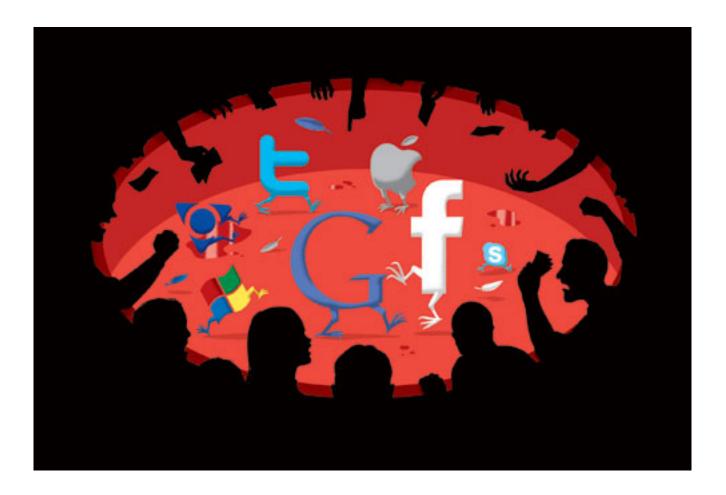
Everyone's betting on the Internet's next big thing. The author provides a tip sheet on competing theories—it's the platform (Google, Facebook); it's the machine (iWhatever); it's digital behavior (Twitter); it's porn (Skype sex!); etc.—along with his own hunch about the year to come. Plus: Live chat with author Michael Wolff about the Internet's next big thing.



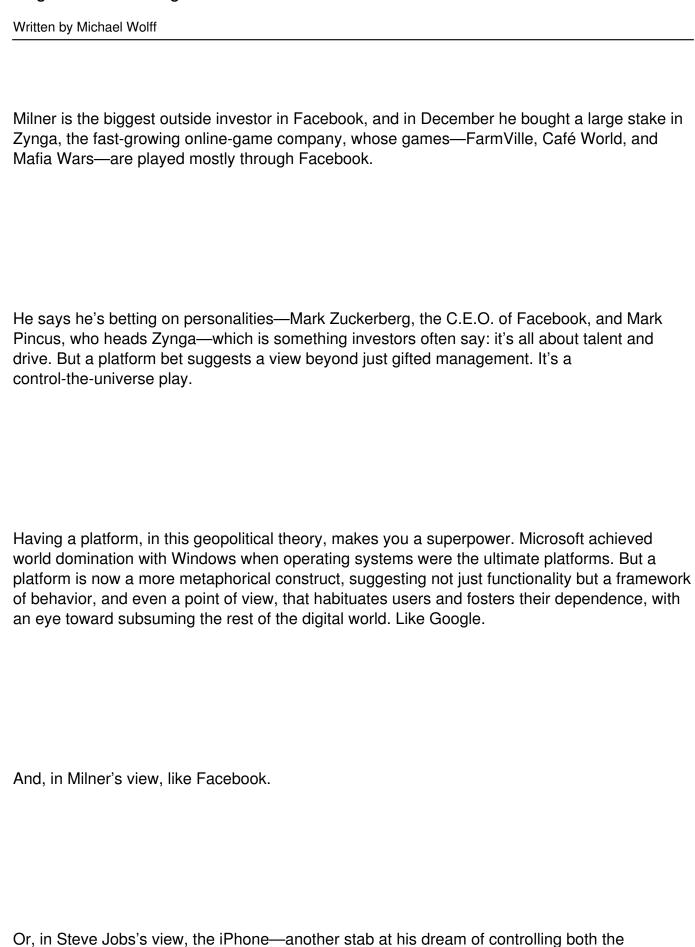


I am told so many things about what is going to happen in the Internet business—happen imminently, happen in a way to transform human behavior and aspirations, happen in a way to disrupt the powers that be, or to restore the powers that used to be—that I should be in a position, if I could just focus my attention, to get rich, finally.

