Social Media Shorts:
A Storied Look at Social Media in Our Society

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Introduction

Before you give it a label, consider this phenomenon: It unites people across

countries, politics, races and religions in their mutual love of cute kitten videos, Harry

Potter fan fiction, and donating to relief organizations in times of crisis. It lets you share

and connect with your coworkers, fans, family, friends, and frenemies alike. And it gives

you instant access to knowledge and databases in a world where you can also

contribute your own ideas, opinions and knowledge. It is a shared space with its own

rules and upsets. And though most of it happens online, it is not limited to one website

or application.

This is social media. And it is the big picture behind how society now operates,

on all levels. It can be a tough concept to grasp for some because it is - essentially -

limitless. How do you define the boundaries of something that grows and changes faster

than your browser can refresh?

Some define social media as, "a group of Internet-based applications that build

on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation

and exchange of User Generated Content."[1] But it's also defined as "Engage or die,"[2]

and, "the democratization of information ... rooted in conversations,"[3] by Brian Solis, co-

founder of the Social Media Club. It's defined as, "Websites and applications used for

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[1] Adreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, "Users of the world, unite - the challenges and opportunities of Social Media," *Business Horizons* 53, no. 1 (February 2010): 59-68.

[2] Brian Solis, "The Social Media Manifesto," *BrianSolis.com*, June 11, 2007, http://www.briansolis.com/2007/06/future-of-communications-manifesto-for/.

[3] Brian Solis, "Defining Social Media: 2006 - 2010," *BrianSolis.com*, January 7, 2010, http://www.briansolis.com/2010/01/defining-social-media-the-saga-continues/.

social networking,"[4] and as, "a set of technologies and channels targeted at forming and enabling a potentially massive community of participants to productively collaborate."[5]

I believe social media is too big a monster to fit in one definition. It is instead a broad term for a number of different — though related — developments in society. This project has a related goal: to share *some* of the overall concepts and applications of social media. Don't read this expecting an encyclopedia of every social network, gaming app, and blogging platform. Read this for an introduction to some of the *possibilities* social media offer us.

So when I say I'm doing a project on social media, what do I mean? The first step was to select three specific applications or topic areas within the broad spectrum of social media (to make this a capstone, not an encyclopedia). The second was to apply those topic areas in a creative way. The three sections of this paper focus on 1) crowdsourcing, 2) online self-branding, and 3) information democracy. Each explores a common theme running through different topics that can all be called social media. I chose these three topic areas both because they interest me, and because I think they represent the flexibility and the utility of social media.

While research like this can show us what's being done with social media right now, it was still necessary to use that knowledge for something *more* and explore where social media could go next. This is where the I adopted my "storied approach." Each section of my research is accompanied by an original short story.

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[4] "Social media - Google Search," *Google*, April 28, 2011, http://www.google.com/search.

[5] Anthony J. Bradley, "A New Definition of Social Media," *Gartner*, January 7, 2010, http://blogs.gartner.com/anthony_bradley/2010/01/07/a-new-definition-of-social-media/.

There are three reasons I chose to incorporate story into this project. First, social media by nature already creates and shares stories. What are all of those Facebook status updates but little narrations of your life story? Creating stories to accompany my overview of each topic was a natural extension of social media's role in society. Second, for those not really using or familiar with social media, story enables me to do more than just explain the mechanics. It allows me to demonstrate and explore how social media creates conversations and builds relationships. And finally, it gave me the opportunity to expand my own communication skills by trying something new (writing fiction is *much* harder than reading it).

Many of the social media ideas I researched were also a part of my writing and creative processes. Using Twitter, I could follow and connect with the book and blog authors I used for my research; I connected with fiction-writing communities on Twitter for tips on how to write a short story; and I posted everything I wrote on my blog. I frequently read other blogs with writing tips, and the author of one of the books I read contacted me on Twitter, asking me to write a review for his book, *Socialnomics*. Using these social media tools for ideas and feedback were an opportunity to practice what I was writing about.

But far beyond this one writing project, social media has infinite possibilities. Nearly every social interaction now has a social media component - some so everyday you may not even think of them as social media. You, my reader, probably take photos with your cellphone and share them via message or online. You probably have at least one social network profile. You probably do at least a little shopping online and at least

once wrote a review or rated a product you had purchased. You already know what social media is because it's a part of your life.

What I want to share with you is an appreciation for the opportunities social media provides you, and a desire to take them. This project is merely an introduction to some of the ideas and applications of social media, but I hope it inspires you to jump into the online crowd, become part a connected conversation, and discover on your own the power of social media.

Part I: Crowdsourcing

It's organized bird-watchers submitting their sightings from across the country. It's joined people with a few free minutes to analyze photos searching for signs of extraterrestrial life with Berkeley's SETI@home project.[6] And it's mobilizing one billion people to make contributions in ways that were impossible before the internet connected them. This is crowdsourcing - a colossal change in the ways individuals connect and organize.

The term "crowdsourcing" was coined by Jeff Howe in a 2006 Wired article that was eventually grown into a book of the same name, *Crowdsourcing*.[7] Another relevant book, *Groundswell* by Charlene Li, describes the same phenomenon of people mobilizing for online efforts.[8] The actual "crowd" in crowdsourcing is the one billion people who are online worldwide.[9] Working on the principle of "meritocracies"[10] - it is the open, democratic process, not the qualifications or professionality of the contributors, that is paramount in crowdsourcing efforts.

Four recent developments have made crowdsourcing possible: (1) "rise of amateur class...[2] accompanied by the emergence of a mode of production" like open source software, (3) "proliferation of the internet and cheap tools gave consumers a

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[6] Jeff Howe, *Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd is Driving the Future of Business*, ebook. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), 14-16.

[7] Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired*, June 2006, http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html.

[8] Charlene Li, *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, ebook. (Harvard Business Press, 2008).

[9] Jeff Howe, *Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd is Driving the Future of Business*, ebook. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), 80.

[10] Ibid., 40.

power once restricted to companies endowed with vast capital resources," and (4) the,

"evolution of online communities - with their ability to efficiently organize people into

economically productive units"[11] The combination of the internet and more affordable

tools have allowed people of all skill-levels to create and contribute.

