ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY

YELP AND THE WISDOM OF “THE LONELY CROWD”

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

May 7, 2013

Save this story



David Riesman spent the first half of his career writing one of the most important books of the twentieth century. He spent the second half correcting its pervasive misprision. “The Lonely Crowd,” an analysis of the varieties of social character that examined the new American middle class, appeared in 1950 to what Riesman, a lawyer who ended up teaching sociology, once called “quite astringent criticism” in the relevant academic prints. He was surprised, and of course pleased, that the book went on to find a wide general audience, but spent decades reckoning with the cost of its popularity: namely, the “profound misinterpretation” of the book as a simplistic critique of epidemic American postwar conformity via its description of the contours of the “other-directed character,” whose identity and behavior is shaped by its relationships. Riesman did his best, in prefaces to

two subsequent editions of the book (at great length in 1961, and, with some brittleness about having to do it once more, in 1969), to correct this reading—to insist that he never meant to suggest that Americans now were any more conformist than they ever had been, or that there's even such a thing as social structure without conformist consensus.

With the rise of the Internet, Riesman's book—which is, at its root, a discussion of the emotional life of information—has become even more relevant now than it was in the nineteen-fifties. But it won't be of much use if it continues to be read as a book about all the miserable conformists. (It has probably not helped that the publisher, Yale University Press, put a flock of jammed sheep on the book's cover.) Critics like Lee Siegel continue to press a distorted Riesman into the service of any given day's anti-Internet jeremiad. In this past weekend's Styles section of the New York *Times*, Siegel uses "The Lonely Crowd" to analyze the putative "Yelpification" of contemporary life: according to Siegel, Riesman's view was that "people went from being 'inner-directed' to 'outer-directed,' from heeding their own instincts and judgment to depending on the judgments and opinions of tastemakers and trendsetters." The "conformist power of the crowd" and its delighted ability to write online reviews led Siegel down a sad path to a lackluster expensive dinner. Unhappy with his monkfish and the names of the desserts, Siegel writes that "gone are the days when 'conformist' was a slur on someone's character. Now the idea is that if you are not following the crowd of five-star dispensers, you're a tasteless, undiscriminating shlub."

Our free daily newsletter delivers context, not clutter.

gideonlk@gmail.com

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our user agreement (including class action waiver and arbitration provisions), and acknowledge our privacy policy.

What Riesman actually suggested was that we think of social organization in terms of a series of "ideal types" along a spectrum of increasingly loose authority. On one end of the spectrum is a "tradition-directed" community, where we all understand that what we're supposed to do is what we're supposed to do because it's just the thing that one does; authority is unequivocal, and there's neither the room nor the desire for autonomous action. In the middle of the spectrum, as one moves toward a freer distribution of, and response to, authority, is "inner-direction." The inner-directed character is concerned not with "what one does" but with "what people like us do." Which is to say that she looks to her own internalizations of past authorities to get a sense for how to conduct her affairs. Contemporary society, Riesman thought, was best understood as chiefly "other-directed," where the inculcated authority of the vertical (one's lineage) gives way to the muddled authority of the horizontal (one's peers). The inner-directed person orients herself by an internal "gyroscope," while the other-directed person orients herself by "radar."

It's not that the inner-directed person consults some deep, subjective, romantically sui generis oracle. It's that the inner-directed person consults the internalized voices of a mostly dead lineage, while her other-directed counterpart heeds the external voices of her living contemporaries. As Riesman put it, "the gyroscopic mechanism allows the inner-directed person to appear far more independent than he really is: he is no less a conformist to others than the other-directed person, but the voices to which he listens are more distant, of an older generation, their cues internalized in his childhood." The inner-directed person is, simply, "somewhat less concerned than the other-directed person with continuously obtaining from contemporaries (or their stand-ins: the mass media) a flow of guidance, expectation, and approbation." You can imagine how the Internet intensifies things.

Riesman drew no moral from the transition from a community of primarily inner-directed people to a community of the other-directed. Instead, he saw that each ideal type had different advantages and faced different problems. As Riesman understood it, the primary disciplining emotion under tradition direction is shame, the threat of ostracism and exile that enforces traditional action. Inner-directed people experience not shame but guilt, or the fear that one's behavior won't be commensurate with the imago within. And, finally, other-directed folks experience not guilt but a "contagious, highly diffuse" anxiety—the possibility that, now that authority itself is diffuse and ambiguous, we might be doing the wrong thing all the time.

Those who have wanted to use "The Lonely Crowd" as a cudgel have consistently elided the book's careful emphasis on the positive aspects of other-direction: openness, lack of inhibition, interest in others, and ability to change. Still, the price of those virtues was a new form of anxiety—about what to do, whom to trust to answer that question, and why—and it's this anxiety that Siegel connects to Yelp, though he easily could've made a broader case about authority and information on the Internet. Siegel is right to make the inference, if wayward in his conclusions. It makes sense to associate the anxiety of how to relate to livingly diffuse authorities with the Internet, which presents the greatest signal-to-noise-ratio problem in human history. Before the Internet, you felt O.K. taking whatever restaurant recommendation happened along from a few trusted sources; this led Siegel to his cherished local Thai place. But where Siegel sees a desperate desire on the part of Yelpers to fit in, one might more charitably suggest that what we're witnessing is the natural efforts of well-meaning people not only to heed credible information but to contribute to it.

