

DEANNA ZANDT

ShareThis!



**How You Will
Change the World with
Social Networking**

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“Deanna Zandt is completely tapped into the social media matrix. Every activist working in the digital space needs this book.”

—Latoya Peterson, Editor, Racialicious.com

“After my daughter explained Facebook to me, I joined. (And surprised many of my friends!)”

—Rachael Zandt, Administrative Assistant, Columbian Financial Group, and mother, Deanna Zandt

“Zandt’s book is like a celebrity cooking show...it breaks down the ingredients of social media successes into basic and easy-to-understand ingredients. You will finish reading this manual with the amazing feeling of ‘I can do this!’”

—Scott Goodstein, External Online Director, Obama for America, and founder, Revolution Messaging

“Deanna Zandt is one of the smartest, savviest, and sharpest observers of the new world, new media, and new ideas.”

—Robert Greenwald, President, Brave New Films

“With media, technology, and politics having essentially merged, all activists for justice need to update their attitudes and their skills. This book by social media maven Deanna Zandt has just the right mix of the why and the how to convince the skeptical and equip the fearful.”

—Rinku Sen, Executive Director, Applied Research Center, and coauthor of *The Accidental American*

“Deanna Zandt thinks big, arguing that social media won’t just change how we talk but how we live. Part analysis, part guidebook, *Share This!* offers a creative, ambitious view of a truly organic political landscape hinted at, but never really pursued, by the new political establishment.”

—Ben Smith, Senior Political Writer, *Politico*

“*Share This!* combines common sense, technically savvy how-to, and a grasp of the way in which human beings and technology come together and sometimes apart. Deanna Zandt is a first-rate guide for the 22nd century.”

—Amy Bloom, author of *Where the God of Love Hangs Out and Away*

SHARE THIS!



How **You** Will Change the World
with Social Networking

Deanna Zandt



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for my mom, Rachael

Preface



HEY! YOU. Yes, you, right there. Did you know that posting what you had for breakfast, offering advice about parenting, and posting links to news stories you find interesting all have the potential to radically change the world?

No?

Then this book is for you.

Social networking is all the rage, and it's coming at us, a million miles an hour. We're surrounded by a flurry of new technology, and just when we begin to make sense of one tool, a new one arrives on the scene. (At the time of this writing, we are predominantly using what you out there in The Future may remember as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and MySpace.)

All this activity leaves us little time to contemplate any forest for all these trees, let alone think about the bigger picture of how this technology will change the future. But here's the secret: *How we share information, find community, and both connect and disconnect will give us unprecedented influence over our place in the world.* Social media technology holds some of the biggest potential for creating tectonic shifts in how we operate, and the overall open-ended promise of technology gives us a great shot at creating the systems for change. Technology isn't a magic bullet

for solving the world's problems, but it's certainly a spark to the fastest fuse to explode our notions of power that the world has seen in a thousand years. In this book, I hope to show you how to light that fuse.

It hasn't been easy to thrive in our culture for the last hundred years or so. We've become ever more obsessed with consumption and power. Our corporate mass media and politicians have been treating us as faceless members of large demographics with open wallets, and less as individuals within communities, leading us down dark paths of apathy and isolation. We've had little room for recourse and little chance to connect to one another.

All of that's changing, and rapidly. People are using social technologies to find and connect. A study from the Pew Internet & American Life Project in November 2009 showed that people who have Internet access and/or a mobile phone were much more likely to have bigger, more diverse discussion networks, for example.¹ As I argue in this book, when we connect and share our lives with one another, both in the digital space and in the physical space, we create bonds of trust and empathy that lead us away from that apathy that's glazed over our eyeballs for at least a century. Our lives matter: What we believe and which truths we hold to be self-evident *matter*.

Along the way, I stress that technology is a tool, a means—never the end. It's important to remember that these tools are never completely neutral (because of the biases tech innovators can bring to the table), and that, to achieve its full potential, sharing in social networks requires complementary forms of organizing, activism, electoral work, and policy advocacy.

Your presence is required in this work: We need you in the online social space. Desperately. We have a tremendous opportunity to bring in voices previously marginalized or dismissed when it comes to shaping public conversations. But change

won't happen on its own—it requires you to show up, and to participate.

