

# Social media and social change

[Media](#), [Social Media](#)



Social Media and Social Change: A Closer Look at the Revolutionary Qualities of Social Media In Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan). McLuhan suggests that messages are greatly affected by the medium in which they are delivered. Messages must be received in the proper channel to create social change. On July 21, 1969, the American astronaut Neil Armstrong created history when he sent his message to 3.31 billion people via radio and television, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind". Forty years later another astronaut created history by sending the first tweet from outer space, "Launch was awesome!!! I am feeling great, working hard, and enjoying the magnificent views, the adventure of a lifetime has begun!" (AP). While many people see online activity on social media sites as a past-time, a growing trend and even a fad, it is actually the biggest key player in creating social change. This is why NASA has more Twitter accounts than any federal agency.

The biggest reason NASA has been extremely keen about adopting social media is because of the collapse of interest in space programs, said the NASA chief of public affairs Bob Jacobs. NASA also has plans to incorporate YouTube on their next shuttle flight to field questions from space (AP). The message is clear, NASA looks to generate more interest in space programs or to create social change and they look to social media tools to help them. We are in the midst of a communicative revolution fuelled by social media and driven by the masses. Social media possesses the intrinsic power to change the world even in the most marginal of ways.

A closer look at the ability social media has to generate dialogue, its ability to change perception and persuade, and its ability to connect and unite the masses democratically, will demonstrate the power that social media possesses to enable a revolution. It will demonstrate a profound shift in the way that we communicate and denounce social media as a current fad or passing trend. Many people credit the television for its ability to deliver a high quality message. In fact it would be extremely hard to misunderstand a message delivered through such a high sensory communicative channel.

Social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter have been criticized for its "dumbing down" qualities. In *Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future*, Mark Bauerlein suggests that Generation Y, that is - a generation of youth born in the late 1970's to the late 1990's - spend wasteful hours on social networking sites posting useless updates and sending mundane messages (Bauerlein 12). But the Harvard Law professor Jonathan Zittrain reminds us that "the qualities that make Twitter seem inane and half-baked are what makes it so powerful" (qtd in Cohen).

It is the same qualities that give social media a high quality communication channel for inspiring social movements amongst participants. Participants of social media are often required to create accounts or profiles and as a result participants are left with a sense of community. Because all content on social media sites are user-generated, any information or message posted on a given site is automatically received

as word of mouth dialogue and this is the powerful nature of social media. It is important to note that dialogue is unrestricted to mediums.

It can occur via face to face interaction, by telephone, by email or even a social media site such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or MySpace. Danah Boyd suggests that comments in a world of social media act as conversation in the real world (Boyd 124). Her compelling article, *Why Youth Love Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life* argues that profiles, friends and comments "differentiate social network sites differentiate from other types of computermediated communication" (124).

Boyd explains that comments are what engage and encourage users to participate and when they do they become participants (127). In *Sociability and social interaction on social networking websites*, Andrew Keenan and Ali Shiri identify the emphasis social media outlets place on transferring your existing "real world" experiences, connections, networks and information to the web and making them accessible (Keenan & Shiri 443). Naturally users are inclined to do the opposite. Any dialogue generated online is not limited to or even discouraged from entering the real world.

What Boyd, Keenan and Shiri remind us is that social media sites are not only encouraging us to socialize on their sites, they are encouraging us to participate and to socialize in the real world. In *The Power of Dialogue*, Patrick Jenlink highlights the contributions dialogue makes in creating social change: The primary challenge to global society, as we pass the threshold of a new millennium, is to transform existing social systems, and therefore

American society, in such ways as to embody a more inclusive, democratic, and open-ended communicative spirit.

Necessary to this transformation is a social discourse that enables the power and potential of global citizens to be realized. Dialogue is such a discourse that enables citizens in unconcealing societal patterns and structures, which guide and direct individual and collective interactions within and across events and activities. Engaging in dialogue, as a social discourse of creative possibility, with others in our daily lives can contribute to change in our selves and society (Jenlink 1). One example of social media's ability to use dialogue to create social change is the recent use of Twitter to coordinate protests.

