues. But Noveck does not cite historical examples of groups speaking "truth to power," and there are countless examples—from the bloody excesses of the French Revolutionary crowd to the lynch mob—that prove just the opposite. In fact, when it comes to truth telling, it normally has been individuals—Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Vaclav Havel, Anna Politkovskaya, Aung San Suu Kyi—who have uttered the first words against power. The crowd, if ever, generally appears later, after the initial truth-telling.

And, in America, that crowd often has the dissonant cadence of a mob. Switch on the AM radio dial and you can hear this crowd baying for blood on call-in shows and ranting the same anti-elitist sentiment as Noveck. No doubt some of them even quote Shaw as they bloviate about how government is a self-evident racket, the ultimate conspiracy. The critical issue, to which Noveck and the digital populists don't face up, is that more political participation neither means better democracy, nor does it guarantee more efficient government. In fact, it often results in the reverse: Mob rule is mob rule, whether it is electromagnetically broadcasted on the wireless or digitally streamed from the Web.

I am not sure whether Noveck has been tuning in to talk radio, but she has certainly been spending a lot of time the Internet. It is here that she has discovered the cure to the professional "conspiracy against the laity." Her holy grail is called "open-source technology," such as "wikis," which subvert all

traditional hierarchies by allowing everyone, irrespective of their qualifications, to participate in knowledge-creation.

It's probably no coincidence that open-source technology was invented in California's Silicon Valley; these knowledge-sharing tools having all the lawless charm of the gold-rush American West. Like mid-nineteenth-century California, the only rule about wikis is that they have no rules: Nobody is in charge of determining who can and can't author a wiki, anyone can become a contributor, anyone can edit the work of another writer, and anyone can come along and (re)edit the original edit. This is, of course, technology created by and designed for libertarians. The traditional hierarchies of knowledge communities—from professional subject experts to professional editors to professional fact-checkers—are made redundant. On Wikipedia, the established expert and the professional elite are no more authoritative or believable than the laity. As Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia's Ayn Rand-worshipping founder, openly boasts, he has no more faith in the knowledge of a Harvard professor than in a high-school kid. And, on Wikipedia, Wales doesn't need to; both the professor and kid have the same intellectual authority, which is really the same as saying that neither has any authority at all. Open-source technology, in other words, is a conspiracy of the laity against professionals.

Wiki-government, then, is about the public storming the Bastille of expertise and citizens seizing the Winter Palace of the professional elite. So what's wrong with that? After all, no government, particularly the American version of recent years, is error-free. Wouldn't it be marvelous to have both more experts and more democracy in government?

Of course it would. But applying open-source technology to government won't do the trick. Noveck's theory might be seductive, but the practice will actually result in less democracy and less expertise. Her logic is premised on the supposed success of open-source media projects like New Assignment, YouTube, OhMyNews, and Simon & Schuster's MediaPredict. If open-source digital media projects work, her logic goes, then digital government will also work.

But this is wrong. Open source hasn't worked in media, and it won't work in policymaking. Without citing any specific stories, Noveck claims that the citizen journalist website New Assignment "produce[s] stories as good as any found in a national magazine." That all depends what you mean by the word "good." She might be right that the volunteers behind New Assignment are as ethically good—as in civically correct—as any hard bitten, gin-soaked professional. But Noveck doesn't cite any concrete examples of "good" (as in quality) political stories because there don't seem to be any; even *Wired* magazine's Jeff Howe, one of crowd–sourced journalism's most rabid evangelizers, described the experiment as a "highly satisfying failure."

Noveck falls into a similar trap in her praise of the open-source video shar-
ing website YouTube. She says it has generated "brilliant art films," but she fails
to name the digital auteurs behind these masterpieces. This is because much of
YouTube's content is posted anonymously. Without a traditional editorial staff,
nobody knows who is authoring much of its content. Not surprisingly, often the
most "brilliant" amateur work turns out to be the professional production of
advertising companies, political parties, or corporations, from a widely viewed
satirical video about Al Gore anonymously posted by a Texas p.r. firm to the
anti-Hillary Clinton viral hit "Vote Different" anonymously posted by a staffer
at a Web company working for Barack Obama. Rather than a paragon of cultural
democracy, YouTube should actually represent a wake-up call to idealists like
Noveck wishing to export the open-source media model into government.

