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Abundance of Information

By Carol Tenopir

CLAY SHIRKY, KEYNOTE SPEAKER at the 2010 NFAIS annual meeting in Philadelphia, believes that “abundance breaks everything.” In times of scarcity or famine, we are accustomed to resolving problems and setting priorities; in the information context, we are good at allocating, rationing, describing, and preserving high-quality resources. But in today’s age of abundance—of information, of software tools, and of opportunities to connect—Shirky says that all of our assumptions are broken and that traditional rules no longer apply.

When everything changes, it is a time of revolution, not evolution, almost by definition. In these times, forget about combining the best of the old with the best of the new, because, according to Shirky, new ways completely supplant the old. The revolution is led by connectedness and social media, where everyone can pursue an equal voice and where the power of instantaneous influence prompts rapid change.

Librarians can probably add their own stories to Shirky’s tales of social media and mobile devices empowering users, including anecdotes of campus protests over impending budget cuts quickly organized, or interdisciplinary groups collaborating on big science projects without ever meeting face-to-face.

Here comes everybody

Much of Shirky’s talk at NFAIS came from his book *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (Penguin, 2008). Indeed, he began with a five-word sound bite synopsis of the book—“Group action just got easier.”

Shirky’s message is told in stories—the first chapter conveys how a 16-year-old who refused to return a lost cell phone to the owner finally got arrested after pressure from massive group action on the net. At NFAIS, he started his talk with the chronicle of a UK bank that

figured students wouldn’t notice if it started charging new overdraft fees over the summer. But the bank didn’t count on huge numbers of student protesters coming together on Facebook. Location or time of year hardly matter anymore, and large-scale group action can happen swiftly in the virtual world.

Shirky’s examples are convincing in a social or political context, but what about the information content context? The NFAIS audience mostly comprises content creators (primary and second-

formation better than organizations do.

Shirky told the NFAIS audience that Google organizes information better than card catalogs or the Dewey Decimal System did. According to him, tagging is more effective and more powerful than subject headings that are predefined and assigned by experts because tags coordinate the community and provide collective wisdom. What’s more, he contends, tags also lead to more information about the people who are doing the tagging.

Group action organizes information better than organizations do, says Clay Shirky

ary publishers) and distributors (librarians and online service providers). This audience makes its living helping people get vetted, quality content, not by enabling social interactions or political upheavals.

The impact of abundance

Consider the impact of abundance, coupled with connections, on newspapers. The ability to deal with large amounts of digital text and graphics, reaching millions of people quickly, and the low cost of providing digital access have diminished the appeal of traditional newspapers. Readers and advertisers alike can now look to scores of alternative competitors.

Traditional encyclopedias also have been broken by the power of group action combining knowledge. Wikipedia took advantage of abundance and connectivity to create a source that replaced the fee-based and slow-changing model of standard encyclopedias. Group action made a bigger, more important resource, judged by millions to be of “good enough” quality.

Group action leads to abundance of information, but Shirky isn’t concerned about information overload. In fact, he believes that group action organizes in-

React or innovate?

One of the key concepts in *Here Comes Everybody* is that humans are always social creatures and “sociability is one of our core capabilities.” This doesn’t have to mean the death of expertise—Shirky points out that even the act of writing a book is a social and collaborative effort among the author, editors, publishers, and indexers. New media bring readers much closer to the whole creation process. Organization and tagging add meaning to expert content by making it more personally useful.

Meanwhile, librarians and publishers are attempting to react to and innovate at the same time. We are embracing both worlds, providing social media tools to bring users closer to the content, while retaining editorial and instructional roles that play up quality.

But are we ignoring the revolution before us, focusing on the evolution we’re more comfortable addressing? Maybe it’s time to examine just how much we lean on our traditional roles and techniques.

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