Essentially, it is because of the internet that we now realize how effectively

productive activities can be organized in communities rather than corporations or

bureaucracies. As Howe states:

> The best person to do a job is the one who most wants to do that job; and the
> best people to evaluate their performance are their friends and peers who, by the
> way, will enthusiastically pitch in to improve the final product, simply for the sheer
> pleasure of helping one another and creating something beautiful from which
> they all will benefit.[12]

Groundswell embodies the same concepts, but instead defines a "groundswell"

as "a spontaneous movement of people using online tools to connect, take charge of

their own experience, and get what they need...from each other."[13] In essence, it is the

same process of people being able to connect and contribute online. People are now

able to use technology to get what they need from other members of the crowd or

groundswell, rather than relying on companies for all of their needs.[14]

The groundswell works according to the same principles as crowdsourcing, even

if the end goals are not necessarily the same. The groundswell looks to each other for

solidarity and problem-solving, while crowdsourcing is collaboration toward larger

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[11] Ibid., 80.

[12] Ibid., 11-12.

[13] Charlene Li, *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, ebook. (Harvard Business Press, 2008), ix-x.

[14] Ibid., x.

projects, problems, or communities. One example of the groundswell in action was the creation by Best Buy employees of an internal network *for* Best Buy employees.[15] It's a place employees created and now use to connect and problem-solve. On a slightly different tack, InnoCentive is a website which allows companies like Boeing and Procter & Gamble to post their research and design problems anonymously, and *anyone* who joins the InnoCentive network can offer solutions — winning solutions receive up to $100,000.[16] This project allows companies who are stuck in a rut to share their goals with a larger crowd, a community large and diverse enough to see new solutions. Crowdsourcing and the groundswell are so similar that we can assume for this research that they are the same phenomenon. And it's something we're now accustomed to seeing in almost every aspect of business.

One of the first and most successful crowdsourcing companies, Threadless, was launched in 2000. The crowd submits and votes on designs for t-shirts, and every t-shirt they produce sells out.[17] We see crowdsourcing models to create and sort new content for television and web channels, in submission contests for user-created commercials for the Superbowl, in problem solving for large corporations like P&G. One of the largest and simplest examples is Wikipedia, which simply collects wisdom and makes it accessible. Though the advertising examples are the most familiar and easiest to point out - who voted for the latest Mountain Dew flavor? - crowdsourcing is the new model of social productivity and ingenuity.

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[15] Charlene Li, *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, ebook. (Harvard Business Press, 2008), 215-220.

[16] Jeff Howe, *Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd is Driving the Future of Business*, ebook. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), 116-119.

[17] Ibid., 7-8.

But crowdsourcing projects rarely remunerate the contributors, and if they do, not enough to justify the time and effort people put into them. So what motivates individuals to crowdsource? Eric Qualman, author of *Socialnomics: How social media transforms the way we live and do business*, suggests people generally contribute to crowdsourcing efforts because they enjoy the activity and because humans naturally desire communities.[18] Threadless founder Jake Dehart and the CEO Tom Ryan stress that they deal with a very creative community who are excited and involved because designing challenges them. They didn't form the business with a bottom line in mind; they created Threadless as a rallying point around activities the community was *already* passionate about.[19]

Apart from the community behaviors, there are several main principles behind when crowdsourcing projects will work, and when they will fail. Though people must be directed, they also need enough autonomy to ensure they stay invested and interested in the project. People join crowdsourcing projects because it interests them and provides them with intrinsic value, not necessarily with monetary compensation. Several social behaviors frequently appear in crowdsourcing communities which reinforce this idea of intrinsic value. A culture of reciprocity, a reputation within the community, collaboration, freely sharing, and "promiscuous creativity" fuel the productivity and success of the crowd.[20]

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[18] Erik Qualman, *Socialnomics*, ebook. (Wiley, John & Sons, Inc., 2010), 35, 82-3.

[19] Erick Schonfeld, "Threadless Is Now Crowdsourcing For Causes," *TechCrunch*, February 21, 2011, http://techcrunch.com/2011/02/21/threadless-crowdsourcing-causes/.

[20] Jeff Howe, *Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd is Driving the Future of Business*, ebook. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), 209.

However, just because people are willing to contribute to crowdsourcing efforts doesn't mean they'll be successful. Crowdsourcing efforts work because they incorporate and diversify experience, availability, interests and contributions. MIT lecturer Karim Lakhani has studied the crowdsourced problem-solving InnoCentive project and determined that the effectiveness of the network comes from the, "diversity of intellectual background," or that "The most efficient networks are those that link to the broadest range of information, knowledge, and experience."[21] The majority of InnoCentive's projects are solved by people operating outside their usual field and interests.[22]

Many companies and individuals have already begun to embrace the dynamics of crowdsourcing. "If you aren't constantly evolving along with your customers you will be doomed to fail," offered Steve Kaufer, the CEO of TripAdvisor.[23] In *Crowdsourcing*, Howe offers 10 basic rules for doing it successfully, and there are numerous examples of what to do (and what not to do). He encourages companies to (1) choose an appropriate model (collective intelligence, creation, voting, funding), (2) find the right 'crowd' for their crowdsourcing effort, (3) provide the right incentives, (4) don't use it as a source of free labor, (5) guide or organize the crowd, (6) divide your tasks into simple components, (7) keep in mind how many of the crowd will actually contribute good material, but also (8) how many are capable of simpler tasks, (9) accept that your community is always right, and finally (10) use this when you are trying to do something

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[21] Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired*, June 2006, http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html, 3.

[22] Ibid., 209.

[23] Erik Qualman, *Socialnomics*, ebook. (Wiley, John & Sons, Inc., 2010), 105.

for the crowd, not vice-versa.[24] These are simple principles, but only businesses who are using them are effectively harnessing the power of crowdsourcing.

There are economic implications to crowdsourcing as well. Crowdsourcing efforts affect other industries in both positive and negative ways. Payment for stock photographs has plummeted, since professionals can't keep selling their stock photos at inflated rates and compete with the $1-40 on the stock photo crowdsourcing site iStockphoto.[25] On the other hand, Hirschorn of VH1 purchased iFilm (an entire collection of crowdsourced viral videos) for what is effectively a bargain price. VH1 saves money on licensing individual videos, and has a constant source of material that is already ranked according to popularity - saving them the time and money of sorting through the massive video collection.[26]

The application of crowdsourcing to economic success can be easily seen with food products. Companies like Ben&Jerry's and Dunkin' Donuts, who have sponsored flavor-design competitions, see the benefits immediately because the flavor is popular *before* it even hits production. If the consumers are invested enough to help create and vote for a new product or flavor, they follow through that commitment and purchase the product when it's released.[27] But that level of commitment is seen on much higher levels than choosing an ice cream flavor.

