Smart Mobs and Beyond

Howard Rheingold

5:00-6:00 pm on Monday, November 27, 2006
Indiana University Bloomington, Indiana Memorial Union, Frangipani Room

Talk followed by reception at Ernie Pyle Lounge (Rm 203), School of Journalism.

ABSTRACT

In 2000, I started thinking about how the mobile telephone, the personal computer, and the Internet were merging into a new medium with unique powers, pitfalls, and characteristics, just as the microchip and video screen combined to create the PC and the PC plugged into the telephone network to begin the evolution of the Net. In 1985, I wrote Tools for Thought about the “history and future of mind-amplifying devices,” looking forward a decade or two to a future in which the first rather puny PCs grew into powerful means of augmenting human intellect and communication.

In 1987, I wrote about Virtual Communities in the Whole Earth Review, and in 1993 published the book, The Virtual Community. I had noted that the unique power of the PC that led to its widespread adoption and directed the power of Moore’s law toward the kinds of machines we saw today was the power of the digital computer to be a “universal machine”: if you could program it to do so, the same machine could be used by a designer, a writer, an accountant, a game player, a scientist. The great power inherent in the emerging online medium that led to the growth of the Internet was as much social as technical: the power of many-to-many communication.

What, I asked myself, was the driving powerful characteristic of the new medium? Witnessing social, political, and scientific events such as eBay, SETI@home, Napster, Wikipedia, the use of SMS in the overthrow of national leaders and the election of others, Wi-Fi, and free and open source software production, it occurred to me that overcoming barriers to collective action could be the single unique power tying these examples together.

Are new kinds of political and economic systems emerging, as Yochai Benkler has asserted? I will talk about Smart Mobs and beyond: toward a broad interdisciplinary study of human cooperation and collective action.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Howard Rheingold is author of Tools for Thought, The Virtual Community, Smart Mobs. He has served as editor of Whole Earth Review and The Millennium Whole Earth Catalog. He was founding executive editor of Hotwired and founder of Electric Minds.
He has taught courses at the University of California, Berkeley and Stanford University in participatory media, cooperation, and collective action. He is a non-resident fellow at the Annenberg Center for Communication at the University of Southern California and visiting professor at De Montfort University, United Kingdom. His current projects include:

- **The Cooperation Project**
- **Participatory Media Literacy**
- **Participatory Media and Collective Action**
- **Toward a Literacy of Cooperation** (Stanford, Winter, 2005)
- **Participatory Media/Collective Action** (UC Berkeley, School of Information, Fall 2006)
- **Digital Journalism** (Stanford University Winter, 2006)
- **Non-resident Fellow, Annenberg Center for Communication, USC**
- **Visiting Professor, De Montfort University, UK**