'Future Perfect,' by Steven Johnson

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Updated 3:08 a.m., Monday, September 24, 2012

Future Perfect
The Case for Progress in a Networked Age
By Steven Johnson
(Riverhead; 233 pages; $26.95)

As he filed plans for an initial public offering, Mark Zuckerberg set forth his company's core mission. Facebook, he wrote, aspired to rewire the ways in which people acquire and spread knowledge: The world's information infrastructure should consist of "a network built from the bottom up or peer-to-peer, rather than the monolithic top-down structure that has existed to date."

Steven Johnson wants to double down on peer networks. To make them "a transformative force for good" in social, economic and political life, he argues, institutions, including Facebook, must replace top-down control "centralized in a charismatic leader" with peer-to-peer networks on the inside of their organizations as well as among their "customers."

In his latest book, "Future Perfect," the Marin County author suggests that technology allows us to envision - and build - an alternative to our "mass society defined by passive consumption, vast hierarchies, and the straight lines of state legibility."

The author of "Where Good Ideas Come From," the founder of the website Outside.in and a self-proclaimed "peer progressive," Johnson acknowledges that the peer-progressive framework is in its infancy. He does not adequately explain how "participatory budgeting" and "liquid democracy" will work - or the mechanisms peer networks will use to assign value to information, promoting positive ideas and discouraging negative ones. And he acknowledges that some problems - like climate change and national security - may require more centralized decision making.

Nonetheless, "Future Perfect" provides an informative, tech-savvy and provocative vision of a new and more democratic public philosophy. It's a breath of fresh air in an age of gridlock, cynicism and disillusionment.

Johnson believes that decentralized peer-to-peer networks, with no one in charge of the system and an emphasis on the free flow of ideas over private property (he is not a fan of copyright and patent protections), offer a model that can revolutionize politics.

Kickstarter, perhaps the most popular "crowdfunding" site, he points out, has had enormous success in providing financial support for creative and charitable causes by inviting potential donors to upload descriptions of films, songs or books of poetry and learn how much money is needed to complete each project. No one is charged until a project is fully funded - and the reward promised to investors cannot be financial. Kickstarter raises more than $200 million a year, far more than the annual budget of the National Endowment for the Arts.

The government, Johnson suggests, could create its own Kickstarter, using taxpayers' dollars to match each donation. It might use prize-backed challenges to steer a peer network toward a goal, as the X Prize Foundation did in initiating a competition to encourage the private space-flight industry.

And it could reduce the political influence of wealthy corporations and individuals by creating "democracy vouchers," which would allow (but not force) citizens to contribute 50 of their tax dollars (and up to an additional $100) to support a candidate. Only those candidates who rejected any other sources of funding could qualify for a pool of cash that could be very substantial.

While insisting that peer progressivism is not a "rarefied theory," but a "practical, living, evolving reality," Johnson acknowledges that there is a "utopian strain" to his vision. And indeed there is. Peer networks do not necessarily weed out bad ideas - or promote good ones. New York City's 311 system, which connected callers to a live person in 30 seconds, may have been a smashing success, helping municipal officials identify and address neighborhood problems, but the "If You See Something Say Something" campaign of the city's Metropolitan Transit Authority (not discussed in "Future Perfect") produced no credible information about terrorists and many false alarms.

And in claiming that the emerging (and diverse) Internet-based "peer news system" looks like an improvement over print and TV journalism, Johnson sometimes conflates information with opinion, and underestimates the importance of well-trained, and, dare I say it, objective reporters and "authoritative" news sources. Let's face it: Viral news helps keep the "birthers" in business.

Johnson knows that direct democracies sometimes elect corrupt or incompetent leaders and spend money on trivial, dangerous or
damaging policies. He recognizes that market-based economies sometimes produce grotesque income inequalities and catastrophic bubbles. And yet, despite an analysis that can be rather facile, "Future Perfect" serves the estimable service of arguing persuasively that direct democracy is more feasible in a networked age than it has been for a very long time - and prompting one to ask whether, despite its imperfections, it beats the alternatives.

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