Igniting the ‘social’ in networks

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Are we in danger of losing the ‘social’ dimension of social media? Are we learning how not to communicate? These questions are explored in the following article, which laments the potential loss of human understanding relationships.

When Tolstoy has Prince Andrei, the scion of a foremost noble military family during the wars with Napoleon, seek a military command to join in the fight, he goes to Field Marshall Kutuzov’s headquarters, where he finds quite a pride of gold-braided rivals, a few from other noble houses, all seeking some favour from the Commander-in-Chief. Andrei notices that these generals and princes all defer to and seek out a young lieutenant. Strange? Not really, since as the Marshall’s secretary, the keeper of access and schedules, he is the key figure in the room.

Much below the other military ranks, the secretary is a nobleman and a close relative of the Tsar. So, Prince Andrei observes, there is the official order, and then there is the real order based on intangibles, personal connections, social position, favour at Court and unknown factors that those in the official order can only guess at.

Later Prince Andrei served as a principal staff officer to Kutuzov and personally carried the Marshall’s corrective, often dismissive, orders to generals in the field. He was a colonel, but his adjutant regalia proclaimed him as Kutuzov’s official messenger, and the generals deferred to him. He had one cavalry boot in the official order and the other in the real order (see http://tinyurl.com/25vnubd).

The arrogant rule of Governor William Cosby over the New York Colony deeply offended the rich Dutch and English gentry notably because of his rapacious taxes. Their control of the press made Cosby a butt of vicious and telling satire, which led to the famous Zenger trial, the first successful defence of free speech however offensive to rulers (see http://tinyurl.com/236s9le).

These events helped form a climate of opinion that years later fostered the First Amendment and after that Fox’s Libel Law in the United Kingdom. These developments may well have occurred anyway, but in fact Cosby, a cretinous but well-connected son of an influential family close to government, was handed the plum of New York, when such positions were a sure path to wealth. Cosby forgot that you also had to govern wisely. The real order ran the official order off the rails.

From tsarist Russia to colonial America, there was a parallel power structure of official hierarchy and Old Boy Networks. The first, institutional, to keep the wheels of state and commerce turning; the second, more ad hoc and personal, to make sure the wheels turned for the right people.

As technology and industrialization grew in complexity and reach, the ad hoc organization became more formalized with its own visible structures from railroads to science labs. This growth of the middle, as it were, took off with the modern corporation, created for specific purposes. Now even individual film projects are run by ad hoc companies specific to that one project alone though networked to studios, technical services, incorporated and agented stars. When the film is finished the corporation dissolves.

We have always had social networks, but the Internet has made them so easy to form that they dominate social organizations both formal and ad hoc from top to bottom. Today,
connections and networks may spring up overnight to mobilize causes, enlist support, reveal state secrets, and in some ways effect change by electrifying the long human practice of networking for pooled efforts toward a common goal.

It is intriguing that the Google campus in Silicon Valley is just that: a collection of buildings in a park setting with much noted designated and colourfully designed areas for sports, games, socializing and hanging out (http://www.google.com/corporate/culture.html). Yet, it is a hive of red-hot competition. Like Bill Gates and Paul Allen, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, Microsoft, Google and Apple started as a buddy film. (It remains to be seen if the Google team splits as the others did for their own reasons.)

These face-to-face relationships and the structures to enhance them are seriously cultivated by the physical and organizational architecture of what have become gigantic firms. The big boys, promoters and innovators in pushing cyberspace connections and making possible networks of thousands of ‘friends’ are under no illusions that the screen and the keyboard can replace the caffeine and candy banter and brainstorming of old-fashioned entrepreneurial and inventive bonding.

However, email, Skype, Twitter, and Facebook can serve as stimuli to starting such relationships and manage to preserve them over the obstacles of time zones and borders. There is no substitute for seeing the original great masters at the Louvre, the National Gallery, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Prado, and elsewhere. However, once you have done that, one can refresh the experience by clicking to high-def reproductions. Alternatively, one can be motivated to go and see originals by linking to graphically stunning distant learning about them.

