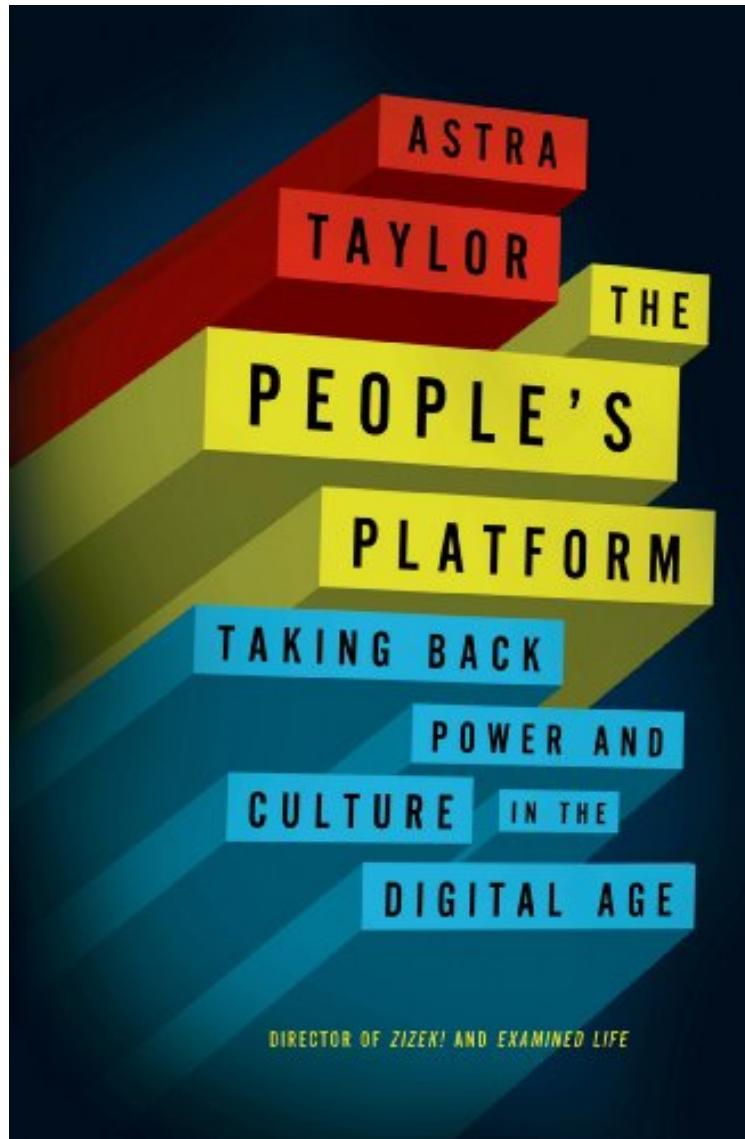


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# The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age

*Astra Taylor*

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**Astra Taylor : The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Occupy the cultural commonsBy Malvinldquo;The Peoplesquo;s Platformrdquo; by Astra Taylor is a timely discussion about the Internet, media and artistry. Ms. Taylor is an accomplished documentary filmmaker, musician, writer and activist. This visionary, intelligent and passionate book

explains why we must Occupy the cultural commons to secure a better future. Ms. Taylor reminds us that the on-and offline worlds are deeply connected. Sharing her own struggles with us, Ms. Taylor explains how the work of cultural production remains labor intensive for most filmmakers, musicians and journalists. However, as the Internet forces prices down to zero due to the relative ease of copying and distributing content, the author contends that the ecosystem supporting cultural producers has been rapidly crumbling around us. As corporations shed workers dedicated to important vocations such as investigative journalism, Ms. Taylor challenges the ludicrous idea that mass amateurism can substitute for the work of dedicated professionals. The rhetoric of end user empowerment masks a private agenda to profits from the public's voluntary labors; while BPs's purchase of search terms related to the recent Gulf oil spill demonstrates how corporations use their power to control the message. Discussing the Internet's rampant sexism, inequality and lack of diversity, Ms. Taylor convincingly argues that the Internet has reinforced the power structures of the real world — not empowered the weak. One of the finest attributes of this book is how Ms. Taylor challenges the libertarianism of the technology industry. Ms. Taylor says that practically, the Net is not really an open platform. Private corporations own the wires and hardware that comprise the physical layer; the user interfaces that are designed to serve up endless streams of profitable advertising messages; and the many thousands of data points that are mined from our online behaviors. Peer to peer networking might well represent a generalized frustration with corporate profiteering, Ms. Taylor observes, but does nothing to help producers make a living. Ms. Taylor believes we must build a "sustainable culture" to address these myriad problems holistically. These include regulating the Internet as a public utility; funding public news; separating corporate monopolies; imposing common carrier obligations; and so on. It seems to me that most of Ms. Taylor's proposals are more than reasonable if we accept that we are still citizens living in a democratic society. I highly recommend this outstanding book to everyone.

