



Not Yet Rewired

A Review of

Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection

by Ethan Zuckerman

New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2013. 312 pp. ISBN

978-0-393-08283-8. \$26.95

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0035350>

Reviewed by

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After finishing *Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection*, I turned to the included press release to find out for whom the book was written. It is “aimed at both the expert and the lay reader” (Norton, 2013). Experts in psychology will appreciate *Rewire* most if they approach it as a lay reader, opening themselves to the problems and possibilities that author Ethan Zuckerman raises. Although structurally frustrating at times, *Rewire* fascinates and stimulates.

Zuckerman makes the case, albeit in a roundabout manner, that we as individuals and as a society need to rewire. On page 117 he states what is arguably the thesis of his book: “We need to look at the media systems we’ve built . . . and ask whether they’re working the way we need them to in a connected age. If they’re not, we need to rewire.”

The delay in reaching the thesis reflects the style of the text. Zuckerman circles around similar ideas throughout the book, written as discovery, making, and not making, the same points. Part of the problem in discerning cohesive arguments is that the book is full of unacknowledged contradictions (e.g., we’re all connected, but we’re not). It’s not that ambivalence is invalid; rather, it’s that the contradictions are left unexplained. Do they depict the author’s own struggle or uncertainty with these issues? Or are they simply byproducts of the way the book was written?

Zuckerman is the director of the Civic Media Center at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a well-respected blogger at <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/>. *Rewire*, his first book, includes elements from his blogs as well as excerpts from his TED talk (http://www.ted.com/talks/ethan_zuckerman.html). It may be that what works in a short post or a talk works less well in a book. For example, Zuckerman frequently offers topic sentences at the end of paragraphs and thesis statements at the end of chapters. Indeed, *Rewire* often reads more as a series of anecdotes than of integrated arguments. But, oh, what stories! They are richly detailed, nuanced, and captivating. Zuckerman is the person we all wish to find ourselves seated next to at a dinner party.

Curators: Others

In the first half of the book, Zuckerman shows how most of us have a distorted worldview, largely because we get the wrong data from others (e.g., news curators) and for ourselves. For example, most everyone, including the Central Intelligence Agency, missed the social unrest in Tunisia that was fomenting change. Zuckerman suggests that this was because the public, the media, and the experts were paying attention to the political powers in Tunisia and not to the people (or, more likely, were not paying attention to Tunisia at all). Of course, often only in hindsight can one tell that one had the wrong data—the woe of every antiterrorist agency and every scientist!

The information gatekeepers, online and off, decide what makes it into the public discussion. Zuckerman provides a plethora of evidence that the U.S. public receives less international news coverage than ever, with U.S. television news broadcasts reporting less than half the number of international stories that they did in the 1970s. He also notes that “GDP [gross domestic product] explained 60% of the variation in news coverage,” followed closely by a statement that “it’s disconcerting to conclude that U.S. media have such a pronounced financial fetish and so little interest in poorer nations” (p. 81). What is disconcerting to me is the frequency with which Zuckerman expresses wonderment at the role money plays in the flow of information.

Although certainly many news gatekeepers try to balance what sells with what they feel the public needs to know, ultimately their services must be profitable. We are all aware of the decline of the newspaper industry and of the increasing share of news in our papers brought to us by newswires. As a whole, the news industry has not figured out how to remain financially viable in light of online news, the ubiquity of digital recording devices, and individuals’ widespread use of social media. It is somewhat surprising, then, that the newspaper industry specifically, and money’s role in media more generally, receives relatively little mention from Zuckerman.

Curators: Ourselves

If we can’t count on the news providers to supply the information we need, Zuckerman suggests that we be our own curators—that we “wield the power of the press” (p. 121). But self-curated news suffers from many of the same limitations as other-curated news. As psychologists know, a person’s attention is selective and limited (Broadbent, 1958) and is pulled by personal relevance and salience (Borgida & Howard-Pitney, 1983). For one to care, information needs to be related to people one knows and things one cares about. Zuckerman’s colleague, Joi Ito, calls this the “caring problem” (p. 204). Moreover, information needs to fit one’s larger narratives. Psychologists know it is much harder to understand and remember information that doesn’t fit into one’s existing schemas, while, paradoxically, much easier to remember an unusual item that doesn’t fit.

Thus, although we can search broadly, drawing in a wealth of information from many different sources, we rarely do. We talk to people like ourselves and select media targeted at us, despite that “it’s easier than ever to share information and perspectives from different parts of the world” (p. 19). We are encouraged to stay in our bubbles because search engines and sellers tailor information to us.