If you choose to sit this one out, though, your void causes a ripple effect. First, your own reputation, something that's increasingly important as recommendation and referral become cornerstones of how we operate, will suffer because you're not there building and managing it. Then, because you're not contributing to the larger, very public conversations about what's happening in the world and how problems should be solved, others will define and direct the conversation without the benefit of your experiences and knowledge. Y'know, like what's been going on for the last few thousand years.

Here's the thing: I truly believe that through social networking, we can influence the way these conversations affect how change happens. As more conversations are taking place in public, we can represent ourselves. We can break stereotypes. We can transform our new connections into social change.

I hereby offer you an ambassadorship to a more democratic future. Do you choose to accept this mission?

Who This Book Is For



Let's start out with some basic assumptions about who you are and why social media matters to you. Then, if you're reading this in the bookstore and wondering whether it is *really* the book for you, you'll know. (And likely, you'll buy it. Won't you? It's so nice and slim and trim, so easy to carry around or take on vacation with you. It's practically *bought itself*.)

People have wildly varied experiences and all kinds of questions about technology, and I'm going to make a few assumptions right at the outset. I'm going to assume, for the purpose of this introduction, that many of you are comfortable with computers and the Internet in general. You have an e-mail account or two.

You've shopped online, and you've got Google nailed. You've heard of social networks, "Web 2.0," and social media, and might belong to a few services. If you do, you use them, but you're not obsessive (like *some* people). You might have a friend or daughter (hi, Mom!) writing a book about the power of social media to induce systemic cultural and political change, but that's a little less likely. Hey, who knows? You're reading this book to figure out *What It All Means*.²

Which brings me to my other crew: There's a group of you out there who are interested in social change and activism. You've been bonked over the head with the idea that social technology can help you to achieve your goals. You've read some articles about how to do fund-raising online or have heard that organizations are having success getting new people interested in their work through social media. In short, you're trying to make sense of this intersection of social justice and technology before it slips through your fingers and evolves into something else, and you don't feel like you've had the chance to grasp what's happening in the first place.

Why I Wrote This Book



Many forces—technological, social, economic, and political—have converged to a place where we can all dive in and make change happen. I decided to write this book to explain the shift that's under way and to show you how you're going to change the world. You, li'l ol' you right there.

I'm a social media strategist who provides planning, workshops, and training on social networking for organizations and people looking to change the world. I came into the world a geek—in 1982, when I was seven, instead of buying a video game console, my parents brought home a personal computer for my brother and me to mess around with. In my late teens,

I became politically conscious and realized that the world's problems weren't going to fix themselves. My inner activist kicked in. When the Internet invaded my life in 1994, I saw the huge potential ahead of us—and the huge amount of work.

By 2003, I'd quit my nine-to-five job in order to commit myself to technology and activism. I've worked with progressive media and advocacy organizations, helping them to get beyond preaching to audiences and instead to explore ways to connect to their communities. AlterNet.org, Jim Hightower's *Hightower Lowdown*, GRITtv with Laura Flanders, Feministing.com, the Women's Media Center, and the Media Consortium are among the many I've had the pleasure of working with. They've taught me that, while it's fun for tech folk like me to bat around ideas, there's still a lot of work to be done in developing technologies that enhance our work in social change, and a lot of work in connecting people to the right technologies to fit their missions. One size does not fit all, and there is no easy answer.

My approach to social media has been heavily influenced by my participation in and organizing of social justice and change projects without formal organizations running them. The Hurricane Information Center, started in 2008 by NPR's Andy Carvin, for example, was a collection of tools gathered and utilized by hundreds of *volunteers* helping hurricane victims prepare for, evacuate, and recover from devastating storms. Later that year, I also worked on the Twitter Vote Report project, in which a number of volunteers used Twitter, texting, mapping, and other technologies to enable voters to report problems at their polling places. Previously, my experiences in offline, ad-hoc organizing, particularly the arts-related projects my cohorts and I developed during the Republican National Convention in 2004, gave me a strategic education that could be applied to online projects. These experiences made it clear to me that the freely available nature of the tools reduces some of the complexity of organizing.

We no longer have to rely on the old ways of top-down, or even organization-based, grassroots organizing.

