

(not) Newmark's Law

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Essay by [Craig Newmark](#), February 20, 2009

This essay was originally posted on Craig Newmark's blog, [Cnewmark](#), and is one of two essays on participation and authority.

Can the Web's valued "culture of participation" co-exist with occasional acts of control?

Jeff Jarvis recently wrote a great book, [What Would Google Do?](#), and in [an article on The Daily Beast](#), he makes a very kind allusion to the part of the craigslist philosophy:

Get out of the way. This is actually Craig Newmark's law. As Google built the most powerful tool imaginable—the entire world of digital knowledge revealed behind a simple search box—so did Craig build a simple tool that changed society (and newspapers and real estate and more) without prescribing how we should use it. They create platforms to enable us to do what we want to do and then, instead of giving us rules about their use, then they stand back and put us in charge.

The credit is a little misplaced; it's my riff on the sixties comment "lead, follow, or get out of the way."

This reflects part of the "culture of participation" attitude that [Jay Rosen](#) talks about. For the most part, people are good at running things themselves, at forming consensus.

This is also why, as [David Weinberger](#) says, places like craigslist or Wikipedia are about the user community ("us") not the people who run them ("them").

However, sometimes, there's some need for some responsible people to assert some control. For example, our customer service team needs to deal with trolling in our discussion boards (not fun). Wikipedia is a culture of participation, but sometimes someone like Jimmy Wales needs to do the "benevolent dictator" thing.

Another good example is the US Constitution, which reminds me of the whole issue of "checks and balances." There's also that phrase, "consent of the governed," which captures the essence of the culture of participation as applied to government.

The deal here is that anyone who runs anything, that is, any governing entity, should normally operate in the "culture of participation" mode. When needed, sometimes the boss needs to do something, controlled by lots of checks and balances. (Remember "consent of the governed.")

Craig Newmark is an Internet entrepreneur best known for being the founder of the San Francisco-based website [Craigslist](#). He blogs at [Cnewmark](#).

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