We also perpetuate our narrowed views through confirmation bias, as Zuckerman notes. Although his definition varies (see pp. 98, 103), in each he misses that we actively seek information consistent with our extant views (Oswald & Grosjean, 2004). And although he discusses group polarization, he misses that polarization effects can occur when people who merely read the same information become more extreme in their original views (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). As a result, we operate in circles that Zuckerman describes as parochial, tribal, and local. This both surprises and disappoints Zuckerman as the Internet wasn't supposed to work like this.

Zuckerman's Solution

Zuckerman's solution comes in a series of recommendations. As his recommendations to governments and businesses are beyond the average person's purview (e.g., wage war differently, build infrastructure), I'll focus on his suggestions for individuals. His advice, in short, is to seek the unfamiliar. Follow a new topic of interest. Go global. Make a conscious effort to wander. Prepare to stumble on the unexpected. Make serendipity happen.

Zuckerman suggests that serendipity will lead to a kind of cognitive diversity. Because different problem solvers tackle problems differently, diversity can lead to great ideas and a reduction of groupthink. As researchers know, it can be hard to have breakthrough ideas while ensconced with like minds.

Because encountering difference is so memorable, we think we do it more often than we do. Zuckerman refers to the regression fallacy as "a tendency to pay more attention to unusual moments in our lives than to the ones closer to our average, everyday existence" (p. 66). Although his principle is valid, it is a misappropriation of the regression fallacy as put forth by Kahneman and Tversky (1973; e.g., an erroneous causal explanation based on regression to the mean). Instead, Zuckerman seems to mean salience—that unusual events stand out in our perceptual fields. Because we mislead ourselves into thinking we're more cosmopolitan than we really are, Zuckerman suggests that we track our media usage. We may discover, as Zuckerman did, that we're not spending our time as engaged in the world as we think.

Even when one is seeking diverse information, it can be hard to obtain it from traditional sources. Zuckerman suggests we connect to the people on the ground, finding and following bridge figures (people who bridge communities or skill sets) and xenophiles (people who love diversity). He suggests that we be open to weak ties (individuals we know but aren't closely connected to) as they are the key to the spread of ideas. We should use the curators of the category to help us find the local maxima (the best of a community).

Zuckerman's Solution Is Not the Answer

Zuckerman wants us to do what we should, not want we want—a hard sell. As Andrew Phelps (2011) of Harvard's Nieman Journalism Lab puts it, Zuckerman wants us to eat our news vegetables. Zuckerman is prompting us to leave our comfort zones and venture into new worlds. But we like the familiar, and we like the similar (Byrne, 1971; Zajonc, 1968). Similarity helps us connect, but it also challenges diversity.

Diversity may enrich us, but it also makes us uncomfortable. As Zuckerman says,

It's not clear how those of us who live and work near the place in which we grew up—the vast majority of people—can acquire cognitive diversity, or how we might embrace the benefits of diversity while minimizing the conflict and discomfort that so often accompany it. (p. 262)

Serendipity is also hard; “serendipity is unpredictable, time consuming and far from guaranteed” (p. 239). Zuckerman suggests we “increase our tolerance for risk or make it less painful” to fail (p. 244). Given that people are generally risk averse and avoiding pain is a hard-wired motive, I think he is asking the impossible. Zuckerman’s example of Nathan Kurz’s experience with Netflix suggests that companies are even more risk averse than individuals are. Kurz developed an algorithm that was more likely to provide an optimal movie recommendation but also more likely to suggest a disliked movie. Netflix rejected it (pp. 240–243).

Tracking our behavior is a tried-and-true technique to get us to change our behavior, but if tracking were enough, then we would not be the overweight society we are! Commendably, after Zuckerman’s self-tracking revealed he was not following as much international news as he thought, he changed his behavior.

Taken together, Zuckerman’s recommendations are like the doctor’s advice we know we should follow. The doctor is right, but we still sit on the couch with our potato chips.

Masters of the New Media May Be the Answer

On page 105, Zuckerman asks, “Can we choose our news wisely without curatorial assistance?” Because we too often find ourselves looking at cats on icanhas.cheezburger.com instead of breaking news on allAfrica.com, I think not, and Zuckerman does not provide convincing evidence that we can. If the geniuses at Google need someone to limit their cheese and croutons—to curate their lunch salads (p. 104)—then surely the rest of us need someone to limit our lolcats—to help us sift through the vast array of happenings and curate the news.

What we need is a new kind of curator. Perhaps it is the developers and champions of the new media who should curate for us. If Zuckerman and his colleagues design the Web for encountering serendipity and diversity, for the discovery of bridge figures and xenophiles, maybe they can get us to eat our news vegetables after all.

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