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A New Approach to Citizen Activism: The 5Cs Framework

The debate on whether internet and mobile technologies are transforming traditional power structures is dominated by three divergent narratives. According to the first, utopian, narrative, internet and mobile technologies enable individuals to publish and distribute content, self-organize into communities of interest and participate in collective action. As a result, they can create new types of media outlets, build new types of civil society organizations, and monitor, protest against and even bring down governments. Even though these new degrees of freedom are far from universal, they are fundamentally changing political power structures.

Social Technologies and Power Structures

Even though these new degrees of freedom are far from universal, they are fundamentally changing political power structures. The future has already arrived, this narrative insists, it's just not evenly distributed yet.

According to the second, status quo, narrative, power structures are ingrained into our society's institutions and internet and mobile technologies don't really change these institutions, or create new ones. The case studies compiled by the utopians constitute anecdotal evidence, at best, and the influence of

networked technologies will always be limited because of issues related to access or ability. So, internet and mobile technologies are a minor influence on political power structures, at best.

According to the third, dystopian, narrative, internet and mobile technologies are, in fact, enabling traditional institutions to further consolidate their power through censorship, surveillance and propaganda. So, even though they give us the illusion of greater power, they have, indeed, compromised our ability to protect our privacy, have access to diverse views, and build real institutions.

It's not easy to conclusively argue for one narrative or the other, unless we outline the entire range of possibilities that social technologies open up for citizens and activists.

The 5Cs Framework

Social technologies encompass many different types of tools, such as blogging (Wordpress, <http://wordpress.com>), microblogging (Twitter, <http://twitter.com>), video-sharing (YouTube, <http://youtube.com>), photo-sharing (Flickr, <http://flickr.com>), podcasting (Blog Talk Radio, <http://blogtalkradio.com>), mapping (Google Maps, <http://maps.google.com>), social networking (Facebook, <http://facebook.com>), social voting (Digg, <http://digg.com>), social bookmarking (Delicious, <http://delicious.com>), lifestreaming (FriendFeed, <http://friendfeed.com>), wikis (Wikipedia, <http://wikipedia.com>), virtual worlds (Second Life <http://secondlife.com>), and several new and hybrid tools.

Cutting across these tools, there are five underlying dynamics in social technologies, the 5Cs of social media: Content, Conversation, Collaboration, Community and Collective Intelligence. Taken together, these five dynamics constitute the value system of social technologies. The tools are transient, the buzzwords will change, but the value system embedded in these 5Cs is here to stay.

If we wish to understand whether and how social technologies can empower citizens, it's useful to explore how citizens and activists can leverage these five dynamics.

The First C: Content

The first C, Content, refers to the idea that social technologies allow everyone to become a creator, by making the publishing and distribution of multimedia content both free and easy, even for amateurs.

User generated content is the driver of the citizen journalism phenomenon, the notion that amateur users can perform journalist-like functions (accidentally or otherwise) by reporting and commenting on news. Citizen journalists have repeatedly emerged as critical in crisis reporting and several citizen journalist platforms like CNN iReport (<http://ireport.com>) Global Voices (<http://globalvoicesonline.org>), NowPublic (<http://nowpublic.com>) and AllVoices (<http://allvoices.com>) have emerged to harness their potential to report hyper-local news.

However, just because everyone can become a creator doesn't mean that everyone does. Researchers have found support for the 1:9:90 rule in many different contexts. The 1:9:90 rule says that 90% of all users are consumers, 9% of all users are curators and only 1% of the users are creators.

At the Content level, the design challenge is to create or harness focused content creation platforms that scale even if only 1% of the users create content.

So far, most initiatives in India have struggled in this respect. Platforms like MeriNews (<http://merinews.com>) are too entertainment focused to be called citizen journalism platforms and individual or group blogs like Kafila (<http://kafila.org>) don't have the scale to make a meaningful impact.

The Second C: Conversation

The second C, Conversation, refers to the idea that social technologies enable two-way dialogues between citizens that sometimes take the form of viral memes and tip into the mainstream consciousness.

One to one conversations tip into viral memes as consumers and curators congregate around compelling content. Natural disasters like the China earthquake and South East Asia tsunami and crisis situations like the Israel-Gaza war and the Mumbai terrorist attacks often lead to viral memes, sometimes misleading ones.

Sometimes, activism campaigns also tip into viral memes. The 2009 Valentine's Day Pink Chaddi campaign (<http://thepinkchaddicampaign.blogspot.com>) that protested against the right wing political party Sri Ram Sena by sending them pink panties as Valentine's Day gifts became viral when more than 50,000 people joined in on Facebook.

At the Conversation level, the design challenge is to create compelling content that demands to be shared and seed conversations around it that can tip into a viral meme.

Evidence suggests that the art of designing viral activism campaigns hasn't been perfected yet and most campaigns that to go viral happen to tip and find it difficult to replicate their own success later.