As a woman all too familiar with the “pale, male, and stale” phenomenon,³ I also understand that diversity is key to bringing about tremendous social change using social technology. And I believe it’s critical to acknowledge the privilege one brings to the table: The social system we live in automatically gives people benefits based on the color of their skin, the money they have, their gender, their sexuality, their access to technology, and more. I recognize that my privilege influences the work I do, and if I lose sight of that fact, I expect to be reminded and held responsible.

What This Book Isn’t



To be clear about what we’re going to get done, I should tell you right off the bat that this isn’t the End-All-Be-All Activist’s Guide to Fixing Everything with Social Networking. (That’s why we didn’t call it that, for starters.) There are plenty of books and websites that will tell you how to raise money, how to get people to sign petitions, how to get people to call their senators, all with social networking. We’ll go over some thoughtful tactics toward the end of the book, but the thrust is going to be on the individual’s role in transforming our culture and thus our world to be more livable for everyone. We won’t get into the nitty-gritty of each tool that’s out there, and we won’t be dissecting case study after case study. We also won’t be addressing the future of traditional media in this book. While we touch on the role that traditional media plays in advancing social change through telling stories, we won’t be able to tackle the hard topics of what the future of journalism holds. I’ll be concentrating mostly on web-based technologies, only discussing others—mobile/SMS, e-mail, and so on—where overlap occurs. There are simply too

many technologies, all changing almost daily, to cover in a static book. And even though I focus on the power of social technologies, don't forget: That's all relative to what else is happening in the world, and we still need loads of other kinds of organizing and activism to complement what we share.

What's Ahead



This book is designed to walk you through the ins and outs—the opportunities and potential pitfalls—of the social networking landscape, viewed through the lens of social change. I've also created the illustrations and graphics to help you visualize new concepts. In chapter 1, “The Power of Sharing,” we'll discuss how the tools help us to transcend the traditional ways of communicating that too often restrict our ability to effect change. But as much as many of us would like to believe the Internet is a promised land of meritocracy, it isn't. Chapter 2, “Are We There Yet?” shows how we reproduce social structures online that marginalize voices and prevent meaningful advancement.

In chapter 3, “We Are What You Share,” we'll learn that there's more to social networks than just posting minutiae: Through sharing with others, we ultimately build the trust and empathy that are the building blocks of any movement for change. Your participation is critical. Chapter 4, “Trust Everyone,” argues that we can subvert traditional power structures through choosing who is important, relevant, and interesting—and we do this by deciding to whom we assign authority. But we need to guard against the temptation to let shiny new things get the best (or worst, as it were) of us.

Discomfort, fears, and hesitations sometimes keep us out of conversations we need to be joining; chapter 5, “Sharing Is Daring,” shows us how to overcome them. And in the Conclusion,

we'll get a glimpse of where we're headed at this juncture of social change and technology.

Finally, the "Resources" section offers a collection of tips and tools designed to help you be your own best advocate for making change through social media. "Yeah, But . . ." provides responses to the most common objections to social media; it's the ammunition you need to build your confidence and win that argument around the water cooler. In "Tips for Individuals," you'll find hands-on advice, from getting started to more advanced and nuanced guidance; "Tactics for Organizations" offers fundamentals that organizations need to keep in mind, as well as essential pieces for the tool kit. And in "Crowdfunding *Share This!*" I've included the tale of how this book got funded, as a case study in the power of social capital and community building.

And We're Off!



When I wrote in these pages that we're going to "change the world," I expressed my fundamental conviction that change starts with each one of us—the "Be the change you wish to see in the world" ethos from Gandhi. When we're connecting, sharing, and changing the understanding of the people around us, we are at the beginning of making the world a better place. Activism always starts with stories, and we each have a unique contribution to make to the Grand Permanent Record of Things. From there, sharing can lead to advocacy success, electoral wins, and policy changes. We'll talk about some strategies and tactics for that kind of change, but before we get there, we have to commit personally to uprooting our notions of how things work and to reaching out to those around us. The commitment to sharing our experiences with one another supports and strengthens our bonds, and *we* are our own best hope for changing the world.

I promise: We're about to have a really good time.