So, too, without a base of real friendship, with nothing to build on, mere cyber-connections are pale shadows of reality which can actually hinder the formation of true relationships. In turn, online meetings can lead to face-to-face connections. It may be that what we used to call flattening the hierarchy has become a fusing of the so-called official order and the so-called real network.

From antediluvian tools...
Twenty-five years ago, I wrote an area study of South African media (Phelan, 1987). It would have been impossible without two key figures: Fr Michael Traber, former editor of this Journal, and Ramsay Milne, North American Bureau Chief of Argus Newspapers, then the major chain in South Africa. Both men, now no longer with us, were nodes in extremely active networks.

Michael had been a priest in what is now called Zimbabwe and a pioneering journalist who helped establish local community media. He knew many South African activists connected with Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu and Protestant and Catholic churches. Ramsay knew every important journalist, media executive, and government official in South Africa, as well as the white oppositionists to apartheid, most based in media, universities, and the South African Racial Relations Council headed by a charismatic Afrikaner (the equivalent of the American Civil Liberties Union).

Thus, when I arrived, I was able to interview literally hundreds of key figures from both the Afrikaans establishment, the so-called English opposition and many others in the Ramsay network. Although unable to personally connect with Nelson Mandela, I did meet with officers of his African National Congress and other underground figures. While visiting Cape Town University, I was advised by an eminent political scientist to join Yale University’s Southern
African Research Program, which, he said, had the best African library in the world, not excluding those in Africa itself. Living about 60 miles from Yale, I had not known this.

With this South African professor’s recommendation, I was able to join the program and use research materials available nowhere else, including airmail editions of key South African newspapers, newsletters, and magazines. So networks were essential to get anything done and to find out what the truth was. In this case, further networking in New York resulted in book publication of the research (see http://tinyurl.com/2bhenv).

At the time, (1983-85) I had to drive considerable distances to Yale and to other specialized libraries to get the resources I needed. When I had almost finished my research and writing I signed up for Compuserve, one of the first ‘portal’ services to what was then called the Information Highway. Through that, I was able to subscribe to Knowledge Index, which provided one with an immensely thick three-ring binder listing all the publications one could access electronically and providing elaborate codes to narrow one’s search as much as possible before going online, as we say today.

Since one was charged twenty-five dollars an hour, it was important to get in and out with the texts and citations needed as fast as possible, hence the print prep. One inputted command lines and one received what we would now consider an absurdly slow feed of one line after another crawling across the screen. It was an immense help but came a bit late, or so I thought.

More than a year later, the US House Foreign Affairs Committee was holding hearings on trade sanctions against the Apartheid regime. On the strength of my book, I was invited to testify with some important American media figures of the day, some top establishment and some dissident South African editors. I was a bit intimidated as I had moved on to other things in the previous 14 months or so and things were moving fast at that time in South Africa.

I had three days. No time to go to Yale or root around in the New York Public Library, or specialist university libraries. Dialogue Knowledge Index to the rescue. I was able to print out the latest poll results and media coverage of current issues from South Africa and I schlepped them down to the Congressional Hearing, boning up on the content and forming a précis of the downloaded material as I flew to Washington. All the other witnesses were lined up and I joined them. In my presentation, I made ample use of the latest reports I had (see http://tinyurl.com/2885dhu [pp. 109-152]).

After the Hearing, the South Africans and some others all came up to me and wanted to know how I was able to get my hands on the latest relevant information. It was then I realized that a new day of information and collaboration had dawned. Old networks were not dead, but they were vastly empowered by the Information Highway and the foreign reporting field was being levelled dramatically.

...to today’s flood of new technologies

Human Society, as the human brain, is concocted from connections whether elaborately engineered or randomly ignited. Only connect, was E. M. Forster’s observation. It took the coming of the computer and the flowering of the Internet to try to analyze and exploit human connections as networks on the model of the electric circuit.

