



BOOK REVIEW: HERE COMES EVERYBODY: THE POWER OF ORGANIZING WITHOUT ORGANIZATIONS

[Clay Shirky, Penguin Press, 2008. Hardback, \$25.95]

—CHRIS FRANCOVICH
GONZAGA UNIVERSITY

To make claims about or even adequately understand the “true nature” of organizations or leadership is a monumental task. To peer into the nature of the future of these complex phenomena is an even more daunting project. In this book, however, I think we have both a plausible interpretation of organization (and by implication leadership) and a rare glimpse into what we are becoming by virtue of our information technology. We live in a complex, dynamic, and contingent environment whose very nature makes attributing cause and effect, meaning, or even useful generalizations very difficult. It is probably not too much to say that historically the ability to both access and frame information was held by the relatively few in a system and structure whose evolution is, in its own right, a compelling story. Clay Shirky is in the enviable position of inhabiting the domain of the technological elite, as well as being a participant and a pioneer in the social revolution that is occurring partly because of the technologies and tools invented by that elite.

As information, communication, and organization have grown in scale, many of our scientific, administrative, and “leader-like” responses unfortunately have remained the same. We find an analogous lack of appropriate response in many followers as evidenced by large group effects manifested through, for example, the response to advertising. However, even that herd-like consumer behavior seems to be changing. Markets in every domain are fragmenting. The World Wide Web, computer technology, and communication technology have given birth to what are now being called “social



tools.” The nature of these tools and their emerging effects on society and organizations are the subject of Clay Shirky’s recent book, *Here Comes Everybody*.

Shirky outlines a compelling set of anecdotes and case vignettes, as well as a plausible explication of the ways in which these social tools are changing the nature of organizing and organizations. His non-intuitive conclusion is that the “love” for what we do and what we are interested in is becoming the driving organizing force for a new class of organizations. Recognition of this new form of organizing from the perspective of servant-leadership offers a vital insight into the nature of 21st-century organizations.

Shirky begins the book with a story of a lost cell phone in New York City. In this case, the finder of the phone didn’t want to return it to its owner. However, she was identified by her use of the phone and the owner of the phone then made a concerted effort to retrieve it. In our traditional civic and legal environment, this would not have made much of a difference to the ongoing dynamics of New York City. However, because of a passionate sense of injustice felt by a friend of the cell phone owner and an ability to use a social tool like a blog, the phone was eventually returned. Hundreds of people became involved in the drama, and over a million read the blog about it over a period of only a few weeks. The initial disinclination of the police to spend resources on retrieving the phone turned on pressure from the public, the *New York Times*, and a story on CNN. How could such a thing happen? What are the implications?

Outlining the “institutional dilemma” facing all organizations, Shirky notes that all organizations have to spend resources on their own maintenance at the expense of their purpose, goals, and mission. This ongoing trade-off accounts for increasing costs to the organization as it grows. These costs are understood as “transaction costs” and reflect the difficulty of coordination as social networks grow. Confusion, conflict, noise, and distrust become the norm as the network grows more complex. Efforts to “communicate” are continually frustrated, and rules, policies, and laws become ever



more necessary and ever more cumbersome. Leadership is constrained and relationships suffer.

However, the possibilities for social communication available through social tools reduce the transaction costs of organizing and make the more or less spontaneous coordination of large groups increasingly likely. What Shirky is pointing out in this book is the possibility of a radical transformation of society. He sums up his thesis by explaining that “most of the barriers to group action have collapsed, and without those barriers, we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done” (p. 22).

Shirky goes on to explore theoretical and technical discussions about organizing, organizations, complexity, and human motivation. His analysis of how social tools like email, blogs, Wiki’s, cell phones, and websites such as “Twitter” and “Meetup” both reveal and subvert traditional notions of organizing is compelling reading. What motivates millions of people to read and add to Wikipedia? How is it that the open source software movement has created in the Linux operating system one of the most used and stable server operating systems in the world?

Sites like FaceBook, MySpace, YouTube, and Flickr are used by millions daily in talking, sharing, and learning with each other. People entertain each other and discover together. The one-to-many broadcast paradigm pioneered by movable type, radio, and television has now become a many-to-many bazaar of incredible complexity. This dizzying change is currently transforming print media such as newspapers and magazines, traditional advertising and marketing business models, and research on all fronts. Shirky notes that now we “publish then filter” the result. Our traditional model has been to filter first—to evaluate and select input based on a calculus of probable merit. Now anyone can write and publish anything. We have created forums and spaces for a plethora of contributions and ideas. Shirky notes that the cost of failure has plummeted.

