

‘Future Fundamentals’ – Plug into the Global Communications Grid

By Clay Shirky

There are about four and a half billion adults in the world and there are over three billion mobile handsets in circulation, so we’re now living in a world where being plugged into the global communications grid is the normal case worldwide. We’re currently in a period of rapid shift: the world revolution in communication.

Whenever you offer a new communications tool that people care about, the uptake, the use, the speed with which it’s integrated into society now outstrips that of almost any other kind of technology because being social is so fundamental to our being. Senegal, for example, went from 100 mobile phone subscribers to 390,000 mobile phone subscribers in the space of five years. The more people have access to this technology, the more wired the planet becomes, the more remarkable the sort of social feedback loops become.

Humans are a social species - you keep track of your family and of your friends. But communication tools now assume awareness of what’s called the ‘social graph’ which means I’m-connected-to-you and you’re-connected-to-her and she’s-connected-to-him. Whereas all previous media was either broadcast or point-to-point through a phone call, today a point-to-point medium knows not just that I’m connected to you but also who you’re connected to and who I’m connected to.

In the short term future, the most interesting thing to me about the communications landscape is that you’ve got two different forces both operating at incredible rates. One, you’ve got an increase in the width of participation; the number of people who get their first cell phone, their first computer, their first internet connection. This is spreading connectivity worldwide. Two, at the same time, the longer someone has these tools, the deeper their use becomes. So that someone who just gets their first phone is engaging in one set of behaviours, and then you’ve got somebody heading off to college, who’s already been using all of this stuff for ten years, engaging in another set of behaviours. And that means the communications landscape is diverging as cultures get more different from one another.

Yet the biggest change is the shock of inclusion: a communications landscape that was previously closed has now opened up to the point where we can all imagine ourselves participating. Why are amateurs uploading things to YouTube? Why are people sharing things around fan sites? Why are people spending so much time communicating with each other? There is an increased leverage and natural extension of our ability to plumb our social networks for valuable or important information. Think about a 22-year old moving to a new city: they need to know where they’ll work, where they’ll live, and who they might date... they can’t imagine a world in which they didn’t have access to all of these tools. The ability for people to create value for one another, just by participating is a big positive change. The business opportunities are to understand what it is the customer wants to do, and how to offer them new opportunities to do it.

You know, McKinsey, the consultancy, famously told AT&T to get out of the mobile phone business because there would never be a US market of larger than a million. They couldn't imagine it as anything other than a niche market! Never underestimate the amount people want to communicate with each other. In thinking about communications networks, the most important question to ask yourself is not 'What can I understand about the future?' but 'What do I misunderstand about the present?'

In my view, the single largest positive opportunity arising in the communications network is the ability for people to provision things on their own and in collaborative ways. Look at the creation of open source software; the Lennox open source operating system; the Apache web server, and Wikipedia as a shared reference work - none of these things are public production or market production, they're social production. When we gave people the opportunity to have networks that allowed participation, they started participating enthusiastically and in droves.

And the positive effects of embracing participation are you can get enormous amount of value out of the good will of the people who want you to succeed. Many think that Amazon is succeeding because it's a retailer with a web presence, but it's not. It's a search engine that happens to own a warehouse. Look at any given Amazon page and what's so striking about it is the number of different ways they're taking advantage not of their suppliers but of their users – through ratings and rankings and lists and reviews and recommendations and stars.

Its users are willing to create a kind of value that Amazon doesn't have to pay for and its competitors can't fake. Amazon can take advantage of a kind of participatory value that many of its competitors have not yet caught up with.

I often talk to businesses or institutions that ask 'Should I have a Twitter presence? Should I have a Facebook page?' But the real question is to ask what are your goals, what do you want to get done by having a presence in social media? I always advise businesses to do two things, neither of which have anything to do with communicating with the outside world. The first is don't hire consultants: hire your own 23 year olds and ask them what they're doing. And the other thing is to do a search specifically designed to find what people are saying about you, your business, your products, your services, out on the open network. Intentionally look for conversations that you're not part of. It's often a shock, because the conversations are far from universally positive. But in a way, the worst news is if no-one's talking about you at all. Until you have some understanding of where you currently sit in the social media landscape, you can't know what to do next.

I think the best thing a business could do to take advantage of the current communications landscape is to find the person in the business who's got the one big idea for transforming the business and lock them out of the building! Don't let them back in until they come back with ten medium sized ideas or a hundred small ideas. The most robust observation in all of the studies on social media is that users never do what you want them to. So having a single big idea is a recipe for failure. Having a moderate number of experiments, even if some go pear shaped yet you can still learn from them, is a much better way of figuring out how to take advantage of everything instead of having a great leap forward. By thinking through how could things get really different, you can start to unlock ways that the future could differ from the present.