The problem with Yelp is not the role it plays, for Siegel, in the proliferation of monoculture; most people of my generation have learned to ignore Yelp entirely. It's the fact that, after about a year of usefulness, Yelp very quickly became a terrible source of information. There are several reasons for this. The first is the

nature of an algorithmic response to the world. As Jaron Lanier points out in "Who Owns the Future?," the hubris behind each new algorithm is the idea that its predictive and evaluatory structure is game-proof; but the minute any given algorithm gains real currency, all the smart and devious people devote themselves to gaming it. On Yelp, the obvious case would be garnering positive reviews by any means necessary. A second problem with Yelp's algorithmic ranking is in the very idea of using online reviews; as anybody with a book on Amazon knows, they tend to draw more contributions from people who feel very strongly about something, positively or negatively. This undermines the statistical relevance of their recommendations. (This phenomenon has been dramatized to hilarious effect in the series of YouTube videos that feature actors performing melodramatic readings of Yelp reviews.)

Yet, the biggest problem with Yelp is not that it's a popularity contest. It's not even that it's an exploitable popularity contest. Those, Riesman himself would have conceded, are the costs of an other-directed person's freedom to roam widely in pursuit of useful authority figures. Rather, it's the fact that Yelp makes money by selling ads and prime placements to the very businesses it lists under ostensibly neutral third-party review. If Yelp really were a way to gain credible information about the best restaurants, Riesman would've been as delighted as Siegel was horrified: the accurate and honest "wisdom of crowds" would significantly lower the transaction costs of being an other-directed person, and would more easily allow for the autonomy of actual choice in one's affiliations (with people, with restaurants). But Yelp's valuations are always possibly in bad faith, even if its authority is dressed up as the distilled algorithmic wisdom of a crowd. For Riesman, that's the worst of all possible worlds: a manipulated consumer certainty that only shores up the authority of an unchosen, hidden source. In that world, cold monkfish is the least of our problems.

Illustration by D. Krán.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus's book, "A Sense of Direction," is out in paperback today from Riverhead Books.



Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a staff writer at The New Yorker covering technology, academia, and books, among other topics. He is the author of the memoir "A Sense of Direction."

More: Elements techpages Yelp

A smarter scroll.

Sign up for our free daily newsletter.

gideonlk@gmail.com

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our user agreement (including class action waiver and arbitration provisions), and acknowledge our privacy policy.

READ MORE

HUMOR

I'm Starting to Suspect That the F.D.A. Is Just Trying to Get Me to Cook

This morning, the agency urged me to immediately discard my store-bought rotisserie chicken and instead braise a lamb shank in a classic mirepoix.

By Greg Mania

BOOKS

Is God Another Addiction?

A remarkable memoir recounts a writer's struggles with alcoholism and religious faith—and the unsettling ways in which each has fed her longing for the other.

By James Wood

THE LEDE

The Toxic Logic Behind the Shaming of Cornell's Jane Doe

One of the biggest failures of the post-#MeToo moment is our collective inability to provide a confident, humane account of sex as a basic good.

By Anahid Nersessian

INFINITE SCROLL

How Lists Became Our Greatest Defense Against Endless Slop

A form that was once emblematic of the internet's frivolity has become our preferred way of expressing taste, with the New York *Times* and Letterboxd users alike clamoring to define the canon.

By Brady Brickner-Wood

THE FRONT ROW

"The Social Reckoning" Leaves Out the Human Element

In Aaron Sorkin's overwritten sequel to "The Social Network," inspired performances by Mikey Madison and Jeremy Allen White can't bring the main characters to life.

By Richard Brody

INFINITE SCROLL

Hollywood's Tech-Founder Fixation Takes a Dark Turn

Tech-entrepreneur bio-pics used to give us flawed men who built great products. But the latest wave of movies, from "The Social Reckoning" to "Artificial," recast Silicon Valley titans as unambiguous villains, and suggest that the products themselves are the threat.

By Brady Brickner-Wood

POPULAR CHRONICLES

The New Age of Reading

Alarm about declining interest in books is perpetual. But, as bookselling reaches unexpected heights, James Daunt, the chief executive of Barnes & Noble, thinks a different future is at hand.

By Nathan Heller

SHOUTS & MURMURS

A.1. II

Readers and condiment lovers react.

By Ian Frazier

THE POLITICAL SCENE

The Battle for the Post-Trump Right

For decades, the Heritage Foundation was a conservative powerhouse. Can it stay relevant in the influencer age?

By Emma Green

THE LEDE

The Humanism Driving the Anti-A.I. Movement

At the Pro-Human Assembly in Washington, D.C., attendees talked less about jobs and policy, and more about their philosophy of life.

By Becca Rothfeld

ON TELEVISION

The Bari Weiss Effect on "60 Minutes"

CBS News' editor-in-chief has pledged to "speak for the seventy-five per cent" of people on the center right and the center left; the reality is different.

By Vinson Cunningham

INFINITE SCROLL

Caleb Hammer's Humiliation Economy

The host of "Financial Audit," a popular YouTube series, claims that his goal is to make his viewers more financially literate, with his down-and-out interviewees serving as extreme test cases for what not to do.

By Brady Brickner-Wood

Privacy Information