Growing with the Flows

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I n a special edition of *Time* magazine, "10 Ideas for the Next 10 Years," Michael Lind, policy director for the New America Foundation, characterizes the coming decade as "The Boring Age":

> We are living in a period of stagnation. Surprisingly, this stasis is most evident in an area where we assume we are way ahead of our predecessors: technology. In fact, the gadgets of the information age have had nothing like the transformative effects on life and industry that indoor electric lighting, refrigerators, electric and natural gas ovens and indoor plumbing produced in the early to mid-20th century. Is the combination of a phone, video screen and keyboard really as revolutionary as the original telephone, the original television set or the original typewriter was?

While Lind seems right about this in the main, he does not look deeply enough into the minutiae of daily life to see how things will be different. What we take for granted in our lives often has the biggest impact. The mass-produced automobile, for example, changed whom people chose to marry. Whereas most marriages at the beginning of the 20th century were between couples who grew up living within five to 10 miles of each other, by the 1940s most couples grew up in communities at least 25 miles from each other (Bagdikian). "The girl next door" became "the girl or boy I met in college or at work" and, nowadays, someone met online. When change affects a structure as basic as the family, there is much greater change in the offing.

Network science characterizes such structural changes as "socialquakes" or "netquakes" (Csermely). Small changes in relationships between elements in a complex network build up tension over time until there is a sudden collapse (disruptive change) that affects the stability of the entire

landscape. The remarkable thing is that these changes sneak up on us, until the earth under our feet begins to move.

THE OCEAN OF DATA

One of the most fundamental changes of our age is our access to information. Since the beginning of recorded history, elites have sought to contain and manage knowledge for purposes they considered appropriate. Formal education was not about sharing knowledge but confining it. Gatekeepers made decisions about the value of knowledge and access to it, the result of which was a system that controlled how high individuals could rise.

Over the past 50 years, the amount of accessible knowledge has grown exponentially. We have created an ocean of data containing information flows that interact with each other in unexpected ways to create powerful currents and complex ecological niches that sustain some forms of enterprise but not others, nearly all of it occurring without the benefit of human design or direction. Note that flows are not just about content, they are also about how people acquire knowledge, their reasons for gathering it, what they do with it, to whom they pass it along, and in what form.

Our society is increasingly knitted together by low-mass information that can be transmitted globally in milliseconds. Digital media and social networks provide novelty and information in instantaneous and haphazard fashion, radically altering our understanding of the world and our response to it. Whereas most people were privy only to the knowledge they could see with their own eyes, now anyone with a mobile device has access to the ocean of data, whether in the form of a recorded lecture or the location of the nearest Starbucks café.

We need only look at the growth of mobile "apps" (small fixed-function software programs designed to enable specific types of activities using mobile devices on a broadband network) to see changes in our everyday life. To date, there have been 3 billion mobile app downloads with an estimated value of $9 billion and, by 2012, the number of downloads is expected to grow to 50 billion with a value in excess of $17.5 billion. Apple currently stocks 150,000 apps for the iPhone, and Google's Android boasts 30,000 mobile apps. The number of stores offering mobile apps shot up from eight to 38 in just the past year. The implications for where, when, and how learning may occur are dramatic.

The ability of individuals to access information in situ—i.e., at the time, place, and in the context that is needed—may seem commonplace, but it is

evidence of a fundamental shift in the structure of our way of life, our society, and our economy. It is the socio-economic equivalent of a massive tsunami sweeping across the globe. The surge keeps everything continuously on the move. For us to keep up personally, professionally, and institutionally, we have to change our posture, our attitudes, our direction, and our positions vis-à-vis everything else.

Why is it important for us as marketers and educators to know that consumers can use an app to see if a product sold at Bloomingdale's is being sold for less at Macy's, or that they can get ratings and reviews from other customers just like themselves who will report their degree of satisfaction?

