RICH CYBERCITIZEN, POOR CYBERCITIZEN: INDIGENOUS TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT FOR A BETTER WORLD

How Technology Development-Not Transfer Will Reduce Friction of the Future

Nayyara Rahman

7/15/2014

RICH CYBERCITIZEN, POOR CYBERCITIZEN: INDIGENOUS TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT FOR A BETTER WORLD

This year, my university held its Second International Conference on Marketing. As a participant, I had the opportunity to hear a panel discussion on "Social Media". And what I found most striking about that panel discussion was not so much the content, but how that content was *delivered* to an audience, comprising mostly of business students, practicing managers and academicians from the country's premier Business School.

In that context, to these businesspeople, Social Media seemed to represent all that was new and approachable of the Digital Age. I have therefore **symbolically** used each element of the Panel Discussion to illustrate how living and working in the Digital Age presents an equal mix of opportunities and risks:

THE DISCUSSION

I live in Pakistan, a developing country which exhibits many of the typical symptoms of a country not quite on its feet yet: Low, wavering literacy rates, gender and income disparity, problems caused by urbanization, and an economy that is optimistically described as "emergent", and pessimistically defined as that of a "failed state". Almost in paradox, Pakistan has a thriving informal economy, which by some estimates is 3 times the size of our formal economy.

If one needs to observe the spirit of "Jugaadh Innovation" or "Quick-Fix Creativity", there is no better place to observe this than Pakistan's informal sector, comprising mostly of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Most of our country's home-grown innovations in transportation, textiles, leather goods and other leading segments owe themselves entirely to innovations within the SMEs. Though of questionable legality, these entities create employment opportunities, provide underprivileged women and men with business opportunities, and by sheer efficiency, make it possible for consumers to enjoy a large variety of (unbranded) consumer goods, including state-of-the-art-technology at affordable prices. And so, while Pakistan's literacy ratio rarely crosses the 50% mark, its tele-density ratio stands at 77%--with a big portion of that coming directly from the SME sector.

Due to their informal nature, a key challenge confronting SMEs is that of Marketing. ATL promotion (Television, Newspapers) is too costly for the individual enterprise, and BTL (in-store displays etc) far too ineffective. Social Media, in this respect, can offer an opportunity that surpasses trade, fiscal and cultural barriers. For a segment that employs more than 40% of the country's population, one would think Social Media's role in facilitating marketing for the SME sector would at least come up in the Panel Discussion. If not that, perhaps the audience would learn about social media innovations taking place in our national language, Urdu. (More than 60% of Pakistanis cannot read English). Or, from a purely managerial perspective, the panel discussion could shed light on how social media practices can be designed to shift its individual

"conspicuous consumption" to one of more collective, organized welfare, such as online legal aid, or ambulatory services that can be ordered online, or hospitals with automatic "Check-in" features, which could discreetly and immediately inform an accident victim's family about his location etc. Did the Panel Discussion talk about anything of this nature?

It didn't. At All.

Instead, let us now turn to what the panelists *did* speak about:

The first panelist--responsible for Digital Marketing in one of Pakistan's largest (and most notorious) media empires described Digital Marketing activities within his organization. He also spoke of how digital media helped sustain a connection with the channel's audience after the channel was banned. The next panelist---A freelance Digital Media Specialist--described how her work helped build PR for her clients online. Her clients were mostly individuals in the service/entertainment industry who sought a wider audience abroad. The panelist who followed her was a young business graduate who made a living through motivational speaking, and a brand consultancy. One might say he was an entrepreneur. He did not mention how Social Media helped his enterprise. But what he *did* talk about was how social media had "empowered" consumers: Quoting the Arab Spring example, he mentioned how much consumers could now do just with a click. He went on to recount examples from his own life: Once, after his flight was delayed, he posted a complaint on the airline's Facebook page. Lo' and behold! Not only was he reimbursed for that flight, but received free air miles as well. On another occasion, he discovered a fly in his soup at a restaurant. He took a picture of that and posted it on his own Facebook Wall, and on the Restaurant's Facebook Page. Soon after, he was reimbursed and compensated.

Once the floor opened for questions, I asked this particular panelist two questions: One: Is it right to give so much power to the customer, whereby a fly-in-the-soup WILL inevitably turn up in Facebook pictures, whether it was actually there or not? And two: Yes, Social Media does make it easy for customers to contact the organization. But how does the organization assess customer authenticity in a pool of millions of anonymous social media users?

My questions visibly upset the panelist. But after a few moments, he responded with "Previously, there was a wall between Customers and the Selling Organization. Social Media has just removed that wall. Everything else is the same."

If indeed Social Media is just about removing "walls", could there have been an Arab Spring –if instead of social media, a chain of millions of anonymous letters had been activated instead? I think not. Would a new government borne out of such a mail-chain be able to sustain itself? I think not. What I found truly imperiling in the discussion was that this risk had not struck him until I pointed it out!