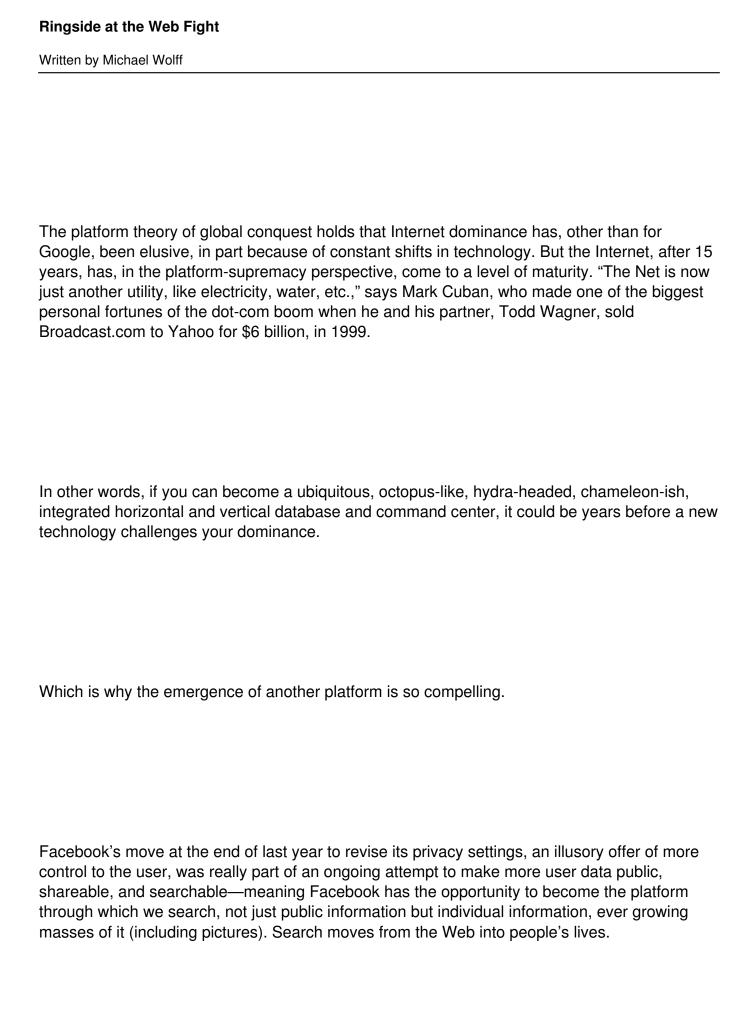
Everybody I know who follows the next big thing believes that this year—emerging from recession, with the death of so many aspects of conventional media—will be a year of, in Internet-speak, radical inflection, precipitating a wave of acquisitions and I.P.O.'s and a river of new investment. If you can only focus on what so many geniuses are saying, you can win big. But deciphering the chatter is no small talent, because the technology business is at least as much talk as it is science. The next big thing can sometimes feel like the coming of Christ, but it can also feel like the internecine debates about socialist doctrine that famously took place in the cafeterias of City College, in New York, in the 1930s.

So what I am going to do here—rather in an effort to create a *Next Big Thing for Dummies*—is to try to align the factions, parse the theories, distinguish the geek Lenins from the geek Trotskys, and offer the possibility for you to profitably know what this year is going to bring (or, anyway, hold your own at a cocktail party).

Actually, start with a Russian. Yuri Milner is a 48-year-old Muscovite, billionaire, and Putin look-alike, who, in the past year, has become one of the largest investors in digital media in the U.S., elevating the next big thing to something like geopolitical status. Other Russian billionaires buy sports teams or newspapers; Milner is buying "platforms."



hardware and the software that control the world.



This prospect leads, in just about everybody's estimation, to an I.P.O. for Facebook this year, which in its size and giddiness will transform the industry with new liquidity and provoke the ultimate superpower platform war, a face-off between Google's dominance over Web-page-based search and Facebook's command of the "social graph."