Information asymmetry asserts that the advantage in any bargaining process (e.g., contracts, purchasing) is always with the party having the most or best information about the deal. In consumer products, the seller has historically held the advantage, while the consumer had to rely on confidence in a brand built by the seller to compensate for a lack or information about the actual value. With digital media, the consumer's thumb can just as easily tilt the scale.

The days of consumers (or learners) taking the provider's word for it are gone. A mobile app can immediately check the seller's claims against the experience of prior customers in a matter of seconds. Just as quickly, comparable purchasing opportunities can be presented. Virtually everything is rated, from eye shadow to your best foreign-language instructor.

KNOWING WHAT THE OTHER HAND IS DOING

One of the goals of the Office of Strategic Development and Marketing at the New York University School of Continuing and Professional Studies (NYU-SCPS) is to be sensitive to changes in our external social ecosystem. SCPS has been successful at meeting the needs of New Yorkers partly because we are good at distinguishing between normal rumblings of the city and ominous shifts in the social structure. Like riders on the A train, we are sensitive to changes and aware of our surroundings. We can still be jostled, but we know what to reach for to regain our balance.

The academy may be one of the most "siloed" of organizations in contemporary society, but it is no less vulnerable to the effects of digital information networks. Networks have bored holes throughout those silo walls. Unrestrained torrents of information are flowing in and out of our knowledge stores every moment of every day. Plugging the holes is not a

practical strategy. Instead, the university needs to develop a mechanism capable of channeling the flows of knowledge into institutionally and socially productive streams.

Schools of continuing and professional studies may be the organizational mechanism best suited to the challenge. They are inherently interdisciplinary, they are not structured around presumed "birth cohorts," and their faculty tend to be made up of practitioners (adjuncts working in a contemporary field of practice) and highly motivated teachers. Their location and proximity in relationship to the main body of the institution's research and scholarly communities often provide an atmosphere, if not an intentional opportunity, for creative collaboration.

To perfect the mechanism, schools need to develop a provisional role that functions as a transformative layer between the university and its external constituencies. Not every educational need can be satisfied with a degree. Schools of continuing and professional studies have many more tools in their kit, including diplomas, certificates, and in many cases, support for professional licenses. Given the rate of knowledge percolation in a digitally networked world, there are few, if any, fields where the body of knowledge remains stable for more than a few months. Increasingly, the most disruptive discoveries cross over from flows in adjacent disciplines. Discoveries in biology, for instance, are suddenly having major influence in the theoretical sciences. Computer sciences have completely changed the process of engineering and design. Visualization and imaging have revolutionized our understanding of brain science.

The digital media environment has created a lush landscape with knowledge flows in every direction. The growing consensus about the post-2009 recovery is that when job growth returns, the employment picture will have changed profoundly. Large numbers of people with established roles in the old economy will find their jobs, and even career opportunities, washed away. The "topple rate" (the frequency at which leading firms lose their top rank status to competitors) has increased 40 percent since 1965 (Hagel et al.). Already on the brink of extinction are fax machines, film developers, dial-up phone networks, newspaper classifieds, roadmaps, CDs, postal services, and dashboard GPS. (Why have a big screen in the dashboard when you already have one in your pocket?) Those businesses are going away only to be replaced by things we haven't thought of yet. In fact, all businesses are beginning to look alike given their dependence

on information. On the upside, for those people who are able to traverse adroitly the new landscape, opportunities abound.

Some months ago, the Office of Strategic Development and Marketing produced a report on the growing demand for what we called "numerati"—the navigators and sailors on the ocean of data. Stephen Baker uses the term for specialists who map the commercially exploitable behavior patterns that individuals make as they interact with the dense digital fabric that blankets everyday commercial transactions. As opposed to the "technorati," who design and build the technology, and the "digerati," who are the soothsayers and celebrities of the digital age, the fill key roles in modeling, managing, and acquiring information for organizations. They are not mathematicians, statisticians, or "quants." The best way to describe them is as "quotidian polymaths." As organizations dig out of the recession, they are the ones learning new, leaner, and smarter ways to organize work. The post-recession organizations will be smaller, more agile, and more volatile. Schools that provide more interconnected learning experiences without appreciably increasing risks (to revenue, reputation, or quality) will give learners more options and institutions greater resiliency.