The enormous facilitation of human connections due to the World Wide Web and email, accessed from laptops and Smartphones, has prompted the burgeoning of social networking software from Linked-in and Facebook to the socializing of browsing, listening to music, and sharing photos through the use of programs like Apple’s Ping, Google’s Picasa, and RockMelt’s Facebook/Browser mashup.
It is a cliché that technological extensions of human physical powers greatly expand humanity’s impact on nature but by the same token wither the former natural capacity. Power steering enabled non-Herculean people to drive huge 18-wheelers. The same is true of mental capacities. Plato famously warned that the implementation of writing would seriously shrink memory’s range and reach. And he was right. In my own time, the introduction of handheld calculators of increasing sophistication have ruined common capacities for notational and mental mathematics.

With modern mass media, the occasions and necessity for ordinary socializing and entertainment have met the same fate. Talk shows provide scripts for private conversations, and supermarket magazines obviate even the humble talent for being a nosy neighbour or a local gossip. Americans devour more media ‘news’ on a daily basis than the plugged-in members of any nation on earth. Yet, Americans score quite low on any current-events quiz, majorities not knowing the name of their own Congressperson or the map location of Iran or Israel.

Once marketing enters the equation, the obsession for large reliable numbers leads to a dumbing-down and a lowering of most norms. This learned disability not only means a lack of interest in meeting a previous norm and thus a lack of ability: it now means ignorance that such a norm might exist.

Following Leo Marx and Lewis Mumford, James Carey developed the notion of the ‘Technological Sublime’ to generalize the schizoid reaction to new technologies. On the one hand, railroads, automobiles, movies, radio, television, and the Internet will redeem and transform humanity to higher levels of morality, community, justice, innovation, understanding and on and on.

On the other hand, the same technologies will facilitate the erosion of local loyalties, marital fidelity, and promote racial stereotyping, warmongering, and character assassination. If we know where to look, both attitudes and expectations have been met, if in somewhat diminished form (see http://tinyurl.com/2gywza4).

Today both government and its opponents fully exploit the Internet for forming and strengthening politically effective networks, from all the dot govs to Wikileaks. All sides — and there are surely more than two — are drowned under a cataract of facts and revelations, mixed with factoids, fantasy, and conspiracy theories. In this context, I believe the use of Google is greatly enhanced by those who have some experience of the non-googled world of vetted and authoritative sources, which lend some kind of built-in discernment that the raw Web requires. To complete the loop, a social network of affined experts facilitates these crucial judgments.

We all remember how ordinary people through the use of Smartphone cameras and Twitter reported on the savage Islamicist crackdown in Ahmadinajad’s Iran. As I write, the powerful but repressed Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is planning to use the same cyber-media to expose any brutal secular state rigging of the election, showing the world if Mubarak continues his secular rule through more fraud and intimidation.

The old media contained everything good and bad, from the best to the worst, like a great city. Mass media have been and are the vehicles for mass culture, whose signature feature is ready accessibility and no expectation or desire for discernment. The World Wide Web is the greatest city in history and is home to a global mass culture of rock and pseudo-rebellion, of statement as fashion and fashion as statement. It is also the key to all the great libraries of the world and to the latest authoritative reports and studies in every subject: a formidable tool for populist mobilization and a venue for global scientific collaboration.
The transformation of the information highway into the social networks of Facebook and its new love of quick hook-ups and short bursts of feverish fanhood may be the disruptive heir to writing and the handheld calculator. Memory and reckoning have been outsourced. The question now is whether these new social networks on the Web are the latest occasion for learned disability, this time in basic human relations, that may render intimacy and trust irrelevant.

Or are they the latest Technological Sublime, tearing down and building up, perpetuating closed clans and opening much wider the door to what has been variously conceived as the Agent Intellect, the Noosphere, the Umma, the Society of Saints, the Mystical Body, the Family of Man and the City of God?

All of the above, no doubt, as we struggle with the promising puzzle and daunting challenge of human life together.

Reference

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