

Interactivity and Social Media

They say that no one ever got rich running a website. "What about Google?" Does one website out of 200-million does not prove an assertion? However, many people find websites useful. One of the most popular is Facebook with 321-million members. Yet the actually business "Facebook" has no visible income, so it must run at a loss. But it makes a killing, just like any successful TV station. People open Facebook at the rate of millions of times a day, and an advertisement placed there commands an enormous premium.



On line chat forum

But that's the same way as Google makes its money. Amazon makes money by taking mail orders on the website. The website doesn't make the money; it's just a cheap replacement for having shops in every town and suburb. It's not the website; it's the merchandise that makes money.

Why do broadcasters have websites? In Europe and America, these sites offer background to the news, schedules, trivia, and links to the websites for all the programmes.

These broadcasters don't actually need, or benefit much from their websites; they would just look rather stupid if they did not have them.

In South Africa it's even worse. You may have access to 20-million viewers, but only 3 or 4 million of these may have access to the Internet.

The websites of the South African broadcasters are little better than electronic magazines that carry schedules and press announcements. The DStv website enables you to check your subscription payments and make a payment. That's all.

Otherwise, they have made absolutely no impact on their traditional operations as a broadcaster.

Even if SABC Education carried masses of useful educational material on its website, who has access to it? The people with Internet access are the ones whose schools are well-equipped with libraries, and can afford other modes of tuition.

Government says that it will roll out computers and broadband to every community in the country. That will take years. So what's the point?

Maximising audience' emotional needs

If we take a look again at Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, and the Nine Needs of Stevens:

Maslow	Stevens
Physiological	Security
Security	Adventure
Social	Freedom
Esteem	Exchange
Self actualisation	Power

	Expansion
	Acceptance
	Community
	Expression

We notice that they all rely on interactions with other people. People need people. People learn from other people. Students learn from interacting with each other. In the lecture room, they only receive information.

Let's take a step further. In a lecture room, or in a company information session, the shy people (about half of them) won't ask any questions or take part in discussion. They gain information. They will learn afterwards if they gain access to private discussion with others of a similar personality.

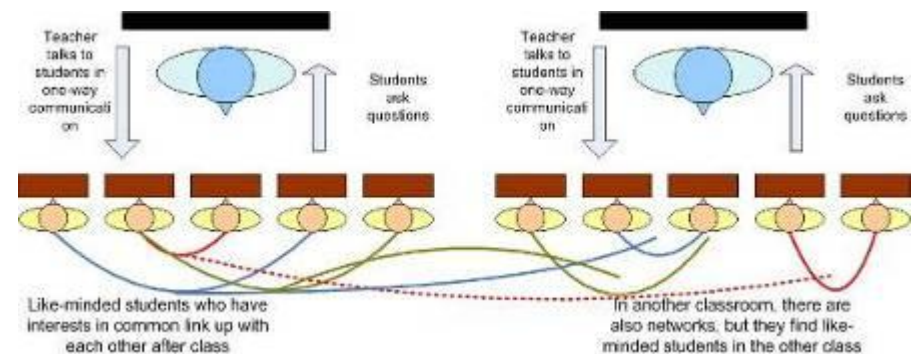
But have you noticed how the withdrawn and introvert interact animatedly with each other when they are in a private group with each other?

This is natural, because no matter what the barriers to interaction in forums where you are not comfortable, you will always seek out opportunities to develop relationships and interact.

That explains why 400-million people join Facebook¹. Sure a lot are in the US, but there are a lot in South Africa, though no one knows how many out of the 5-million Internet users. However, it serves to confirm our argument that people need to interact with others, and they will use any means to do it. In a poor country like South Africa, how come there are some 35-million phones, and they are used by the very poor where cellphone costs are the highest in the world?

WE don't know just how many of the youth use Mxit.

