

## Book Review by Ronnie Stillwell

Title: “Smart Mobs”

Author: Howard Rheingold

Publisher: Basic Books

Length: 215

Price: \$16.00

Reading time: 4 – 5 hours

Reading rating: 7 (1 = very difficult; 10 very easy)

Overall Rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

Is wireless going to be the next big thing? Howard Rheingold shines some light on the trends that are following the wireless communication arena in *Smart Mobs*. “*Smart Mobs*” encompasses several different aspects of the Information Age. As the younger generation and the older generation find new ways of communicating with each other does the culture change? Rheingold traveled the globe to watch first-hand the interactions on the streets to see how wireless and other technologies are changing our lives.

If you have been in the information technology business for more than 10 years, you might think that this book is just an overstatement of the obvious. Well, of course wireless is going to be big and of course it is not going away. But the book also opens the senses to other changes taking place. Rheingold mentions several different new phenomena being born, but I found two that really left a lasting impression on me. First is that we are leaving behind traces of ourselves all over the world. Second, we are finding new ways of communicating with each other, which gives rise to a new social revolution.

The first issue of leaving parts of us behind is a frightening thought. When we connect to a computer or traverse the Internet, a trail of bits and bytes is left behind so we can be traced and followed. Unless we are heavy in technical skill it would be difficult to cover our trails in the computer world.

Is privacy at stake? As we walk down the street, pictures are being taken of us all of the time in larger cities. Wireless satellites are orbiting over head that can take pictures of us at any time. Our phone conversations and e-mails are being monitored. Every student in my class is carrying a cell phone and most of the new models have digital cameras. When I pass an accident on the road I usually see several cell phones out snapping pictures and possibly being used to send those images through the air into the world of the Internet. “*Smart Mobs*” opened my eyes to even more ways that our privacy is being lost all the time.

The second issue—the one that seems to be more of the book’s focus—is the social implications of technology and, more specifically, the implications of wireless technology. It does not take long for me to see how wireless technology is affecting the lives of my students. They use their cell phones at any given moment during the day to say hello to their parents and friends. The part that always surprises me is their ability to

carry on several conversations at once. To see a student have two cell phones open and be carrying on a third conversation with an individual in person amazes me. And now we have the ability to use text messaging instead of having to talk directly with a person, which has given rise to shorthand ways of text communication. It makes me wonder if we are losing the ability to communicate with each other face-to-face.

Referring to advances in technology, Rheingold says, "Maybe you should refuse it." Well, that is a choice that I alone cannot make but it does give you the reader something to think about. Will we be able to make a choice for the better? Should we slow down? Or is it even possible?

Ronnie Stillwell is a Professor of Computer Information Systems and Economics in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. He has taught for more than 10 years in this field. For previously reviewed books, visit our Web site at [www.wcu.edu/cob](http://www.wcu.edu/cob).