Book Here Comes Everybody

The Power of Organizing Without Organizations

Clay Shirky
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Recommendation

Author Clay Shirky tackles a daunting task: He sets out to explain how new electronic media are transforming society. In itself, that sounds common enough, but Shirky's focus and specificity raise his book to a level of much greater value and utility than its peers. He examines the social nature of humans, and analyzes how tools ranging from email to text messages change the way people organize into groups. His style is easy, and he tells interesting and highly convincing stories to illustrate the changes he observes. The result is a book that anyone dealing with group organization and communication should read. *BooksInShort* recommends this innovative work to marketers, social critics and entrepreneurs who hope to tap into or develop new social structures.

Take-Aways

- People are innately social.
- New online media provide innovative ways for communities to form.
- Traditionally, organizing people to work together has been costly in money, time and effort. Computerized communications make it very easy, quick and almost free.
- Blogs and Web sites let anyone become a media "publisher."
- The sheer speed of these new media tools allows community action to happen at an unprecedented pace.
- Online forums allow people to meet in new ways.
- These forums enable even marginalized groups to form their own communities.
- New electronic tools lower the cost of experimentation, generating many more new projects. Most fail, but those that survive achieve superior quality.
- New collaborative projects, such as Wikipedia, are process-oriented; people have to keep getting involved, or these projects will fall apart.
- Successful social tools promise to make your world better, give you innovative tools, and create a relationship between you and other users.

Summary

Social Beings in a Brave New World

The introduction of new social media tools and electronic communication methods feeds one of mankind's defining traits: "Human beings are social creatures – not occasionally or by accident but always." People live in groups. All foundational human activities depend on group interaction. Humans are so social that they've developed an almost endless string of terms to describe their relationships, so social that the punishment of "solitary confinement" is considered more harsh and profound than being in a prison community, where the only members of society are criminals. Humans are so good at acting in groups and so accustomed to doing so, that people often take their groups for granted and don't mention them. You recall Michelangelo and Edison, but what about the people who carried the paint up the ladders in the Sistine Chapel and dusted the light bulbs in Edison's lab.

> "When we change the way we communicate, we change society. The tools that a society uses to create and maintain itself are as central to human life as a hive is to bee life."

Emerging technologies are changing how people interact, how they stay in touch with their social groups and how new groups form. One critical change is economic.

Mobilizing a large group of people used to be expensive. Organizing them took huge amounts of work, which led to "the institutional dilemma," the axiom that formal institutions are necessary for getting things done, even though they absorb resources and get in the way. Now, because e-mail and instant messaging are fast and cheap, time costs are evaporating. Since you can send an electronic message to many people as easily as to one, everybody has access to groups that, once, only their leaders could reach. This fundamental change will produce tremendous upheaval throughout society. For example, look at what's happened to the music industry in the wake of file sharing.

Sharing, Community and Media

Communities are defined by what they share; members have something in common, even if it is just the experience of interacting. Not all groups are communities. In fact, as a group gets larger, "it becomes impossible for everyone to interact directly with everyone else." Above a certain size, the effort of integrating a new person into a community becomes excessive; you lose more than you gain. Organizations grow only when the benefits of adding people outweigh the cost.

> "Anything that increases our ability to share, coordinate, or act increases our freedom to pursue our goals in congress with one another."

Traditionally, organizations establish formal hierarchies, symbolized by the "org chart," and its defined lines of responsibility and communication. When changes take too much managerial effort, the organization simply doesn't do them, but if it can reduce such "transaction costs" a bit, it becomes "more efficient." When transaction costs plummet, organizations can grow and small organizations can compete with big ones. When transaction costs disappear, as happens online, groups can do "serious, complex work" without anyone being formally in charge of a project.

> "Communications tools don't get socially interesting until they get technologically boring. The invention of a tool doesn't create change; it has to have been around long enough that most of society is using it."

Just as formal organizations exist because of the costs of coordinating groups for mass efforts, so formal professions exist because of cost. They either require specialized skills (driving race cars), specialized equipment (broadcasting TV news) or both (performing neurosurgery). Professions develop formal training to give members the required skills and a shared "way of understanding their world." But, when electronic media remove such barriers to entry, the result dissolves long-established professions. Printing a newspaper takes time, materials and machines, as well as reporting and writing skill, but publishing a blog or copying an electronic file is easy and almost free, so journalism is awash with new perspectives as citizens themselves report on the world.