1



The Power of Sharing



SOMETHING FUNDAMENTAL about change has not changed at all: Stories still come first. Before any change happens, online or offline—before you get your phone banking, your petitions, your door knocking, your lobby days, your e-mail campaigns, your anything—change starts with stories. *Our* stories. Storytelling has been the most powerful building block for social change since the beginning of time—think about how long humans have been sitting around the campfire telling each other what’s going on. Social networking gives us unprecedented power to share our stories with more people than we ever imagined.

What happens when you tell stories? Two magical things: You build trust with other people in your network, and from there you build empathy. Note that I’m not talking about sympathy. *Sympathy* is when you feel badly for people who have had something bad happen to them. *Empathy* is when you share the emotions that other people have and express. It’s a powerful, deeply primal experience.

The trust we create on social networks fuels the empathetic response we have to one another, even if we don’t know each other that well. All of us have stories, experiences, and opinions to share as foundations for the change we make in the world.

As we'll see, sharing subverts our traditional notions of power around information, and it offers a must-seize occasion for democratization.

Welcome to the Future, or, The Birth of Sharing

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In order to understand why sharing offers such a radical opportunity to create a better world, it's helpful to understand the origins of the World Wide Web. That history shows, pointedly, how the web's origin is a story not just about whizbang technology; it's more fundamentally about great human drive—the primal need to interact with people who have similar experiences, values, and goals.

Although the Internet has been around for 40 years,¹ it was largely the provenance of military researchers and academics until some Very Important Things happened. In early 1992, there were “26 reasonably reliable”² servers connected to one another, forming the World Wide Web. By late 1993, that number had grown to more than 200,³ and a trifecta of events occurred within a few months of each other to send the WWW hurtling toward the mainstream:

- A lot of users had been using something called Gopher, developed by the University of Minnesota, to share documents. The university made a very silly judgment call: It decided to charge organizations that wanted to use this technology on their servers.⁴ That decision caused server administrators to explore other free options; the World Wide Web, just gaining traction, was quite attractive.
- Then CERN,⁵ the organization that was “in charge” of the technology behind the WWW, decided that it *wouldn't* charge for licensing the tech and that it would make the code readily available to anyone who was interested.

- Finally, Marc Andreessen, who had left NCSA⁶ in '93 to start a company focused on web software, publicly released the first version of Mosaic after earlier versions had gained popularity among academics.⁷ It was one of the first graphical web browsers accessible for everyday folks to use, and one of the first to display images “in-line,” or within the web page. Inline images were a huge leap! Mosaic and the company that Andreessen founded eventually became Netscape.

Voilà, the rush to the WWW was born. But it was very different from what it looks like now. If we wanted to publish something online—think of the web then as being almost like a library with an infinite amount of space and few books in it—here are the hurdles we might have encountered. First, we'd have to get access to a server that was connected to the web. Access was fairly limited, as most of the web was being used for academic purposes, and online services such as Prodigy, AOL, and CompuServe wanted customers to stay within the neat walled garden of content they provided. Even the WELL,⁸ a nerd-famous online community started in 1985 in San Francisco, while having a more open policy for getting on board with the web, had its own members-only, non-web content (which it continued to maintain for a number of years).

Once we had server access, we (or someone we knew) had to know Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML), the language that's used to present documents on the web. It was pretty simple compared with actual programming languages, but it was created by geeks for geeks. Anyone could learn HTML, but a certain bent toward the nerdy was required to get into it.

Once we finished putting those documents in HTML, we'd have to transfer them to the web server so that they could be “served,” or viewed by others. Each one would have its own

unique URL that we could then share with our friends. Sharing the documents could be tricky. Few people had e-mail, and probably fewer had Internet access that would allow them to work with documents online. The few who did have access and e-mail (again, mostly people at universities or in certain workplaces) could go to the links and read the documents. To share feedback, they'd have to send private messages to the author of the document, or if they belonged to some sort of group messaging service, such as a listserv, they could offer comments to the group. Everything operated within *closed systems*, which meant that the conversation was contained within its own sphere, with little to no extension into public conversations.

Sharing for the Rest of Us



Cowboy capitalism took over the initial period of the web's mainstream explosion, but it wasn't long before the human drive to connect and share rose out of the ashes of the dot-com boom/bust.

