Tweets from Birmingham jail

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Malcolm Gladwell’s recent New Yorker article ‘Small Change’ has set the blogosphere buzzing with its strongly stated argument that social networks such as Facebook and Twitter will not usher in a new age of social activism, as some digital evangelists have proposed, but that they and the relationships they foster are actually detrimental to real social change. As Gladwell puts it, ‘The instruments of social media are well suited to making the existing social order more efficient. They are not a natural enemy of the status quo.’

Predictably, the article has been met with numerous rebuttals which largely take two tacks. The first challenges Gladwell’s examples – whether of successful movements for social change, like the Civil Rights Movement, or examples of the role social networks like Twitter have played in fostering social change in countries like Iran and Moldovia (which he considers to be overblown). The second tack has been to say, basically, that Gladwell is a digital immigrant who doesn’t understand the nature of the tools he’s condemning.

But both Gladwell and most of his detractors overlook a significant problem with his argument, which is that the two things he’s considering are not really parallel: rather than comparing social networks to pre-Internet social movements, we should be comparing them to the tools those movements used.

A major element of Gladwell’s essay is that social networks require very little commitment from participants. It’s a familiar argument: 25,000 people ‘like’ the Save Darfur Coalition, and yet Darfur is no closer to being saved. Gladwell suggests that this is due to the distinction between weak and strong ties, terms taken from the work of sociologist Mark Granovetter. Basically, strong ties are those that both require and inspire commitment – between family members, spouses, close friends, comrades-in-arms, etc. – and weak ties are those that require and inspire less commitment, such as ‘liking’ a Facebook page.

Although in most aspects of society weak ties are as important as strong ones, Gladwell argues that in the context of social movements only strong ties are sufficient to motivate the kinds of action necessary to bring about social change – and social networks, according to Gladwell, promote only weak ties. It’s a big step, though, to go from saying that something primarily promotes weak ties to saying that it solely promotes weak ties.

Take high school as an example: most of the ties that I made there were weak ones, to the point that relatively few of them persisted outside of that context – but a small number of them were strong ties, to the point that they persist to this day. Moreover, when we consider social networks in terms of being tools for social change, it’s not hard to find parallels. The most apt is the bumper sticker, definitive symbol of low-commitment involvement in a cause; a million Priuses bear ‘Free Tibet’ stickers, and yet Tibet is no closer to being free.

Common characteristics of social media tools
When we look at those media tools that were employed effectively by social movements we find a number of common characteristics. The samizdat of the Soviet period and zines, their North American equivalent, were similar in a number of significant ways. First, they published content that was difficult or impossible to find in mainstream media (such as sex and gender issues, the peace movement and social justice issues in the case of zines and nearly anything not approved by the state in the case of samizdat) and as a result stayed as far as possible from the attentions of both the mainstream media and the state.

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Second, print-runs and readership were small, cheap and close to the ground: the *zine* movement owes its existence to the appearance of affordable photocopying in the early 1970s, while many *samizdat* publications were created on typewriters or even by hand. Third, they had low barriers to participation: *zines* would typically publish almost anything submitted to them, and many *zine* founders cited reading other *zines* as their inspiration for getting involved.

Most media employed by social movements have these three characteristics, such as the Baptist pulpits Gladwell describes as being so effective in the Civil Rights movement, which addressed a small audience using low-tech means to communicate messages unpopular to the larger community. Going further back, we can even see the printing press as an example: unlike the scriptorium monks who were the ‘mainstream media’ of the day, the press allowed anyone who could come up with a fairly modest sum to print something the authorities might not like people to read – a Bible, for instance, or ninety-five theses arguing against the sale of indulgences – and do it in readers’ own language, as opposed to Church Latin.

The parallels to online media such as Facebook, Twitter or blogs are obvious: like the above examples, online media have low barriers to participation, a limited audience (author-selected in the case of Facebook or *samizdat*, reader-selected in the case of Twitter, blogs and *zines*) that are generally far from mainstream or state eyes and often publish content that is hard to find anywhere else. While the role of Twitter in Iranian politics may have been overstated, as Gladwell suggests, the role of blogs has, if anything, been underestimated; certainly the Iranian government considers blogs to be a sufficient threat to their regime that they routinely arrest bloggers, some of whom receive longer sentences for their activities than they would for murder.

**Multiple patterns of use**

A secondary argument in Gladwell’s article has to do with the egalitarian structure of social networks, as he maintains that only a hierarchical movement can organize effectively and keep its movement on-message – for example, the Civil Rights movement derived much of its moral authority from being resolutely non-violent, something that Gladwell says could only be accomplished when members felt a duty to a central authority such as Martin Luther King.

What Gladwell fails to take into account, though, is that for each social networking tool there are multiple patterns of use: different communities often use the same tools in different ways. Twitter is a good example of this because the patterns of use are so distinct. Relationships on Twitter are not necessarily reciprocal, because those you ‘follow’ are not required (or even necessarily expected) to ‘follow’ you; the result is that in some communities – particularly among African-Americans – Twitter has the structure of a network, with tight, reciprocal clusters of users sharing a conversation, while in others it is a hierarchy, with a large group of people jointly ‘following’ a smaller number.

Individuals may even use Twitter in different ways in different contexts: a particular user may unilaterally ‘follow’ some users while forming a reciprocal network with others. In this respect the Baptist churches Gladwell cites as having been instrumental in organizing the Civil Rights movement are almost exactly like Twitter, with individual parishioners unilaterally ‘following’ the pastor and reciprocally ‘following’ one another.

Gladwell is unquestionably right when he says that social media will not on its own result in an increase in activism or meaningful change. Most people, if they get involved at all, will continue to content themselves with low-commitment activities such as ‘liking’ Facebook groups and putting bumper stickers on their cars. But dismissing social media as tools to
motivate and organize social change – or saying, as Gladwell does, that they can only be used to bolster the status quo – overlooks the advantages they give social movements in making it easy to publish and distribute content without going through a state or corporate authority that is likely to be indifferent or even hostile to their cause.

When it comes to organizing, the mere fact that nearly all youth use social networks shows that social movements would be foolish to ignore them. As the 1930s convicted U.S. bank robber Willie Sutton reportedly said when asked why he robbed banks, ‘That’s where the money is.’


Note
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell?printable=true