

IJIDI: Book Review

Lingel, J. (2020). *An internet for the people: The politics and promise of Craigslist*. Princeton University Press. ISBN 9780691188904. 197 pp. \$29.95 US.

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Jessa Lingel's *Internet for the People* reflects major shifts in tech companies' online presences and their impact on user expectations. She uses Craigslist, founded on Web 1.0 standards, to exemplify aspects of the old internet. Then draws attention to Web 2.0's shift in political and economic values that, in many instances, undercut the original Web 1.0 standards of "access, reach, and privacy" (p.20). She demonstrates how the internet transformed from a medium used to access knowledge and information into one where "continual self-disclosure, and ... steady integration of online devices into everyday life" (p.21) has become the norm. This once one-way tool used to retrieve information has become a receptacle that collects user information and retrieves personalized data, allowing users minimal room for choice. Since Craigslist continues to position itself within the Web 1.0 standards it has resisted mainstream media web changes. Lingel's book compares aspect of the internet's new standards to the original and provides a comprehensive critical look at the benefits and drawbacks of each.

Although the book focuses on Craigslist specifically and its journey to success, and its struggles to avoid obsolescence, it also addresses persistent social and cultural concerns that resonate off-and on-line. As more and more social media and classified ad sites adopt mainstream values, they demonstrate signs of uniformity in style and business ideologies. They neglect diversity and originality as core values in favour of financial gain. Evidence of this change is seen through sweeping online transformations that resemble gentrification. Lingel demonstrates how this phenomenon, which results in physical and cultural changes to existing neighbourhoods, has extended to the internet to the point where Craigslist, a "long-standing internet resident" (p. 110) has become an outcast. She observes the ways new tech companies have transformed online spaces and shifted the aesthetic expectations and political norms (p. 110). However, as Craigslist remains true to its original values, its mere existence is perceived as an ungentrified anomaly and a rival to existing online mainstream media politics. This pesky old internet fixture continues to challenge the new notions of privacy and monetization.

Lingel's book is divided into two parts, each addressing a specific aspect of Craigslist. Part one describes the company's historical background while part two explores the site's past and present functionality. By exploring the site's origins and legal battles, Lingel contextualizes Craigslist's humble beginnings and demonstrates the struggles and determination the founder and CEO underwent to preserve their core values. Its sustained presence, persistent hands-off approach, and respect for users' privacy contributed to the cultivation of communities and spaces where people can develop their personal and political expressions. Lingel argues that

Craigslist exemplifies “the early visions of how the web should be” (p.161) with Web 1.0 standards upheld. She reveals how the site’s simple aesthetic design and orderly content contribute to both its early popularity and recent appeal; but, she affirms, its easy navigation and respect for user privacy continue to be its main attractions.

When depicting Craigslist’s historical background, the book illustrates the site’s unique business ideology, which is established upon two main tenets: simple design, and minimal profitability to maintain user privacy. Although Lingel demonstrates that these driving principles have been reasons the site appears outdated, it also conveys originality and a genuine loyalty to users. Their basic premise for keeping it simple, was to ensure the site’s efficiency using “lightweight programming” (p.30) and applying updates only when necessary. This minimalistic design reduced their financial overhead costs ensuring transparent monetization without compromising users’ data. Initially, Craigslist’s shares were split among three members: The founder Craig Newmark, his CEO Jim Buckmaster and an additional member, Phillip Knowlton. When Knowlton sold his shares to eBay, Newmark and Buckmaster fought to reclaim full control to avoid flashy banners or commercial advertisements. They wanted to prevent monetizing user information that finances adding unnecessary new functionality. However, maintaining this simple design, as Lingel elaborates, involved years of courtroom battles. Their success eliminated outside interference in both its operations and design while keeping company stocks out of the public domain.