Despite the fact that technological hurdles prevented everyday people from being able to publish and participate on the web early on, market forces allowed people with capital and resources to jump right in. If you personally didn't have the skills to create web pages and maintain a server, or you didn't belong to those networks that had access to the Internet, you could simply purchase a server, hire a few nerds, and head on down the merry way toward the Wild West of the Internet.

The people who were willing, in the early days, to risk spending that kind of money were investors who either saw the light or knew they could make their money back. Soon, those folks with the cash began driving the development of services available on the web, in an effort to maximize the return on their investment. The web, during the ramp-up of what became known

as the “dot-com boom,” became less about people sharing information with one another (how can you make money on *that?*) and more about creating ways for people to buy and sell products to each other.

The web became a market paradise, a capitalist’s *dream*. While there were still plenty of people working on more social applications—forums come to mind—the cultural focus, as it wont to happen, shifted toward commercialism. It took less money and less know-how to sell on the web than it did to set up a brick-and-mortar business, but it certainly took *some*. Which was way more than most had.

Lo and behold, in 2000, bubbles burst, and the dot-com boom ended a few years into its silliness. Note that the Internet didn’t pack itself up and wander off; innovation and a dedication to refining applications continued. What emerged out of those ashes was, in many ways, a return to the original ethos of the web: making it easy for people to share information.

One of the more well-known products/services to come out of this drive was blog software. In 1999 and 2000, some technologically inclined people started to realize that manually updating their web pages was kind of a drag, and developers (like proto-blogger Dave Winer, Evan Williams of Blogger and the guys behind LiveJournal) started producing software that would simplify the process. *Weblog* first came into use in 1997; its shortened version, *blog*, was meant to be a joke, but Williams popularized the term with his Blogger software.⁹ Soon enough, people gained the ability to share and publish their experiences and opinions without a lot of technical know-how.

Progressive activists started using early web technologies to share stories not being covered in mainstream, traditional media. In response to the desire to offer alternative news reportage about the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999, a group of media activists founded the first Independent Media

Center (IMC).¹⁰ Anyone in the IMC model could publish and share news stories; the idea caught on in other cities worldwide following the protests, and a large decentralized network of IMCs formed in the following years.

Also in the late 1990s, basic social networks were launched. One of the most prominent was Classmates.com (which is still around), while one of my favorites, SixDegrees.com,¹¹ went defunct in the bubble. SixDegrees was particularly revolutionary because it allowed you to look for other members and see how you were connected to them—very Kevin Bacon.¹² Many websites started including social networking features, such as the ability to add friends, and to share links and content with them.

By the early 2000s, sites whose main function was social networking started to spring up—who here remembers Friendster? MySpace, Black Planet, MiGente, hi5, Xanga, Facebook, and Ning all followed shortly thereafter, not to mention more informal social networks that were created around content-sharing sites like YouTube (video sharing), Flickr (picture sharing), and Delicious (bookmark sharing). Mobile technologies had also matured to a point where SMS texting became fairly common in many demographics, as well as did surfing the web via cell phones. When Twitter took the tech elite by storm at the SXSW Interactive conference in 2007, social networks were granted staying power. The seeds of change had been firmly planted into the culture.

How the Magic Happens



The difference between old ways of communicating and what's happening on the Internet now is the *digitization* of our relationships and networks. Social networks are not a new phenomenon—people have belonged to numerous networks since the beginning of humanity. Think of your own social spheres, which may include work friends, family members, and neighbors. Now

picture them not just as isolated from one another in our minds, but also as overlapping at some points, and connected in public through you. We're sharing information about ourselves and our networks online, which leads to more connections with other people and other networks. The mapping of those connections via online social network tools—in essence, creating large information pipes that didn't previously exist—puts communication methods like word-of-mouth on steroids *and* speed.

