As they “conjured up entirely new worlds — like websites — voila! out of nothing,” declared Larry Harvey, the co-founder of “Burning Man,” the weeklong festival for Silicon Valley “digerati,” 21st-century technologists would transform the society, economy and culture of the United States.

Along with other missionaries for "Web 2.0," Harvey predicted that social media would promote democracy, inclusion, equality, prosperity, communal participation and self-fulfillment through work and self-expression.

In "Status Update," Alice Marwick, a professor of communications and media studies at Fordham University, acknowledges that the notion that the Silicon Valley "tech scene" fosters authenticity, meritocracy and entrepreneurialism has "some basis in fact."

Drawing on interviews and firsthand observations, and an analysis of the practices of "micro-celebrity," "self-branding" and "life-streaming," however, she insists that "Web 2.0" actually teaches users to be corporate consumers in a post-industrial world "by harnessing marketing techniques to boost attention and visibility."

And that it reinforces social stratification and inequities based on class, gender and race.

Marwick's conclusions are not surprising. Coined in 2004, amid excitement with wikis, blogs and mashups, the term "Web 2.0," she concedes, became passé by the 2010s. Dampered by the "harsh reality" of a global economic meltdown (and, one might add, rhetoric that was over the top under any circumstances), "the idea of openness and participation seemed naïve in the face of walled-garden App stores and Facebook."

Although they take distinctive forms, "micro-celebrity," "self-branding" and "life-streaming" are, Marwick writes, as "susceptible to trends and platitudes as any other aspect of popular culture."

As elsewhere, she points out, "authenticity" is socially constructed on the Internet, where a purposefully "edited self" is presented as "the real me" and the act of revealing intimate (or apparently intimate) information creates a bond (sociologists call it a "para-social relationship") between micro-celebrity practitioners and their audiences.
All too often, it is a strategy of self-promotion "tied to the business logic of the tech scene." Why then, one wonders, should anyone take seriously the denunciation of blatant self-promotion as "déclassé and very cool" by "high status members" of Silicon Valley?

As Marwick demonstrates, though social media is "the latest in a long line" of platforms that promote fantasies of self-realization, it does permit individuals to advertise themselves far and wide.

And, it might be added, "Status Update" is the latest in a long line of critics of "Web 2.0" technologies. Social media sites and texting can be tools of connectivity, with the power to introduce each of us to wider arrays of ideas and acquaintances.

But they can also eviscerate or eliminate complexity in the name of brevity, annihilate the present (by making us incessantly interruptible), privilege what historian Christopher Lasch called "the banality of self-awareness," and encourage us to equate reality with role playing, as each of us aspires to be "the star" of our own lives.

Status update: In the digital age, it is not easy to nurture self-esteem, a healthy sense of identity, and a capacity for intimacy, the sources of a fulfilling life.

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