21 of 23 people found the following review helpful. A downer, but an essential read for the 21C, nevertheless. By Naum Trifanoff

Documentary filmmaker Taylor skewers the romanticism of utopian new net heralds. That the promise of an open, democratic internet has been subverted by corporate overlords, monopolistic titans, public relations skills, and destructive wasteful advertising interests. In the process, shredding journalism (to which Taylor repeatedly refers to now as "churnalism") and transforming the media realm into hamster wheel (my words here, not hers) where every click is measured and logged for the science of predictive marketing. Depressing, because she is correct here -- though I do believe it's not in complete entirety and that this state is due in large part to web users themselves, who are indeed attracted to this model. Saddening, because reading this confirmed my own evolving darkened view of the web, as once I had so much faith in the power of the networked web. Taylor chronicles the obscenity of pay-per-click, the wasted resources (in both money and carbon). Even noting the irony that it was government that created these modern marvels, only to witness now private corporate entities siphon all the goodness in erecting their media empires and their quest to swallow all. That this unethical conflict of interest and crass commercialism reigns in the online realm, where it be considered offensive anywhere else. In the meantime, she questions whether this is a good arrangement for creative workers, who now are relegated to compete in a winner-take-all lottery, with no security, and most not making even enough to live on. Here, it's personal for Taylor -- while she strives to adopt an objective mantle, her experiential background surfaces again and again. Taylor, like a lot of creative professionals, feels like she can belong to neither side in the digital rights battles -- that both sides error egregiously, both the media company overlords and the "everything should be free" crowd. Knocking off a star because the text is repetitive and redundant in driving home her points, even if she conducts her take in a lustered fashion. Also, while recognizing the government creation, I didn't see any mention that most of the tools used to create and publish web "creative" products are the result of those free software loving hippies. Yes, it's acknowledged that a good number of F/OSS (Free/Open Source Software) developers are in the employ of for-profit corporations, so that they can put bread on the table. Though it can't be stressed enough that most of the new media prophets wane eloquently on the greatness of the new age, but yet still draw their livelihood from traditional employers, a future that's growing increasingly impossible for many educated and talented young (and older too) creative workers, due to this "creative destruction" hailed by such luminaries. Some other qualms I have with her arguments (and remedy proposals):

- \*\*Failure to distinguish between \*text\* and \*media\* (audio or video). \*\* Especially in the matter of digital rights. Yes, this meanders into "the power of plain text", technical details of encoding scheme ownership, etc. But it is an important distinction.
- \*\*Failure to promote the power of existing state of internet publishing. \*\* I don't discount the criticism proffered by Taylor in transforming the open net into a click farm and even believe the moniker of "digital sharecropper" is apropos. But, consider that it is so wondrous and such a marvel that in the 21C you have the power to publish a creative work that \*anyone\* across the \*globe\* (with an internet connection) can read (or listen or view). Because, in large part, due to Tim Berners-Lee great vision. And all of those F/OSS hippies who contributed tools such as Apache web server, the WordPress blogging platform, etc...
- \*\*20C solutions to a 21C problem. \*\* Really need to think outside of the box here, as 20C solutions (Taylor references past initiatives that created public broadcasting, FCC stipulations on serving "public interest", some copyright law fiddling with ponying up more money for longer copyright, software patent reform, etc.) Taylor cites European nation measures to deal with some of these issues, but still, we need to think bigger here. But nevertheless, this is essential reading for anyone interested or concerned with where we are headed with the internet. It's a

conversation that must be conducted. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. I disagreed on almost every page, but this book raises important issues. By A. MILLER As someone with sympathies to tech and business, I disagreed with Taylor on almost every page of the book. She frequently oversimplifies the issues and relies far too heavily on anecdotes. My main criticism is that she does little to discuss the upsides of technology while focusing solely on its downsides (thereby offering no real solutions to the problems she raises). All that being said this is a great book. Assuming that you are familiar with all the benefits of technology, this book is a great reference to keep on your shelf. It's thought-provoking and touches on many of the most sensitive issues surrounding technology that gets lost in the techno-optimist bubble of Silicon Valley.