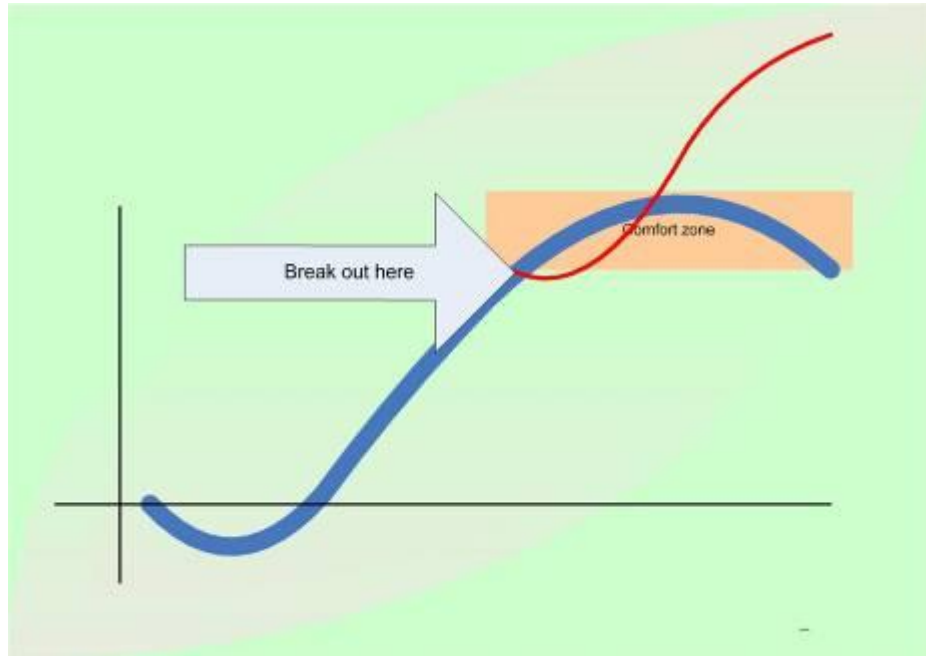
Let's look at the situation in a classroom, where this type of interaction has been going on for hundreds of thousands of years.



¹ There are more than 400 million Facebook users worldwide. 2.5-million of them are from South Africa. (facebook.com, www.nickburcher.com)

This shows how networks expand, or rather iterate. Iteration means that things grow exponentially. But not forever. Everything, everyone, every TV programme, book and pop song go through the same phases of:

1. Struggling to get going,
2. Taking off
3. Reaching the levelling off, or "comfort zone"
4. Decline.



Social networks

In the same way, some social networks will take off, others will just limp along, but one thing is certain, all will eventually die, or mutate into something else.

They are not driven by you; they are driven by the people who belong to it. But an outsider can feed it, and encourage it to perhaps move in a slightly different direction.

It's rather like herding sheep. If there are too many of them, you cannot possibly herd them.

We saw how social networks naturally develop. The example of the classroom can be duplicated in the houses in the street, the flats in a block, the villages in a rural area, and a gang of kids in the street.

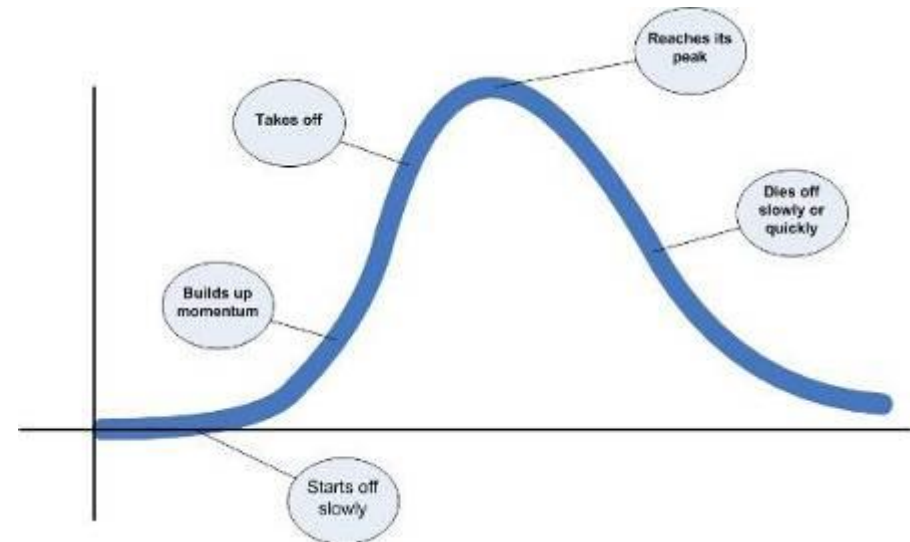
These happen spontaneously. They can be encouraged by providing an infrastructure and other stimuli (like shepherds tending the sheep). This happens in community clubs, interest groups, hobby clubs and especially sporting clubs.