> "Like everything described in this book, a wiki is a hybrid of tool and community."

In this wave of "mass amateurization," anybody can be "a media outlet." However, bloggers are excluded from journalism's professional structure and training. They define and cover the news differently. That's not the only pitfall in the new media landscape. If you sample a few blogs, you might think they sound odd. You might wonder how they expect to reach a mass media audience. The answer is, they don't. Blogs are available to anyone, but they are like other people's phone conversations, posted online for small communities, not large audiences. Blogs can develop into "communities of practice," where people share their expertise about topics on an ongoing basis.

> "We have lost the clean distinctions between communications media and broadcast media."

The actual process of making things public is also different. When it is expensive to publish things – as with newspapers – publishers filter information before printing it. Online, the rule is "publish, then filter." The result is a transformed route to trustworthiness. Any single blog is likely to be less credible than a major newspaper, but the mass of bloggers build on one another, correct one another and gather worldwide comments far faster than traditional media outlets can.

People Working Together

On the "ladder" of group interaction, simple sharing is easiest and cheapest. For example, people can share photographs with anybody on sites like Flickr. The next step in community interaction is cooperation, where you share with a chosen group, but not with other individuals, although you align your behavior with theirs, perhaps in online conversations. The third stage is "collective action," where people work as a group on a specific task in a specific way. To function, such groups have to form a unified identity and stay together.

> "An individual with a camera or a keyboard is now a non-profit of one, and self-publishing is now the normal case."

Sharing information online is easy, but throughout most of history, such sharing has been incredibly difficult. If you had a bad experience with a company or an institution, how could you find other victims? Unless you knew them, happened to meet them or paid for ads in the media to find them, you couldn't. New media have shattered the barriers to connection. People who are culturally, geographically and even temporally far apart can share information now. Look, for example, at the way Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) mobilized in response to child abuse. For decades, people had reported that some Catholic priests had abused children, but the isolated victims were relatively powerless. The Church could respond or not as it pleased. To oppose one priest, VOTF spread victims' stories via electronic document sharing, and enabled members to join its efforts by e-mail and online. The result was a larger audience, a community that mobilized quickly – and the removal of the offending priest.

> "It is a curiosity of technology that it creates new characteristics in old institutions."

Wikipedia is a good example of the next step: "distributed collaboration." It emerged out of attempts to solve the production problems with a previous project, Nupedia, a would-be "online encyclopedia." Frustrated with the glacial speed at which articles were written and edited, Wikipedia co-founder Larry Sanger took the idea of a "wiki," or "user-editable website," so flexible that anyone online could edit its content. He almost casually invited his friends to post initial entries on Wikipedia. It might not have seemed to anyone else that an encyclopedia with no one in charge – a reference work that anyone could edit – would even work, but it does, though it is "almost comically chaotic."

> "The scope of work that can be done by noninstitutional groups is a profound challenge to the status quo."

Wikipedia is growing daily in scope and credibility. If you think it needs an entry, but you don't have the data, you can post a "stub," inviting others to supply the information. If you're an expert, post all the knowledge you want to share. Wikipedia works because people stay continually involved, adding new articles and editing older ones. If people stopped working on it, it would quickly be vandalized out of existence. It demonstrates the "power distribution law," a concept that describes a "social system" where a few people are very involved, a few are somewhat involved and most are barely involved, perhaps making only a single small edit to one article.

Tools for Protests and Community

Cell phones and Web access enable groups to organize at unprecedented speeds. This has spawned new activities, such as the "flash mob," where crowds mobilize in response to text or e-mail messages to engage in performance art. Such possibilities also change the nature of political protests. If a group leader posts revolutionary information online or calls for political involvement, the authorities cannot tell who visits the Web site. Organizers can call protestors together quickly via cell phone or e-mail to occupy public spaces peacefully and within the law. This happened in Belarus, where such organizing desensitized the authorities to public gatherings and then shifted to political activity. Immediate access to information has changed consumer grumbles about bad service into formal protests. Because many people are now members of social media sites, such as Facebook, if something happens that they don't like, they have access to venues that allow immediate protest to lots of people. Finally, activists can use services such as Twitter, which most users employ for purely social contacts, to track government responses to protestors in real time and to react immediately.

