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How You Will Change the World with Social Networking

Deanna Zandt
Berrett-Koehler, 2010
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Recommendation

Social activist and media guru Deanna Zandt proclaims, "Don't let your fear of social networks keep you from joining in the conversation." She explains that the new ecosystem developing online needs everyone's voice to be healthy. A diverse group, she believes, must engage online, sharing their stories, experiences and opinions. Zandt's easy-to-understand, conversational style helps dispel some of the fear surrounding new technologies, as do the resources, tips and tactics she includes in the closing chapters. Zandt makes a good case for joining in, but leaves the details about how activists should use social media to others. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to anyone looking to understand the online fray as well as to those interested in social change.

Take-Aways

- Social networking is causing a major shift in human communication.
- The growth of such sites as Facebook proves social networks are here to stay.
- For centuries, the informational hierarchy formed a pyramid, with the few but powerful at the top.
- So far, the Internet has replicated the traditional power structure of communication.
- "Generosity, identity, empathy and authenticity" are the necessary ingredients of a healthy online community.
- When you participate online, you contribute to the vitality of the online ecosystem.
- People trust their social networks more than they do experts or institutions.
- Messages shared by a small, engaged community are more influential than communiqués via mass media.
- Social networks facilitate the exchange of diverse viewpoints.
- Fear of new technology and loss of privacy keep many people from using social networks.

Summary

Roots of the Revolution

Social networking is revolutionizing the way people disseminate information, fueling change in the communication power structure. Now you can relate your personal experiences to a wider audience than ever before, and muster the power of storytelling. By sharing personal experiences and ideas via social networks, you build trust and empathy – two ingredients that help bring about positive change.

> "We're being flooded, and we're not sure what to do with it all."

Social networks are not a passing fad. By 2010, Facebook had more than 350 million users and continues to grow. In 2009, Twitter – which still was relatively new – had more than 20 million visitors. Social media emerged with much speed and strength, and an overview of the World Wide Web helps explain why. Initially, military organizations and academics used the Internet. In the early '90s, server administrators began to seek free ways to share documents. CERN, the company that developed the technology for the World Wide Web, released its code, and Marc Andreessen, founder of Netscape, made the Mosaic web browser available to the public.

> "Storytelling has been the most powerful building block for social change since the beginning of time."

Access to the web was rather limited, and people needed to know Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML) to participate. Conversations took place within the system's "closed" internal limits. Then came the dot-com boom, which focused more on making profits than "sharing information." When the dot-com bubble burst in 2000, attention shifted once again to public information sharing. Blogger software emerged, giving people the ability to post and contribute knowledge and data. Activists founded the Independent Media Center (IMC) site for distributing news stories.

> "Never before have so many people had instantaneous access to so much unfiltered information."

In the early 2000s, social networking sites began to emerge, beginning with Friendster and followed quickly by MySpace, Black Planet, MiGente, hi5, Sanga, Facebook and Ning. Next, content sharing sites sprang up, including YouTube for video sharing and Flickr for photos. Mobile technologies matured, and texting became commonplace.

Information Brokers

For thousands of years, the information hierarchy resembled a pyramid. Power brokers and decision makers sat at the top. The middle level included business owners, politicians and journalists. At the bottom were ordinary people operating within their small spheres of connections. Those at the pinnacle sent information to the masses, or messages trickled from the bottom up, becoming increasingly filtered on their way to the top.

> "Finding solidarity with other people can save your sanity on any day."

Social networks changed how people distribute information. People no longer simply receive information; they create, share and comment on it. New conversational pathways include email, social networking sites and blogs.

Leveling the Playing Field

Authorities and experts – self-proclaimed and otherwise – continue to be primarily white males. Thus, the Internet replicates the traditional power structure of communication. Why are the usual candidates dominating the conversation? Largely because:

- Less than half of African-American households have broadband service.
- People in lower income brackets are less likely to take political action.
- Some 64% of young adult men share content online, as opposed to only 50% of young women.
- Wikipedia contributors overwhelmingly are male, single and young.

> "Bigger used to be better, but now, effective is better."

Enacting social change requires online diversity. Wider Internet access alone isn't the answer; users also need equipment and technological skills to enter and influence the digital conversation. Mobile phones have good penetration in lower-income markets, but cellphone networks are "closed" systems, in contrast to the "open" Internet. Mobile phones remain effective tools for community organizers who must relay information quickly and efficiently.

> "Money, influence and access congregate around those who do the talking."

Men and women tend to use the Internet differently. Men make connections with people they know casually, garnering "bridging capital," a valuable networking tool for advancing professionally and disseminating ideas. Women are more likely to deepen relationships with people they already know, developing "bonding capital."

Why Go Online?

Social networks have created a new online ecosystem that needs "generosity, identity, empathy and authenticity" to be positive and healthy. When you participate online, you contribute to the overall gestalt of the system. This becomes a "political act" because your input combines with the inputs of thousands of other people to affect perceptions, expectations and the political balance.

> "It's time to bring fresh life into the conversations...about social change, and social networks are our strongest bets."

Social networks are a "gift economy," because people contribute without remuneration. Wikipedia is a perfect example. A gift economy encourages community spirit and collaboration. When you participate in social networks, your "connections, reputation, influence, access to ideas, talent and resources, favors, and accomplishments" make your contributions valuable.

> "Your participation in social media is much more than just the individual bits you choose to share."

