

ALEX GRECH

CHAPTER 11

BEYOND NETWORKED INDIVIDUALISM AND TRIVIAL PURSUIT

Putting disruptive technologies to good use

The web is more a social creation than a technical one. I designed it for a social effect – to help people get together – and not as a technical toy. The ultimate goal of the web is to support and improve our web-like existence in the world. We clump into families, associations and companies. We develop trust across miles, and distrust around corners. (Berners-Lee, 2000 p. 123)

In recent years, people with access to a computer and an internet connection have had the capability to deploy social media technologies to identify, mobilise and lead online tribes¹ and start to break down some of the barriers to more inclusive communities. This chapter argues that despite long-standing concerns about the digital divide, privacy and control, access to disruptive technologies by networked individuals offers an opportunity for the creation and distribution of information without mediation. Although online tribes may be more ephemeral and temporal than offline networks, they may also lead to activism beyond geographical confines, with new leaders empowered to raise their voice and engage with a sense of purpose, creating new stocks of social capital in the process.

THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Over the past three years, 'social media' has become a term associated with a social and technological phenomenon, primarily because of the exponential growth in user adoption of a set of commercially-supported, Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of the read/write web or Web 2.0,ⁱⁱ and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media technologies can loosely be grouped into the following categories: wikis, blogs, micro-blogs, photo-sharing sites, slide-sharing sites, real search syndication (RSS), social networks, social bookmarking, podcasts, video-sharing and instant messaging. Most social media technologies are free for the end user for the basic services, helping make them mainstream tools of

choice to communicate across time and space with individuals and groups of any size. The Nielsen Social Media Report for Q3 2011 says that across a sample of 10 global markets, social networks and blogs are the top online destination in each country, accounting for the majority of time spent online and reaching at least 60 percent of active Internet users. Facebook, a social networking site, grew from 100 million active users in August 2008 to over 750 million by August 2011.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to Graham (1999, p. 37) the marks of a truly transforming technology are twofold: the ability to serve recurrent needs better (qualitatively as well as quantitatively); and having a major impact upon the form of social and political life. Social media appears to meet these requirements. The significant media shift is from the 'one-to-many' broadcast mechanism to a 'many-to-many social exchange model', rooted in online conversations between authors, people, and peers. This model has created opportunities for people with similar interests, values, or ideas to participate, connect, interact, collaborate, produce, network and form relationships. Citizens have tools that can transform them from passive content readers into publishers, getting close to the ideal of 'citizen media' (Rodriguez, 2001) where groups of like-minded individuals can collaborate and mobilise towards a common cause, without mediation.

In practice, the collaborative environments of the 'read/write web' at the root of online social media networks have existed on the internet since the 1980s, when popular internet forums such as the WELL^{iv} led to the coining of the term 'virtual community' (Rheingold, 1993). Within this context, social media can be seen to be the latest stage in the evolution of the information society, as we begin to see a series of economic, social, and cultural adaptations that make possible a radical transformation of the information environment we occupy as autonomous individuals, citizens, and members of cultural and social groups (Benkler, 2006, p. 1).

What social media has particularly facilitated is the empowerment of individuals: as opposed to communities organised by topic, the media celebrates personal (or egocentric) networks, with the individual at the centre of their own community (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), with the capacity to increase social ties and interaction, provide an outlet for self-expression, and assist in helping with information seeking and task completion (Gallant, Boone, & Heap, 2007). The updated claim for Web 2.0 is about harnessing collective intelligence, where value is facilitated by technology, but co-created by and for the community of connected users (O'Reilly & Battelle, 2009). As we move away from the old mass media topology of information networks from the hub and spoke to a distributed architecture with multidirectional connections, passive consumers of mass media formerly known as the audience (Gillmor, 2006) have the means to become active participants and producers of the networked public sphere, with increased freedom to participate in creating information and knowledge (Benkler, 2006). There are frequent claims that social media contributes to a reinvigorated public sphere – free of central organisation (Farrell & Drezner, 2007), with the potential for expression ranging from collective action to a virtual private square (Papacharissi, 2009). In practice, there are several, different levels of individual participation within this