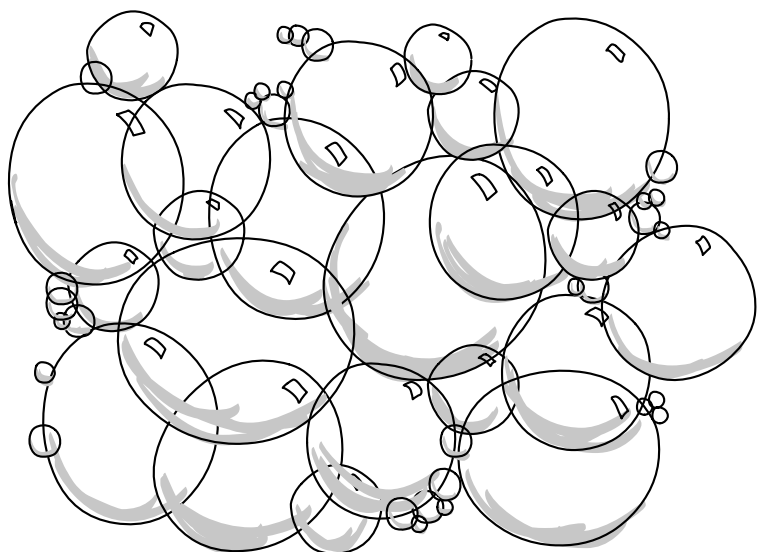
The traditional media (cable news channels, newspapers and magazines, etc.) have a love-hate relationship with social technology—and with good reason. This technology is revolutionizing how we send and receive information. It's not just that our current media structures are threatened (they are); it's also that an entire shift is happening, both in how we obtain information and in what we do with that information once we've processed it.

For starters, we're not just consuming information; we're *sharing* it, immediately and constantly. When we read a news story online, there's usually a tool on the page that encourages us to “e-mail this to a friend” or post it to one of dozens of social networks. When we watch a funny video, we embed it on our own site or link to it so that others will watch. When something happens that makes us go “Wow!” we want to tell everyone we know.

And we can. But our sharing power reaches beyond our own personal relationships to the relationships and networks of our friends, and their friends', and so on.

Picture billions of soap bubbles in a sink. Each bubble represents a different person, and the bubble size reflects that person's sphere of influence. Where bubbles connect and intersect represents our relationships with people around us.

We've always belonged to multiple spheres, but in the off-line world, the piece that was missing was clear documentation



Like soap bubbles, social networks include connected elements of varying size of influence.

or mapping of those relationships. We could exchange information about ourselves, but physical limitations and social expectations prevented us from widespread information sharing. You wouldn't, say, set up a conference call with a bunch of people you knew casually to talk about your family vacation—it would have been expensive and culturally weird.

Now, using a variety of tools—e-mail, social networks like Facebook and MySpace, and microblogging services like Twitter—we have the ability to create *maps* of our relationships. I don't mean maps in the pictorial sense, like a giant family tree. I mean maps in the pathway sense. We are able to create and use direct pathways to engage in immediate, many-to-many conversations with people in our social networks by sharing our experiences with one another.

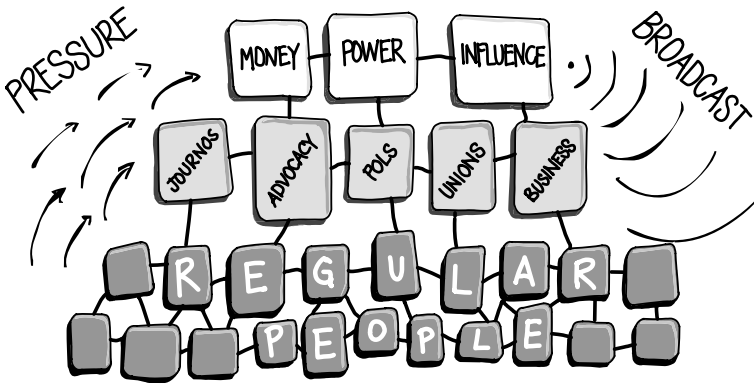
Those pathways create ways for us to take advantage of our relationships in revolutionary ways, particularly when we share information with each other, rather than simply receiv-

ing information passively from sources outside of our personal relationships.

Freedom of Information Act(ion)

Information has been released from hierarchical constraints, to some degree.

The old way of doing things involved a fairly complex hierarchy, one that many of you are probably (painfully) familiar with. We can simplify that hierarchy into a pyramid shape for the purposes of this discussion:



At the bottom of the food chain, there are the everyday people. You and me. We've all got connections and relationships, but to get anything significant done in the world, it's helpful to be connected to people higher up in the hierarchy. Of course, very few people are.