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[24] Jeff Howe, *Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd is Driving the Future of Business*, ebook. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), 213-19.

[25] Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired*, June 2006, http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html.

[26] Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired*, June 2006, http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html, 2.

[27] Amy-Mae Elliott, "Power to the People: 3 Tasty Crowdsourcing Case Studies," *Mashable*, February 21, 2011, http://mashable.com/2011/02/20/crowdsourcing-case-studies/.

The billion individuals Jeff Howe writes about have the time, the desire, and often the skills to contribute to a multitude of projects. What remains is the structure to organize those crowds, and the companies who will find ways of making the crowds productive. Companies like Threadless and InnoCentive have already done this effectively, and on a smaller scale, corporations like Coca-Cola have used it for marketing campaigns and designing flavors that sell. But the true potential of the crowd remains untapped, and as the technologies for bringing communities together continue to evolve, so will the power of crowdsourcing.

Story I: A Brief (and unfulfilling) Conversation

This was exactly the sort of thing that annoyed her. She had chosen this table because it was empty. The cafe was one of the few places she wasn't constantly connected to the Exchange. She had put her purse on the second chair so no one would be tempted to share. And this guy had the nerve to just move her purse onto the table and take a seat. No coffee shop courtesy.

Until he pushed the second cup in his hands over to her. "This one's for you."

"If you were meeting someone, you have the wrong table," she informed him, pushing the steaming cup back his way. But to her surprise, the stranger shook his head and said briskly, "It's a white chocolate mocha. Yours has been gone for half an hour, Vivianne."

She was sure she didn't know him, but it's not like her port profile was a secret - anyone could have recognized her from it. So she pasted on a smile, thanked him for the drink, and waited to hear an explanation for why this stranger had sought out an Exchange administrator.

"We want the secret."

She blinked and waited, but he just looked at her, expectant but guarded, so she began, "I'm not sure I understand what you—"

"Listen. I know your angle. Your team has been in charge for six years now and we've been watching. We know what you say, the face you put on for the world. We're not unfamiliar to your *revolution/great shift* and how you say it operates. You say it's the decision of the crowd—"

She raised a skeptical eyebrow in protest but he shook his head and continued, abandoning his cool demeanor from before. "Listen, I'm just a middleman, but you have connections, and my boss would pay a lot for what you've learned...on the inside. I've sent a number -in dollars - to your port device but that will disappear 24 hours from now. That's how long we'll wait for your information."

Her eyes flicked over to where her port rested in her purse before she looked up to address him. "I don't think you understand how things work around here, "she began, "um, what's your name?" she asked.

"You can call me Lawrence." He'd taken his elbows off the table and leaned back to sit, tense and upright.

"Lawrence," she rolled her eyes, "you are welcome to my information. You and your boss are welcome to the Exchange files, all of the election ballots are filed publicly online and are synced to every citizen's port account. If you're looking for fraud, you

don't have to ask me, you can check the records yourself. And *we* haven't been running this country for the last six years. Everyone has." She shrugged and continued, "I'm just one of their favorite secretaries."

"I organize. I enforce the rules. When thousands of people suggest solutions to one problem, I figure out how we can sort through, pick the best ones, and let every citizen on the port vote on those top ideas. That's what's been happening here and you are welcome to see any of that data."

Lawrence said nothing, just continued staring at her expectantly. She shrugged her shoulders, took a sip of the drink he'd put in front of her earlier, and let her eyes flit back to her e-reader sitting on the table. This was her personal time, and she didn't appreciate being interrupted by those who didn't understand the Exchange government and weren't willing to listen when someone explained it to them.

Sure, she did work in one of the highest offices but that was because she was good at her job and everyone knew it. But Lawrence could ask anyone in this coffee shop how the Exchange worked and they could tell him as much as she could. They all contributed in one way or another, and they all logged their weekly hours contributing to the Exchange. Whether they spent those hours typing up proposals, making edits, or voting on those written by others, or a myriad of other tasks that were left to the crowd to complete, they were still all part of how things got done.

That had been the agreement when they switched to this form of government. Crowdsourcing will only benefit the crowd if the crowd remains active and involved in every level.

Lawrence finally cleared his throat. "Well, I feel like I've made myself clear. My employer wants to know who's really running the show, and you're close enough to the top to know. If you're worried about repercussions, we can cover for you and make it look like the data was stolen from you. This will not reflect poorly on you. No one will know. Our offer is on the table and on your port device." He glanced up from the table at her and softened his voice to add, "We're only looking for honesty. We just want to know who we're dealing with. You wouldn't be endangering your country."

She watched him push his chair back and walk out of the cafe. Past the group of wrinkled old men huddled together playing chess, past a woman on her laptop scrolling through some of the details for next year's government health spending,, every now and then clicking and typing little notes, and past two high school students either doing homework or creating a new level for a favorite video game – maybe both.

The stranger got into a dark sedan and was gone. Another disbeliever.

She shook her head and tucked her hair back behind her ears. Before she could return to her reading, she took a moment to wonder why other governments and other peoples

were still so skeptical. So unwilling to take seriously a country that had risen to the greatest in the world, riding on the never-ending crest of the ideas of its people.

All of those peoples, Lawrence and whoever he worked for, searching for answers that were so close to their faces they refused to see them. All of them underestimating their own power. Couldn't believe a government could truly be as strong as each of its citizens — each of their contributions and all of the time they collectively donated to make everything function, little by little.

She was only one part of that, and thousands of others would keep things running while she took a coffee break. She allowed herself a brief, satisfied grin, and continued reading.

Part II: Online Self-Branding

If you're not "on Facebook" these days you get a quizzical look, even though the site has been public less than a decade.[28] Twitter isn't yet all-inclusive, but even the 140-character network is increasingly being used for job searches and news exchange. And while not everyone has a blog, you do if you want to be a definitive presence in your field. Essentially, if you're *not* online, you're no longer capable of networking and advancing. Social media and online tools have made creating an online presence - a brand of you - both easy and essential, but with that come the dangers of over-exposure online and over-specialization society needs to be conscious of as we move forward and "brand" ourselves online.

It was more than thirteen years ago that Tom Peters debuted the idea of, "The Brand Called You," in a "Fast Company" article.[29] Peters both heralds the internet as the tool that allows anyone to "have a website" or an online presence, and states that only those who effectively brand themselves will have a *successful* online presence. He even states that the individual approach should be identical to that of behemoth brands like Nike or Starbucks. Most of his suggestions - contributing to a newspaper or blog or speaking on a panel or at a conference - have only become easier with new methods of social connection and information distribution.

