

Virtual Communities, Real Social Change

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Social networks and virtual communities on the web are transforming social organizations and institutions in a fundamental and radical way. Social networking has enabled democratization of knowledge, transformation of philanthropy, mobilization of social capital and advancement of innovations. Individuals, social organizations, stakeholders, allies and collaborators are connecting with each other and effecting a systemic social change on a scale never seen before. But harnessing the power of social network requires understanding the degrees of its potential, engaging selectively with participants, adopting right level of managerial control, establishing internal capabilities and nurturing relationships.

The advent of online social networking platforms in recent years is beginning to change the world in ways that are difficult to comprehend. Platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Wiki* are providing a means for smaller social organizations to connect with a larger audience and tap into resources, which were otherwise inaccessible, to create a greater social impact. This is an important trend.

“Absolutely, in cattle class out of solidarity with all our holy cows!”

Could one have imagined that this seemingly casual message on a social networking platform could irreversibly dent the career of a celebrity politician?

But before delving into how network of online communities could be harnessed to bring about social change, its power in gathering a critical mass of innovations, people, organizations and institutions that positively feed on to one another to effect a system-level change needs to be explored.

Enabling a Systemic Social Change

Systemic social change goes beyond individual social organizations and their tailored stop-gap solutions to glaring social issues. It involves a fundamental, radical and enduring transformation of institutions and systems - policies, funding, knowledge, technology and governance- on which we depend. The network of online social communities enables this large-scale systemic change needed to address today’s mega social, economic and environmental challenges.

Democratizing Knowledge

As a conduit for exchange of “open” knowledge, social network is much more than a new media channel for old content. It has democratized knowledge by enabling creation, synthesis, acquisition and sharing of knowledge which was previously masked or was accessible to only a select few. *Wikipedia* is one such platform that has produced remarkably reliable knowledge base of more than 9 million articles in 250 languages, all for free. The abundance of community-generated content in social networks has helped spread awareness and appreciation of many once buried social issues. Armed with the knowledge, today’s online citizenry are more conscious of abject poverty, failing health and education systems, environmental degradation, and human right abuses.

Guluwalk is an example of how two people from Toronto successfully leveraged social networks to draw attention to the plight of night commuters in Uganda. In 2008, 30,000 people in 16 different countries took to streets to support the cause.

Democratization of knowledge through social networks also enables the design of “social stock markets”. The collective intelligence emerging from such markets could not only provide interesting insights to stakeholders, but also help assess the effectiveness of programmes and relative performance of social enterprises through simple and reliable mechanisms.

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Transforming Philanthropy

The plethora of data and information available these days through social networks provides funders and financial institutions with greater visibility on causes and worthwhile initiatives supporting them.

Online Giving Trends

- More than 65% of donors use information available online to make philanthropic decisions (*Kintera Luth Non-profit Trend*)
- Online giving climbed by 46% in 2009 as compared to the previous year (*Blackbaud*)
- *Kiva* has connected 350,000 entrepreneurs to donors and helped start businesses in 185 nations

The network is also a new, far-reaching and effective channel for people-to-people fundraising. Leveraging this potential through innovative business models, new organizations around the world such as *Kiva* and *Microplace* have sprung up. By transcending space and time, the network also facilitates more effective and quicker responses to causes. The responses to disasters such as hurricane *Katrina* and earthquake in *Haiti* are a testimonial to this fact.

The power of the network if actualized could eventually help build a community of “advocates”, not mere “donors”. *SixDegrees.org* is one such network through which users could support causes by checking out what others in the network, including celebrities, are endorsing. *Change.org* is another such online hub where users can join virtual foundations dedicated to specific causes.

Mobilizing Social Capital

Social networks provide a tool to organizations to mobilise social capital – the value of benefits accrued from ongoing interpersonal relationships. The network enables social organizations to connect and strengthen ties with stakeholders and allies, to influence them, to amass information and to access resources that were previously elusive. It can also help organize and

transform “collective conscience” into some form of unprecedented cooperation, advocacy or activism that effects a social change.