Take Julie, a beer hobbyist, who samples new beers and posts reviews on her Facebook page. Her friends comment on her reviews and add links to her page when they come across anything beer-related. Julie checks their links and thanks her contributors. Other microbrewing fans – potential information resources – befriend her on Facebook, expanding her influence and credibility. Julie has become an expert, reliable authority.

"Change does not, and will not, happen in isolation or on an individual basis – we need each other to produce results."

Initially, people were wary of revealing their true identity on the Internet and used pseudonyms when posting or conversing online. However, transparency is an important element of the ecosystem. By going public online and trusting those who receive your input, you expand your reach and create empathy. As people purchase products online, or post pictures and personal information on social network pages, the web earns a higher level of trust. Social networking encourages an overlap between individuals' personal and professional identities. These changes have created more online authenticity. Always use your true identity.

"When we share our experiences and opinions, we create the opportunities to establish ourselves as authorities in places that were previously the domain of only an elite few."

Social networks allow people to connect in far greater numbers with those outside their close-knit groups, thus increasing their capacity for empathy – the ability to relate to another's feelings. However, empathy is the byproduct of authentic, meaningful connection. Don't attempt to reinvent yourself online, and don't present opinions or experiences that are not your own. To enable others to understand your viewpoint, present a genuine reflection of your personality.

It's a New Day

Social networks are realigning the power dynamic. How people assign authority is evolving, changing the makeup of society and politics. Taking control of information away from the traditional power hierarchy redistributes who shapes policy and disrupts the status quo.

"Diversity is a strategic imperative for achieving collective goals."

People are placing more value in their social networks, usurping the authority of experts and institutions. For example, people are more likely to trust a Facebook friend's opinion of a movie than they are to trust a newspaper reviewer. Political critic and commentator Baratunde Thurston calls this type of trust "organic authority." This threatens business, media and political institutions that seek to retain control over information distribution. Media mogul Rupert Murdoch, for example, threatened to prohibit Google from accessing any of his News Corporation's content. However, as people become comfortable choosing what information they regard as relevant and significant, they'll reject organizations that don't adjust to the new order.

"If we're not heard, we can't make a difference."

The mass media approach of sending a message to as many people as possible is waning in effectiveness. Instead, smaller, engaged groups that share a message are more credible and influential within their circle of contacts. The downside of social networks is the sheer numbers of emerging sources. Learning to navigate the social network maze and choose what's relevant and useful is a challenge to every individual online.

"World-changing ideas start with a few individuals sharing with and relating to one another."

As the "many-to-many" model of communication replaces the "few-to-many" model, the issue of focus comes to the forefront. How do you pay attention to the massive amount of available data? Begin by rethinking how you use the Internet. If you consider it a constant flow of information, much like a river, you can dip in and use it as necessary. Rely on your networks to bring relevant topics to the surface. Your friends, both on- and offline also will help provide links to sites that interest you.

"Remember, technology won't solve our problems. We will solve our problems, and in many cases technology will help us."

Question the veracity of the information you receive, because those who post online don't always check and confirm the accuracy of their data. As an Internet news consumer, demand accountability. Keep your reactions on hold until you know that the information you are seeing is true. Celebrities Farrah Fawcett and Michael Jackson both died on June 25, 2009. For whatever reason, social networks spread the story that actor Jeff Goldblum died as well. Although Goldblum's agent immediately contradicted the reports, it took days for the story to fade.

Social Networks for Social Change

Seeking friends who resemble you is a human tendency – and so is having biases. Social media won't change these human predispositions, but being aware of prejudices can help you keep them from blocking positive change. Interacting with people who have diverse backgrounds and experiences is a good start. "We're porting our understanding of the offline world – with all our prejudices, biases and hierarchies – onto the blank canvas of the Internet." Social networks potentially are great agents for promoting and facilitating the gathering and exchange of different viewpoints. However, to make genuine connections, recognize your preconceptions, put defensiveness aside, listen to others with an open mind and keep your eye on the goal of working for the greater good.

The social network landscape changes every day. Understanding, using and keeping up with the technology frightens many people. However, if fear makes you refuse to engage, the interactions that compel social change will take place without your input. To counter this apprehension, understand that most social networks provide a safe online haven where your connections become your allies. Other common fears that keep people away from social media include:

- **"I don't want people to know about my private life"** – Don't post anything you don't have to share. You choose when and where to make a comment.
- **"I feel like I have to get everything perfect before I post online"** – Social networks are forgiving, and the writing style is usually conversational.
- **"I don't like blending the professional and personal"** – The line between home and work is blurring, but you control the degree and amount of interaction.
- **"I don't have time for any of this"** – Social networks can be a time-saver because you'll receive less email and find information you value through your contacts.
- **"Just when I learn one network, a new one pops up and I have to start all over"** – This is frustrating, but think of it as updating and adjusting your digital mix.
- **"I feel like I have nothing to add to the conversations out there"** – You add value even if only agreeing with and supporting, or disagreeing with, another's point of view.

When you set up new profiles, include a brief bio, a photograph, and a list of interests and activities. To maintain your networks and build your social capital, invest a little time each day. Be sure to check your network daily and reply to any comments. Once a week, review your friend lists, and check your account settings and filters. Monthly tasks include eliminating friends or organizations that no longer interest you, and exploring new additions.

About the Author

Deanna Zandt hosts "TechGrrl Tips" on GRITtv and specializes in issues involving women and technology issues.