From a cutting-edge cultural commentator, a bold and brilliant challenge to cherished notions of the Internet as the great leveler of our age. The Internet has been hailed as an unprecedented democratizing force, a place where everyone can be heard and all can participate equally. But how true is this claim? In a seminal dismantling of techno-utopian visions, *The People's Platform* argues that for all that we "tweet" and "like" and "share," the Internet in fact reflects and amplifies real-world inequities at least as much as it ameliorates them. Online, just as off-line, attention and influence largely accrue to those who already have plenty of both. What we have seen so far, Astra Taylor says, has been not a revolution but a rearrangement. Although Silicon Valley tycoons have eclipsed Hollywood moguls, a handful of giants like Amazon, Apple, Google, and Facebook remain the gatekeepers. And the worst habits of the old media model—the pressure to seek easy celebrity, to be quick and sensational above all—have proliferated on the web, where "aggregating" the work of others is the surest way to attract eyeballs and ad revenue. When culture is "free," creative work has diminishing value and advertising fuels the system. The new order looks suspiciously like the old one. We can do better, Taylor insists. The online world does offer a unique opportunity, but a democratic culture that supports diverse voices and work of lasting value will not spring up from technology alone. If we want the Internet to truly be a people's platform, we will have to make it so.

From Booklist The Internet, many thought, was going to usher in a new era of information sharing; of open, unfettered communication; of new arts and new media. But, instead, Taylor argues in this persuasive book, the Internet has given us more of the same. Instead of leveling the playing field, giving everyone equal opportunities to succeed creatively and economically, the Internet carried over the traditional problems: corporate monopolies at the controls, unfair economic practices, and a disproportionate focus on popularity and mass appeal. The author isn't saying we should rebuild the Internet from scratch but, instead, that we should strive to create a more democratic Web in which users are treated like citizens, not consumers or unpaid workers. We need, in other words, a new financial model. Newspapers, he points out, are being hurt by the enormous amount of online content, and most of that content is generated by people who aren't paid for their work. How, Taylor asks, is that fair? A smart, well-reasoned approach to a highly topical subject. --David Pitt "Taylor's critique hits hard . . . The People's Platform should be taken as a challenge by the new media that have long claimed to be improving on the old order." --Tim Wu, *The New York Times Book Review* "Taylor is the Marshall McLuhan or the Neil Postman of our new digital economy, the lonely voice raising urgent questions we need to answer together . . . If *The People's Platform* doesn't spark the conversation about the kind of democracy and culture we deserve, then we'll deserve the one we get." --NY1 News' *The Book Reader* "Taylor's smart and nuanced overview of the new media landscape is the best I've recently read and an excellent summary of the mess we're in . . . After reading Taylor's brisk and lucid survey, there's no denying that in online media, the market is falling short." --The Boston Globe "Do you use the Internet? Then you have to read Astra Taylor's *The People's Platform*, one of the most important books of the year." --Flavorwire "Taylor makes a thorough case that the technological advances we've been told constitute progress—that anyone can start a blog, that we can easily keep up with our friends (and frenemies) on Facebook, that Twitter can foment democratic revolution—are actually masking and, in some cases, exacerbating social ills that have long plagued our society... Compelling and well argued." --Los Angeles Times "A bracing expression of intelligent outrage—with the manifesto vibe of No Logo and the prescience of *Silent Spring*. By delivering a streetwise economic analysis of our technological reality, Taylor leaves her reader feeling at once charged and newly aware of being duped.... A smart and needful reminder that we sacrifice our systems of knowledge and communication to corporate interests at our great peril. More importantly, it reminds us that there is no single destiny for us; that we can, and must, engineer more than machines—we must engineer modes of use." --Globe and Mail (Canada) "In her excellent new book *The People's Platform*, Astra Taylor thinks through issues of money and power in the age of the Internet with clarity, nuance, and wit. (The book is fun to read, even as it terrifies you about the future of culture and of the economy)." --The Awl "Meticulously details how work, education, and the public sphere have been eroded." --National Post (Canada) "We need books like this. Astra Taylor is a talented documentary-maker who was dismayed by the way her work was appropriated and pirated online. But instead of fuming silently in her studio, she set out to seek an understanding of the paradoxical world that the merging of cyberspace and meatspace has produced. What she finds is a world which is, on the one hand, hooked on an evangelical narrative about the

