

Marc Hummel

"US versus THEY"

1.

I'm not the only one left. This isn't a story like that.

I didn't foresee something everyone else missed. I'm not a person like that.

I'm not stepping in to "save the day" or restore order to formerly placid prairie plains. I don't know how to write a plot like that.

I'm just a man with a unique perspective – a point of view that makes me wary of the future and mindful of my obligation to take action and correct the fallen.

This is my manifesto.

2.

I know guys who've been doored seven times already this year. You could say it was their fault; a well-trained eye knows to look for the silhouette of a head in the driver's side window, and for cars whose headlights just shut off. Or you could avoid the risk altogether by riding on the side of the street away from all the parked cars, but risk getting a flat amidst the potholes and chunks of smashed beer bottles that tend to collect there. But as much as I'd like to avoid barreling into a freshly opened car door, I can definitely appreciate the cred-building of an epic crash.

The way I see it, cyclists are positioned second-to-last on the Great Highway Totem Pole (*GHTP*: [ghtp.org](http://ghtp.org)), a ranking that comes with certain obligations. According to the *GHTP* Web site, the bottom three hierarchies (the handicapped, pedestrians, cyclists) are

authorized to react with as much vehemency to a situation as they see fit. So if you get cut off, don't just write it off as a grandpa who can't see too well or a soccer mom late to her daughter's afternoon scrimmage. You should catch up to them, kick in the side of their car, and demand some respect. Education Equals Eventual Enlightenment (*EEEE*: [eeee.org](http://eeee.org)).

But there are lots of ways to prove you're not just an ex-Spandex suburbanite tourist. I was hit by a red Civic last year, when the fucker decided to pull a U-y right in front of me. I couldn't pull the brakes in time so I swerved into his car, hoping to minimize the damage. I got up, checked out my bike, and dusted off little gravel bits stuck to my oozing red road rash. I didn't feel like waiting for a cop to show up so I grabbed my U-lock, cursed him out, and swung it at his windshield until the whole thing was in pieces on the dashboard. I was out of the city by the time he knew what hit him.

Consider this basic training.

3.

*Large white man with backwards baseball cap and one of those hands-free microphone thingies:* "Yo, lemmee get a big ass pie with peppers. Green peppers. Delivery."

I'm writing to you from my favorite bench in Rittenhouse Square, the one dedicated to "Rosemary Thompson: *A great lover and a fantastic cook.*" The tinny blast of snare drum and cymbals bleeds out from a pair of yellow headphones from a guy sitting on a bench beside mine. Streets that were once silent save for the clop of a horse hoof and the

slap of a whip are now alive with the bleeps, buzzes, taps, scrapes, and other bits of audible pollution caused by the proliferation of portable electronics. I wonder if the Constitution ever would've been finished if James Madison had a Twitter account. Or what would've happened if the hard drive they were saving it to crashed after Article Four.

*Businessman with a grocery bag in each hand, cell crunched between shoulder and cheek:* "Did you hear about the diamond thief who logged in to check his Facebook before leaving the scene, then forgot to log off?"

"What's that? Yeah sorry, an ambulance just went by."

Five-hundred halves of a thousand conversations, all playing out in real time.

*Disheveled blonde thirtysomething:* "Love you too, Mom."

What's the point of bringing a laptop to the park, anyway? Is it possible to jog without music anymore? Where's the joy in walking your dog while talking on the phone? Do people really use virtual sex toys? Do we need to bring our Privacy Cloak with us everywhere? What did we do *before*? What did we do with all that wasted time? Did we know that we were wasting it, all the while hoping for something battery-powered to save us from ourselves? Are we better off?

*Hyperactive redhead in sweatpants and loose-fitting tee-shirt:* "Yeah I just left work! I'm walking fast! Yeah! Chill!"

## 4.

The EXposé of Corporate Interweb ThEory (*EXCITE*: [excite.net](http://excite.net)) was the first I heard of this particular scheme. According to EXCITE, The Hedonistic Egomaniacal Yahoos (*THEY*: [they.org](http://they.org)), is a fantastically out of control secret society of CEOs and politicians, bravely leading modern civilization off a cliff positioned directly over a fiery pit of compliance ruled by huge furry rats, slimy red cockroaches, and Rupert Murdoch. EXCITE also reveals that THEY has an unspoken pact to create an unending array of attention-sucking gadgets, with the goal of eventually turning each and every consumer into a zombie-like neanderthal.

The EXCITE document was the inspiration for United Survival (*US*: [us.org](http://us.org)), an organization I personally founded to take THEY down. THEY knows that by popularizing Portable Podcast Players, Camera Phones, Simulcasts, and Personal Transportation Pods, everyone will become systematically reactionary, unable to form thoughts or take actions of their own. The Interweb, with its power to take the mystery out of everything, is only the enabler of a larger plan. The citizenry will fall further and further into the consuming clutches of convergence, where brain and device collide, leaving behind a beeping, talking, inefficacious blob of flesh and machine.

THEY knew the Interweb would relegate opinions of dissent to the fringes, resulting in a useless state of collective non-cohesion, so THEY sold it to us as the latest beacon of free speech. THEY predicted we wouldn't see that the more voices we create, the more power we give to the conglomerates. THEY programmed all these things to take over its host simultaneously, leaving behind hordes of thoughtless louts, set on

alluring everyone to a life free from decision making and cumbersome reflection.

The more I think about it, the more I see it.

5.

*Diminutive gray-haired man in an ill-fitting blue suit:* "Yep? Uh huh, and the quote you sent over includes the invitations? Yep? It does? Great. Yep."

