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Beyond Viral: Generating Sustainable Value From Social Media

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Why hasn't the proliferation of social media resulted in long-lasting social and business change?

We have witnessed social media playing a major role in mobilizing events of historic proportions, such as the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. Digital social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, are often cited as the facilitators of these mobilizations.

But most big social media-generated events seem to burst upon the scene, capture our attention for a few days, and then fade into oblivion **(https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/leadership-lessons-from-the-boston-marathon-attack/)** with nothing substantial accomplished. No one — be they a charismatic leader or a raucous crowd — seems able to move people into action for extended periods of time using social media. This is especially ironic at a time when the online, crowdsourced society has reached maturity and is now widespread. Given all we have learned about social mobilization, why isn't it a more reliable channel for constructive social and long-term business change?

We argue that the rise of both social media and what author Moisés Naím has termed "the end of power" is anything but a coincidence. In fact, we view the confluence of these factors as a techno-social paradox of the 21st century.

We have studied why social media has provided the fuel for unpredictable, temporary mobilization, rather than steady, thoughtful, and sustainable change. In business, this may play out when a new product,

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company, or service — from phones to startups to games — grabs people's attention for a single announcement and then flames out.

How can businesses and others reverse this trend and reap more enduring benefits from social media? For starters, it will take a fundamental change in focus.

The Need for Incentives

We find that there is insufficient attention on the underlying incentive structures — the hidden network of interpersonal motivations and leadership — that provide the engine for collective decision making and actions.

A number of large-scale social mobilization experiments bear out the importance of incentive structures. Consider our own experience with the scientific scavenger hunt, the 2009 Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) Network Challenge **(http://archive.darpa.mil/networkchallenge/)**. Our MIT Red Balloon Challenge Team competed with 57 other teams across the country to locate 10 weather balloons tethered at random locations all over the continental United States. None of the other teams managed to create a viral campaign that reached large populations and created awareness, while our team used an incentive scheme that motivated people to recruit their friends. As a result, we recruited over 2 million people in less than two days to help with the search, and we won the contest.

The difference in strategy was not just our emphasis on viral communications, but the way that incentives were matched with the motivations of the participants. Even for the simple task of finding balloons, successful teams tapped into people's motivation for personal profit, charity, reciprocity, or entertainment.

Our research shows that incentive networks are an important middle layer between ideologies and culture on the one hand, and the simple digital fingerprints left by social movements in online digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. They are part of what is fueling new areas of business such as the cocreation of products and brands through competitions and crowdsourcing.

Ideologies and culture shape what individuals want to achieve as they go about their daily lives, how they relate to each other's well-being, and how they help each other achieve those goals. These behaviors can be mapped into a network of incentives where each individual payoff depends on the payoffs of others. By contrast, the inability to sustain and transfer bursts of social mobilization into lasting social change or business results is rooted in the superficial design of today's digital social media — that is, it is designed primarily to maximize information propagation and virality through optimization of clicks and shares. However, this emphasis is detrimental to engagement and consensus-building. Understanding the dichotomy is an important lesson for those involved in online marketing.

From 'Likes' to Actions

Effective social media is the result of both information diffusion and recruitment incentives, yet most social media has focused on diffusion. From a business perspective, it means that social media is still extraordinarily ineffective at getting people to take action — for instance, by clicking through ads to make a

purchase. As an industry, social media is still stuck on how to make people "like," not on establishing loyalty and stickiness **(https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/can-social-media-cultivate-long-term-loyalty/)**.

One reason behind the emphasis on information virality is a phenomenon we call network measurability bias, which refers to the tendency to focus on processes that are easily observable within digital social networks, such as retweets. It neglects key latent processes such as the ideological, cultural, and economic incentives of actors.

But that's the wrong focus. If we shift our efforts toward mapping incentives, we may better determine the suitability of content for action — and create more lasting social and business change in the process.

Social media is an amazing tool that allows social scientists to measure information spread in real time, yet it is almost totally blind to other relevant factors, such as framing processes, reflection, consensus formation, or argumentation processes — which social scientists have found to be important in connecting content to sustained motivation.

Convincing someone of an idea is one thing. Recruiting them to incur costs of substantial time, effort, and risk toward supporting a cause or brand — or buying a product — requires much more commitment. We need new experimental paradigms and tools that spur individual, social, and cultural incentives in social mobilization processes.

Experimentation with these concepts may take time. Incentives are far less visible than message content, and a particular action often results from multiple incentives. When we do develop these models, however, they will help us develop a new generation of social media that can go beyond flash fads and viral memes toward consensual construction of sustained change.

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