In the middle is a conglomeration of folks with more influence and power—journalists, midlevel politicians, owners of sizable businesses, as well as advocacy organizations and some labor unions. In the media subset, journalists are pressured and pitched by folks both above and below, and the stories that result (or don't) are not always fair or comprehensive.

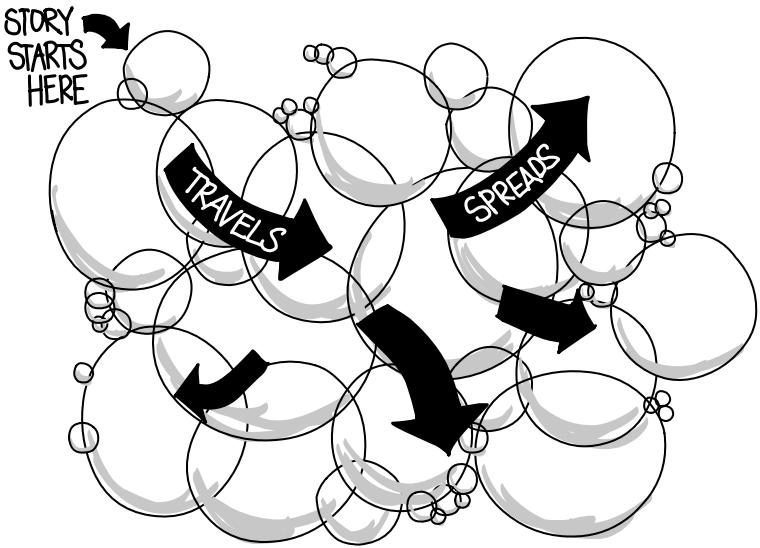
Everyday folks can organize and push up onto bigger levels to get their stories told. Working on their own (less effective) or in groups (the more the merrier), people can petition, write letters to the editor, make calls, and use online tools to make their voices heard. It's a constant struggle, this pushing up, and invariably some voices don't make the cut.

In the upper echelons, you'll find the bigger decision makers and power brokers. High-level politicians, media moguls—pretty much anyone who can issue any kind of mandate. They're giving directives to the folks in the middle about what the folks at the bottom want to hear. It's like a giant pyramid with information traveling upwards, slowing to a trickle as it gets to the top. Then, because it's mostly a broadcast medium, the information is released from the top and heads downward—a constant, fast-moving flood.

Of course, information is also shared laterally—passed via word of mouth within and sometimes between levels. But for the most part, our mass communications have operated for centuries within a pretty rigid pyramid structure.

While the pyramid game of top-down-bottom-up may still be desirable at times, it's now no longer as necessary to play. To return to the soap bubble metaphor, effective communication is much more about sharing within networks and connecting to new folks who share your interests. Social media tools make it wonderfully easy to do just that.

Already we've seen cases in which everyday people have used the relationships they've fostered on social networks to do good. In the summer of 2009, for example, the Palm Beach County School District announced a controversial new academic program that centralized authority over teaching programs and increased the emphasis on standardized tests.¹³ Parents throughout the school system were upset with the changes. Soon after the announcement, a substitute teacher and parent named Lisa



How stories travel on social networks.

Goldman started a Facebook page called “Testing Is Not Teaching!”¹⁴ where people in the community could come together and share information and action ideas.

After a critical school board meeting, the group ballooned to more than a thousand members, and after just five weeks in existence it had expanded to more than six thousand members. Several months into the fight, school administrators agreed to meet with members of the group, and in October 2009, the superintendent of the school system agreed to let individual principals of schools decide which parts of the plan they would adopt. Goldman and a comanager continue to press on for the reversal of the program.¹⁵

Goldman and her group didn’t have to rely solely on traditional modes of getting the word out about their issue or spend as much time offline organizing their fellow parents as they would have in the past. They were able to tap into existing relationships and social networks (Goldman cites the strength of the

relationships between mothers in the community in particular) quickly and effectively through Facebook.

Advocacy and messaging in the social networking sphere is not so much about broadcasting to a billion people with the hope that a few care about the information they're receiving, as it is about targeting a smaller, more invested number of individuals and letting them share the information they're concerned about with their own networks.