new public sphere. Li and Bernkoff (2008) developed a social technographics profile that grouped people according to the way they participate in social media: *Inactives, Spectators, Joiners, Collectors, Critics and Creators*. They coined the term 'groundswell' to explain the practice whereby people increasingly use web 2.0 technologies to get the things they need from each other, rather than from traditional institutions such as corporations, teaching institutions, or indeed their immediate geographic or socio-economic communities. Levering on the groundswell concept, there are three primary reasons why the time is now ripe for this groundswell to become more inclusive:

1. **Technology Diffusion:** Information and communication technologies (ICTs) continue to spread throughout the world as more people gain access to the internet and its wealth of information and applications. Access to the internet via mobile cellular networks has grown rapidly with the increasing availability of IMT-2000/3G networks and enabled devices, including mobile handsets and data cards that allow users to access the internet over the mobile cellular network using their computers. Internet access speeds are also increasing, with fixed broadband replacing dial-up in most developed countries, accompanied by a decline in tariffs. According to ITU (2011), by the end of 2010, in developed countries, mobile-cellular has reached saturation, recording penetration rates of over 100 per cent, and a growth rate of only one per cent during the past year. Mobile growth in developing countries remains buoyant, at 20 per cent, with subscriptions corresponding to 70 per 100 inhabitants at the end of 2011. Mobile cellular penetration in developing countries has more than doubled since 2005, when it stood at only 23 per cent.
2. **Economics:** The human instinct to belong to a group that shares, cooperates and acts in concert online has to date been constrained by costs of transactions, subscriptions, downloads etc. The fact that the primary social media tools are free and readily-accessible to anyone with an internet connection has not just led to mass consumer take-up, but also turned long-standing business models on their head. Technology convergence has finally found the mass user-generated content it requires to flourish; but up-front investments in infrastructure and innovation need to be monetised, and the capitalist model is still struggling with 'freeconomics' (Anderson, 2009). Content and basic services are given away for free to the majority of users in the hope of selling premium services to entities who are attracted to the huge number of users congregated on a particular social media platform. There are many concerns that the price being paid for the 'freemium' model is user privacy, with user-generated data being used for the profit of companies such as Facebook and Google who are at the hub of the crowd-sourcing around social media applications. O'Neil (2009, p. 23) puts this succinctly:

The traditional libertarian concern for privacy has its limits: when it contradicts the profit motive. For the exhaustive profiles listing people's most intimate material, spiritual or consumer preferences – which they have themselves helpfully created – legally belongs to the owners of Facebook, and to the advertisers they sell this information to. In informational capitalism individual users can freely copy and distribute digitised corporate content, and corporations can freely copy and distribute digitised user-generated content.

3. **Social Engagement:** The most sweeping claim for social media is that it facilitates direct democracy by allowing ordinary citizens to bypass the mediation of elites and information gate-keepers and challenge hierarchical discourse and authority. The advent of web 2.0 combined with the global uptake of mobile technology provides citizens with the opportunity to move seamlessly from content consumers to publishers, participants and even activists. If everyone can have a voice and everyone can link to everyone else, the promise is that no one is in a position to dictate what anyone else can say or do. Inspired individuals can use the new technologies to engage with others in initiatives relating to migration, disability, ethnicity, racism, youth positioning and (dis)empowerment, identity, gender issues, crime and deviance, labelling, stigma, social policy, activism, globalisation, citizenship, human rights, social exclusion, and social cohesion.