As earlier mentioned, this element is being used as an analogy to corresponding risks and opportunities of the digital age. Let us see what the "Panel Discussion Analogy" represents:

⌈ **Empire Encroachment:** The Media Empire earlier mentioned is one of Pakistan's biggest media organizations, with a strong local presence in print, electronic and now digital technologies as well. It is true that large organizations will have to cross the digital threshold if they want to remain in business. What is unique about this particular channel is that it was banned for violating licensing and IPR agreements, airing offensive and indecent material and other infringements of fair practice. It is not a victim of censorship. But through a targeted digital media strategy, it is able to communicate a victimized image to its audience. Hence, while social media can help multiply mass **awareness,** it is equally at risk of spreading mass **ignorance.** Something I am personally quite apprehensive about, therefore, is the controlled ownership of Digital Space. The more controlled it is, the less likely is to offer the benefits it was created for in the first place.

⌈ **Soaring Opportunities, Like Never Before**: One of the clients the freelance digital media specialist mentioned was a Pakistani writer who wanted to be featured on the New York Times Bestseller List. She was helping him achieve this, by increasing online traffic about his work through paid blogs etc. Digital technology has allowed people to not only create new careers from themselves, but also to compete globally at a level previously considered impossible. The biggest advantage of this is that it has helped remove psychological barriers between nations. In a world which is increasingly fragmented and decentralized, and where economic security has become almost a thing of the past, digital technologies could become the means through which millions escape poverty.

⌈ **Is Social Media Giving Opportunities To The "Wrong" People?** Truth be told, I never really got an answer to my "Fly-in-the-soup" question. But it does not end there. This panelist actually named the restaurant and airline he had grievances with, which is unfair to those organizations, and in very poor taste, at the least. In an increasingly knowledge-rich corporate world, the implications of such irresponsible disclosures can be far-reaching and irreparable**.** Imagine: if you are a doctor serving dozens of people a day, thousands a year. One day, someone takes a picture of your clinic, and cleverly photo-shops it to make you look like a sleazy criminal, and posts your name and practice all over Twitter and Facebook, where would you go, and how would you reconstruct your life? How would you receive damages, if this particular cybercitizen chose an anonymous name like "Do-Gooder"? Can we use digital technologies positively if they shorten our reaction time, discourage us from scrutiny and reflection, and compel us to always seek visible, measurable proof?

⌈ **Technology Can Close The Poverty Gap, But Not The Other Way Round:** The success stories mentioned in the Panel Discussion related almost invariably to educated, upper, and upper-middle income individuals. These individuals sought to make careers out of their hobbies, after successful careers in otherwise conventional jobs. Do the economic promises of the digital age extend to the poor, the uneducated? Is technology

transfer ready for the developing world? In my country, the government still employs human beings to do tasks Personal Computers have been doing for the past 30 years or so in Developed Countries. Part of this is to provide employment opportunities. But a much more sinister reason is that technologies that threaten the livelihood of such complacent individuals have not only been met with **resistance,** but have been misused as an act of passive aggression. In Developing Countries, such practices happen en masse, and often in complicity with key decision makers. The costs are long-term and felt very widely.

THE MODERATOR

The moderator for the final panel discussion was a business graduate from one of my country's lesser-known universities. After dabbling in freelance work and PR for a number of second-tier organizations she had transitioned into New Media in 2013, and that is what had landed her in the Moderator's Chair.

The discussion—as it progressed under her—reflected most of the shortcomings of this situation, and very few of its strengths. For one thing, most of the talking was done by the moderator herself --more than all her panelists put together. It was openly skewed, with already-famous panelists getting more audience time, while lesser-known technical experts struggled to get a word in.

As a result, the discussion concluded as a reinforcement of popular belief. Uncomfortable questions were discouraged. The audience did learn a few new things, mostly social media statistics. But the discussion failed to make a more fruitful progression, because spontaneity (the moderator's own excitement and need to be agreeable) trumped foresight (time management in adherence to the conference schedule). Also no attention was paid to whether the moderation justified the costs the audience had borne for it. (E.g. the explicit costs of the conference, but also the opportunity cost in terms of time and resources wasted, and the inability to learn what one had come to learn in the first place).

TRADITIONAL MANAGEMENT MODEL

Though it may seem so, this is **not** a personal attack on the Moderator. Rather it draws an analogy of the quality of **Information Management** we have come to accept as cybercitizens. Hence, what we learn from the "Moderator Analogy" is:

⌈ **You Don't Have To Be An Expert To Be Taken Seriously**: This is true for individuals, as
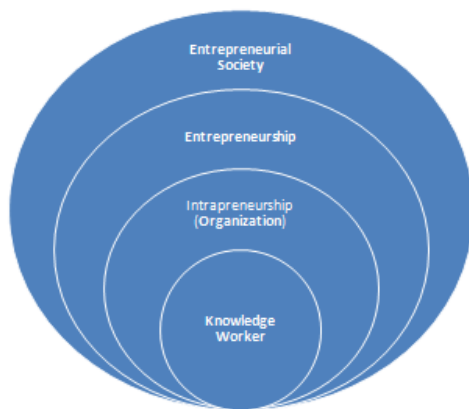
well as brands or organizations struggling to be recognized. On the upside, this does reduce the complacent hegemony of large, bureaucratic organizations. Startups should worry less about being right and more about being "loud" enough, and "visible" enough. On the downside, it means authenticity has been put on the backburner. Is it good news if colloquialism outdoes accuracy? One must question if it is a good thing that consumers demand less of suppliers before putting their trust in them.

