



Social Media Transformation

Van Hoenserlande Patrick

A few months ago, I started writing for the HQ blog not because I like blogging – to be honest, I have no warm feeling for this type of social medium – but because I was unpleasantly surprised to discover almost nothing about transformation on it. I felt like a traveller through a desert arriving at an oasis only to find that there is no water. Instead of complaining, I started to dig for water. I did not find it yet because more than 10 articles later I cannot speak of a success story. Why?

The first question that comes to my mind is the definition of success. How will I recognize it? Is success measured by the number of comments? The number of likes – where is that button? The number of colleagues telling me, almost by accident, that they had read the blog? The number of informal discussions in relation to the topics in the articles – how to count? What if only one sentence in all my articles leads to a successful transformational action? Can I call that a success? I do not know. The only thing I cling to in an almost dogmatic way is my experience that it takes about 18 months for the feedback loop to ignite in a unforced approach of information exchange. But what will closing this loop look like?

Yes, there are some brave souls who dared to comment. Hope? But hope is not a method, and those scarce comments are hardly enough to start a multiple way communication stream. Or are they not brave, but just the few active on our social media? If so, why is that? Or do they represent the active top of the iceberg?

The Public Affairs office running the blog was convinced that this lack of interaction was due to the outdated tool supporting the blog. Yes, it was not easy to publish an article, but replying to it was not hard at all. Just hit the comment button and wrote what you thought. Nevertheless, they strongly believed that a better, sexier software tool would increase the utilisation of social media within the HQ. That is why they have hard-pressed on the release of the new tool, called 'ACT Connect'. Didn't you detect the change?

I believe they are wrong. A technologic improvement without a thorough understanding of the cultural environment wherein it is released rarely solves problems. More technology, more of the same, does not solve problems if the cause is not addressed. A new, untargeted change does not equal an improvement. And not every problem can or should be solved with technology.

But, then again, they may be right. Who could have predicted the effects of social media on the world population – what was the problem it tried to solve? A recent study of the millennium generation by our colleague Dr. John Kelley – contact him if you want to read it - clearly indicates that the introduction of information technology has a similar impact on the whole generation of youngsters, whatever their cultural background, wherever they live. And it is the technology that makes them equal, because where they lack those tools, this equalisation does not take place. Are we evolving towards a real global civilisation with a common cultural foundation based on accessibility to modern information technology? Technology as the ultimate equalizer? Who dares to predict the impact of the yet-to-be-invented changes on the yet-to-be-born generations? Do you?

And what about the impact on the military of all that technology? Will wars be fought and won on the internet? War is all about the mind and souls of the people and if future generations are similarly influenced by social media, would we then not expect to see virtual battles for those social connections? And what will such a battle look like? If all are culturally equal, how then to attack the enemy without hurting ourselves? Mao's fish in the water approach in the virtual world. This must surely be more than a simple extension of strategic communication. What would happen if an army of internauts hits in full force (a part of) the world population? What would be the consequences of Facebook, Tweeter, or Wikipedia suddenly becoming weapons of mass disinformation? How can we prepare ourselves for such a scenario?

Every soldier learns to handle a rifle during basic training. It goes without saying that every soldier must be able to riposte any direct attack. In an organised way, every unit must be able to defend itself and safeguard its mission. We don't even think about that. It is a lesson our history of wars taught us, over and over again.

But in regard to attacks via social media, we're armed with nothing more than pocket knives and not sure how to use them. Yes, technology will change the world, but it does that through the new generations. Our young soldiers are expert users, but our commanders aren't. Should we not all be as good with social media as we are with a rifle? Practising the use of social media should be as normal as going to a shooting range.

Should staff officers not be motivated to practise in a safe environment? Educated and trained in the use of modern, social technology? Not only to better understand and communicate with our young soldiers born in the computer age and having no idea how we survived without laptop, PlayStation or smartphone, but also because it could be the preferred weapon on the next battlefield. The battle for the narrative cannot be won by a small expert group. Ships, jets and tanks will not stop the flow of information attack.

Can a well-used internal social media like an internal blog serve as a virtual shooting range? Can it serve as the experimenting basis for our social transformation?