There is a wealth of recent events to support the claim that social media is enabling social engagement and political activism. On 26th December 2004, within hours of the Asian tsunami, a blog^v was set up to coordinate a sustained collective aid response from around the world, far more quickly than any regional government: more aid was contributed via this source than any individual government's effort. Facebook has been used as a platform to build connections and organise actions – from the 2008 protests against the Colombian FARC, a 40-year old terrorist organization, to fighting oppressive, fringe groups in India. Costa Ricans used Twitter to coordinate efforts to share new information and help victims of a major earthquake in 2009. The Arab Spring saw widespread use of Facebook and Twitter in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Syria and Libya, leading Shirky (2011) to claim that social media have become 'coordinating tools for all of the world's political movements'. Indeed, 2011 will be remembered as the year for much populist and utopian discourse about 'Twitter and Facebook revolutions', fuelled by the embracement of social media by major news networks such as CNN and Al Jazeera.

POWER TO THE NETWORKED INDIVIDUAL

Online tribes are rooted in networks of micro groups that are likely to be transient. Maffesoli (1996) predicted that as the culture and institutions of modernism declined, societies would look to the organisational principles of the distant past for guidance, and that the post-modern era would therefore be the era of 'neo-

tribalism' – small groups of individuals distinguished by shared lifestyles, tastes, a common subculture and complexes of meanings. These neo-tribes might not exist for a long period of time, or might even be unstable or small scale, not fixed by any of the established parameters of modern society. O'Neil (2009) concurs on the temporal nature of 'neo-tribes': they may happen to have goals and finality, but this is not as essential as the energy expended on constituting the group as such, and the capacity to switch from one group to another. In contrast to the stability induced by classical tribalism, based on ethnically and culturally fixed membership, neo-tribalism is characterised by fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal.

The temporal yet intensive aspect of these neo-tribes and the propensity of their members to 'switch' from one group to another are reminiscent of Wellman's (2002) view that when people have a strong sense of community and sense of belonging they will mobilise their social capital more willingly and effectively^{vi} – but that they will also operate under the guise of 'networked individualism'.

The shift to a personalised, wireless world affords networked individualism, with each person switching between ties and networks. People remain connected, but as individuals rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and households. Individuals switch rapidly between their social networks. Each person separately operates his networks to obtain information, collaboration, orders, support, sociability and a sense of belonging. (Wellman, 2002, p. 15)

This chapter's tenet is that engagement with social media and membership of an online tribe can contribute to an individual's social capital – particularly for individuals who feel marginalised. Definitions of social capital typically contain elements of social networks, social support and trust. Indeed, Bourdieu's definition of social capital (1986, pp. 248-249) resonates of the new tribes:

... the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.

Online tribes can also be viewed as the arena where new stocks of social capital are created and maintained. Being able to manage Twitter effectively to connect with people with similar interests or set up a sustainable Facebook page for a cause or an event, is likely to provide the user with incremental 'status' in the online communities in which he/she chooses to engage in, which may not be possible in the offline world. Such online activity may also enhance, stimulate or support existing face-to-face relationships, thus increasing stocks of existing social capital in the process. There are no hard and set rules as to how and when this happens. In small, bounded societies like the Mediterranean island of Malta, where I live, and where 47%^{vii} of the population is on Facebook, it is easy to meet up with people face to face after you have engaged with them online: it may not be so practical in other places. According to a report from the Commission of European Communities (2009), internet use is also associated with the increased likelihood

that users will engage in civic activities. In fact, while about half of internet users reported their participation in social activities, only a third of non-internet users did so. Clearly this requires further investigation.

Social network theory has long held that individual centrality in a network is strongly associated with knowledge and power. I believe that the individual's *ability* to use social media tools *strategically* is vital if they are to contribute to a more inclusive community. Lovink (2005) says there are no networks outside of society, and like all-human techno entities they are infected with power – undermining power as they produce it. Foucault revealed the reciprocal connections between power and knowledge.

Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (1977, p. 27)

Breaking down the barriers to more inclusive communities requires the knowledge to operate the online tribe as a Foucault power machine, on a range of scales, traversing intra-local networks and overlapping with trans-national insurgencies. Social media represents an opportunity for individuals who are excluded or marginalised from the mainstream and who have access to the internet to set up, lead and mobilise tribes around shared interests. It empowers not just individuals, but the emergence of passionate groupings around leaders and common interests. Geography and proximity, so long attached to the concept of community, have become superfluous to those with access to the internet – so tribes can operate as dispersed social networks. In fact, people may have a stronger sense of solidarity within networks of interest because they are based on choice and consciously shared interests rather than on what may be the accident of shared location (Michaelson, 1996).

In the same way that people may need the comfort of others in their same situation, they may also seek to pass as members of other (more-inclusive) tribes. The sense of 'community' may not necessarily mean finding people 'of your own kind' but also others who may not know of your 'marginalised' status – or indeed other people who feel equally marginalised, for totally different reasons (e.g. disabled people and ethnic and racial minorities), and seek comfort in connecting with others through social media. Within some of these, you may have no desire to demonstrate that you are, indeed, disabled, black etc. And this desire to 'protect' or even fake identity may well be another aspect of social media interaction that needs to be investigated: the propensity of people who are typically marginalised to pass themselves as less-marginalised using the blanket cover/anonymity of the internet, hence pushing for a serious questioning and exploration of issues of identity and identification.

The mainstream *trust* in all things digital and social media in particular, as demonstrated by the mass user take up of social media networks, is also contributing to a gradual growth in offline, face to face, interpersonal relationships. Wellman (2002) believes that the internet is used to complement other forms of

communication, which leads to an overlap between online and offline interactions, suggesting the emphasis should be placed on how online communities become integrated with physical communities. Castells (2001, p. 131) argues that:

Individuals build their networks, on-line and off-line, on the basis of their interests, values, affinities, and projects ... what we observe in our societies is the development of a *communication hybrid* that brings together physical place and cyber place.

To make the hybrid become the norm, online interaction becomes the glue before and after face to face meetings in the physical space. We appear to have rapidly moved away from virtual communities of people who connected online and never met, to a multi-directional networked society. Ferlander (2003) believes that the only difference between virtual and physical communities is in the mechanisms of communication used, and not necessarily the meaning of the relationships involved, the social process they encompass, or the effect they have on their members. Again, this does not imply that online communities can or will replace the need for human contact and face to face communication or satisfy emotive and other (for example sexual) needs: but our social worlds are rapidly going digital regardless, fuelled by the take up of devices such as the iPhone and the iPad, and the applications mushrooming around them.

It's way too early for nirvana

The hypothesis that social media facilitates the set up of online tribes and hence contributes to social inclusion is subject to a number of caveats, many of which may be uniquely or collectively more powerful than any individual's *desire to set up and participate* in online tribes. Digital inclusion is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for social inclusion in contemporary society, notably in technologically developed settings and where technology is more or less available to most irrespective of social, cultural, economic and political differences. Castells (2001, p. 277) notes that in a global economy and a network society where most things that matter are dependent on internet-based networks, to be switched off is to be sentenced to marginality.

For social media to contribute to more inclusive communities, the technologies must open up community voices and participation (Pettit et al., 2009). They must facilitate social, political and cultural models that are free from interference by the state, market actors, and multilateral agencies; produced by the local community in their own language for their own consumption on issues that they themselves deem relevant to their needs and so 'alternative' in content from the dominant media. Media and communication can no longer be reserved as engineering tools of hegemonic and centrally located actors – they have to become personalised, readily-accessible tools for the weak and marginalised, so the latter may define, claim, and give meaning to their citizenship, and re-create the social and political openings and alternative spaces where their voices might be heard (Saeed, 2009).

As a medium, technology is far from neutral: the daily escalation of computer use reproduces and strengthens social divisions related to gender, age, education

and work. The 'digital divide' threatens to exacerbate existing social disadvantage. Ironically, the technology that holds the key to more egalitarian participation could well become the instrument of further discrimination (Seymour, 2001).