Noveck also fails to grasp the
destructive ways in which crowd–
sourcing sites are undermining the
concept of expertise. On Wikipedia,
for example, there are no epistemo-
logical hierarchies, no central editors
identifying credible writers or deter-
mining what entry is more important
than other entries. Instead of radical

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democracy, Wikipedia is radically absurd. It manifests the surrealist vision of a
Jorge Luis Borges or a Stephen Colbert—indeed, the Wikipedia entry on Colbert's
concept of "truthiness" (his joke about the subjective epistemology of right-wing
pundits) is almost as meticulously footnoted as the entry on "truth," the central
concept in the history of Western philosophy. There are, in fact, some things
that are more important to know than others, and we rely on professional edi-
tors, educators, and experts to tell us which. But Wikipedia sacrifices concrete
content in favor of abstract form: What we celebrate is not the information it
delivers so much as the democratized method by which it is produced. In our
increasingly information-hungry economy, that seems like a direct route to a
serious famine of useful knowledge.

Noveck's plan to apply wiki-techniques to patent review processes seems,
on the surface, to avoid some of these. The general public does not completely
replace the patent reviewer; they only provide additional information. But she
never really explains who, exactly, will differentiate the advice of the crank
from the credible hobbyist. Rather, she relies on the crowd to do her policing,
weeding out good ideas from bad on its own. But this crowd is not a suitable
gatekeeper for distinguishing the credibility of volunteer bureaucrats. Left

unaccountable, it is liable to offer incomplete information or, in its deliberations, degenerate into a mob.

In addition to Rousseau, Noveck claims Aristotle as a theoretical father of wiki-government. But it was Aristotle who, in *The Politics*, recognized that radical democracy naturally leads to oligarchy, and today's Internet confirms Aristotle's fear of radical democracy's unintended consequences. Open-source technology is actually creating a new, often anonymous class of digital oligarchs on wisdom-of-the-crowd sites like Wikipedia, Digg, and Reddit. This über-volunteer oligarchy is the new Internet elite—an unaccountable, anonymous, and, as the *Wall Street Journal* revealed in an expose of this new class, sometimes even dishonest aristocracy of "amateurs" who are using this new media to further their own careers as taste-makers.

It is this group of online activists who are willing to spend their time in endlessly arcane disputes for no obvious financial reward. And the same would be true in wiki-government. Most genuine graduate students want to earn their degrees rather than become *pro bono* government workers. Most consultants—at least those who don't have trust funds—need to be financially rewarded for their expertise. But this open-source model fails to address the defining reality of twenty-first-century life: our common scarcity of time. Whether or not we share Noveck's idealism about open-source decision-making, most us don't have the time—outside our jobs and family lives—to give away our specialized labor for free. So this admittedly well-meaning experiment will become vulnerable to a much smaller group of activists who—for reasons both fair and foul—will come to monopolize wiki-government.

Noveck does acknowledge that "competitive self-interest will be one of the drivers causing people to get involved." But, in contrast with government bureaucrats who are paid a financial wage for their expertise, she fails to establish a coherent economic model for volunteer wiki-wonks. She suggests "prizes," "rewards," and a "monetary bounty" to create incentives for the distributed digital citizenry. But turning government into a lottery would mean that the majority of wiki-governors wouldn't win the prizes and thus would still be giving away their labor for free.

Am I saying that all activities are only worthwhile if they make you money, that there is no place for volunteerism or public service in our democracy? No. Let's not confuse traditional political activism with participation in wiki-government. The prior is a democratic obligation of American citizens; the latter, I fear, is an attempt to get service for free. Particularly in a country hostile toward the authority of central government and federal taxation, wiki-government could become an excuse to outsource government to voluntary American citizens.

Ironically, Noveck's seemingly progressive idealism could even be hijacked by libertarians who believe that American government is a self-evident racket, the ultimate conspiracy. They could use Noveck's utopia of selfless activism as an excuse to fire all professional officials and replace them with a pure wiki-democracy of those who have the time and the money to get involved. Open-source technology would make traditional government entirely redundant, thereby emancipating America forever from the permanent embarrassment of a professional political elite. Then we'd be free from the tyranny of the state. We could all become unpaid government bureaucrats, technology finally having allowed us to realize our true humanity.

I'm joking, of course. But the problem is that such libertarian nonsense is not only being peddled by the crazies on the blogosphere, but also by well-meaning academics like Noveck. ◗