But every single one of these has a constraint – you cannot extend the network beyond which people can meet and talk face to face, or conduct the networking by talking over the phone.

Until along came the Internet and the cellphone.

The social network structure (which is not more than software), combined with the cellphone (remember only 10% of the population has access to a computer), is all you need to have a social network.

Every social network starts slowly, and if it is going to take off it takes off progressively, incrementally, like this:



But, this is too simple. These social networks don't die. Long before people start getting bored with them, events and changes in society and fashions feed them, and cause them to move into different directions.²

Not everyone will move into the same direction – many will change direction with only a part of the membership.

Let's take an example. The newspapers help to make a professional attention getter like Khanyi Mbau a sleb (show biz jargon for a celebrity). People talk about her.

They get onto a social network, and find people in Cape Town who have never heard of her, but who also find her antics fascinating. So these people in Cape Town now have something in common with the people in Johannesburg, although they have never met or even spoken to each other.

All the communication happens through Mxit (or Twitter or Facebook, or any of the 200 or so social networks gathered through a specific software system.) A blog network like Wordpress is the same but you really need a connected computer for that.

These people in Cape Town and Johannesburg are now joined by people of like age and interest in Durban and PE. Now you have four or more times as many people connected because they are following the adventures of Khanyi Mbau in the hairdressers.

² See Aczel, Amir. Chance. A Guide to Gambling, Love, The Stock Market, & Just about Everything Else. High Stakes. 2006. P 25

In the course of all this interaction, some of the group find out that an interest they are also passionate about is shared by some other people within this Mbau network. They find this new shared interest far more interesting, so they form their own network, while they may (or may not) stay connected to the Mbau network.

Who knows? You can't control it. Or can you? Can Khanyi Mbau do things that keep people on her network? Can she find things to do that bring others into her network? Only Khanyi Mbau can tell, and, if she has sense, she will only do something if increasing the network is going to work for her by promoting her career, whatever that is.

She may have encouraged some talk about her CD prior to its release, but when people discovered that not only can she not sing, but that she is also tone deaf, all chatter would have turned into the type of thing Khanyi would have liked to stop, but now could not at all. This died away, and within a month or two no one even remembered she had made a CD.

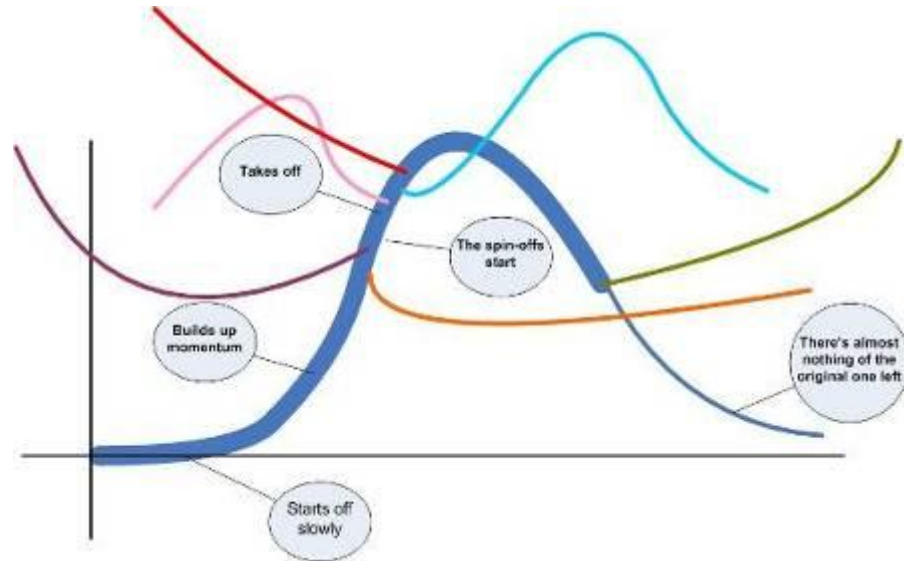
I have taken this example, but the subject of the original social network could have been Big Brother; Survivor Africa; Noelené Maholwana-Sangqu; DJ Fresh; Emzini Wesinsizwa; Julius Malema; Atkins diet; Naomi Campbell; or Chomee.