The 'digital divide' is a 'relative concept' and compares the level of ICT development in a country with another at a certain point in time. It is often associated with imbalances in access to physical infrastructure, such as computers and internet; or conventional communication infrastructure, such as fixed telephone lines. In 2011, the digital divide remains a significant barrier to inclusive communities. According to ITU (2011), fixed internet access in developing countries is still limited (especially in dispersed rural areas), and, where available, often slow, unreliable and/or expensive. While fixed-broadband penetration in developed countries was almost 24 per cent at the end of 2010, in developing countries it reached only 4.2 per cent.

Over the past 36 months, the global take up of social media technologies has addressed some of the initial fears associated with technology – that it would be confined to traditional computer users, such as young well-educated men from high social strata. However, in the case of traditionally disadvantaged groups *without access to ICT*, there is a real risk that the digital divide will only perpetuate existing inequalities and in fact get worse. Castells (1999) refers to the digital exclusion of poor countries and neighbourhoods as 'technological apartheid'. Indeed, differential access to technology may be perpetuating existing social, economic and political inequalities with long historical lineages, as well as creating new ones.

Putnam (2000) asserts that the digital divide must be challenged directly if social capital is to be created, citing the internet as a kind of twenty-first century public utility. It becomes the obligation of governments to address the issue by providing access to ICT and the internet and train people in computer skills as a basic right (collective ideal). Instead, recent history is riddled with examples of governments such as Venezuela's trying to block access to social media. On 2nd June 2009, in the run up to the tenth anniversary of Tiananmen Square, China followed a long-standing ban on YouTube by blocking access to several sites including Twitter, Flickr, Wordpress and Bing; Facebook was blocked on 7th July 2009 (Wauters, 2009). In May 2010, Bangladesh briefly blocked access to Facebook after satirical images of the prophet Muhammad and the country's leaders were uploaded. Twitter users managed to foil Iran's clampdown on international media reporting during the June protests, with the US state department asking Twitter to postpone planned maintenance to enable Iranians to tweet on events in their cities (Parr, 2009). Many Western Governments, including the UK, took the lead of the Obama Washington.gov portal and set up portals with links to social media platforms in a show of 'open government' intent to engage with citizens in a more open, personal and transparent manner. And yet, on 11 August 2011, in the middle of the UK riots, Prime Minister David Cameron said that his Government was considering turning off social networks to prevent people using technology to plot 'violence, disorder and criminality' (Cameron, 2011) – at the same time that citizens were using Twitter to mobilise city centre clean ups.

The hope remains that as 99% of the content on the Web is privately owned, governments can only own the pipeline that transmits it, not what flows through it (Krotoski, 2009). So one could add that communicative capitalism is far from dead: attempts at global regulation such as the *Stop Online Piracy Act* (SOPA) in the US and the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) proposed in 2012, are being resisted by citizens who defend the notion of the 'free Internet'. Nevertheless, although the ubiquitous use of social media and mobile technologies has received global attention because of the Arab Spring, the assumption of their automatic democratic empowerment remains optimistic and narrowly technocentric. For instance, further research needs to be undertaken to understand how a new media ecosystem may be emerging, where social media operates in tandem with other mainstream, community and citizen media in contributing to communicative efforts for democratisation, empowerment and social change.

Concerns about privacy on online social networks attracted much mainstream media attention in April 2010, when Facebook was widely perceived to be tampering with its users' privacy settings as part of a systematic strategy to use personal information for profit. Facebook responded quickly in May 2010, providing users with more control over how content and basic information is shared, and an option to turn off all applications.^{viii} At the time of writing this chapter, there are many who believe that Facebook's global reach and subscription base merit the company to be regulated like a public utility company. Google appears to have learnt lessons from its clumsy launch of its Buzz social network in February 2010 by providing several privacy features when launching its Google+ service in June 2011. In the future, it is inevitable that users of social media technologies will have to weigh up the trade-off between the benefits of free, ubiquitous, useful technologies and trusting powerful, private companies with their most intimate data, without a full understanding of how that data is being used in the provider's business model. As long as the means of production are available for free to networked publics and the tools and platforms are owned by corporations, the risk of regular breaches of the 'social contract' between the two parties remains very real.