It may be overreaching to describe quotidian polymaths as the new breed of talent that will advance to the forefront of our economy over the next decade, but our global society has become too complex, interconnected, and interdependent to be sustained by specialists operating in silos or organizations expending scarce resources to restrain the flows of knowledge.

NEGOTIATING THE FUTURE

For 75 years, the SCPS identity has been closely aligned with the demands of New York City's unique requirements. Through its own mysterious power, New York has always been a place of continuous regeneration and reinvention. New populations, new enterprises, new technologies, and new economic and cultural elements materialize regularly on its shores. While New York is still a destination for "the huddled masses" seeking a better life, they are more likely to be optimists seeking a place to realize their ambitions. Increasingly, they are the world's elite, including privileged, middle-class Americans with fine educations and degrees from many of the best universities. For them, New York is not so much a destination as a way station on a journey that will move them from hub to hub in a global network that belongs more to a global digital culture than to any uniquely New York or American culture.

For SCPS to serve our constituents and the university effectively and to create value for the community, we have a commitment to shaping a new order. Our starting point is a change in the way we view the territory, as suggested by an article on the top global cities in *Foreign Policy* magazine:

> More than anything, the cities that rise to the top of the list are those that continue to forge global links despite intensely complex economic environments. They are the ones making urbanization work to their advantage by providing the vast opportunities of global integration to their people; measuring cities' international presence captures the most accurate picture of the way the world works.

How might SCPS adapt its experience to serve a global cities perspective? Can we view other global cities as virtual New York City neighborhoods? Can we market to them as effectively as we market to the people in New York City's boroughs and throughout the tri-state region? Can we use new techniques, such as social network analysis and behavioral metrics, to know them as well as we know our current students? Can we design and test various collaborative scenarios? Can we emphasize "thought leadership" in a noncredit context and transform it into meaningful courses of study for both credit and noncredit applications? Can we cluster cohorts with similar learning requirements in "small world networks" (i.e., collaborative structures that would permit students to meet specialized learning requirements through our sister schools and outside institutions or non-academic organizations)? Can we make such flexible structures coherent enough to sustain trans-disciplinary professional studies formats? Can we leverage NYU's global assets to provide unique learning networks for a student body that spans the globe?

It is never enough to know what we are doing here, inside the institution. It is every bit as important for us to know and understand what is happening in the world as it is being experienced by the people we hope to serve. We have to know how they see it, and how they see us. Marketing should provide a sort of institutional proprioception, a third sensory system that tells us whether we are moving in the right direction and whether our actions are appropriate to the conditions. This is one of our key reasons for doing market research.

FROM THE SUBLIME TO THE PEDESTRIAN: RETHINKING PLANNING CYCLES

In addition to redefining our perspective about the scope of our market and our approaches to students, SCPS has also had to rethink its basic planning processes. For years, the need to produce our *SCPS Bulletin* has driven much of our planning cycle, but with changes in technology and shifts in marketing methods, we have to review our basic assumptions about planning. The *Bulletin* remains a foundational framework that provides structure and urgency to get things accomplished internally. It is also our pre-eminent social token—a common emblem for our audience that cues them to consider their educational needs.

It is the only comprehensive, generally portable, personal document that our learners can explore on their own and in their manner. The structure of the *SCPS Bulletin* itself presumes the user will navigate his/her own way through its pages, according to his/her own logic.

But if we abandon our traditional planning cycle, how will we reframe it? The *Bulletin* is generally acknowledged in our culture as something everyone needs to contribute to. Without that framework, how would the big picture of SCPS emerge in any form that would be universally recognizable? Before we de-emphasize the *Bulletin* we have to ask, what else will fill its broader functions? Do we even know what those functions are? Or do we just assume they are part of our natural environment?