The point is that social networks may be started, but they may also be dead in the water as just nobody is actually interested.

If they do take off, they will never stay in one direction, but branch out. Some branches may die out, and some may carry on with a few devotees for years.

In a way, you may say that social networks start with something (usually something trivial), and then split off as members find other members with whom they have more important ties.

A specific piece of trivia never lasts, it's like match that flares and dies away. Let's just hope that while it is burning, it sets fire to other matches.



New Media

New Media is hailed as the symbol for everything that characterises the 21st century, and the one single factor that ensures that our lives will never be the same again.

South Africa has policies and funding in place to launch the digital age to all, with access to the wonders the technological marvels can bring to people.

The newness of the words, their lack of any definition and the absence of anything tangible make them a god-sent gift to anyone trying to sell something.

Their aim is to confuse people, so that they believe anyone who talks about it with authority, even though what he says is rubbish.

"New media" are two words used commonly by politicians, salespeople and advocates of almost anything to persuade through awe. Perhaps that's why the modern word for "marvellous" is "awesome".

Definition

New Media means what you want it to mean. There are thousands of definitions, every one of which is an intellectual exercise in pedantry.

If you ask someone to give examples, they rattle off CD, DVD, PVR, Podcast, email and lots of things.

The only thing that links all these disparate definitions is that they are all based on digital technology.

We have managed to establish that "Digital" is the cause, and "New Media" is the result. The claim is that the ultimate effect is a changed life, free of burden, where work is nothing but pleasure, and the rest of our time is recreational with infinite range of digital entertainment.

Perspective

All this is rubbish.

Digital is just a physical or technological way of doing something. It's as great a technological revolution as the invention of printing by the Chinese in about 600 CE. They revolutionised their own invention with moveable type around 1040 CE. It would take another 400 years before moveable type was discovered in Europe by Johannes Gutenberg.

What moveable type did to reading and writing, so digital did to printing.

In the middle of the 20th century, the world media consisted of printed media (from books through to tabloid dailies and leaflets), radio (that sent electromagnetic waves through the air, movies (that shone projector light through transparent films, and TV (that used enough electromagnetic waves to carry not only sound like radio, but the pull colour picture as well.)

At that time, music was distributed through vinyl disks that were read with a needle vibrating in grooves.

The digital revolution was no more than harnessing digital methods to make all of these cheaper, easier and more versatile.

Digital only stores and distributes. It cannot originate. Things are originated in analogue as they always have, and the converted into digital. They cannot be experienced again until they are converted back to analogue.

Analogue and digital

We live in an analogue world.

Analogue refers to real things that can be experienced in the real world by the five senses.

You hear music when sound waves in the air hit your eardrums. You see things when the reflected light reaches your eyes. You touch things when your nerves ends tell your brain what they are feeling.

Everything about our bodies and the world we live in is analogue.

If we can use devices to convert analogue to digital, we can store and manipulate them, mix and match them and do lots of things we could never do before.

- Like we can take the sounds from a piano, digitise them, and then play with them in the digital domain, and put again through the loud speaker, and the ear will hear them as a violin playing.
- We can take a scene of an actor crying, and superimpose behind him and enormous and destructive volcano, so the end result is a heart breaking scene of devastation.
- We can take an old document, scan and turn it into a digital signal, and the full colour, full size storage of it takes up so little room that one CD contains thousands of books.

But, digital is only in the middle. There has to be analogue at the beginning: we have to start with real things, real sound and real sights.

Once we want to experience these digital signals we have to convert them back to analogue so that our ears can hear the sound waves, our eyes can see the light, and our hands can feel the paper.

We haven't got much digital smell and taste around, because no one's really worked out why we should need it.

We originate in the real world, in analogue. We store, manipulate and distribute in digital, and then we have to convert back to analogue in order to experience the effects of the digital wonders.

Before we get an animated film, someone has to draw the figures using analogue things, such as fingers.