Numerous social networking initiatives have sprung up around the world with the specific mandate to mobilize social capital. *Genocide Intervention Network* established in 2005 used social network to quickly transform itself from a small student group to a national non-profit. *BuildAStrongerAmerica.com* is another such initiative that has given entrepreneurs a platform to amplify their voice. The networking platforms enable users to build and self-organize communities without any explicit central intervention. Such powerful initiatives emanating from citizenry not only lead to effortless endorsements but also quicker actions. *Facebook’s Causes* is one such initiative that enables users to create grassroots groups around social issues that concern them.

Advancing Innovations

Innovations needed to address mammoth social, economic and environmental challenges can only come by tapping into collective brainpower around the world. Henry Chesbrough, author of the book *Open Innovation*, explains how sustained innovations can no longer be created in closed walls by hiring the best resources. The world is replete of wonderfully designed works based on “closed innovation” model that have failed to achieve a sustainable and scalable impact. James Surowiecki, in his book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, illustrates how a diverse, independent and decentralized group of people are smarter than an elite few in designing deceptively simple innovations that have profound implications.

Online social networks provide a platform to create “collaborative entrepreneurship” models that enables social organizations to focus energy and intellect on creating viable business models for extracting most value from “open innovations”. It aids a community of social enterprises, stakeholders and allies to overcome organizational and institutional barriers, and collectively

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challenge, defend and develop continuous and sustained social innovations. *InnoCentive* is one such organization that has created an Open Innovation Marketplace™. *Open Source Drug Discovery* is another such platform where best minds can collaboratively innovate to solve complex and neglected healthcare problems of developing countries.

Harnessing the Potential

With the rules of effecting a “social good” changing, it is time to take social networking seriously. But one must be aware that fathoming the promise and perils, let alone realizing the positive consequences, is not simple. Social organizations must develop policies and strategies, both to realize the value and to mitigate the challenges of virtuality, fragility and fluidity of the connections. This necessitates focus, depth and continuity.

1 Understand the Degrees of Potential

Social network could be used as a tool of Communication, Coordination, Cooperation or Collaboration. As a *communication* channel, it enables effective marketing, outreach and community relations. Social enterprises could also use it as a tool to *coordinate* with employees, volunteers and stakeholders on tasks, deliverables and schedules, and effectively avoid gaps and overlaps in work. The platform could also be used to gather mutual *cooperation* from internal and external stakeholders on solving problems of interest. But the true potential of social networks is realized when it facilitates *collaboration* with a wider audience – individuals and organizations. With a well-defined mission and an atmosphere of trust in the community, *collaboration* could propel social innovations, craft solutions and yield collective results that participants are incapable of achieving alone.

2 Engage Selectively

Before engaging with virtual communities, the motivations of participants need to be understood.

Broadly, individuals affiliate to some social networks to promote *self-identity*, maintain *relationships*, pursue *interests*, accomplish *goals* and/or espouse *values*. It is imperative to understand these motives and choose a relevant social networking platform to engage with communities whose collective motives resonate with organization’s mission. Also *slacktivists*, armchair supporters and sojourners need to be segregated from passionate advocates.

3 Adopt Right Level of Control

Managing online communities requires understanding the role to be played both to mitigate negative consequences and to foster positive engagement. Based on what the social organization chooses to leverage networking for, it needs to accordingly assume the role of *managing*, *supervising*, *orchestrating* or *enabling*. To be an enabler of collaboration requires uncomfortable proposition of relinquishing ones absolute control.

4 Establish Internal Capabilities

Engaging the virtual communities requires strong internal capabilities in terms of strategy, structure, system, skilled staff and effective operating techniques. One must not jump into the social networking bandwagon until these soft and hard elements of internal capabilities are established.

5 Nurture Relationships

The volatility and virtuality of connections on the social networks are challenges that demand continuous monitoring and building trust. It is essential to organize face-to-face contacts, not just meet on *Second Life*, to nurture relationships.

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Social network’s true potential is realized when it used as a *transformative* force, not as a mere *transactional* tool. But a radical and systemic social change happens by adopting new values, attitudes and behaviours, not just by embracing new tools.