



Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/orgdyn



Social media and business: We've been asking the wrong question

Michela Arnaboldi, Jean-Francois Coget

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a revolution. It is, nevertheless, misunderstood. It is quietly changing the world more deeply than we realize. Think of the Arab Spring. Populations from countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria have finally taken action against government forces that had oppressed them for decades and more. Social media has been crucial as a tool to empower these uprisings, providing rebels with a means of mass communication that could not be controlled by their governments. Think of WikiLeaks. With help from various intelligence agency insiders, it has taken whistle blowing to a new level, capable of challenging powers such as the CIA, and leading the government to change its surveillance policies.

These two examples illustrate how powerful social media can be, and how much it can potentially change the balance of power. It gives voice to communities that previously were disenfranchised and disempowered. It threatens powerful organizations, such as the CIA, or even governments, which are used to controlling information and dictating the terms of a relationship. Social media has the power to change society profoundly.

Business organizations have recognized the potential of social media over the last few years, often beginning with a focus on marketing. Likewise, practitioner articles about how companies can harness its power have expanded massively in recent times. However, researchers and business people alike have been asking the wrong question. In typical business fashion, the question that most business stakeholders have been asking about social media is: "How can it be exploited for our benefit?" Putting the question in these terms shows how misunderstood social media is and how ill-equipped organizations with a traditional business mentality are to survive the social media revolution, let alone to thrive in it.

We, therefore, aim to bring a different light to the topic of social media and business by asking a different question:

"How is social media changing society, and how will that change the way organizations do business?" Framed in this way, the emphasis shifts from how organizations can exploit social media to their benefit to how they must adapt to a new social order. We argue that social media can drastically redress imbalances in power. Hence, organizations thinking that they are running the show may be in for a big surprise. It may be time for them to accept an era of genuine participation in larger communities. To illustrate our arguments, this essay is organized as follows: the first section introduces social media innovation and how it is turning society on its head (through the use of four pillars). The second section introduces a reference framework that explains why there is a shift in corporate logics from exploitation to citizenship. The last section proposes four tests that organizations can use to establish how far their corporate reasoning fits a citizenship attitude compatible with the revolution in society brought about by social media.

SOCIAL MEDIA: A MILD TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION THAT BRINGS ABOUT A SOCIETAL REVOLUTION

Social media refers to new media technology that enables instantaneous, multi-way communication between groups of individuals. This section first introduces the technological aspect of this innovation, and then we will focus on the broader impact that this technology has on society and the way we communicate.

Social Media: An Enabling Technology

Social media refers to Web 2.0 applications that allow users to create, exchange and share content over the Internet. A

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2015.12.006>
0090-2616/© 2016 Published by Elsevier Inc.

number of social media platforms are available, each with its own distinctive features. Facebook, for instance, originally started as a digital replacement for Harvard University's Freshmen Register, known as the Facebook. Facebook users create a profile and establish a network of friends with whom they can exchange material, such as photos, videos and verbal communication, using in various methods, that is, privately, one-on-one, or publicly. Twitter is another popular social media tool that takes the "status update" function of Facebook and uses it as its main, minimalist feature. LinkedIn is a professional version of Facebook, where users create a professional profile, and exchange information with other professional contacts. Other widespread and growing types of social media have the aim of sharing photos and videos. Examples of these include YouTube, Pinterest, Flickr, and Instagram. At the technical level, social media is only a "mild" innovation, relying on improvements in database technologies and network protocols, among other innovations. However, three key technical features should be highlighted.

First, social media is an *open, multi-way communication tool*. It merges the capabilities of personal media, such as the phone, and mass media, enabling individuals to respond to any comment in mass media messages, and their personal communications can reach large audiences. While email already allows individuals to communicate in a multi-way manner, it does so in a private, closed way. By contrast, social media is open and accessible to everyone. For instance, when telecommunication companies such as Vodafone use Twitter or Facebook as a customer service tool, the messages exchanged between company and individual customers are visible to all users, not only to the customers who posted the specific question or complaint.

Second, *social media is fast*. It increases the speed with which information about events is created, circulated and commented upon. While personal media and mass media have already increased the speed of communication and, therefore, the pace of life, over the last century, social media has accelerated things further. In fact, social media can be almost instantaneous. An example of this is the rapidity with which a video showing a FedEx employee throwing a package over a gate and destroying its contents spread on YouTube. The video went viral and FedEx was forced to respond and reimburse the customer.

A third characteristic of social media is that it is *affordable*. Membership for most social media platforms is free or relatively inexpensive (as is the case of premium memberships offered by platforms such as LinkedIn). Furthermore, unlike mass media, the equipment and software needed to create and distribute content on social media is affordable and widespread. A smartphone is all you need to generate and circulate videos, pictures and text, which can spread over the web like wildfire. Add a personal computer or tablet to the equation, with cheap or free media editing apps, and most users have the tools to produce highly sophisticated material. This feature reduces the previous asymmetry between accessing and broadcasting information, allowing individuals and small organizations to communicate globally. One of several possible examples is the once small Seattle-based shop, Cupcake Royale, which can reach its customers through a simple Facebook page.

Social Media: A Societal Revolution

While social media has introduced important technical innovations, the real revolution is how it can change society. Social media empowers individuals and communities to communicate and disseminate information cheaply and instantly on the web, with a potentially global reach. We have identified four pillars through which social media is revolutionizing society.

Pillar 1 – diffused authority and power

In traditional mass media, which is one-way, power lies in the hands of those who create and broadcast information: journalists, newscasters, academics, government officials, and business leaders. These "authorities" have traditionally held the monopoly on what information is broadcasted to passive audiences. Although social media does not cancel out this power differential, it alters it. Authorities, celebrities, and government officials are still more likely to be heard on social media than the average person; for one thing, they have many more followers on Twitter. However, average users now have a voice, and their voice can propel them into temporary celebrity status if they broadcast the right message at the right time.

This can take the form of a user voicing a complaint about an organization that finds resonance with other users, such as an airline customer complaining about service issues. A notorious example involved British Airways and an unhappy customer, Hassan Syed. In order to complain about lost luggage, he resorted to buying a promoted tweet, that is, a paid-for tweet normally purchased by advertisers who want to reach a wider audience. His tweet said "Don't fly @BritishAirways. Their customer service is horrendous." The tweet went viral, in part due to British Airways' inability to reply to or moderate the original tweet. This example illustrates how even a normal customer can reverse the balance of power with authorities that typically wield unilateral power in situations similar to a lost luggage issue.

Pillar 2 – immediateness and authenticity

In the case of traditional mass media, information usually passes through a structured organizational process, in which pre-defined mediators decide what to publish and how. This process mitigates visceral, emotional reactions and favors edited and rationalized messages. In contrast, social media brings out authenticity and passion in people. Since individuals who express themselves on social media feel that they are revealing their private self, they tend to be more genuine, emotionally transparent and unfiltered than when they communicate through official, public channels. The individual voices that surface through social media thus tend to provide an alternative take on events and reality. Because they are more authentic, typically they also have more power to touch other people and so their views spread.

Social media was used in the Swiss village of Graubünden to revitalize tourism, providing an example of the power of authenticity. Photos and videos depicting some of its 76 inhabitants were posted on Facebook. Some of them referred to simple, rural buildings as "museums," to great comical effect. The authenticity of Graubünden's inhabitants really transpired from their posts, which were widely circulated and a clear marketing success.

Pillar 3 – community as unit of analysis

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/889117>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/889117>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)