

Behind the Rant: Maciej Ceglowski

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As a noted Internet pundit, I have spent years suggesting that the future would be so bright if everyone worked on my pet project. In particular, I have argued that the Internet needs serious, well-written, critical investigations into societal phenomena. Now Maciej Ceglowski has shown just how right I am. Ceglowski, who in addition to being a brilliant ranter can also [paint](#), [program](#), and [act as some sort of unspecified nonprofit functionary](#). In a brilliant and detailed piece entitled [A Rocket to Nowhere](#) Ceglowski takes apart the manned space program with an elegance and completeness not seen since Christian Parenti wrote for *The Baffler*. How did this feat come about? I sat down with Ceglowski over email to discuss it.

Aaron Swartz: The Weblog: You're a ranter (in the best sense of the word) more known for your pieces about technologies and technologists, like your [audioblogging manifesto](#), than for social criticism. What led you to a piece about manned space flight?

Maciej Ceglowski: I don't think a rant about space flight qualifies as social criticism. There are rockets involved, after all.

What provoked me in this case was the hype about the "Return to Flight", along with a series of NASA statements suggesting that the Shuttle was safer than ever. And there is something fascinating about the completely reflexive nature of this mission. Trash collection aside, the only point of the flight is to see whether things that break on the way up can be fixed in time to come down.

ASTW: Did you have any previous background in the subject?

MC: No. I wrote a small shuttle rant two years ago after the Columbia investigation, and I was a space geek growing up like everyone else.

ASTW: Your article shows a withering level of understanding of the program in all its many facets. What was your process of research?

MC: here is an enormous amount of space-related material online, a lot of it highly technical. Many space geeks are web geeks and take the time to scan strange old articles, transcribe stuff, and create obsessive websites. NASA also puts up a lot of interesting documents. This makes it particularly easy to find good information on the space program, including far more incisive critiques than the one I cooked up.

ASTW: How long did the whole thing take? Did it interfere with your [busy schedule of unemployment](#)?

MC: I collected links for a month and then pooped out a rant. Most of my limited active time is spent [painting](#), but the oppressive heat provided a good excuse to stay home and read Shuttle links instead.

ASTW: In the article you write that, “Future archaeologists trying to understand what the Shuttle was for are going to have a mess on their hands.” What do you think future archaeologists will think when they search the text of this era for comments about the problems of future archaeologists? Do you think they’ll find such results genuinely helpful or more of a rhetorical concern?

MC: I think future archaeologists will be digging through 30 meters of ice with a sharpened stick, looking for canned goods.

ASTW: Already your article seems rather popular. Do you see yourself doing more such work in the future?

MC: I’m sure I’ll continue emitting sporadic essays, I like to write and I enjoy getting attention.

ASTW: What do you see as the larger place for such writing? In an era of generally superficial science reporting, largely uncritical magazines, and endless technical jargon, wouldn’t you endorse my hobbyhorse?

MC: People need to stop wasting their time surfing the web and get back to work. That means you too, startup boy - coffee break is over!

ASTW: Often while reading someone or about something, you feel like there’s something wrong but you can’t quite put your finger on it. As one of the Internet’s most noted ranters, you don’t just put your finger on it, you put your finger all the way through it and twirl it around for good measure. By clearly articulating a problem, one would think you might have more effect than people who vaguely complain about it, but does that effect ever reach nonzero?

MC: Well, twirling the finger is just good manners. As for nonzero effect, I don’t think the NASA administrator is going to read my weblog and scrap the International Space Station any more than I thought Paul Graham would stop writing online essays after [Dabblers and Blowhards](#). The point of the exercise is to offer a little mental release to people who get as annoyed as I do, but lack the time or energy to spell out why.

ASTW: Have you thought about writing for some more formal publication or submitting your stuff to something like *Harper’s* or *The Baffler*?

MC: Writing popular online essays is like being the prettiest girl in Scotland - satisfying on its own terms, but you can’t let it go to your head.

If you look at a publication like the New Yorker, there’s a dearth of articles written by guys who sit around reading web links in their underwear, and a profusion of articles by people reporting from remote places, or speaking to anonymous sources they’ve cultivated over a lifetime of careful journalism, or deploying vast reserves of wit and erudition against a topic they’ve studied carefully. It all just sounds like work.

ASTW: Thanks for sitting down with us.

MC: Thanks for emailing me this template.