Social Media in Everyday Life: Is the Medium the Message or Has the Message Changed?

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The ubiquitousness of social media is becoming a cliché; it is hard to find someone who has either not heard of social media, does not use social media or does not feel the need to learn more about social media. This is similar to the widespread public interest in the world wide web and the dot.com explosion in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Many commentators say it is a new beginning or a 'brave new world' without really understanding the second phrase in particular, derived as it is from Huxley's (1932 [2007]) novel of the same name, which portrayed a future world in which eugenics determined a citizen's place in society and in which workers are merely consumers driven by carnal and sensory urges. Ill-thought-out headlines aside, the importance of social media and the internet is substantial for researchers, business and our personal lives.

Erik Qualman has, in the second edition of his book on social media, produced an engaging publication on the many aspects of social media which will interest those with no technological background and those who use it daily and want to explore its potential. Qualman's is not an academic text, and avoids conceptual arguments in favour of the prosaic, but its cover says it is 'based on meetings with seventy-five Fortune 1000 companies, fifty colleges and universities, and more than 100 small businesses and nonprofits since the first edition', so there is an empirical basis to his claims. Though filled with American examples, it is still a useful read for those outside of North America as he explains the various instances of social media in very accessible and vivid terms.

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IT'S NOT A ZERO-SUM GAME

While Qualman is very positive about social media in nearly all its forms he is good at tempering unbridled cheerleading for its various platforms by providing apposite quotes from industry leaders. One, from Andrew Heyward of the Monitor Group, concerns how we should view social media with regard to what came before; some commentators have presented facile suggestions that social media will render the previous ways we communicated obsolete: 'We should be careful of these zero-sum games where the new media drives out the old … I think what we see is growing sophistication about making the channels work together effectively' (p. 50).

It is not that we should unquestioningly embrace every aspect of social media and change our societies to suit it, but rather we should consider what we want for our societies and use the best parts of social media to facilitate such change. That includes a place for the neologistic and re-invigorated verbal nouns no news piece seems to be without: 'tweeting', 'trending' and 'blogging', to name a few. Qualman explains in detail the importance of such terms and activities for our social, business and political lives.

It is hard not to be swept along by his very positive view of social media, which has inspired the supposed paradigm shift which is captured in the book's title, *Socialnomics*, or 'the value created and shared via social media and its efficient influence on outcomes (economic, political, relational, etc.) … it's word of mouth on digital steroids. A subset of this is that in the future we will no longer search for products and services; rather they will find us via social media' (p. xvii).

This is an evocative but contestable quote, as is Qualman's view that 'the economic potential of social media [is] in its ability to reduce inefficient marketing and middlemen … the winners today are great products and services' (p. xviii). Unfortunately this is not the case; inefficient marketing and middlemen still seem to peddle poor goods and services in spite of social media. However, Qualman makes a strong case for social media being the means by which people can, as consumers and as citizens, share experiences quickly and collectively and so learn not to purchase inferior good and services.

PLUS Ç A CHANGE …?

Though he acknowledges that the internet and social media are not the same thing, Qualman strays into statements which presume they are. Historically, this is important as people could communicate by e-mail even before the web was developed and could share instant message forums as long ago as the 1980s. This would suggest that social media is not necessarily as radically new as its advocates propound. Furthermore, the 'Arab Spring' of 2009 and 2010, which led to the overthrow of some despotic and undemocratic regimes, was not the first time that computer-based communication devices enabled rapid message delivery between individuals; in 1986 a French national student strike was coordinated using Minitel, an early computer device. So, our present social media is nothing new in this respect.

What is novel is the mobile computing technology which supports social media, particularly the rapid uptake of smart phones and tablet computers in the last five years, which

has meant that people may access the internet more easily on the move without having to sit down at a computer. Lighter, more portable devices have meant that more people are accessing the web to enter discussions on social forums, such as Facebook, or to purchase goods and services. The resulting significantly larger number of consumers means that it is more attractive for programmers to develop apps for even relatively small market niches.

What is also different is that before, to use the parlance of the marketing uptake curve, a relatively small number of early uptakers and innovators purchased and communicated on the web and by social media. Now even laggards are using social media to communicate their musings, whether others want to hear them or not; easily uploadable blogs and video clips have given rise to what some term 'citizen journalism', which, while short on considered analysis, broadcasts greater raw information on events and allows the subversion of the powerful or corrupt, such as with the Arab Spring. This democratising, as some term it, of web content allows the citizen's or consumer's voice to be presented to others unfiltered, thus increasing the chance that goods, services and even formal democratic processes will be more greatly influenced by the views of the people. To this end, Qualman makes the remarkable claim that 'before social media, Obama would not have won his own party's nomination, let alone become the 44th president of the United States' (p. 63).