Sorry, I gotta take this...

"Hello? Oh, not much, you?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna make some flyers for the next meeting tonight. Are you gonna come?"

"Really? You can't get out of it?"

"Oh, well, that's a shame."

"Tonight?"

"We're gonna talk about how I don't think our biggest concern should be that our threshold for privacy is being lowered or whatever. It's the constant barrage of one-sided conversations, all the moments we share as transmissions over radio waves that truly worries me."

"I've been walking around all day and I only saw one guy not on a cell, and that dude was picking his nose. Wayyyy up there. Half of 'em didn't even look like they knew where they're going or where they were supposed to be. There was this blonde in a tight gray pantsuit, almost got hit by a bus. I think they might've flicked the zombie switch earlier than we predicted. Even the homeless have them Blackberries now."

"Hell if I know who they're typing to!"

"I know, they've got us good! But they didn't plan on US, right? We've got a fleet of bicycles ready to be deployed, and a whole team of US teammates to ride them.

"Oh, but they'll show up once they see how drastic it's gotten. The meetings are gonna be great!

"You have to go? Oh, okay, yeah, sorry, talk to you soon."

6.

I plastered the flyers everywhere. I posted them at schools and bookstores, on telephone poles and around subway lobbies. I gave a copy to everyone I met for an entire week. *"LOOKING FOR OFFLINE EXCITEMENT? Join US. Info meeting on Sunday, August 4th at 5:00 PM, at the Wooden Shoe, 401 South Street. For more, email luddite\_surprise@us.org."*

I got to the Wooden Shoe at three to setup for the meeting. It was in the basement, which I liked for the kind of "forbidden" connotation underground meetings have. I brought a white board for notes and a bowl of butterscotch candies. By the time 5:30 rolled around, I was critiquing the flyer copy I wrote and wondering if I should've put more information on the flyer. Nobody showed up.

*"Before US it was only YOU. Info meeting on Monday, August 27th at 5:15 PM, at the Wooden Shoe, 401 South Street. For more, email luddite\_surprise@us.org."*

I got to the Wooden Shoe at four this time – no candy and no white board. We had an attendee, but I read somewhere that family doesn't count.

*"FREE PIZZA. US info meeting on Wednesday, September 5th at 5:30 PM, at the Wooden Shoe, 401 South Street. For more, email luddite\_surprise@us.org."*

I think Wednesdays are our night! The third meeting was very well attended.

That is, until I passed around a clipboard with the following pledge:

1. I will never use *MMMmail*, *Zmail*, *LoMail*, *BoxedIn*, *ChainedIn*, *SOS*, *HisSpace*, *HerSpace*, *SpaceSpace*, *Bitter*, *Fitter*, *Skipper*, *GirlBook*, *UPS*, *BlackBook*, *Mint*, *Cilantro*, *Basil*, *Sprint*, *Primp*, *Tint*, or any other Alienating Social Site (ASS: ass.org).

2. I will never visit a Wi-Fi equipped coffee shop without a friend.

3. I will never own a car or accept a ride from someone who does.

4. I will never live in a house that has cable, even if we split the bill.

5. I will seek and destroy every known copy of "How to Win Friends & Influence People" and any other self-help book written by a former Fortune 500 executive.

6. I will never purchase bottled water or anything smaller than my thumb labeled "fun-size."

7. I will use force if necessary.

It must've been the idea of a formal, documented commitment that scared them away. Lots of people are afraid of signing their name to something that pushes them to think in a new way. Or maybe our movement was formed too late, maybe THEY was too agile an opponent for such a lean organization like US.

7.

It was a warm mid-September day, and I was sitting on the steps of the Central Library on the Ben Franklin Parkway. I was thinking of the next action items for US, now that THEY had enabled the mind control zombie function we foretold. It was a

sudden, fully palpable shift. The highway was nothing but a frozen sea of metal. Men with their eyes glued to open laptops staggered toward me, the sole technological loner, from all sides. I pretended to fumble around in my pocket and held my hand to my ear, having an imaginary conversation with an imaginary friend.

"US just wasn't enough, I suppose. I wish we could've done more, I wish we could've saved more people, but it's too late.

"I had it all mapped out. I had a vision for a society that functioned entirely off-the-grid. We would've recruited the best cooks, doctors, acoustic guitarists, farmers, teachers and the strongest, most nimble cyclists to run a new society based on laughs and companionship."

The ruse appeared to be working.

"It sounds great on paper, but in reality US is an utter failure. Our vision was no match for the virtual worlds of the Interweb and the glorification of constant contact."

A teenage boy with baggy jeans, a blue tee-shirt and spiky orange hair was coming toward me. He was looking down at a screen, nearly tripping with every step. I emulated my surroundings, trying to fit in, my hand clutched to my ear in a desperate attempt to appear innocuous.

"Excuse me sir, do you know how to get to the Art Museum?"

My left hand was on the one weapon I knew how to use, my right hand still clenched around my ear. I rose slowly, muttering something about US and THEY, not wanting to scare him off. This was it. This was my moment.

"You know sir, the Art Museum?"

I grabbed my U-lock and with one swift swing, smashed his head down to the pavement. His body shook. I took the phone from his blood-covered hands and laid it out on the sidewalk next to him, so THEY would know why I did it. I stumbled away, half shocked by the act I had just committed, half thrilled that the moment had finally arrived. We can fight this. Order will be restored.

I tossed my U-lock into a neatly-trimmed bush nearby, my hand still resting on the number pad of an imaginary phone.