Academic concerns frequently cite that online social networks are simply equated with the technologies they use, without a coherent grasp of the social, cultural, and political processes involved in making them transformative and sustainable. Views about the outlook for the future of social media networks remain polarised: from optimism about their transformative potential (Tapscott, 2006; Leadbeater 2008; Shirky, 2008), to concerns about Internet freedom (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006; Lessig, 2004) and accusations that unmediated, user-generated content is leading to the collapse of culture as we knew it, through the loss of traditional gate-keepers (Keen, 2009; Lanier, 2010). Rheingold (2010) proposes a new type of education, if the new social channels are to be used for advocacy and knowledge management purposes, as opposed to passive consumption:

Attention is the fundamental literacy. Digital media and networks can only empower the people who learn how to use them – and pose dangers to those who don't know

what they are doing. Those people who do not gain fundamental literacies of attention, crap detection, participation, collaboration, and network awareness are in danger of all the pitfalls critics point out – shallowness, credulity, distraction, alienation, addiction.

Inevitably, social technologies can also turn ugly: there is a disturbing trend in sites being used to disseminate online terror and hate campaigns. The power of an online, free platform to reach a potentially global audience will not be lost on people with dubious objectives. Castells (2003, p. 94) says that: “the network structure of the Internet reproduces the autonomous, spontaneous networking of militia groups ... without boundaries, and without a definite plan, but sharing a purpose, a feeling and most of all, an enemy”.

In 2010, the Simon Wiesenthal Center identified around 8,000 social media sites with elements of religious terror groups, anti-semitism, racism, xenophobia and the likes – an increase of 30% from the previous 12 months. Facebook groups and *Second Life* have been identified as potential communication and event-planning tools for terrorist and hate groups (McCarthy, 2009). Even micro-states like Malta have their share of racist, xenophobic blogs, such as *vivamalta.org*, run by extreme right-wing organisations promoting a homogeneous Maltese identity and culture to counter the perceived invasion of the island by refugees from Africa. As more and more people cluster around social networks, extremists are going to the same sites.

WORKING TO REMOVE THE BARRIERS

And yet, the disruptive technologies remain remarkably resilient despite visible or covert attempts at control by corporates or censorship by governments. Information flows quickly online, and the lack of visible intermediaries empowers new citizen journalists and activists. For every dubious social media application, there are hundreds of initiatives such as *Business Fight Poverty*, *Bottom of the Pyramid*, *Social Entrepreneurs and Knowledge Management for Development (KM4DEV)*. Ushahidi, a non-profit company developing open source software played a prominent role during the 2008 post-election crisis in Kenya in crowdsourcing crisis information. Avaaz.org, a global campaign and petition network with more than 6 million members from over one-hundred countries, is an example of the global-local nexus at the heart of e-participation and -mobilisation. NGOs and charities have been particularly adept at using social media channels to raise their profiles and conduct fund-raising campaigns targeted at user groups most likely to be responsive to the ‘message’.

If we are to believe as Benkler (2006) does that access to knowledge has become central to human development (p. 302) and that the welfare and growth of developing and less-developed economies and societies rely heavily on the transfer of information-embedded goods and tools, information, and knowledge from the technologically advanced economies (pp. 354-355), there is a compelling argument to resist attempts at control and privatisation of social media platforms; and to lever these as tools through which innovation, research and development can be pursued

by local actors in the developing world itself. The emergence of peer production may provide new solutions to some of the problems of access to information and knowledge, particularly when trying to work around the barriers that the international intellectual property regime places on development. There is a growing awareness of the human cost of relying solely on the patent-based production system, and of the potential of the commons-based strategies to alleviate these failures.

