- PDF
- Send to a friend

The Latent Community in Every Webpage

Essay by Clay Shirky, May 15, 2008

On a Monday morning in March of 2006, forty thousand students in southern California stunned teachers and administrators by walking out of school to protest HR4437, a bill in the US Congress that would have mandated a crackdown on US immigrant populations. The largely Latino student group had been inspired to act by a similar protest that had taken place two days before. So many students walked from their schools to City Hall that they blocked traffic as they went, creating a very visible and public display for their cause.

There were several remarkable things about the protest. The size of the walkout alone made it unusual — getting tens of thousands people to take any coordinated political action is hard. Getting high school students to do so, when most of them are too young to vote, is even harder. Being able to do so without the school administration knowing was hardest of all — keeping a secret among 40,000 people has never been trivial. And doing it all in 48 hours should have been impossible — would have been impossible, in fact, even a year before.

The thing that made an instant, secret, and huge protest possible was the spread of new communication tools, especially MySpace and text messages on the phone. Armed with these tools, students were able to coordinate with one another, not just person to person but in groups. Using these tools, the messages they exchanged went to the people who mattered — the other students — without reaching the school administrators.

Making the protest possible, though, was not the same as making it happen. The thing that made it happen was real political feeling — the students had a message they wanted to send. MySpace and texting amplified that message, but they didn't create it; the real story here is the increased ability of an otherwise uncoordinated group to achieve its shared goals.

Economists would describe this change as a positive supply side shock to liberty. Whenever you improve a group's ability to communicate with one another, you change the things they are able to accomplish together. The old dictum that freedom of the press only exists for those who own a press points to the significance of the change; to speak online is to publish, and to publish online is to open the possibility of connecting with others. With the arrival of globally accessible publishing, freedom of speech now blends into freedom of the press, and freedom of the press blends into freedom of association.

With this blending of broadcast, conversational, and social elements into one medium, we have entered a world where every web page is a latent community — each page collects the attention of people interested in its contents, and those people might well be interested in conversing with one another as well. In most cases, that community will remain latent, either because the potential ties are too weak (any two users of Google are not likely to have much else in common) or because the people looking at the page are doing so separated by too wide a gulf of time. But in a growing number of cases, being able to synchronize large groups via social media is adding a new feature to traditional media; it is becoming not just a source of information but a site of coordination.

William James, the American philosopher, maintained that thinking is for doing, which to say that our brains don't exist for purposes of abstract cogitation, they exist to help us decide what to do

next. A similar transition is happening to media today: increasingly, publishing is for acting. Instead of just distributing information, many media outlets are also providing ways of gathering users, allowing them to come together as a group.

To put it in military terms, media can create 'shared awareness', the sense in a group that not only does each member understand what is going on, but that the understanding is similar among all, and, critically, each member understands this as well. Shared awareness is a useful precursor to coordinated group action, and given how recently we have had not just early adopters but whole societies online, most of the effects of this new leverage for freedom of assembly are still in the future.

Clay Shirky is an adjunct professor in NYU's graduate Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP), where he teaches courses on the interrelated effects of social and technological network topology — how our networks shape culture and vice-versa. He is most recently the author of Here Comes Everybody, the Power of Organizing Without Organizations*.*

All Cooperation Essays

The Cultural Commons

- A Brief Overview of U.S. Public Policy on OER from California's Community Colleges to the Obama Administration
  by Carolina Rossini, Erhardt Graeff
- The Need for a "Knowledge Web" for Scholarship
  by Carolina Rossini
- The Right to Communicate
  by Daithí Mac Síthigh

The Networked Public Sphere

- Bring in the Human Rights
  by Rikke Frank Jørgensen
- Decision-Making in a Culture of Participation
  by Craig Newmark
- (not) Newmark's Law
  by Craig Newmark

View all thematic areas »

Source URL: http://publius.cc/latent_community_every_webpage#comment-0