Essentially, what used to be the territory of self-help books that focused individuals on improving their business success has evolved to "self-*packaging*," in which, "success is not determined by individuals' internal sets of skills, motivations, and

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[28] Nicholas Carlson, "How Facebook Was Founded," *Business Insider*, March 5, 2010, http://www.businessinsider.com/how-facebook-was-founded-2010-3.

[29] Tom Peters, "The Brand Called You," Magazine, *Fast Company*, August 31, 1997, http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/10/brandyou.html?page=0%2C0.

interests but, rather, by how effectively they are arranged, crystallized, and labeled."[30] It is then how you package and display your skills that allows you to create your personal brand.

The methods available to potential self-branders had already begun to develop and have proliferated exponentially since Peters' article. The lowered costs of digital cameras have given nearly everyone the ability to take high-quality digital photographs which are easily shared online. YouTube wasn't created until 2005, but has spawned a generation of mini-celebrities who quickly and effectively spread their personal brand through viral videos or channels. And social network profiles like MySpace and Facebook, though only recently introduced, have created new methods for individuals of every age, bands and artists, start-ups, and every small initiative imaginable to create strong, simple online presences. As Seth Godin has counseled in his books on successful marketing, to spread ideas and market something - even yourself - you need to target a niche.[31] And that's exactly what these tools have enabled *every* person to do — target and connect with a *specific* online audience.

One of the largest changes since Peters wrote about promoting yourself is the rise and monopoly of social networks. The networks Peters recognizes as your marketing vehicles are now easily calculable. 100 Twitter followers means 100 word-of-mouth connections. "The key to any personal branding campaign is "word-of-mouth marketing." Your network of friends, colleagues, clients, and customers is the most

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[30] Daniel J. Lair, Katie Sullivan, and George Cheney, "Marketization and the Recasting of the Professional Self," *Management Communication Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (February 2005): 308.

[31] Seth Godin, *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2003), 31.

important marketing vehicle you've got; what they say about you and your contributions is what the market will ultimately gauge as the value of your brand."[32]

In the personal branding toolkit of Dan Schawbel, owner of the award-winning "Personal Branding Blog", nine of the ten tools he recommends are digital or online, and four of those are online profiles or blogs.[33] The only thing you need to manage offline is your wardrobe - for in-person presentation. This points to how essential social network connections have become to maintaining a successful personal brand, and consequently, a career. Instead of simply up the career *ladder* of one corporation, individuals are using these tools as a lattice of connections to working their way *out*.

However, the more people have transferred their lives online, the more we see serious repercussions caused by new social pressures. As more individuals create their brand and identities online, the more potential strengths and risks have become apparent. Particularly for younger generations using social networks, cyberbullying has led to high rates of related depression and suicides. The Cyber-bullying Research Center reports that 19,000 young people attempted suicide as a result of online bullying via instant messaging or on social networks. And the National Crime Prevention Council asserts that more than half of American teens are affected by cyber-bullying.[34] Whether or not these consequences could have been foreseen and prevented is moot, but actions are now being taken to help prevent more of these incidents.

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[32] Tom Peters, "The Brand Called You," Magazine, *Fast Company*, August 31, 1997, http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/10/brandyou.html?page=0%2C0, 3.

[33] Dan Schawbel, "Personal Branding 101: How to Discover and Create Your Brand," *Mashable*, February 5, 2009, http://mashable.com/2009/02/05/personal-branding-101/.

[34] Zachary Sniderman, "President Obama Fights Bullying on Facebook," *Mashable*, March 10, 2011, http://mashable.com/2011/03/09/president-obama-cyber-bullying/.

U.S. President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle held a White House Conference on Bullying Prevention this March 2011, teaming up with Facebook and other organizations in an effort to create more "digital citizenship", and less online bullying. Facebook's corresponding new policies include new tools for reporting offensive content and a more resourceful safety center, giving people more options for "What You Can Do," to report incidents, and prompting them to connect with a trusted friend or adult if they feel unsafe, stressed, or bullied.[35] Because the problems are community-oriented, Facebook is underlining the fact that to be most effective, the solutions need to be as well. These new efforts at protecting youth in their online social activities forecast both the importance of online identities, and the associated risks offline, in the real world.

It is clear that you need to brand yourself online to succeed in the digital and business world, but also that proper precautions and methods are necessary. It is not enough to create and maintain online profiles. You need to be a figure in your niche market, part of the communities you're involved in, and propagate a "culture of respect"[36] in both your on and offline interactions. But how do you both maintain an active, conscionable online brand, and still stand out from the crowd?

As Schawbel and Godin have suggested, some of the most successful individual brands carve out a place in a particular niche - tech bloggers, fashion bloggers, cupcake

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[35] Jolie O'Dell, "Facebook's New Anti-Bullying Tools Create a," *Mashable*, March 10, 2011, http://mashable.com/2011/03/10/facebook-anti-bullying/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Mashable+%28Mashable%29&utm_content=Google+Reader.

[36] Jolie O'Dell, "Facebook's New Anti-Bullying Tools Create a," *Mashable*, March 10, 2011, http://mashable.com/2011/03/10/facebook-anti-bullying/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Mashable+%28Mashable%29&utm_content=Google+Reader.

bloggers, or Schawbel's own "personal branding" bloggers.[37] But this level of

specialization comes with its own caveats, which might not yet be fully felt, but which

may begin to change our society more in the future. Cultivating our online communities

and information into what specifically suites our interests - or niches - creates what

some call a "filter bubble".

Board president of MoveOn.org, Eli Pariser, is currently writing a book on the

intrinsic dangers of the self-propagating information loop he calls the "filter bubble".

Nearly every internet platform now customizes ads, search results, and information

channels you can subscribe to.[38] One example is Amazon's recommendations, which

appear below products you're currently looking at, and after you make a purchase,

further suggested items appear that you might be interested in. These

recommendations can be created based on your past browsing and purchase history, or

by comparing the purchasing habits of customers with similar habits.

Even our news and search results are now manipulated with algorithms to give

us a, "personal ecosystem of information ... to who they think you are."[39] Pariser notes

when two friends Google searched an identical term, but were provided radically

different search results based on their past search behaviors. Such a personalized

sphere of information has proven itself to be beneficial to some users. For example,

NYT journalists use tools like Twitter to promote their own stories, but also to keep quick

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[37] Dan Schawbel, "Personal Branding 101: How to Discover and Create Your Brand," *Mashable*, February 5, 2009, http://mashable.com/2009/02/05/personal-branding-101/.