The great hope for closing the digital divide is wireless-broadband. With the introduction of high-speed mobile internet access in an increasing number of countries, the number of mobile broadband subscriptions has grown steadily and in 2010 surpassed those for fixed broadband. In poor and emerging economies in the global south, wireless-broadband including prepaid mobile broadband is mushrooming, and Internet users are shifting from fixed to wireless connections and devices. Poor countries, particularly in Africa, see mobile as a core, rather than a complimentary internet technology (ITU, 2010). By the end of 2010, around 30 per cent of the world's population was online, up from 12 per cent in 2003 and 6 per cent in 2000, with much of the growth driven by large countries such as *China, Brazil, India, Nigeria and the Russian Federation*. Conversely, about 80 per cent of the developing countries' population were not yet using the Internet.

As Di Maggio et al (2004) suggest, we need to move from just focusing on the digital divide of "haves/have-nots" and "users/non-users" to the full range of *digital inequality* in equipment, autonomy, skill, support, and scope of use among people who are already online. It is just as vital to provide people with the skills to enable them to use the internet and social media effectively, as solving the inequalities in access to ICT. Social media also provides a new opportunity for corporates to meet social responsibilities by addressing a wide array of environmental, social and governance issues, including those relating to a more inclusive society (Bonini et al., 2009). NGOs and key individuals engaged in social media would benefit from following simple rules such as: researching online communities relevant to the target audience (listening); monitoring these communities to determine etiquette and community culture; participating only when relevant to share valuable information; engaging with transparency about affiliations to build trust within the eventual tribe.

Open source continues to thrive, driven by the 'hacker ethic' of people who may never meet or know each other and yet collaborate online to build technologies for the benefits of others. There are tribes of people who program enthusiastically in the belief that information-sharing is a powerful good, and that it is an ethical duty of hackers to share their expertise by writing free software and facilitating access to information and computing resources whenever possible.^{ix}

Although trust between online users is often perceived to be fragile, the lack of physical clues on the internet also creates fewer prejudices and enables marginalised groups, such as disabled people or those with low self-esteem to participate more equally with other people. The closed membership of online community sites has the benefits of a walled communication garden. Many online

tribes self-regulate: members have to engage with respect; bullies get kicked out; crises are managed, sometimes more publicly than in the offline world.

The One Laptop per Child (OLPC^x) project is supported by academia, industry, the arts, business, and the open-source community committed to providing a 'rugged, low-cost, low-power, connected laptop with content and software designed for collaborative, joyful, self-empowering learning 'to more than one billion children in the emerging world that don't have access to adequate education (OLPC mission statement)'. In small countries such as Malta, Internet and PC access is subsidised by local government, with local councils providing centres where people can use a PC and access the internet at local council premises. The internet café is still ubiquitous in urban areas, and plays a role in overcoming the digital divide with impact on social exclusion, the decline of social capital and loss of community. Following the lead of the Obama administration, social media technologies are also attracting the attention of governments in poorer countries, interested in deploying cost-effective applications to facilitate access to public information, enhancing information literacy and 'humanising' the process of 'open government'. Public sector and other non-profit institutions that have traditionally played an important role in development can do so with a greater degree of efficacy by taking the lead in putting open source, social media technologies for the benefit of more inclusive societies.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter's central argument is that the strategic use of social media by skilled individuals provides access to shared local and worldwide networks. This has a significant potential for the creation of new social capital for marginalised communities with access to the internet. Social media also provides the platforms for the mobilisation of minority groups. Ethnic minorities can set up multi-lingual community sites to help new arrivals in a host country and help provide unsanitised information on issues such as ranging from culture, language, religion, gender and sex to financial structures. Social media enables inspired individuals to set up and manage a variety of tribes – without losing their own individuality and identity in the process. It may provide a platform for those who feel marginalised and isolated by connecting them with people who are not in the same physical environment. It facilitates social participation at a low cost across physical and temporal barriers. The true value of social media is in the combination of virtual and real community, online and offline interaction between members of the tribe. Having access to the internet and social media provides opportunities for certain disadvantaged people to bridge visible or perceived gaps, and bond with people that they would not normally feel able to engage with.

