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WhoseSpace?

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Review of *Stealing MySpace: The Battle to Control the Most Popular Website in America*, by Julia Angwin. Random House Publishing. 384 pgs. $27.00

Meet the New Boss. On July 18, 2005, News Corporation purchased Intermix, the parent company of the phenomenally successful social networking site, MySpace, for five-hundred-fifty million dollars. With one stroke, Rupert Murdoch outfoxed his arch-rival Sumner Redstone to vault his company to the front of the digital revolution. By 2006, Murdoch was crowing: "The Internet is a transforming technology that will have just as great an impact on our civilization as the
invention of the wheel, the printing press, steam power and the combustion engine."


Moving and grooving in the go-go days of the Internet are MySpace cofounders, Chris DeWolfe and Tom Anderson, "cubicle-dwelling marketing executives with no technical prowess or revolutionary ideas." After sketchy attempts at spam, spy cameras and anti-spyware-which-was-really-spyware, the boys hit on the idea for MySpace. Kind of. What they mostly did was borrow the look, feel, and functionality of the social networking site, Friendster.

Angwin combines juicy pulp with biz-dev context to turn this story of somewhat shaky and shady entrepreneur-businessman-techie-marketers into a page-turner. "This is not how Google and Yahoo were born...the time was ripe for a new kind of Internet giant to emerge - one where human creativity was at the center of the experience, not technology."

MySpace became a cultural rocket ship, counting 75 million users in July, 2008, twice as many as its rival, Facebook. DeWolfe took to wearing black. As musicians and bands harnessed the power of social networks, Anderson hosted MySpace parties, bringing bimbos to rock-and-roll royalty. Users began to compete for the longest list of Myspace "Friends." Weirdos like Tila Tequila became MySpace stars.

Anderson and DeWolfe's dilemma, and the central conflict of the book, was (and maybe still is) that they controlled but never owned MySpace. *Stealing MySpace* documents their bounces from owner to owner, as they worked with, whined at, and outlasted the managers of the moment.

Angwin raises but does not resolve the two fundamental questions posed by the Internet: who will control the flow of content and how can content be monetized.

Despite their earlier experience as entrepreneurs, Angwin suggests DeWolfe and Anderson fought steadfastly for the power of the user, sending shots of lighter fluid from Santa Monica to feed the gas fire fight between the suits and the T-shirts. Reading *Stealing*, though, makes us wonder whether DeWolfe and Anderson's evangelizing was a conscious ploy to retain their power in a company that kept changing owners.

In a world of MySpace, Facebook, You Tube, Skype and now Twitter, it is hard to deny the power of the user. MySpace's particular appeal was that it "gave teenagers the world over a virtual street corner where they could interact without adult supervision, and express and discover themselves in a creative, liberating way."

But direct control brings a plethora of problems. Sexual predators prowled MySpace from the get-go, requiring DeWolfe to face a beat-down from Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal in 2006. Next, MySpace's open system included a decision by its founders not to stop "fraudsters" - impostors claiming to be someone else (like Pete Townsend) on a MySpace page. And finally, the theology of MySpace and its fellow travelers, made it easy for anonymous posters to rip up anyone they didn't like.

The law is struggling to keep up with "realities" provided by Internet technology. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 grants web-sites broad immunity from what their users post online. Yet the Children's Privacy Protection Act of the same year requires all websites to obtain parents' permission before collecting personal information about anyone under thirteen.

Like most Internet companies, MySpace's challenge, as one Fox executive put it, was and is to capitalize on "the quantification of engagement," the way in which advertisers know how much attention users pay to a particular space. But aside from a big - and it was big - commitment of nine-hundred million advertising dollars over five years from Google in 2006 (on which the verdict is not in), the results are mixed, and given the nature of Fox's financial reporting, it is difficult to measure MySpace's performance.

It may well be, we think, that the step-back from the story of MySpace is that, except for the amazing Google, with its amazing algorithm, no Internet provider has yet been able to extract big green numbers from social networks. No one has monetized "engagement" -- certainly not yet. As it becomes more apparent that this Internet world isn't making any money, we wonder if the last laugh will belong not to the users, and not to the techies, but to the media companies who know how to create content with mass appeal -- and figure out a way to charge for it. Just like the Old Boss.


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