[38] Lynn Parramore, "Eli Pariser on the future of the Internet," *Salon*, October 8, 2010, http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war_room/2010/10/08/lynn_parramore_eli_pariser.

[39] Ibid.

tabs on their competitors and to follow only news sources that are related to their own field.[40]

It's difficult to say whether overpersonalization will ultimately be a dangerous or a beneficial development. Cass Sunstein, a professor at Harvard School of Law, legal scholar and current administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, has written multiple works analyzing polarities and democracy in social life. In "Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide," Sunstein discusses his theory of group polarization, that, "When people find them-selves in groups of like-minded types, they are especially likely to move to extremes."[41]

These extremes can promote positive, more dynamic engagement, but can also push members to violence and extremism.[42] The application of blogs, RSS feeds, chat groups, Facebook groups and fan pages, and more are all explicitly connect like-minded individuals. This puts society in danger of Sunstein's predicted civic polarization. If you only interact online with others who share, for example, your political ideology, you are no longer exposed to new and potentially conflicting ideas. It's like voluntarily isolating yourself in an online echo-chamber — your own identity shifts to become more extreme within that set of ideas or beliefs.

Areas like this are relatively uncharted territory and demonstrate the backlash society may face as a result of moving our identities online. Shifting lives, ideas, profiles, and personal brands online has created massive opportunities for self-

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[40] Arthur S. Brisbane, "A Cocktail Party With Readers," Newspaper, *The New York Times*, March 12, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/opinion/13pubed.html?_r=1.

[41] Cass R. Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

[42] Ibid., 152-3.

marketing, but new social platforms also create new social pressures. Some of these

dangers are manifesting through problems like cyber-bullying and collective extremism.

Personalizing ourselves and our information online needs to be approached carefully.

While individuals are capable of branding themselves online in a particular niche, it is

increasingly difficult not to confine your online-presence to one realm, and trap yourself

in the "hall of mirrors" of information,[43] without exposure to *new* and *different* people.

[43] Arthur S. Brisbane, "A Cocktail Party With Readers," Newspaper, *The New York Times*, March 12, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/opinion/13pubed.html?_r=1.

Story II: Top Blogger

"Are you okay if we live-stream this?"

"Yeah! And I definitely want to live-tweet it too! If my fans send some questions, can you ask me them? They would just die if their question was asked on this competition!" she practically shrieks.

"Well, we have to ask you the same three questions we're asking all of the other contestants. So no one has an unfair advantage," Jay explained to the preppy, overly made-up teenager sitting across from me. He gives a visible sigh as she keeps tapping away on her smartphone and ignoring him. Hosting this competition is becoming more than he had bargained for.

He leans back in and gives a little wave to catch her attention. Then a bigger wave.

All the voters have seen so far has been from each competitors' blog. This will be the first time they "meet" the contestants, and tonight's vote will eliminate half of the competitors. Sitting before him is Contestant #4: The Tumblr Peacock.

Only six more interviews after this one, he has to remind himself. "Okay, what we'll do now is review the questions so you'll know what to expect during the live interview." She perks up again at the mention of something happening "live".

It's not that they aren't good. They're all very creative, popular bloggers with big fan bases — that's how they got enough votes to become our twenty-five finalists, and made it past the second vote when we narrowed it to top ten.

But this third phase of the competition is supposed to introduce them as real people. And even as the host, he's not convinced they are.

He wasn't hosting last year, but he was here during a lot of the production and followed the whole thing. There was this total badass WOW player who made it through the first 2 stages of voting, maintaining his blog and still playing World of Warcraft the whole time. When the guy slept was a mystery, but the guy could relate WOW to *anything*.

In person though... No one actually *likes* someone who can't hold a conversation without referring to himself in the third person and by his WOW character name to boot. Sure, it's funny to read now and then when you check his blog. Not so funny for a 5-minute assault on your ears.

And after they live-streamed the interviews, his voters abandoned him. They rallied to the adult LEGO vlogger who did these stop-motion videos of everything he built and he became 2014's Top Blogger.

The problem this year was that as far as Jay could tell, all of the contestants were like that. And he only had to talk to them for a few minutes in front of a camera.

"So, can you just tell me a little about where you came from?" he asks.

She looks up and scrunches her eyebrows. "You know I'm from Texas. It's on my Facebook profile."

"Oh, I meant...a little about your hometown? Your family?"

The eyebrows remain scrunched. "Well, I didn't grow up there knowing I'd be a blogger, but look at me now! I'm glad you're asking about my family because that's basically how The Tumblr Peacock got started." Jay heaved a sigh of relief; they were getting somewhere.

She continued, "If you go back to my very first post, it's this photo from a family vacation. My brother and I were totally bored because my mom is always trying to snap pictures for the family photo album she'll never make, and we're left there, standing in front of Mt. Rushmore with stupid grins on our faces until she finally takes the picture. I was totally sick of it, so I started just doing outrageous poses every time she tried to take a photo."

"I post them all, sometimes with caption contests, on Tumblr, and this travel company sponsored me to travel and keep it up last summer so I have a bunch of photos from Europe, and now I'm trying to put all of the ones my followers love the most into a book —" she paused to suck in some air and Jay jumped on the opportunity.

"Is there anything about yourself, aside from your Tumblr, that you'd like to tell the voters?"

"Sure!" She yanked up her sleeve to the shoulder, revealing an enormous tattooed peacock feather from elbow to shoulder. "I just got this a few weeks ago when I turned 18. Since my Tumblr is all about being yourself and outrageous and colorful, which is why I call it The Tumblr Peacock, I want everyone to see this! Here - can you snap a pic so I can tweet it?" she asked, shoving her smartphone into his hands.

A few more minutes like this, and Contestant #5: Shut the Front Door! — a daily collection of "news so pointless, we wanted you to hear it twice" — was ushered in to prep for his interview. Jay gave up. It was easier to just let them keep talking about their blogs and vlogs and Tublmrs and tweets than to convince them to open up, just a little, about what they were like offline.

He shook his head and flipped through his notecards again. As far as he was concerned, 2015's Top Blogger was already over.

Part III: Information and Democracy

Human history is a story of expansion, innovation, and information. We've only been around (as a species) for 150,000 years — barely a blip in the 3.5 billion year history of life on Earth.[44] Still, in that time, humans have built civilizations and empires, the Internet and the iPhone, and I believe we have reached the nexus of information and democracy in our societies. By comparing it to former technological innovations, identifying whether it has the necessary elements to spur change, and looking at what social movements and changes already happening, we can determine that social media creates a unique, accessible environment for the democratization of information.