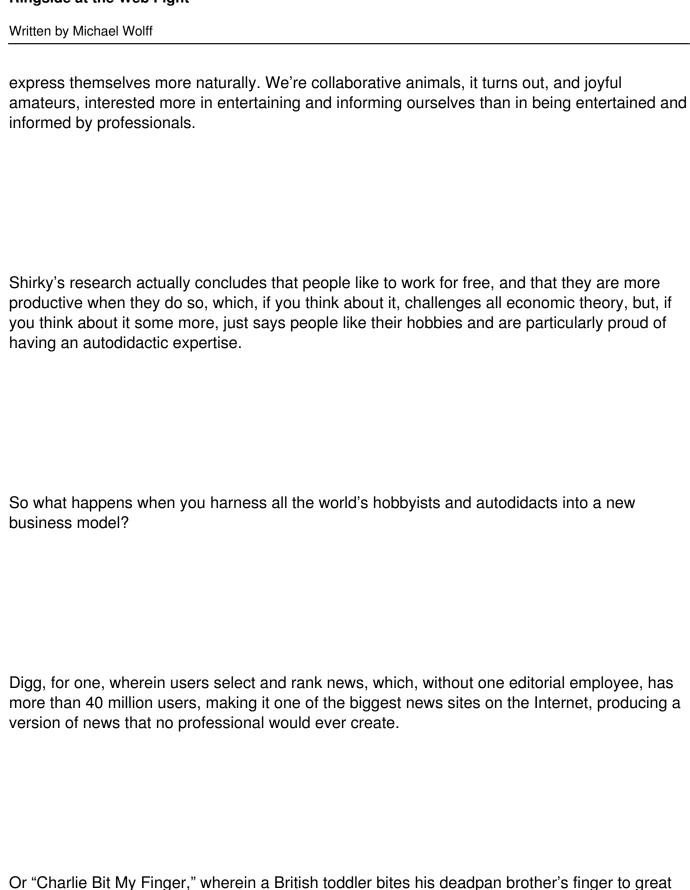
And yet, such platform politics, such continuing belief in the possibility of control, may be just so Cold War. The better way to look at what changes the game, according to a group you might call the digital behaviorists—part hucksters and part self-appointed sociologists—is to understand how the Internet radically alters the desires and habits and actions and reactions of the people who use it.

Clay Shirky, for instance, the author of Here Comes Everybody: *The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, is a man whose name is now uttered in technology circles with the kind of reverence with which left-wingers used to say, "Herbert Marcuse." "Web 3.0 is not an upgrade—it's a revolution," says Shirky characteristically. Shirky, along with Jeff Jarvis, a Cotton Mather (or Billy Sunday) figure, who has turned his sky-is-falling lectures to old-media executives into a lucrative consulting practice to old-media businesses, Chris Anderson, Wired's editor in chief, and Jay Rosen, an N.Y.U. professor—all dedicated bloggers and, in Internet parlance, "quote monkeys"—have essentially morphed the anarchic, 60s-style,

Whole Earth Catalog

roots of the Internet into aggressive business theory.

At its heart, the digital-behavior theory is that the old media business imposed an unnatural behavior on its users—not least of all a strict divide between creators and audience. The Internet, with a flat hierarchy, cheap distribution, and virtually no production barriers, lets people



merriment, which, with 149 million views on YouTube, is bigger than the Super Bowl.



And if this obsessive disgorging and contributing produces, as Jarvis acknowledges, "a mountain of crap," this just means the next big thing will be about sorting, sifting, and filtering the crap.

Even the need for filters and editors, in the behaviorists' scheme, will be met by a product of the new behavior: Twitter.

Twitter, according to the behaviorists, is both the finest expression of free labor and infinite disgorgement, and the way we will navigate through ever greater vapidness and clutter. Twitter is, for the behaviorists, a second-by-second, real-time database of the human experience, a searchable record of all thoughts and actions, which will generate, according to Biz Stone, its co-founder, a billion search queries a day in the coming year. Instead of Google algorithms establishing the information hierarchy, the mass of Twitter-centric humanity—or one's pre-selected peer group among Twitter-centric humanity—will establish what's important and hence what comes up first in search results. "E-mail and I.M. have morphed quite naturally into a much broader and more open public discourse," says Stone, a discourse which in itself becomes a primary navigation tool and a way, "well beyond entering a term in a box and clicking a button," of interacting with the information world.

The live Internet, in the behaviorists' eyes, is the next big thing. Web sites and Web pages are out of date. "Google," says John Borthwick, whose Betaworks is a venture-capital firm that invests solely in behaviorist business models, "still thinks of the world as pages." In Jarvis's declaration, "media is no longer a product." It is not a production. It is not a box-office hit. It is how we contribute to and how we benefit from our collective expressiveness.