Although social media take-up is dominated by the Western world, the list of countries with the fastest growing numbers of Facebook users over the past 12 months includes countries such as Indonesia, Romania, the Philippines and Colombia.^{xi} Trust in word of mouth appears to be as strong in Western paradigms as in the close-knit communities prevalent in non-Western contexts.

The corollary is that no amount of available technology will prevail over one key factor: the human will to put new social media tools to good use and engage with others. The risks of digital and social exclusion have not disappeared; in some cases, they get even worse as certain disadvantaged groups continue to be excluded from the internet. It has become necessary to have access to the internet, computers and the skills to use them in order to be able to participate more fully in contemporary society. It is also becoming easier to become disconnected from face to face social interaction and withdraw to one confined in front of a monitor. Social media can therefore be both anti-social and empowering. It can be used to bring tribes together or tear people apart. The implications and ramifications of the new interaction will continue to unfold. There is both freedom and loneliness in the options opened by social media.

Our desire to 'belong' without losing either our sense of individuality or identity means that the notion of community itself is changing – smaller, in harder times, but also potentially stronger. It is just a different type of community: tribal, transnational, online, which requires digital literacy and transliteracy (Thomas et al., 2007) and critical engagement with the functionings of these new and consistently dynamic groupings. Social media provides an unprecedented opportunity to find, join and lead a tribe, and to start working at wearing down the barriers to whatever keeps citizens marginalised and on the outside.

NOTES

- ⁱ In this chapter, a tribe refers to a group of individuals who use web 2.0 technologies for online social interactions. They are social formations which favour grassroots direct democracy, the pleasurable provision of free gifts, and the feeling of proximity to others. Maffesoli (1996) uses the term 'neo-tribes' to describe new forms of sociality based on proxemics, the feeling of belonging. The emergence of mobile communications and pervasive computing led to Rheingold (2003) coining the term 'smart mobs'. Godin (2008) defined tribes as groups of people, connected to one another, connected to a leader and connected to an idea that inspires their passion. I use the term 'tribe' as opposed to 'community' as it indicates a more proactive degree of individual engagement online.
- ⁱⁱ The term 'Web 2.0' was coined by Tim O'Reilly, to describe the second generation of web-based communities and hosted services that evolved after the 'dot.com' crash of 2001 (O'Reilly, 2005; O'Reilly & Battelle, 2009). Web 2.0 is distinct from Web 1.0 in that its sites are interactive and allow users to do more than just retrieve information: it includes a social element where users generate and distribute content, often with the freedom to share and reuse under a Creative Commons licence.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Available at <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics> (Accessed 18 September 2011).
- ^{iv} Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link.
- ^v South-East Asia Earthquake and Tsunami Blog <http://tsunamihelp.blogspot.com/>.
- ^{vi} It is perhaps important to note that the increased attention paid to social capital is both a western enterprise, and notably in the context of increased neoliberalism and associated reductions in public sector intervention, as well as increased individualism (see Grech, 2009).
- ^{vii} Available at: <http://www.facebakers.com/countries-with-facebook/MT/?chart-interval=4> (Accessed 18 September 2011).
- ^{viii} Facebook (2011). Privacy policy explained. Available at: <http://www.facebook.com/privacy/explanation.php> (Accessed 18 September 2011).
- ^{ix} Raymond, E. (1996). *The new Hacker's dictionary*, 3rd edition 1996, cited in Himanen, 2001, p. vii.
- ^x OLPC mission statement available at: <http://laptop.org/en/vision/index.shtml>.

- ^{si} Facebakers (2011). Countries on Facebook, Facebook Statistics. Available at: <http://www.facebakers.com/countries-with-facebook/order/user-grow/> (Accessed 18 September 2011).

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