liberating, empowering, enlightening, democratising power of information technology while, on the other, being increasingly dominated and controlled by the corporations that have effectively captured the technology.... The People's Platform will be an invaluable primer for anyone seeking to understand why our networked world isn't all that it is cracked up to be." *The Observer (UK)*; "A thoughtful corrective about the nature of a medium that has promoted itself as the great equalizer. Taylor delves deep into a world often assumed incomprehensible to anyone but the archetypal techno-geek. She expertly surveys a broad range of research and opinion, and her conclusions will shake the complacency of anyone who thinks that their computer's firewalls will protect personal privacy and keep them free of the hidden corporate hand surreptitiously shaping their search results." *Quill Quire (Canada)*; "A phenomenally important book... The People's Platform isn't easy to stomach--and that's because it presents plenty of devastating truths.... The People's Platform is nothing short of a clear-headed gut-check, but Taylor's message is deceptively simple: That technology is a tool, not a solution. And even if technology has boundless democratizing potential, at current, it hasn't levelled inequalities." *Fast Forward Weekly (Canada)*; "With compelling force and manifest-like style, writer and documentary filmmaker Taylor lays out one of the smartest--and most self-evident--arguments about the nature and effect of technology in our digital age.... Taylor's provocative book has the power to help shape discussions about the role of technology in our world." *Publishers Weekly (starred review)*; "The Internet is often lauded as an open, democratic marketplace of ideas and goods in which anyone can thrive. In her sweeping critique, documentary filmmaker Taylor challenges this notion, arguing that networked technology has allowed for greater concentration of power and has reduced transparency. Her well-researched, unsettling, and occasionally downright harrowing book explores the consolidation of popularity; the stubborn digital divide; copyright and piracy; and the pervasive power of advertising.... This provocative populist manifesto on an utterly timely subject deserves a wide audience among policymakers and consumers alike." *Library Journal (starred review)*; "One of the more incisive voices among the multitudes delivering their visions of what the Internet is and might become.... [A] well-defined examination of media culture... Not to be skimmed. A cogent and genuine argument for the true democratization of online culture." *Kirkus*; "A persuasive book... The author isn't saying we should rebuild the Internet from scratch but, instead, that we should strive to create a more democratic Web in which users are treated like citizens, not consumers or unpaid workers.... A smart, well-reasoned approach to a highly topical subject." *Booklist*; "If you've ever had the uncomfortable feeling that we've taken a wrong turn on the way to the future, Astra Taylor's shocking, utterly rational, and elegant book will have you shaking your fist along with her. This is an essential and overdue indictment of our ailing media culture." *Andrew Blum, author of Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet*; "The scariest book I've read in a while is also the most exhilarating: there is no better, stronger picture of our bleak new technological landscape and the peppy delusions and deceptions of its profiteers than *The People's Platform*. But knowledge is power, and Taylor gives us a picture so clear it empowers us to find a way forward through the debris. Read it and revolt." *Rebecca Solnit, author of The Faraway Nearby*; "The promise was so utopian, and it really seemed possible! Now we watch as the lauded instrument of 'creative destruction' ends up in the hands of a few giant corporations. What happened? Is there a way out beyond pulling the plug? In response, Astra Taylor has laid out clear arguments, sobering information, and inspiring insights. There have been a lot of books about how the Internet is changing our world, but this is absolutely one of the best. Beautifully written and highly recommended." *David Byrne, author and musician*; "Internet policy books seem only to come in two colors: bright dream or dark nightmare. Enter *The People's Platform*--it's a rainbow of insight. With nuance and a light touch, Astra Taylor exposes the fallacies in contemporary digital punditry. Unlike her peers, she has her eyes on a truly democratic politics. Which makes this a rare book--one that can radically change the way we see the future of digital social change." *Raj Patel, author of The Value of Nothing and Stuffed and Starved*; "What happened to the Internet revolution? Why, if everything's so different, does it feel like everything's still the same? Astra Taylor breaks it down here with humor, patience, and an unerring moral sense. This is a brave, inspiring, and necessary book." *Keith Gessen, author of All the Sad Young Literary Men*; "Astra Taylor's insights into the 'missing middle' of our present situation are sane, lucid, and generous. This book adjusted my thinking on several scores." *Jonathan Lethem, author of The Ecstasy of Influence*; "In this, perhaps the most important book about the digital age so far this century, Astra Taylor reveals the unacknowledged economic system actually running the net. It's a landscape in which leisure might better be classified as labor and the promise of free culture ends up costing us so much more than money." *Douglas Rushkoff, author of Present Shock: Why Everything Happens Now*; "Lucid, unsparing, and brilliant, *The People's Platform* demonstrates how the Internet, hardly a paradise of freedom and equality, has been left in the hands of moguls, oligarchs, and corporate scamsters to produce little more than new forms of exploitation. But it also shows that the utopian promise is not all hot air. Freedom doesn't just happen. It has to be conquered, and this book begins to tell us how." *David Graeber, author of Debt: The First 5,000 Years*; "Why has the invention most celebrated for putting the means of expression in the hands of the people produced a few billionaire moguls and a mass of creative producers expected to work for free? Confronting this core inequality of the digital age, Astra Taylor opens a new front in the battle for sustainable culture--and gives us good reason to think that this is a battle we can win." *Jodi Dean, author of Democracy and*

Other Neoliberal Fantasies About the Author Astra Taylor is a writer and documentary filmmaker. Her films include *Zizek!*, a feature documentary about the world's most outrageous philosopher, which was broadcast on the Sundance Channel, and *Examined Life*, a series of excursions with contemporary thinkers. Her writing has appeared in *The Nation*, *Salon*, *Monthly*, *The Baffler*, and other publications. She lives in New York City.