"Our new freedoms are not without their problems; it's not a revolution if nobody loses."

Social media are producing new communities and changing older ones, sometimes in unexpected ways. Take the online service Meetup, which was designed to help people who share interests find one another online and, if they desired, meet in person. The most active groups on Meetup are not those the founder predicted, such as pre-existing hobby groups. Instead, Meetup draws groups of people with strong interests and shared values who don't enjoy "support from the broader U.S. culture," such as self-identified witches. Meetup is popular with people who have already met online and want to meet in person, and with people who share interests, but weren't already in groups, such as fans of singer Tori Amos. "Stay at Home Moms" is one of the most active Meetup groups, because changes in American living patterns have made it harder for them to gather. Groups that face societal disapproval, such as one that is actually in favor of anorexia, find it easier to meet online.

"Open source doesn't reduce the likelihood of failure, it reduces the cost of failure; it essentially gets failure for free."

These new forms of community coalition-building generate several losses for society. People lose jobs as older industries adapt to online media. Social rules come into question. Just in this area, for instance, many laws protect journalists; do these laws also protect bloggers? Finally, online communities are "more resilient," which is a problem when the group has a negative, dangerous or illegal intent, like a terrorist organization.

"The Internet augments real-world social life rather than providing an alternative to it. Instead of becoming a separate cyberspace, our electronic networks are becoming deeply embedded in real life."

Most people are part of a "Small World network," which is connected to a medium-sized group of people, many of whom are connected to one another. A few of the people in your small and medium worlds are highly connected to more outsiders, and they link your group with farther-flung communities. In a setting such as a professional association, these people wield considerable influence. People who associate primarily with others like themselves – no matter how many – generate fewer, safer ideas through a kind of diffused groupthink. By contrast, those who link up with many different kinds of people generate a greater number of better, more innovative ideas.

"The net effect is that it's easier to like people who are odd in the same ways you are odd, but it's harder to find them."

Social media tools provide professional advantages by lowering the cost of failure. For example, many proposed Meetup groups fail. Most older businesses would find this daunting: they try to manage the cost of failure by making it less likely. Those who associate with repeated failures might even be stigmatized. However, trial and error, a great way to learn, is far less expensive, daunting or damning online. Just consider the world of open source software. Most open source projects go nowhere and have no users. Yet, because open source people get involved in projects voluntarily and abandon them with no penalty, talent flows to interesting projects, letting communities sort projects cheaply and try them risk free. From a traditional business point of view, this is chaos and early in the process, no one can predict which projects will fly. However, if a project reaches a critical mass of involvement, and if it sets community norms of reciprocity and high performance, and if those involved care about each other and act respectfully, community-based projects can be cheaper and even better than professional projects.

"Promise, Tool, Bargain"

Every new electronic device or online meeting place tries to create "a successful fusion of a plausible promise, an effective tool and [an] acceptable bargain with the users." New venues or mechanisms often communicate their promises implicitly, through interpersonal social cues, to try to draw people to engage with them. These promises shift in time and context; it is harder to enlist people to participate in starting something than to get them to try something you started for them. Choosing what tool to use also depends on your context: the tool you need is governed by what you want to do. As you invent or test more tools, the options your community promises its users grow richer and more varied. The bargain often blends explicit rules and community norms, so it also changes through interaction over time. Getting all three elements right is difficult. In some cases, like a start-up or experiment, set the bar very low so you encourage involvement. In other cases, your promise might be exclusionary. Who uses which tools, and how often will vary radically within a single community. As for the bargain, that will change too; communities die or, sometimes, fulfill their purposes and just fade away.

"Fame is simply an imbalance between inbound and outbound attention, more arrows pointing in than out."

About the Author

Clay Shirky writes and consults on the cultural implications of the Internet, and serves on the faculty of the Interactive Telecommunications Program at New York University.