Historically, we give revolutions in information technology credit for altering the distributions of power in society. In looking at how the internet is changing humans and their interactions, Adam Gopnik declares three outlooks on how our information technology is changing: the Never-Betters, the Better-Nevers, and the Ever-Wasers. Respectively, they believe that 1) we are constantly advancing but each new advancement makes our society better than the last, 2) that society has finally overstepped its most productive phase and is entering a decline, and 3) that as society progresses these advances into modernity are constantly happening even if it may be difficult to recognize them at the time.[45]

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[44] "Hall of Human Origins," Museum, *American Museum of Natural History*, 2011, http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/humanorigins/history/.

[45] Adam Gopnik, "How the Internet Gets Inside Us : The New Yorker," *The New Yorker*, February 14, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2011/02/14/110214crat_atlarge_gopnik?currentPage=all.

Many of our information technology revolutions have been hailed as "never-better" waves of "democratized information," like Gutenberg's printing press.[46] The Middle Ages information age is frequently used in comparison to the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and now the digital age. The role of the printing press is hailed as, "the first true one-to-many communications medium."[47] In reality, the printing press didn't democratize information from the bottom-up and create one-to-many connections that didn't already exist in the power structure. Most of the material printed came directly from the royal governments, not the democratic underdogs.

Like the monarchs who *actually* held the power of what was printed, there still exist gatekeepers of information, and they hold much of the power. The CEO's of the most powerful digital information companies don't necessarily decide what gets published, but they do determine user privacy restrictions and policies for government interactions - both factors key to the democratization of information. Those functions are embodied in the code of conduct for the Global Network Initiative (GNI).

The GNI was established in 2008 by Microsoft, Google, and Yahoo in recognition of the power their companies play and in a conscious effort, "to avoid or minimize the impact of government restrictions on freedom of expression" and protect user privacy when demands by government "compromise privacy in a manner inconsistent with internationally recognized laws and standards."[48] Beginning with the Chinese government's attempts to censor and restrict information flow via internet technology, all

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[46] Ibid, 1.

[47] James A. Dewar, "The Information Age and the Printing Press:Looking Backward to See Ahead," *Ubiquity* 2000, no. August 1 - August 31 2000 (August 2000): 3-4.

[48] Verne G. Kopytoff, "Sites Like Twitter Absent from Free Speech Pact," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/07/technology/07rights.html?_r=2.

three member corporations have tried to alter their policies to favor human rights, even when it might jeopardize business in restrictive countries. Unfortunately, since its creation no new corporations have joined the GNI. Social network giants Facebook and Twitter remain absent from an initiative that seems tailor-made for their global reach and socially active nature.[49]

And social media might be the key to *real* information democracy where previous technologies have failed. While the printing press was still limited to those who could afford production, since its invention in 1991 the World Wide Web has overcome the main fiscal barrier and become both accessible and indispensable to most of the world's population.[50] Subsequently developed social media tools enable individuals to create content and participate in information exchange more affordably, rapidly and successfully than ever before. But why have people so quickly adapted to these developments?

Brothers Chip and Dan Heath coauthored a book on change, *Switch*, which outlines several tenets for what motivates people to adopt change, or what successful changes have in common.[51] The three necessary factors are 1) changing the situation to make change more likely, 2) appealing to both people's rational and emotional sides, and 3) providing "crystal-clear direction," for people to adopt the change.[52] Using these

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[49] Verne G. Kopytoff, "Sites Like Twitter Absent from Free Speech Pact," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/07/technology/07rights.html?_r=2.

[50] "The Invention of the Internet," *History.com*, 2011, http://www.history.com/topics/invention-of-the-internet.

[51] Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change When Change is Hard*, 1st ed. (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 4.

[52] Ibid., 3-18.

three guidelines, it is easy to see why social media has been so quickly adopted and used to create social change.

Social networks create a new environment where change is more likely because they, 1) "bring a noble goal within the realm of everyday behavior."[53] 2) By nature, a social network appeals to people's emotional side because it connects them to their social circle, but also their rational side, because it enables those connections to happen quickly and easily in an aggregated fashion. Though the invention of the postage stamp was a step forward in communication,[54] a digital archive of your "friends" on Facebook is more effective than the postage stamp because it shrinks the challenges you face when trying to keep in touch with all of those individuals.[55] And finally, 3) crystal-clear direction for the change is provided not just by industry leaders, but by anyone effectively using social media to create change and information democracy.

By enabling information to be more easily disseminated and shared, social media technology might have the ability to succeed where previous information revolutions have failed. Recent global events are case studies in the effectiveness of social media tools in the democratization of information. Social upheavals in Moldova, Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, and more may not be entirely due to social networks, despite being dubbed

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[53] Ibid., 53.

[54] Adam Gopnik, "How the Internet Gets Inside Us : The New Yorker," *The New Yorker*, February 14, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2011/02/14/110214crat_atlarge_gopnik?currentPage=all.

[55] Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change When Change is Hard*, 1st ed. (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 175-6.

"The Twitter Revolution" or "Facebook Revolution", but tools like Google, Facebook, and Twitter have certainly played a part.[56]

For better or worse, the worldwide access to social media allows citizens of any nation to participate in protests and action. Massive levels of participation become possible. Journalist and blogger Andrew Sullivan declared, "The revolution will be Twittered," when events began in Iran in 2009.[57] Protests in Tunisia successfully overthrew their dictator of 23 years, and soon after the democratic movement spread to Egypt to overthrow their own dictator.[58] A Facebook page titled, "We Are All Khaled Said," was created in honor of an Egyptian man who was beaten to death by police after he posted video on his personal blog revealing illegal police activity. This became a rallying point for Egyptian activists, gathering more than 380,000 followers to the page.[59] Following Egypt's success, one young man even named his newborn daughter Facebook to honor the social network's role in organizing the Tahrir Square protests.[60]

However, mass online participation and organization has its own limitations. During the Iranian protests, instructions were posted online about how to slow down the Iranian government's news sites. Americans responded in force, because "...what could

[56] Alina Mungui-Pippidi and Igor Munteanu, "Moldova's "Twitter Revolution"," *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 3 (July 2009): 136.

[57] Andrew Sullivan, "The Revolution Will Be Twittered," *The Daily Dish*, June 13, 2009, http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2009/06/the-revolution-will-be-twittered-1.html.