Communities, organizations, and people are complex systems with a great deal of autonomy. There is no prime directive compelling people to do specific things at specific times. Culture ties them together through various synchronizing processes—many of which are wholly social (June weddings), religious (Passover), or cosmological (orbiting the sun). The fact is that societies function on synchronizing events, and for many colleges and universities, a publication like the *Bulletin* is one of them. With the Internet as the main information hub, we should be alert to the *Bulletin'*s customary role as social synchronizer and carefully assess whether we have adequately addressed that role in our soon-to-be cloud-based information systems.

KNOW THE DIFFERENCE AMONG LISTENING, EAVESDROPPING, AND SELLING

In the age of the Internet, every page is designed to produce a decision (a click). The product of each decision is yet another action, e.g., "fill in the blank where there is an asterisk." The resulting digital "click stream" tells

us a lot about how people move through a web page presentation. It is true that new media can generate more data about our learners. Through their responses and through our listening posts, we can gather better information about how well we are meeting our objectives.

From a planning perspective, social media can be used to gather intelligence if used appropriately. A recent Arbitron and Edison research study of social media found that 48 percent of Americans ages 12 and older belong to at least one social network, up from 24 percent two years ago. The older the cohort, the lower the percentage of people with personal profile pages, but half of the people between the ages of 35 and 44 have them already (O'Malley). Almost every social group, organization, or activity constitutes some kind of sub-net in which people discuss their needs and perspectives on varying issues. As part of the community we have a lot to contribute and a lot to learn. We also have a lot to risk if we do it badly.

The new social media contract is different. In the new media world, trust is the new currency of the realm, and the reliable test for it is the degree of transparency all participants are willing to provide. Transparency means more and less than you might think. It does mean that you need to disclose your intent in communicating. If you intend to recruit students, you are expected to say that upfront. Do not imply to the groups you participate in that you are there to help them, and subsequently try to sell them into a master's program. That should not be your purpose. If you are there to help, then help—provide honest advice and counsel, ask important questions, but honor the implicit social contract. If you intend to analyze the content you can gather in a social setting you sponsor or create, say so. Explain that you, too, are learning a lot about them and their needs. Be open, appreciative, and respectful. If they want to talk to you more about a particular program or need, create the opportunity and direct them to another space designed for that purpose.

If you are "lurking" in their social space (Facebook, MySpace, or Linked In), be upfront about it. It is okay as long as you make clear your purpose. In short, separate "selling" from "learning" and be sure you know the difference.

If you are strictly interested in observing what goes on in some spaces, if you qualify to participate, go ahead and lurk all you want. Gather the information you think is significant, discuss it, learn from it, use it to generate ideas, identify needs, and gather whatever else you believe is worthy of your enterprise. But do not turn around and use it for something else—

like targeting specific participants. Protect the information you gather and avoid becoming the source of phishing and other online scams, which can hurt an organization.

CONCLUSION

We live and work in an era of transformation and uncertainty; we know that things are changing, but we are not sure where they are headed. One of the key forces of change is the enormous flow of information that individuals and institutions consume and produce. Awareness of knowledge flow is essential, but so is the sense that neither individuals nor institutions can control these flows. Even Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, can be humbled by the flows he has tried to control. Discussing the embarrassing series of privacy policies decisions he and his organization have been forced to reverse recently, Mr. Zuckerberg said recently, "I know we've made a bunch of mistakes, but my hope at the end of this is that the service ends up in a better place and that people understand that our intentions are in the right place and we respond to the feedback from the people we serve" (as cited in Scoble).

Just as King Canute was unable to hold back the tide, we do not rule the flows of knowledge that we encounter. But with an awareness of their strength and potential, we may be able to use them to serve our constituents better and to create opportunities for them and ourselves.

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