The Qualities and Potential of Social Media

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INTRODUCTION

Technology has long been thought to bring about change in human behavior. This varies from minor changes in individual behavior to larger societal level transformations. Twitter and a variety of other social media have been considered as playing a significant part in facilitating, if not causing, recent political revolutions in certain North Africa and Middle Eastern countries in which long standing political regimes established in the post-colonial period were overthrown often by internally driven anti-systemic movements. In a number of instances the overthrow has resulted in less stable states (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). Similarly, social media has been credited heavily in the spread and organization of the various occupations and civic unrests that occurred in Western societies under the auspices of the Occupy movement (Gleason, 2013). Occupy is a globally distributed network of anti-systemic groups broadly opposed to what they perceive to be systems of economic inequality and the pan governmental legal instruments that facilitate such inequality. A significant volume of commentary on blogs and in newspaper columns has clearly identified social media (often accessed by a mobile phone) as one of the driving forces and key tools of these uprisings (Marzouki, 2011).

Similarly, in commentary on less headline-grabbing events, we also find social media as credited with a change causing potential and social media has also been considered as a way to improve organizational performance (Curran, O'Hara & O'Brien, 2011). In business and management so-cial media is seen as a way to empower customers and users, improve service levels through feedback loops and generally offer an improved service users' experience of bureaucracy. In this article we examine how the qualities and potential of social media can be understood to cause social change.

BACKGROUND

Social Change

Collective human life is structured by social practices; they define accepted behavior and how we act in different circumstances. Sociologists often understand such social practices as changing and shifting in response to social dynamics, logics and developments as well as external drivers (Giddens, 1990). We may understand technology as a major agent in driving such social change though there is disagreement in the manner in which such change occurs (Leaning, 2009) and whether such change is socially beneficial. One argument is that social media are contributory to the general decline of collective action in social life - social media contribute to the atomization of society and a decline in social capital – the binding connections between individuals. An opposing position contends that social media and similar technology actually contributes to social capital since there "is clear evidence that social capital has been on the ascent in the past decade: in the form of networks in cyberspace" (Lin, 2001). That is, the interpersonal connectedness facilitated by

social media is beneficial and indeed social media afford communities opportunities to internally 'bond' or change in a positive, affirming manner.

Social Media

Social media refers to a range of World Wide Web (hereinafter referred to as 'web') applications that facilitate communication between individuals. Numerous technical sources identify the ancestry of social media in web 2.0 technology. Many of the features considered unique to social media (such as interest-driven communities, peer commentary and horizontal rather than hierarchical information flows) were present in early internet communication systems. Indeed much contemporaneous commentary on social media echoes statements made about the internet in the 1990s and early 2000s.

New Technologies

In analyzing technology we often seek to find characteristics, features or qualities that were not present in whatever technology went before – social media must do something that previous media simply did not do. The cause of this perception lies in the marketing and financing of new technologies; there has to be a unique selling proposition of a technology, it has to offer a feature that solves a problem that previous technologies did not. However, this runs counter to the way in which technology is developed. Technology does not progress in terms of major changes, it moves forwards cautiously rather than in leaps and bounds. We might argue that technological innovations occur on a continuum; new technologies slightly improve a particular aspect of what went before but they rarely take things in a new direction entirely. A new technology may do the task we want performed better but only very rarely does it perform a new task.

Moreover, we should recognize that technological history is often not a single, linear pathway (Nicholson, 2007). While from our current per-

spective a technology may seem to be the result of a continuous path of development we find that there are often many developments that leading to technological cul-de-sacs. We may see the development of technology as occurring in a similar fashion to natural evolution - many different approaches to problems are tried out, some succeed but many fail. However, the important aspect is that each instance of technology is designed as an end in itself, to solve a problem or meet a need. Technologies are not (normally) developed as a stepping-stone to a clearly defined future technology. However, when we examine technology in hindsight that is exactly what they appear to be. Technology is not consciously moving towards a specific goal, rather it is changing and transforming and fighting for survival in an environment of limited resources (Ziman & Ziman, 2003). Thus if we look at social media we find that many of the features are actually improvements upon already existing patterns of communication rather than 'true' innovations. Different forms of social media may share certain features in common and seem to be advances of earlier technologies but whether they are radically different from previous forms of technology and communication is contestable.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

If the argument that social media do possess new characteristics is correct then we can start to identify the particular areas in which social media is an improvement on what went before. In this article we focus on four key areas:

- The contemporaneity of communications;
- Productive audiences;
- Its dialogical and network nature; and
- Its searchable and 'taggable' nature.

While these characteristics were present in previous internet enabled media (and even earlier in some cases) they are modified, adjusted and

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