

Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age

Clay Shirky



Spare Time + Social Media = A Brave New World?

What possesses authors to give books difficult names? Clay Shirky's first book *Here Comes Everybody* is a title most of us would be intrigued by. But his second, *Cognitive Surplus*,¹ with its hint of psycho-babble, is hardly going to leap off the shelf into your hand. And yet it's a good work and worth attention.

Be assured the psycho-babble stops at the title, which Shirky is quick to translate. "Cognitive surplus" is a fancy name for spare time, the kind of time you and I and the rest of the Western world have been frittering away glued to the television. Pool that surplus energy and time and you have a formidable resource of brain-power which could be put to much better use than watching sitcoms:

"This increase in our ability to create things together, to pool our free time and particular talents into something useful, is one of the great new opportunities of the age, one that changes the behaviors of people who take advantage of it."²

To achieve this of course requires means, and – voila! – social media are the answer. With the advent of social media there is a stream of constructive ways to use our spare time, and people are already enthusiastically doing just that.

I am reminded of the old saying "where there's a will, there's a way." For Shirky the will has always been there but the way has not – until social media brought us opportunities in spades. One can feel his excitement as he explores the new possibilities. Some of his observations on how it all works—

- People enjoy getting connected and social media enable this. They find a purpose true to their interest, whether it is hobbies, social service, or political activism. The technology that is now universally available makes it possible for them to organize and, importantly, connect. Whatever the passion, today connectedness is easy, and downright seductive.
- They work as amateurs. It doesn't have to be a great movie – or even a great website. What matters is that the individual has crossed from passivity to reaching out.
- They are volunteers. This is after all being done in our spare time. But Shirky is insistent that volunteers lose their sense of fun if they are paid and he cites one study in support of this. In collaborative efforts like Apache, an open source web server, paid employees would hinder its critical openness. Plenty of contributors of course are workers, but their paychecks do not come from Apache.
- Their volunteer efforts are collaborative and because these are virtual assemblies, they can be very large. But people still bond and their

¹ Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, Penguin Press, New York 2010

² *Cognitive Surplus*, p. 119

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close cooperation can generate ideas that are original and exciting. Needless to say these ideas spread like wildfire.

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Charities with a new face?

While Shirky's interest is in the broad impact of social media, he also sees a pending revolution in the world of charities. He tells in detail the story of a group of music fans who got connected through social media and decided to fundraise in the name of their celebrity. They called themselves “Grobanites for Charity,” started a website and proceeded to raise money. Their overhead costs were nil because there were no professional staff, no office, everything was amateur, and it was a labor of love. To Shirky this is the face of charities of the future. He cites other web based charities like Netsquared.org, idealist.org, Care2.com, Kiva – and yes Wikipedia – because, with the right volunteers they can operate with ‘zero’ expenses.⁴

I am not entirely convinced of this being the model for the future. The idea that a charity can be wholly run on volunteer effort – while no doubt true for the Grobanites – does not strike me as being a “fit” for the greater majority of charities. These have long deployed volunteers as a treasured resource, but these are normally recruited, screened, trained and assigned as a paid employee would be. Like the granny who cuddles babies in the preemie ward, they work under the guidance of staff. Many of the volunteers Shirky cites – like a programmer modifying open source code – can operate independently, which is an important difference.

Oddly enough, while Shirky's terrain is vast – the world – his focus is, perhaps necessarily, narrow. He is observing what functions easily across the internet. And that is a tiny proportion of what charities do. You can't for instance treat patients with social media, nor can you run a soup kitchen, care for and educate kindergartners, or respond to people in distress, and so on. You can recruit subjects to a study, and Shirky is enthusiastic about that, but it's hardly new. The Children's Oncology Group for instance has been successfully using the global resources of the internet to obtain sufficient subjects for clinical studies for quite some time. It's a superb application of the power of sharing resources internationally, but it is not reliant on social media.

There is a sound reason for this – the Group serves very sick children and takes its responsibility to them seriously. Structure, management, and governance are essential. While Shirky sensibly acknowledges the need for governance, he does not really explain how the viral model will do this better than the traditional.

³ *Cognitive Surplus*, p. 186

⁴ Not entirely zero however. I have donated to both Wikipedia and Kiva for operating expenses, which suggests that behind the scenes there is at least a core group of staff.

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However...

Shirky has done a terrific job of exploring in depth an amazing social phenomenon which most of us are already using to some degree – if only to draw donors to the “Donate” button.

But he also offers an intriguing possibility in the potential of social media to help generate ideas – “do radical things” as he puts it. Shirky notes how groups, simply by virtue of operating together, generate novel ideas, and inspire each other to innovative action. (He is quick to point out that this is not new – claiming only for social media the facility with which it can now be achieved.)

Do you have a program you want to rejuvenate? A group to engage? A resource you would like to bring on board? Instead of yet another SWOT analysis, consider soliciting the ideas of the many. Drawing on Shirky's “cognitive surplus” in ways that could bring new vision and engagement to your charitable enterprise.

In his last chapter Shirky, who cheerfully acknowledges both successes and failures in his attempts, lists a number of helpful tips that can start you off. The web being an evolving field he doesn't get too specific! But the fruits of his experience are worth noting –

1. Start small. Launch a service (or project, idea, or question) on a small scale first – it's easier to build momentum.
2. Ask why a user would care about your project before launch. That helps you phrase the question.
3. Narrow the action options – there are many to choose from and you need to achieve a good fit with the volunteer/donor profile you devised in answering question 2.
4. Make social value the default (as opposed to narrowing it to individual value) – that is, share widely. You need to be comfortable with transparency for this one!
5. Be prepared to manage growth, especially from intimately small to very large. Allow participants, as this grows, to cluster into groups.
6. Don't complicate – people have a low tolerance for elaborate protocols.
7. Be prepared to adapt as things change.
8. Don't be afraid to bend the rules.

And an encouraging last word:

“The world's people and the connections among us provide the raw material for cognitive surplus. The technology will continue to improve, and the population will continue to grow... what matters now is our imaginations.”