⌈ **Collectively At Least, Cybercitizens Don't Want To Be Intellectually Surprised:** While the internet offers history's greatest chance to engage in intellectual exchange and research, one wonders if this exchange is only growing organically. Has the isolated, privatized consumption of information led to the shrinkage of intellectual curiosity? The Industrial Age swept in a range of household appliances and made us convenience seekers in physical effort. Has the Digital Age done the same for mental effort? As knowledge workers, how far can we afford to go on like this?

WHAT NOW?

So we now live in, (and are fast approaching) a future that is full of contradictions: Humanity now has more means to access individuals, express itself and assert its abilities than ever before in history. Yet, the probability of even one voice being well-heard in this mad din keeps getting lower and lower. True to Drucker's prophecy, people will go through a series of careers, instead of one. These Information Workers will be far more skilled, knowledgeable and focused than any of their predecessors. And yet, the pressure to remain competitive will mean that much of their skills and resources will be deployed—not towards the practical, far-reaching application of

MANAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL AGE

their knowledge-- but simply to remain relevant in careers they will soon outgrow. Hence, the demographic profile of a young parent in the 1980s may equal the demographic profile of a student in 2025. Add to this, the contradictions of technology—where improved Personal Security often comes with a compromise on Personal Information Security. It will be an age where poor people will be able to successfully compete with the rich, but only after a ruthless elimination of their own. For those standing on the brink of Today and Tomorrow, an inevitable question is: What Now? Is there a "One-Best-Way" ahead?

Collectively speaking, the answer is: YES. We cannot remove the demands and uncertainties of the digital age. But we can make it more manageable. In order to respect the opportunities offered by the customized, sprawled-out technology frontier, we must first limit its risks. Some measures in this area are:

- **Cross-Functional Development Of A Universal Code Of Digital Age Ethics (UCDAE):** I suspect that despite the many individual and country efforts to develop Digital Age (Media) Ethics, success is elusive because the scope of such rules is too narrow, too country-specific and their assumptions too naïve and optimistic. Developing the Universal Code of Digital Age Ethics will require multi-disciplinary and cross functional input from experts in Marketing, Supply Chain, IT, Medicine etc. And also from artistes, disenfranchised individuals like refugees and even prisoners. It will be a long-term, expensive and difficult effort. But a standardization of Digital Ethics is necessary. To survive in the Digital Age, everyone needs to have the same "Starting Line" into the Digital Age, with no cheating and no leg-pulling. It will bring some much needed "Economies of Scale" to technology development, by reducing the motive to violate IPRs, and also reducing rent-seeking behavior by others.

- **Not Aid, Not Trade. If You Really Want To Make The World A Better Place, Facilitate Technology Development:** This is not a political recommendation, but an economic one. Opportunities of trade—those that offer both trading partners an opportunity to grow and profit, are often the victims of internal dissent: Politicians of developing countries often tell their citizens that their bleak economic outlook is the result of "Western" conspiracies to keep them poor, and such conspiracies can only be overthrown at the cost of national sovereignty. Technology due to its distilled, impersonal nature, on the other hand, is not as easily maligned. And unlike trade, technology cannot be boxed into a cartel-like arrangement. In fact, the demand for technology in developing countries is so high that it is often stolen and not purchased. One prescription for a frictionless future is that developed and developing countries engage in Technology Exchange. Instead of placing the focus on trading goods and services, they should work out arrangements whereby skills are upgraded, exchanged and re-thought, keeping in mind each country's socio-cultural and economic shift.

- **Fluid Education:** Saturated economies in the West, and capacity issues in the East have compelled academicians to rethink the scope of education. A big reason to delay technology differentiation in my country at least is that its human resource is too set in its ways to be absorbed elsewhere. In Pakistan, textbook-learning is increasingly being paired with full-time "Experiential learning" in the students' chosen field. In my opinion, this trend should be encouraged by reducing the number of "classroom years" required for a degree. This will ease the transition as individuals outgrow their functions and their organizations, and (as Drucker predicted!) let them experience several careers during their lifetime rather than just one.

- **Get Multilingual**: Understanding language presents businesses not just a point of entry, but a way to remain culturally sensitive. In my opinion, the most effective form of globalization is not that we impose our interpretation of the world, ON the world, but that we absorb and recreate individual solutions in the most efficient and creative way possible. In the Digital

Age, with omnipresent automation, understanding another language and being able to communicate in it will present the biggest challenge (and reward!) for individuals and organizations.

It was Shakespeare who said, "Nothing is really good or bad, but thinking makes it so." It is good advice from someone who not only understood himself, but those around him too. The Digital Age opens many worlds to our own world. It reveals many lives to our one life. The secret lies in knowing ourselves and ensuring that technology helps give us a compassionate, positive understanding of others' lives too.