The Iranian government's attempts to restrict and censor media outlets was challenged by citizens that used Twitter to spread the word about the Iranian Election (Cohen & Stone 2). When the Chinese government censored citizens from accessing the internet the Global Internet Freedom Consortium provided Chinese movements with software that helped evade censorship. When asked about the increase of traffic from Iran, the founder of the organization suggested that " the Iranian people actually found out by themselves and have passed this on by word of mouth" (Cohen & Stone 2).

Furthermore, Zittrain suggests that " Twitter was particularly resilient to censorship because it had so many ways for its posts to originate - from a phone, a web browser or specialized applications - and so many outlets for those posts to appear" (qtd in Cohen & Stone). Similarly, word of mouth messages are difficult to avoid because they can be delivered from so many

places - a neighbour, a teacher, a coworker, a classmate or even an astronaut.

In short, the intrinsic nature of social media sites to turn user generated content into word of mouth information, that is - unrestrictive dialogue - allows for users to spread messages quickly and effectively. Social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and MySpace have not only given us a way in which we can converse, they have given us a space in which conversation and dialogue can start and continue to grow. When John E. Kennedy first tried to define advertising in 1904 he did so with three simple words, " salesmanship on paper" (O'Reilly).

While he might rework this phrase, first to include all forms of advertising media and then to comment on some form of social change; he would certainly be forced to include social media tools such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter as they have changed the way in which we choose to communicate. When considering social change it is imperative to consider advertising. The first step to creating social change on any level is to change public perception and there is no other industry known more for changing perception than the advertising industry.

It is best explained by notorious ad man who persuaded millions to watch MTV and wear Tommy Hilfiger, George Lois who said, " Great advertising can make food taste better, can make your car run smoother. It can change your perception of something. Is it wrong to change your perception about something? Of course not. I'm not lying; I'm just saying, 'This one's more fun, this one's more exciting. '" The advertising industry is typically always the

first one to recognize the capability of digital technologies to create social change.

This is why Katalyst Media, a media agency dedicated to producing content on social media has more campaigns than they can handle. The founder and CEO of Katalyst Media, Ashton Kutcher uses social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to send his message and to persuade others to join his causes. It started with a message to promote World Malaria Day that read " Every 30 seconds, a kid dies of malaria. Nets save lives. \$10 buys a net" and was followed by a link to Malaria No More's web site where people could donate (Macasai & Wilson 80).

The celebrity's tweet persuaded millions to join and the donation website had more traffic in one month than it did the previous twelve (80). Kutcher was able to tally nearly 90, 000 nets in a very short time. What Kutcher did was raise awareness to a cause and by taking advantage of the most popular space in modern times to have a conversation he created action. Another celebrity to cash in on free advertising, that is - the process of attracting public attention to a product, business or cause through multiple forms of media with the ultimate goal of delivering a message to create action - is Bill Cosby.

Cosby recently held a virtual town hall to discuss issues that face the African-American Community and to promote this town hall he advertised his message on social media sites, Facebook and Twitter (Hein). Cosby launched his ad campaign in a few simple words, " Our children are trying to tell us something, but we are not listening" followed by a link to Ustream - a

website that streams footage live alongside a comments box where the streamer can read at the same time. Cosby was capable of generating 1.3 million views which set a record behind President Obama's inaugural address (Hein).

Similarly, companies are taking advantage of social media sites by gathering positive word of mouth dialogue to create a social change, that is - a higher demand and positive brand relationship with consumers (Schmitt).

Companies like Nike, Red Bull and Samsung all have their own Twitter and Facebook pages where consumers post reviews and experiences with relative products. In *The Last Campaign: How Experiences Are Becoming the New Advertising*, Garrick Schmitt highlights the increasing awareness that companies have for social media (Schmitt). He also argues that companies unwilling to adapt are unlikely to survive (Schmitt).