CHALLENGES AND COMFORTS

Qualman believes it is not going to stop there and says that 'there is something beyond social media that we don't even know about yet that will rise in the coming years' (p. 275). One question for academics might thus be how we position ourselves with regard to social media. Some are actively engaged in tweeting and posting blogs and have raised their profile in the news media substantially by doing so. Some say that this is useful to their careers as third level institutions often wish to hire media-savvy researchers who will improve their college's brand image. However, I was impressed by a newspaper article (Tol, 2011) which suggested that for economists in Ireland the amount of self-authored peer-reviewed journal articles was inversely correlated with the amount of newspaper articles written. Nevertheless, though their publications in high-impact journals may have suffered, participating in the media hasn't harmed some academics' careers, with some gaining professorships on the basis of their media work.

More important are the implications of social media: the lack of privacy (O'Brien and Torres, 2012) and the enabling of communications in important areas, such as healthcare. Like any important societal phenomenon, the initial period of rapid expansion is often greeted with unquestioning and fawning media coverage. Such has been the case with Facebook and other similar media sites. There have been occasional pieces on the implications for our privacy, with O'Brien and Torres (2012: 64) starkly suggesting that:

> While privacy risks tend to be underplayed on social networking sites, the reality is the public sphere that is the internet means millions of users around the world are interacting and socialising in an extremely open and public environment. Unless protective

controls are actively used social networking users risk losing control over their personal information, which subsequently erodes online privacy.

The irony is that while social media site users are often inconsistent or ignorant about privacy controls they, like many people around the world, expressed outrage in early 2013 when it was revealed that the United States government is using the PRISM programme to collect data on them without their permission (Rushe, 2013). Qualman advises caution: 'the key message is don't put anything on social media that you don't want the whole world to know about, because eventually, one way or another, the world *will* know about it' (p. 99, emphasis in original).

In addition to this, it is not clear whether he is being ironic when he talks about the pros and cons of modern technology: 'We have to live our lives as if our mother is watching us. The pros are these: less crime, less adultery, less lying, and the like. The cons: we have less privacy and fewer channels to release stress without ramifications' (p. 274).

IT'S A MATTER OF TRUST

Thus an important issue for present and future users of social media will be that of trust, that goods and services ordered online will perform in the way consumers want and that the online social communities in which users invest time and emotional energy do not misuse that trust. This will become increasingly important as medical and health platforms move their services online; medical websites are not new but the greater acceptance of social networking sites for the general population may encourage hospital users and acute condition sufferers to share their experiences online, either with a doctor or another healthcare user.

Remote medical devices allow healthcare professionals to monitor the condition of those with chronic diseases and this is very much to be welcomed. However, human contact is often the best medicine as healthcare professionals can best assess a patient's circumstances in person. We need to ensure that a drive towards greater use of social media for treating patients remotely is not motivated by cost savings and is systematically research tested before it is rolled out. As the quote from Heyward suggests, above, social media is not a universal fix-all; our research efforts should be focused on where and how social media works for us, rather than us for it.

LISTENERS WILL SURVIVE

Qualman suggests that social media will require service providers and retailers to reflect on how well they respond to consumers:

But who is the winner in this new world? Customers and good companies win – which, as a society, we have been trying to achieve since the industrial revolution. Good companies view negative feedback as an opportunity to act on and adjust their products or services accordingly; bad companies view it as a nuisance or something they need to put an effort toward hiding (p. 297).

That is the point, we need to listen to whomsoever we deal with when using whatever platform, technological or otherwise, we use to communicate with others. So, to answer the question implicit in the title of this review, based as it is on Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967), the medium has changed and is a message all of its own but the message has not changed; we are still human beings, as citizens and consumers, who try to make sense of the world and social media is just the latest, very fast, way in which we try to do that.

In summary, Qualman has written a stimulating book on social media which is well worth reading. His book is full of enthusiasm for social media's possibilities and occasional dangers. He shows us these using a positive, engaging style and by providing examples to suggest why any present or future businessperson will need not merely to know about social media but also to master it. While some of his contentions are debatable, as I have suggested, this remains a very suitable publication for any business course on social media.

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