In addition, Lingel’s representation of Newmark and Buckmaster’s satisfaction with the company’s existing profit margins reveals a professional integrity contrasted with other mainstream sites like Facebook and Twitter. These sites that include banners and commercial ads do so to finance slick designs that ultimately compromise efficiency and functionality as well as user privacy. This reflection and historical background draw readers attention to large tech companies’ insatiate appetites for greed who choose high profit margins while exploiting users’ information in the process. But it also illustrates user’s role in propelling these values forward through their growing demands for additional features and shinier interfaces.

Alternatively, Lingel uses the second part of the book to illustrate Craigslist’s social influence as a community builder. She explains how the site acts as a resource that connects people to jobs and cultivates unique user interactions emanating from the buying and selling of items. These interactions have contributed to the site’s negative and positive attributes that have either tarnished its reputation or turned it into a cultural phenomenon. But in both cases Craigslist exposes the class divisions that permeate in the online world.

As an indication of class division, Lingel points to how Craigslist’s job ads, one of the site’s initial key functions, have diminished in popularity. She explains the novelty that Craigslist online job ads had at the beginning, appealing to a broad range of people. However, as more and more tech companies took to the internet, Craigslist job ads went from elite postings to casual gigs, from full-time stable positions to part-time temporary contracts, resulting in a decline in its popularity. Lingel explains that as employment plays an important role in identifying class structures, Craigslist became the “poor-people’s internet” (p.112) causing a large number of users to turn to other sites. Undisturbed by this outcome, Craigslist maintained its commitment to inclusivity, and equal access to unfiltered information, refusing to be more selective in the types of listings it posted. In maintaining its original values, Craigslist did not succumb to mainstream expectations nor did it attempt to lure back previous users.

Lingel also demonstrates how “difference[s] in class and background matter when it comes to not just whether people use technology but how” (pp.102-103) they use it. In addition to job ads Craigslist is known for its buying and selling aspect. From interviews with Craigslists users, Lingel identified three types: the environmentally responsible, the local community builders and the entrepreneurs. Each of these types of users turns away from mainstream capitalism to develop their own niche communities. Craigslist’s hands-off approach to these online transactions, keeping its role as a facilitator, maximizes users’ autonomy and personal expression. Her accounts describe people like Mimi whose commitment to protecting the environment and “avoiding consumption” (p.71) motivate her to keep “items out of trash bins and landfills” (p. 71). Molly and Lou use the site to develop social ties within their communities by circulating household items in their respective neighbourhoods. They believe in and value each items’ historical provenance. By buying and selling these items among a tight knit community they are building social values that come with linking old owners to new ones. Finally, there is Micah, who has established an entrepreneurial business from selling, buying and pricing goods on Craigslist. Craigslist has given users the autonomy to express their own social and political views, establish a personal approach and cultivate a community of local connections by maintaining a zero cost for everyday users while charging only official retailers.

Lingel demonstrates how Craigslist has also become a cultural and artistic inspiration. People interested in examining social change or exploring socio-technological interconnections have used Craigslist to produce mash-up catalogues, popular culture memes, and contrasting displays of original Craigslists ads with new ones (p.84). The site makes these comparisons possible by maintaining its original appearance and style, which offer a unique and perfect point of historical reference. Craigslist’s influence has reached beyond a basic classified ad site and extended its digital afterlife imprint through these inventive revivals.

Although Craigslist’s online presence has enhanced its users’ experience, cultivated online and offline communities, exposed social divides and challenged mainstream media sites, Lingel also highlights the issues Craigslist’s hands-off approach raises. She draws attention to platform accountability involving concerns of user safety and exposes the boundaries a controlled versus control-free website can achieve. She leaves her readers contemplating the future of the internet and acknowledging aspects that need to remain such as user privacy and transparent corporate policies over monetization. Her book builds on previous works by Megan Sapnar Ankerso in her *Dot-Com Design: The Rise of a Usable, Social, Commercial Web* and Astra Taylor’s *The People’s Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age*. All strive to understand and mitigate future interactions and social barriers in the digital ecosystem.

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