The ability that social media has to change perception is largely fuelled by its ability to generate dialogue in a public space. In creating a public space social media sites provide a space where the masses can rule, even if the masses are as marginal as a group of chess players. In *Explaining Why Young Adults Use MySpace and Facebook Through Uses and Gratifications Theory*, Mark Urista, Qingwen Dong and Ken Day assert that " the uniqueness of social networking sites is not in their ability to allow individuals to meet strangers but rather their ability to enable users to shape and make their social networks visible to others (Urista et al. 17). Because social networks are visible to the public it is easy to find the best or most popular product. Persuasion and the changing of perceptions becomes easy



when 500, 000 people think the same way you do. This is why Bill Cosby was capable of generating 1. 3 million hits when he only had 650, 000 Twitter followers and 26, 000 fans on Facebook. In short, social media sites present users and companies with a platform for persuasion through a visibly public space. Effective companies and social change movements relish critical feedback via social media and used correctly can persuade the masses to take part of revolutionary change.

Perhaps the most powerful quality that social media possesses is the ability to connect, unite and democratize traditional forms of communication. All of which help to generate social change albeit unintentionally. The most recognizable form of social media's ability to democratize and unite can be found in its language. Twitter for example opened up its ever evolving language to its users. Tweets is a term that refers to a Twitter post. the letters RT is a negotiated term amongst all users that stands for Retweet which means to forward, like an email or repost.

As more and more uses are found for social media sites such as Twitter, the language evolves. For example, Tweet-Up is a recently added term that refers to a real-world meeting of people who connected via Twitter (Wired). Another way in which social media acts as a democratic force is its ability to give power to the masses. User-generated content certainly adds to the democratic nature of social media sites because the content on them can become important or redundant but it is up to participants and users to decide.

When something becomes popular often times groups will be started and streams of meta data are collected and grouped to provide easy access. In *Socialnomics: How Social Media Transforms the Way We Live and Do Business*, Erik Qualman suggests that "human beings have the dichotomous physiological need to be our own individual, yet we also want to feel like we belong to and are accepted by a much larger social set. People are willing to have an 'open diary' as a means to stay connected - as their ultimate desire is to feel connected" (Qualman 43).

This idea suggests that we are rewarded for participating so a simple call to action is in fact rewarding: Part of this lies in a yearning to have a clear understanding of what the majority is doing. It was much easier to know what the majority was doing when all one had to do was tune into Casey Kasem's "American Top 40" to find out the latest and greatest in music or to flip through "Vogue" magazine to quickly grasp every fashion trend. "Social media help us make sense of information overload by quickly seeing what our friends find important, helpful or interesting. It also helps eliminate people performing the same tasks - if three of your friends have already performed the task (finding a good hotel in Bermuda), why should you be redundant? (Qualman). Danah Boyd also highlights social media outlets call to participate as a reward (Boyd 126). Social Media makes participation in social movements rewarding and democratic. Participation in social media allows users to connect and unite as the public platform used by social media sites makes it easy for users to connect and to participate with others. These qualities are the underlying reasons surrounding the profound shift in the way that we choose to communicate.

Social media has become the biggest change to our society since the industrial revolution (Qualman). Qualman states the following statistics while arguing his case for social media revolution: 96% of Generation Y have joined a social media network, is the number one activity on the internet today, 1 out of 8 couples married in the US last year met via social media, it took the radio 38 years to reach 50 million users, the television took 13 years, the internet took 4 years, the iPod took 3 years, Facebook added 100 million users in less than 9 months (Qualman 2).

Along with it are the intrinsic qualities social media carries with it, that is ability to generate dialogue, to change perception and persuade, and its ability to connect and unite the masses democratically. The social media revolution is incipient and inchoate. The creation of every new medium brings with it a learning curve and as its strengths are developed and its language invented, social change will be one of its many uses.