The Third C: Collaboration

The third C, Collaboration, refers to the idea that social technologies facilitate the aggregation of small individual actions into meaningful collective results.

Collaboration can happen at two levels: co-creation and collective action.

In co-creation, the value lies as much in the curated aggregate as in the individual contributions. Wikis are a perfect example of co-creation. Open group blogs, photo pools, video collages and similar projects are also good examples of co-creation.

Collective action goes one step further and uses online engagement to initiate meaningful action. Collective action can take the form of signing online petitions, fundraising, tele-calling, or organizing an offline protest or event.

At the Collaboration level, the design challenge is to start with a big task, break it down into individual actions (modularity) that are really small (granularity), and then put them together into a whole without losing value (aggregating mechanism).

In 2009, I co-founded a crowdsourced election monitoring platform Vote Report India (<http://votereport.in>) that is a good example of a platform designed for co-creation. The Ushahidi (<http://ushahidi.org>) based platform presented an aggregated visual view of irregularities in the 2009 Indian elections by plotting text messages sent from polling booths on a Google Map. However, we realized that the platform couldn't scale without tapping into an offline volunteer network. Kiirti (<http://kiirti.org>) is a more evolved co-creation platform that factors in the need for such an offline support ecosystem.

The Pink Chaddi campaign resulted in more than 2000 pink panties being sent to Sri Ram Sena and is a good example of collective action in India.

The Fourth C, Community

The fourth C, Community, refers to the idea that social technologies can facilitate sustained engagement around a shared idea, over time and often across space.

The notion of a community is really tricky because every web page is a latent community, waiting to be activated. A vibrant

community has size and strength, and is built around a meaningful social object. Often, lifestyles, passions and causes make for more compelling social objects than people, organizations, or campaigns.

At the Community level, the design challenge is to identify a compelling social object and build a large and vibrant community around it.

I am currently working on iJanaagraha (<http://ijanaagraha.org>), a community platform built around the notion that real change begins in the neighborhood. It's a new type of citizen platform, with strong location, community and activation layers, designed to promote proactive citizenship by providing citizens the information, tools and networks to drive real change in their neighborhoods and cities.

The Fifth C, Collective Intelligence

The fifth C, Collective Intelligence, refers to the idea that the social web enables us to not only aggregate individual actions, but also run sophisticated algorithms on them and extract meaning from them.

Collective intelligence can be based on both implicit and explicit actions and often takes the form of reputation and recommendation systems. Google (<http://google.com>) extracts the pagerank, a measure of how important a page is, from our (implicit) linking and clicking behavior. Amazon (<http://amazon.com>) and Netflix (<http://netflix.com>) are able to offer us recommendations based on our (implicit) browsing, (implicit) buying and (explicit) rating behavior and comparing it to the behavior of other people like us.

It becomes easier to extract meaning from a community as the size and strength of the community grow. If the collective intelligence is then shared back with the community, the

members find more value in the community, and the community grows even more, leading to a virtuous cycle.

At the Collective Intelligence level, the design challenge is to aggregate our individual and collective actions in databases, and run sophisticated algorithms on them to build reputation and recommendation systems.

Barack Obama's presidential campaign (<http://my.barackobama.com>) and some of the work done by the Sunlight Foundation (<http://sunlightfoundation.com>) are good examples of citizen initiatives that tap into collective intelligence. I haven't seen any good examples of such initiatives in India, but we are building such capabilities in the iJanaagraha platform.

In Summary

So, the 5Cs form a hierarchy of what is possible with social technologies. As we move from Content to Conversation to Collaboration to Community to Collective Intelligence, it becomes increasingly difficult to both observe these layers and activate them.

Each layer is often, but not always, a pre-requisite for the next layer. Compelling content is a pre-requisite for conversation memes and meaningful collaboration, which is a pre-requisite for a vibrant community, which, in turn, is a pre-requisite for collective intelligence.

The 5Cs framework can also be used to design and measure specific social technologies initiatives. The best social technologies initiatives leverage all these five layers, but most initiatives get stuck between the Collaboration and Community layers. Examples of social technologies initiatives that leverage the Community or Collective Intelligence layers are few and far between.

I want to emphasize that each layer is valuable in itself, and

it's OK to design an initiative to only exploit the Content or Conversation layers. It's important to note, however, that institution-building kicks in only at the Collaboration and Community layers, and real change happens only when we build new institutions.

Finally, evidence has shown us that all these five underlying dynamics can be used for both good and evil. Misleading or inflammatory content can be used to drive propaganda and spread rumors. Communities can easily become cabals and collaboration and collective intelligence can be used to profile and persecute minorities and other disadvantaged groups.

Social technologies open up possibilities for new behaviors and new power structures. It's up to us, as individuals and societies, to choose how we use these possibilities. The question is: how well will we choose?