That is why there is no such thing as a digital TV set. Our eyes cannot read 0 and 1. Our eyes only see real images. The TV set has taken the digital signal and converted it to an analogue image on the screen.

It is not a digital image: it is 100%, pure, analogue.

Digital is just a technical method nothing else. It's cheap, versatile and can enable us to do wonderful things to mundane inputs and achieve "awesome" outputs. But it's just a technology.

Indispensable?

We could survive without it. We did for 2- million years. And we have really only experienced the fun of digital for 20 years.

And life hasn't changed much.

1. We are using more paper than ever, especially after the computer companies started promoting the "paperless office".
2. We work longer hours and have less leisure time than we had forty years ago.
3. It still takes two hours to get to work in a taxi.

4. The rich have got richer, and not much has improved for the very poor.

Useful?

Digital has changed so much in our lives in individual ways that it is very unfair to look at digital and condemn it just because we still have wars, famine and disease.

Without digital, there would be no:

- Microwave ovens
- Satellite TV.
- Internet
- Email
- Cellphones
- Mxit

Home entertainment would still be on VHS.

Only people over the age of 40 really appreciate digital technology for what it is. For the rest, they are either over-awed by it because they don't understand it, or they don't care and assume it to be as much a part of everyday life as blood is to the body.

What really is New Media?

New media are just more media. People, who were used to sending telegrams, now send emails as well. (In fact people still send telegrams where there are no computers). You hardly ever buy a postage stamp for yourself, if you have a computer, but only 10% of the country can send emails. The rest go to the Post Office, or just phone their relatives in another province on their cellphone. Just like they have always done.

Only about 6-million people experience satellite TV. Although most people have access to a cellphone, it remains the most costly phone call in the world.

Most people listen to the radio. The next biggest population watch TV. The rest phone or buy a newspaper. Lots of people keep in touch and expand their social circles through social networking – only a few on Facebook, most through Mxit.

South Africa remains a digital backwater because of the high cost of phones and broadband.

Having said that, there is an enormous advantage to being in a "backwater". Thousands of new digital products and services come onto the market every year. About 5% of them survive. By the time they get to South Africa, or can be marketed here for bandwidth reasons, they are usually tried, tested, accepted and proved to be of value.

For just these reasons, media professionals should not feel insecure because they are not "New Media Savvy".

If you were to produce a DVD of something people really want, there would be pirate copies on the pavements before you can get them into the shops. Podcasting doesn't exist in South Africa because what we call "Broadband" here (1 Mbps) is regarded as narrowband in Europe and Japan.

New Media and people

New Media" is:

1. What you want it to mean.
2. Just another technology

It has had no effect whatsoever on the essential nature of people. It just enables them to do more things usually cheaper and quicker.

Technologies and the value to development are suspect discussions.

"Advancement" is as subjective a definition as "New Media". As we saw, China had printing with moveable type four hundred years before Europe. Egypt had writing and building technology 5000 years ago, and they didn't change in any noticeable way for three thousand years.

A history of new communications technology consists of the arrival of:

- Printing
- Postal services
- Telephone
- Silent movies
- Radio
- Talking movies
- Television
- Internet
- Digital Media

Not one of these changed people basic needs (Chapter 3). Their motivations remain the same as they were before technology. Their feelings remain the same. They haven't digitised love, hate and fear.

People are the same as they always were. We should let our rear of understanding people far outweigh any fear we have for digital media.

"New Media Savvy"

Being "new Media Savvy" in South Africa means doing what Africa has always been good at, - doing the very best with very little.

This is where the broadcasters are now scoring. They are beginning to realise that a website for a TV programme has little reach, and that email is for the privileged. You can't say "Visit my website" to the waiter in a restaurant, or "Send me an email" to the gardener.

But there are 37-million cellphones in a population of 50-million people³. That's real saturation

South Africa's "New Media" have a more narrow range than they do in the wealthier parts of the world.

But the next chapter will show that there is enough of the very little, with which to do the very best.

³ 60% of urban cellular users in SA have phones that can browse the Internet. However only 21% report that they use this form of mobile Internet access. (The Mobile Internet in South Africa 2010). 56% of urban cell phone users take photos with their cell phones. A further 22% have a camera on their phone, but don't use it. (The Mobile Internet in South Africa 2010)