How Connectors Feed the Magic of Sharing

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Some people play another important, very specialized role in passing on stories through social networks. These people have large spheres of influence that are based on their connections to many different groups. Malcolm Gladwell spends a great deal of time talking about these folks in his book *The Tipping Point*. These are his “Connectors”:

Sprinkled among every walk of life . . . are a handful of people with a truly extraordinary knack of making friends and acquaintances. . . .

They are people whom all of us can reach in only a few steps because, for one reason or another, they occupy many different worlds and subcultures and niches.¹⁶

Connectors create two main types of relationships that play a large role in social media. First, there are the obvious *strong ties*—close friendships, business relationships, romances, family.¹⁷ They are the people with whom we come into contact regularly, and we have a deep, core understanding of one another.

Then there are what sociologists refer to as *weak ties*. Weak ties can be people with whom we have random, light, infrequent interactions. Maybe you sat next to someone at a confer-

ence and exchanged contact info, and you only run into each another at that kind of event.

Weak ties can also represent the idea that we *might* know or be interested in each other simply based on the number of people we have in common. If I have 20 friends on Facebook, and I see that 10 of them are friends with you, then there is a chance that we share some commonality.

Making and maintaining weak ties used to require a special sort of person—someone whom Gladwell describes as having “some combination of curiosity, self-confidence, sociability, and energy.” Maintaining weak ties, before the explosion of social technologies, took a lot of work.

Because social technologies now make it easier to stay both loosely *and* tightly connected to one another, it’s more convenient than ever for all of us to maintain weak ties. But in many ways, Connectors play an even larger role than ever because of the multiple worlds they move within. It’s no longer as important to be at the top of some social pecking order to have a major impact on how far we spread information.

In the case of “Testing Is Not Teaching!” let’s say that people are blogging and commenting on social networks about the academic program, coming at it from different angles. There’s the educational value angle of the story, there are class and race implications of standardized testing, and there are local-politics angles that are being discussed. If enough people are talking about it, a Connector is going to notice the chatter across different spheres, and that person will likely post it to their social networks, thus spreading the story out even farther.

When these Connector folks get involved, mainstream media, politicians, and others at the top of the old hierarchy start to take notice. That hierarchy (unfortunately) isn’t completely going away anytime soon, so getting people with influence on

board might still be important. But the distribution of information doesn't have to start with those "in charge."¹⁸

Onward, Young Sharer

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We're living through the emergence of a complementary form of information distribution through social technology tools, one that has the potential to shift and, in many cases, dissolve the information hierarchies that have existed for thousands of years. The web is just now starting to realize some of its disruptive potential, and the digitization of our social networks give us a great opportunity to shift power dynamics away from those hierarchical constraints.

We each have a significant contribution to make to that shift, and sharing our stories with one another on the grand scale that social networks provide is the place to start. The events, opinions, and experiences we choose to share don't just matter on a hyper-local level (within the tighter parts of our social networks); they also have ripple effects through others' networks as they spread. You may remember, for example, an upstart long-shot presidential candidate with a funny name from 2008, who harnessed the energy for change found in social networks—and won. World-changing ideas start with a few individuals sharing with and relating to one another.

But before we can say that it's all smooth sailing in the world of social networking, it's important to identify the structural and cultural biases that keep everyone from participating. Without everyone's voices being heard, our next great leap toward progress is in danger.

About the Author



DEANNA ZANDT is a media technologist and consultant to key progressive media organizations, including AlterNet and Jim Hightower's *Hightower Lowdown*, and hosts TechGrrl Tips on GRITtv with Laura Flanders. She specializes in social media and is a leading expert in women and technology. Deanna works with groups to create and implement effective Web strategies to meet organizational goals of civic engagement and empowerment, and uses her background in linguistics, advertising, telecommunications, and finance to complement her technical expertise. She has spoken at a number of conferences—including the National Conference on Media Reform; Bioneers; America's Future Now (formerly Take Back America); and Women, Action & the Media—and provides beginner and advanced workshops both online and in person.

In January 2009, Deanna was chosen as a fellow in the Progressive Women's Voices program at the Women's Media Center. She also serves as a technology advisor to a number of organizations, including Feministing; the Girls & Boys Projects; and Women, Action & the Media.

In addition to her technology work, Deanna writes and illustrates graphic stories and comics, and volunteers with dog rescue organization Rat Terrier ResQ.

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