[58] Bruce Riedel, "Tunisian Revolution: Other Arab Dictator At a Crossroads," *The Daily Beast*, January 15, 2011, http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2011-01-15/tunisian-revolution-other-arab-dictator-at-a-crossroads/.

[59] Mike Giglio, ""We Are All Khaled Said": Will the Revolution Come to Egypt? - The Daily Beast," *The Daily Beast*, January 22, 2011, http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2011-01-22/we-are-all-khaled-said-will-the-revolution-come-to-egypt/.

[60] Mark Memmott, "Little Egyptian Girl Named 'Facebook' To Honor Site's Role In Revolution : The Two-Way : NPR," *NPR*, February 22, 2011, http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2011/02/22/133959319/little-egyptian-girl-named-facebook-to-honor-sites-role-in-revolution.

be more exciting than the prospect of attacking the evil government of Ahmadinejad

from the comfort of one's favorite café?" Unfortunately, not all world-wide support

actually proved helpful. They failed to realize that so many people performing the same

long-distance role also slowed down *all* of the internet service in Iran. Effectively, the,

"foreign supporters of the Twitter Revolution managed to do what the Iranian

government couldn't: make the Internet unusable for activists."[61] Activists abroad

offering their "support" don't always realize the real repercussions of online actions and

sympathies abroad.

      In his contentious *New Yorker* article, best-selling author Malcom Gladwell

laments that, "Where activists were once defined by their causes, they are now defined

by their tools."[62] While I disagree with his overall sentiment, Gladwell makes some

important points. Technology alone cannot inspire campaigns, uprisings, and efforts for

transparent governments. But technologies like Twitter and Facebook *have*

demonstrated their utility in quickly spreading information worldwide, and in organizing

people who previously didn't have access to the information tools they needed. These

movements showcase that quick adoption and change that can be mobilized by new

information technologies.

      There's no fair way to compare social media to information technologies like the

printing press or even card catalogs. Each presented a shift from what came before in

how we organize and use information. But whether you are a Never-Better, a Better-

Never, or an Ever-Waser, you can still see that social media is something different — for

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[61] Evgeny Morozov, "Downside to the "Twitter Revolution"," *Dissent* 56, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 13.

[62] Malcom Gladwell, "Twitter, Facebook, and social activism," *The New Yorker*, October 4, 2010, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell, 1.

better or worse.[63] Since its relatively recent development, we've seen astounding rates of creation and adoption of social technologies. And while social uprisings still require human thought and motivation, they've been more quickly and widely spread because social media creates such a positive environment for change.

What the world has witnessed so far is only the beginning. But the fact that the world *is witnessing* this change as it happens, in real-time via social media, is the biggest hint yet that information democracy is a real and growing phenomenon, and that this, "new connective technology, by joining people together in new communities and in new ways, is bound to make for more freedom."[64]

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[63] Adam Gopnik, "How the Internet Gets Inside Us : The New Yorker," *The New Yorker*, February 14, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2011/02/14/110214crat_atlarge_gopnik?currentPage=all.

[64] Adam Gopnik, "How the Internet Gets Inside Us : The New Yorker," *The New Yorker*, February 14, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2011/02/14/110214crat_atlarge_gopnik?currentPage=all.

Story III: They can't take him.

"Jack's dead," I begin typing. "And I think they killed him."

"We should have seen it coming." I think about erasing that last part, but I leave the incriminating statement glowing on my screen.

He wasn't family or anything, but he might as well have been. He taught me everything there was to know - from what dealers would sell you the parts, to building a computer, to sneak onto the Worldpedia. Without getting caught.

Except he did.

This thought rattles me back to the task at hand. I don't bother saving the page I typed about Jack.

I absentmindedly punch in our security codes under the flickering glare of a single bulb in the cellar. Half of my mind is on the programming task at hand. The other half is listening for the sounds of swishing robes and shuffling feet in the house above me. I know I'll be punished if they find me like this, before Jack's even in the ground.

Of course, once he is buried, I'm still not sure what I'm supposed to do.

I could just hide all of this. I don't think any of them have the skills anymore to really track what we've been doing. They'd just be guessing, really. I'd probably still be punished and our house destroyed.

When Jack grew up, everyone had a computer. He used to talk about it when we were alone. He said with the Movement we shut ourselves out of a beautiful, connected world. But those were his theories. The "people's" Movement thought otherwise.

I never knew anything but this world. And if it weren't for Jack, I'd still be collecting scrap like everyone else, barely scraping by and spending my evenings memorizing their long, oral histories. That's what they reduced themselves to when they rejected the technology they thought made their lives miserable.

"A return to the true human nature," they say. Jack would always snort at that and mutter, "Ha, I thought we'd already seen all of your 'human nature' on the web." He always did think the burned politicians were behind this. Said since they couldn't hide from the web, they had to destroy it to stay in power.

But I'm not powerless. I allow myself a little smile at this, in Jack's memory. He'd known how empowering social technology was. He'd known how dangerous it was to cut ourselves off from it. He'd predicted the financial ruin, the plummet from global recognition to international joke.

I've decided.

I come to the screen Jack and I set up for if something happened. I ignore the contingency plan for deleting all of his files. I watch the cursor take four slow steps backward as I erase Jack's name from his Worldpedia page. Then I fill in my own.

With a click, I share it with every nation but my own. But I want everyone out there to know I'm here, resisting the Movement like Jack did every day of his life. I can't bring down the Movement without help.

I sign off, lock and disguise the door to our computer hideout in the basement. Then I sit next to the front door, waiting for them to come collect Jack's body. But that's all they can take of him. I have everything that matters.

Conclusion

We've covered a lot of ideas in relatively few pages (some real and some fictional). But that's one of social media's perks: it's not about defining every social network and tech tool. The technology has only enabled ideas that were already present. It's all about how *people* are using those technologies.

Ideas like crowdsourcing are enabling people to contribute according to their own abilities and motivations, and bring us enormous projects that would otherwise be impossible — like bird-watchers all across North America putting together their sightings into one large database. Ideas like self-branding allow us to create and share ourselves online, and then interact with others through those identities — like using Facebook and blogs. And ideas like information democracy are allowing citizens of any nation, around the globe, to access information and communicate where geographical, political, or financial barriers have previously made it impossible — with simple technologies like Twitter and text messaging.