The book talks at length about how sharing, cooperation, and collective action each reflect an aspect of the ways in which social networks are created, enlivened, and sustained by social tools. The sharing of information



on the web, for example, is easy and common. Billions of people agree (whether they know it or not) to participate in Google's web search data collection project. Photo upload sites like Flickr, SmugMug, and Webshots receive millions of photos daily that are being freely shared by millions of photographers. As some percentage of these millions become more involved in photo sharing and the learning that goes on in subgroups on these sites, they become more implicated in cooperating with one another in terms of feedback, expectations, and discussions of reciprocity. An even smaller subset may become active in actual projects with each other requiring the use of resources and time. This journey from sharing, to cooperation, to collective action is, Shirky notes, made much much easier with social tools and is quickly transcending the relatively innocuous example of photo sharing. He chronicles numerous cases of political and economic activism that have been aided and sustained by the social networks emerging through the use of these technologies.

Collective action and response to Hurricane Katrina, the 2004 tsunami, political rallies, and so forth are all part of this rapidly changing landscape. For example, one day in 2006 tens of thousands of students in Los Angeles walked out of school and began to march on City Hall in protest of a proposed anti-immigration law. They organized under the noses of school officials and law enforcement people via MySpace. Shirky contends that this is just the beginning of this type of collective action. The phenomenon of "shared awareness" is amplified by technology. Shirky claims it has three levels: "when everybody knows something, when everybody knows that everybody knows, and when everybody knows that everybody knows everybody knows" (p. 163). This kind of group awareness is an awesome force, and one that is likely to make social change occur faster and faster.

One of the most interesting sections of the book concerns the question and the fear that these technologically oriented "social tools" deal mostly with issues that have been created by the social and technical revolution—issues related to "virtual worlds" and postmodern fragmentation of the social fabric. On the contrary, argues Shirky. These social tools are breath-



ing life into what Putnam (2001) saw as the decline of social capital created through face-to-face interactions like bowling. Sites like Meetup.com offer participants both a searchable database of local interests by topic and an agreed-upon structure to initiate face-to-face meetings. In groups of two or more, Meetup communities are burgeoning in most locales. Their website (Meetup, 2008) advertised that nationally there were over 74,000 face-to-face meetings of members in the month of March. People with interests as diverse as violin refinishing and talking about philosophy are finding each other in their local communities and gathering to talk and share.

It is clear that an increased ability for individuals (citizens) to interact via these social tools may speed up what is understood by some (Graham, 1995; Kezar 2001) as both a call to higher moral action and an opportunity to achieve a better “fit” between more democratic governance structures and vital organizational cultures.

Shirky ends his book noting that the success of social tools is not a simple proposition. The usefulness, popularity, and sustainability of projects is dependent on what he calls the promise, tool, and bargain sequence. Users of these social technologies have to both believe and find relevant the promise of the opportunity. For example, the users of MySpace are promised a free web page that has options useful to the user. The tool is the site itself—all you need is internet access. The bargain is that you allow MySpace to show you some ads, that you refrain from certain kinds of activities, and that you respect the rights of others. What users get from this deal varies from person to person. The site is wildly popular and, as noted above, was used to turn a host of students into activists virtually overnight.

The implications of Shirky’s thesis and his book for the servant-leadership community touch on the very foundations of what it is to serve. Whether we use the metaphors of “below,” “behind,” or “on the sidelines” to describe the general position of the servant-leader, servant-leadership nonetheless remains a fundamentally populist or bottom-up approach. Part of the paradox of servant-leadership is the transformation of followers into servants themselves—of creating in the organizational or civic context the



types of actions that are life-giving, generative, and inclusive. Social tools are creating both the means toward and the ends of this vision. The stewardship of all by all is the dream. Shirky's book is an exciting contribution to that vision.

Chris Francovich is assistant professor in Gonzaga University's doctoral program in leadership studies and is a husband and father. Since he is interested in a variety of theoretical and practical areas of the world, Chris' work focuses on the dynamics of the self-in-society and the implications of this interpretation on ethical, normative, and cultural practices. Chris is also a senior research analyst for the Northwest Regional Faculty Development Center in Boise, Idaho. This work involves understanding individual and cultural aspects of post-graduate medical education in ambulatory medical clinics. He is also a research associate with the Reina Trust Building Institute of Stowe, Vermont. The Institute is devoted to building and sustaining trust in the workplace.

REFERENCES

- Graham, J. W. (1995). Leadership, moral development, and citizenship behavior. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 5(1), 43-54.
- Kezar, A. (2001). Investigating organizational fit in a participatory leadership environment. *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management*, 23(1), 85-101.
- Meetup: World's largest community of local meetups, clubs and groups! - meetup.com. Retrieved 4/6/2008, 2008, from <http://www.meetup.com>
- Putnam, R. D. (2001). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community* (1st Touchstone ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Shirky, C. (2008). *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*. New York: Penguin Press.