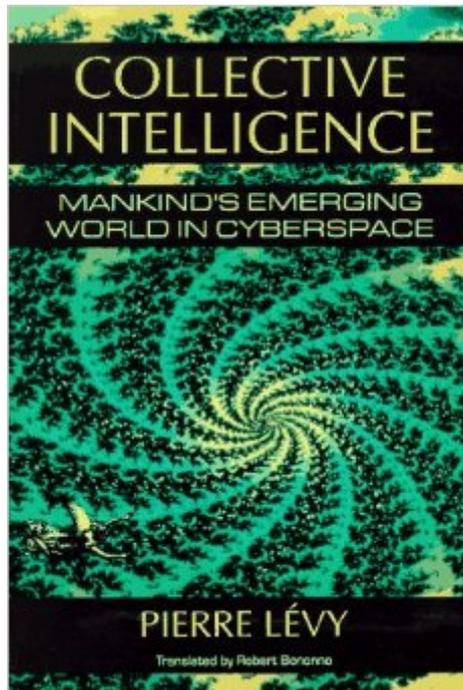


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Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World In Cyberspace



Synopsis

The number of travelers along the information superhighway is increasing at a rate of ten percent a month. How will this communications revolution affect our culture and society? Pierre Levy believes that rather than creating a society where machines rule man, the technology of cyberspace will have a humanizing influence on us, and foster the emergence of a "collective intelligence"â "a meeting of minds on the Internetâ "that will validate the contributions of the individual. With a depth of scholarship and imaginative insight rare among media critics, Levy demonstrates how the unfettered exchange of ideas in cyberspace has the potential to liberate us from the social and political hierarchies that have stood in the way of mankind's advancement. At once a profound historical analysis of the development of human culture and a blueprint for the future, *Collective Intelligence* is a visionary work that will make a substantial contribution to our views on society through to the next millennium.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Sometimes Pierre Levy likes Michel Serres a little too much. Serres, a brilliantly original thinker, often explains that what he says and how he says it are inseparable, and is thereby in the best French philosophical tradition. Which works very well in his books, for the initiated, but Levy's probable attempt to emulate this in *Collective Intelligence* doesn't quite reach par, although at no point is he difficult to understand - the prose is just occasionally over-baked. This being the only

reason the rating dropped from five to four stars, on to what makes this an essential read. The title is a little unfortunate, as it will have some buyers believing here is another new-age bible about networked togetherness and pony-tailed social savvy. It isn't. Like *Becoming Virtual*, this is a serious book of philosophy, sociology and anthropology, with concepts and insights that make other theorising in the area of information technology, for example, look positively anemic by comparison. Above all 'collective' has wider meanings than the normal usage, and explaining how is probably the best way to review the book. 'Collective' usually implies a collection, a group of distinct things gathered together in some way to make a bigger thing. Some reviewers of the book use this meaning, suggesting Levy's idea is that technologies such as the internet simply extend traditional communication processes over large geographical distances, so that we can 'share information' better, and so on. Levy's collective, on the other hand, derives from Serres', where all large-scale, collective phenomena are distributive rather than summative - you don't make big, 'global' things by stacking lots of smaller, 'local' things, Lego-block style, because the local and the global don't have any necessary relationship.

If you want an interesting book, I'd recommend 'Collective Intelligence' by Pierre Levy. This book examines the social impact of Internet technology and proposes a set of ideals that should be used to guide a society using it. Levy tries to show how his set of ideals would obtain the most benefits from society from this technology. An interesting part of the book occurs when Levy compares the mode of live in an Internet society with that derived from Catholic ideals. He recounts mediaeval Catholic philosophy on the means by which God's insight creates the world. God exists by hid contemplation his own existence since he is the essence of all things and out of this contemplation springs angels which can contemplate their own existence but need other things to exist. There are 10 ranks of angels each created either by God's or the next higher angel rank's contemplation of themselves. The contemplation of the lowest rank of angels creates our world. The nub of this is that the world is top down. The ideal is at the pyramid of existence and goodness derives its meaning from the top. Levy contrasts this with the new conception of the Internet. The lowest rank which is our world can create a new world above it. In our case, it is the lowest level of connectivity of the Internet. This new world is good in so far as it enables the inhabitants of our world to flourish. The lowest levels in cyberspace can create higher levels of existence with no limits on the number of levels which corresponds to the ranks of angels. Goodness flows up these levels from the real world in direct contrast to Catholic theology. Another view on this can be found in, 'The Religion of Technology' by David F. Noble. This book traces the origin of the Internet and the attitudes of its

developers to Protestant theology.

Collective Intelligence was published in 1997, just as the Internet was gaining traction in the popular imagination. Reading this book, together with Neuromancer, made me realize that something monumental was afoot. Pierre Levy inspired me with this kind, poetic and visionary book. With cyberspace Levy says, " Movement no longer means moving point to point on the globe, but crossing universes of problems, lived worlds, landscapes of meaning." Later he says, "The prosperity of a nation, geographical region, business, or individual depends on their ability to navigate the knowledge space. Building the knowledge space will mean acquiring the institutional, technical, and conceptual instruments needed to make information navigable, so that each of us is able to orient ourselves and recognize others on the basis of mutual interested, abilities, projects, means, and the identities within this new space." This process has made great strides since 1997, but I have heard it said that we are still on page one of the history of the Internet. Levy explains how totalitarianism fails because it cannot not harness collective intelligence. But he cites the mass media focus on spectacle as a hindrance to capitalist society, and believes that cyberspace would help people filter their information and navigate knowledge. He said, "In the society of the spectacle, thought is buried in the world of media and advertising." As a solution, he sees reciprocal apprenticeship, breaking down previous social hierarchies. To help bind us together, Levy also sees the importance of signs, symbols and stories in cyberspace. A deep and generous philosophy pervades this book. He says, "The just man includes, he integrates, he repairs the social fabric.

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