More than any of its definitions, social media is a spirit of community, of collaboration, and of sharing, which makes innumerable projects not only feasible, but easy. Social media makes possible a constantly-updating encyclopedia with billions of articles - like Wikipedia. Social media makes possible networks that help you stay in contact with old friends from high school and new friends across the globe - like Facebook. Social media makes possible information exchange so fast and efficient, we can follow and offer support for tragedies and celebrations worldwide in real time.

All of these things are part of the phenomenon called social media. And while I encourage you to see the value in what social media makes possible, I also recognize

that it's not a miracle solution for all the troubles in the world. How effectively we use social media to solve our problems, to create better solutions, to build better relationships in the future — that all depends on how *individuals* use it. A blog can spread a bad idea as easily as a good one. People aren't always who they say they are online. Some governments are using technology to block information instead of share it.

My social media short stories are an attempt to show some of the ambivalent possibilities of a social media society. Like any human creation, it is not always predictable or rational. In the time it's taken me to write this sentence, there have probably been a dozen new social media startups created. Not all of them will make the cut, but some of those new companies could be game-changers — like InnoCentive was, like Amazon was, and like Twitter was.

You don't have to be one of the people inventing these technologies, but you will almost certainly be using them. So while I may not have provided you with a concrete definition for "social media," I hope to have given you at least a representative taste of what social media contains*,* and of what it is capable in the future. It's up to you to decide how you'll be part of it.

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Appendix A

Presentation given at the American University Honors Capstone Conference
Wednesday, April 13, 2011, as recapped on my blog:

Before we get started I have one important question – what happens to your Facebook
profile when you die?

You're probably one of Facebook's half a billion users. You probably have at least 1
email account. You either text or tweet, or instant message. You might also have a
Netflix account, or maybe a Flickr where you share all of your photos. And if you're
really into online, you might have an entire SecondLife virtual reality account.

I don't want to be morbid – but just to get you thinking about realm of my Capstone -
have you considered what happens to these online accounts when you die?

Rest assured – companies have sprouted up to handle your online affairs post-mortem.

But it's new predicaments like this that started me thinking about **where social media
will take our society in the future**.

So let me walk you through my research on social media, and show you how I used it to
write 3 short stories.

Don't worry if you're not using all of these. What I want to show you today is that these
are **just websites and applications**. And individually, people are choosing which ones
make sense for their life.

You don't have to be the person filming and uploading a video to YouTube. You can be
the average American, who **watches at least 30 minutes of video online, every day**.
You don't have to be the person building apps and games for Facebook and
smartphones. You can be **part of the social gaming community who bought $2.2
billion dollars worth of virtual goods** in 2009. Yes – $2.2 billion real dollars on things
like Farmville.
And you don't have to be one of the 15 million active users tweeting all day long. You
can be one of the 175 million registered Twitter users, **gathering your news and daily
info from what other people tweet**.

The blanket term "social media" encompasses a huge swell in information technology
and social sharing tools, and their growth has been so rapid and so ubiquitous, that
there are lots of things you probably **use every day**, but don't think about as social
media.

We have a tendency to just talking about the tools, instead of **the social phenomena**
behind them. You might send a text message, leave a comment on a Washington Post
article, bid on something on Ebay, follow a sports game on your blackberry during class.

My point is, I could blog about this every day and still never catch up to the innovations and changes happening daily, (I think that's what happens at the Mashable and Technorati blogs) so in order to fit this capstone into one semester, I chose **3** distinct social media topics to research – **1 Crowdsourcing, 2 creating an online branding or identity, and 3 new intersections of information and democracy**.

1- Possibly the biggest, most well-known crowdsourced project is Wikipedia. There are over 14 million registered accounts,but only 2%, 300,000 of those have edited articles at least 10 times, and only 5,000 have made edits more than 100 times – that's not even 1%. And these are just the people contributing a little information here and there, not to mention the millions who never edit an article, but visit the site simply to view the information. This is the power of crowdsourcing – everyone contributes a little, to their ability, and the collective self-corrects. Here are a few more examples – like Threadless and Seti@Home.

2- Since we're doing so much online, it's only natural that people began crafting online identities.

13 years ago, Tom Peters wrote an article in Fast Company telling us how everyone could begin to build their own brand – just like Nike or Starbucks – with the tools of the internet. Just over a decade later, we have more tools than he could have imagined at the time, and the number one piece of advice is to carve out your niche.

Choose your field. In an online crowd of over 1 billion, you can't be the expert on everything, so become the expert at something. Contribute to related websites. Tweet on that 1 subject. Build a blog around your niche.
But as we narrow our selves to such specific audiences and feedback, we create new dangers, like cyberbullying, and a "filter bubble" where we only see opinions just like our own.

3- Now let's look backwards for a moment and think about books. When we think information revolution! we generally think Gutenberg! The truth is yes, books did spread knowledge, but they didn't democratize it for the masses. It was still the royal and wealthy who could afford to have books printed, and they decided what that would be.

Jump back to today. Countries like China still have strict censorship in place, but in most of the world, is social media doing what books couldn't? You and I can now publish anything we want and share it with most of the world. Are we almost there? Are we almost an information democracy? Much like Wikileaks, the jury's still out on this one.

Within these three topics, with all of these ideas, and with these constantly growing statistics in mind, I wanted my capstone to do what my major is really about – **communicate**. And so from each of these topics, I've been asking questions, looking forward, and writing short stories.

I chose social media because it's at the nexus of all communication we now do, and I chose to represent that in story for 2 reasons:

Because these ideas don't need more academic stats (you can find them yourself with Google or Wikipedia). There are several great books that cover the nuts and bolts, I wanted to create something as flexible and accessible as social media itself.

And second, because story really is at the heart of all social media.

I don't want to just tell people how we're crowdsourcing right now. I want to paint you a picture of **what it might look like if our entire society operated as efficiently and with as much passion and involvement** as Threadless-the tshirt company.

I don't want to just tell people that creating your online identity can create new opportunities, and a bucketful of new problems. I want to **introduce you to fictional bloggers who may have branded themselves online a little too successfully**.

And I don't want to only explain to you how social media is altering power distributions where even the book, the telephone, and the television failed. I want to help you **envision where these changes could take our society – with one wrong, or right turn**.

And ultimately, I wanted to create a Capstone that was as **understandable and interesting to my non-techie parents and my younger siblings, as to my professors** and fellow students. Who doesn't enjoy reading a story?

If I've done my job, you not only want to go create your brand online and write a Wikipedia article. I've also piqued your interest in my short stories on social media.

You can find more on me **@suchthekaitlin**.

Thank you.