

January 26, 2008

**Author Q&A**
**Lee Siegel on the Internet's Destructive Side**
**'Popular culture has given way to popularity culture'**

 By **JEFFREY A. TRACHTENBERG**

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Where most people see the Internet as an essential part of modern life, providing convenience, access to friends and speedy information, essayist Lee Siegel sees a dark force intent attacking modern culture.

In his new book "Against the Machine: Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob," Mr. Siegel rails against the worst aspects of the Web, which he views as a vehicle for commerce that devalues serious thought in favor of "page views." The Web, he suggests, nourishes a youth-focused culture that prefers gossip and buzz to reporting.



Mr. Siegel, a cultural critic and senior editor at the New Republic, sees the obvious advantages of the Internet but focuses here on what he describes as "its destructive side." He worries that the Internet is creating a universe of isolated people, and expresses dismay over such sites as [Gawker](#)<sup>1</sup>, which he sees as outrageously mean-spirited. Ten years ago, he writes, readers would have laughed over the thought that "powerful and seasoned newspaper editors" would cower "at the feet of two obscure and unaccomplished twentysomethings, terrified that this unassuming pair might call them 'douchebags.' "

Mr. Siegel, 50 years old, made headlines several years ago when he was a staff writer at New Republic. As he describes in his introduction, anonymous readers were using the Talkback section of a culture blog he wrote to launch vile, over-the-top attacks upon him. Mr. Siegel then created his own pseudonym, and used it to attack his enemies and praise himself. He says that he was goaded into action by the publication's editors, who ignored their own rules regarding obscenity in favor of "open discussion." For his efforts, Mr. Siegel was briefly suspended. The author was interviewed by The Wall Street Journal's Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg.

**The Wall Street Journal:** What prompted this book?

**Lee Siegel:** People are going to say that I wrote the book in the spirit of anger. It's not true. It's the most even-tempered thing I've ever written. In 2005 I told the L.A. Times that the blogosphere was lowering culture. I've wanted to write this book for a long time. I'm speaking out against thuggish anonymity.

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## THE NATURE OF THE INTERNET 'NOT INEVITABLE'



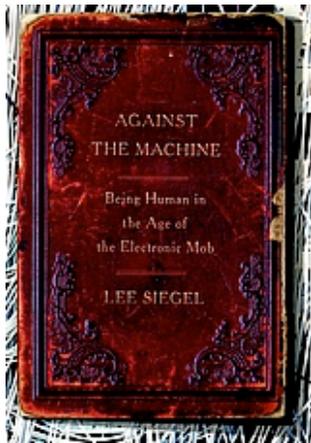
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Listen to Lee Siegel read from  
"Against the Machine"<sup>3</sup>.

**WSJ:** You complain about the use of anonymous attacks on the Web, but you used a pseudonym yourself. Any regrets?

**Mr. Siegel:** No, I'd do it again. I did it as a protest, to give these people a taste of their own medicine.

**WSJ:** You worry that Internet book reviewers don't have the same discipline as newspaper book reviewers, yet there has been very little public outcry over the closing of most standalone book reviews in newspapers. What does that tell us?

**Mr. Siegel:** I think the people who love book reviews and enjoy reading them are the least proactive members of the population. You aren't going to see book worms marching on Washington. Who should they appeal to, their congressmen? They aren't going to stop reading the newspaper.



**WSJ:** Is it possible that you've overstated the significance of the Internet mob in dumbing down daily life?

**Mr. Siegel:** I don't think so. You can see the leveling of culture in every aspect of culture. You have a situation now where the audience is so exalted and catered to that at the end of a Broadway play you will have the actors applauding for the audience, and the audience will take a bow. That's the power of the Internet, where consumers are seen to have such powers that they must be heeded. What this masks is a crude commercial pitch. Getting people to participate is just a way of getting people to consume.

**WSJ:** One of your biggest concerns is that the Internet frames every human experience, from sex to medical care, in terms of commerce. Is business always an enemy of serious thought?

**Mr. Siegel:** You would not have had the Italian Renaissance, the great Victorian novel and the flourishing of culture after World War II if not for business and prosperous societies that poured their resources into the arts.

Business is a great blessing. But when the arts become obsessed with business, that's when things begin to change. You really have a marketing consciousness entering creative acts, bloggers obsessing over their page views. What you're authentically thinking is no longer the issue. Rather, it's what gets most people to go to your Web site. And what gets the most is the crudest emotional or intellectual expression.

Popular culture has given way to popularity culture. Popular culture draws people to what they like. Popularity culture and Web culture draws people to what everybody else likes. It used to be that Big Brother is watching. Now it's Big Brother is watching, oh, really, when, and how can he watch more? Big Brother, what's his cellphone number?

**WSJ:** Can you explain again why Wikipedia is so terrible?

**Mr. Siegel:** It's full of inaccuracies and constantly changing according to the prejudices of its administrators. Mounds of facts are constantly shifting. That's not healthy for a reference work.

**WSJ:** You poke good fun at [Match.com](#)<sup>4</sup>, which you say teaches people to package themselves like products. But isn't that a fair description of every singles bar on the planet?

**Mr. Siegel:** It's very hard to have a calculated conversation with someone. However careful you've been

in creating your presentation, you are still taken by surprise at a bar, at a party, on the street. The level of calculation is very low because you have to respond. But online you have time to think about creating a new persona for yourself through packaging.

**WSJ:** Most people don't post nude videos of themselves on the Web, or spend hours anonymously hurling invectives at people they've never met. Do you worry that you might have extrapolated too much from the behavior of a few knuckleheads?

**Mr. Siegel:** My book is really about what it means to be online. The Internet is the first social environment created for the asocial individual. There is no signal of a real presence: not a voice not a face. Just words on a screen. The Internet is a remarkable phase in human civilization and it has its beneficial side, such as the access to information. But it also has its dark side, and we have to talk about that.

**Write to** Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg at [jeffrey.trachtenberg@wsj.com](mailto:jeffrey.trachtenberg@wsj.com)<sup>5</sup>

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