

# How To Get Sustainable Social Media For Social Change

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/10/07/how-to-get-sustainable-social-media-for-social-change/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/10/07/how-to-get-sustainable-social-media-for-social-change/)

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Social media works

The problem for development donors and activists who engage with social media may not be a lack of enthusiasm, innovation, skills or even resources. The issue for me is sustainability. We don't want a social media philanthropy social media boom if it's followed by a bust.

(These are notes from a talk I gave to an event to launch an [Indigo Trust](#) report on how Philanthropists should use social media for development and social change)

Here are four key ideas that I want to throw into the mix that I hope might give a way of shaping the debate around these issues.

## FIRST MESSAGE:

We are entering an age of COMPLEXITY and UNCERTAINTY. You only have to think about what is happening with the economy, the climate and terrorism to see that.

Then think about how something like WikiLeaks has change life for governments and mainstream media.

Reports like this one help us understand how to use something like social media, but we have to understand the wider context – and the wider context is that these technologies add to the increasing complexity of modern lives.

We see that new media technologies tend to be additional to rather than replacing other platforms – people have mobile, an ipad, a laptop – they get information from diverse sources – Facebook as well as the BBC.

So social media platforms introduce more variables into a personal and global environments that are increasingly uncertain for most people in most places. Whatever we think now, we will have to re-think again soon.

That might well be a good thing – it may make life more interesting – especially if you run a media think-tank – but it doesn't make life simpler.

SECOND MESSAGE: Don't separate media out from the bigger social, political and economic trends.

Our [research on how families use new media](#) shows that technology does not drive behaviour alone – there is a co-evolutionary process by which, for example, changes in family make-up foster particular platforms – think of a single parent texting from her kitchen to tell her daughter who is upstairs in her bedroom to come down for her tea – how did that happen? is it good or bad? is it a product of the phone or the parenting? what outcomes will that kind of interaction have for long-term relationships in that family? So when we use social media for social effects, first think of the social context.

THIRD MESSAGE: IT'S JUST MEDIA – DIGITAL DISCOURSE IS STILL LIMITED BY REALITY

I spend most of my time talking about the potential of social media but we should also be media-realists.

Only 1-2% of the internet is concerned with politics. I suspect only a similar amount with directly philanthropic, development, social entrepreneurship activities. The evidence is that only 1% of people at any one time are participating.

Many of the patterns on inequality are simply repeated online – intelligent well-educated people tend to dominate

digital discourses – we are all aware of the digital divide in terms of access, but there are other limits – take the myth of digital natives – of course if you are growing up in a generation surrounded by new technologies then you will be more familiar with them – but just because you can use text-speak doesn't mean you have some magical or genetic propensity to be able to use those technologies to improve your life.

Remember on the Internet you will have to fight harder for attention. People go to Angry Birds, not Global Voices or MySociety. People have the rest of their lives to live apart from your noble attempts to make them more involved. That's why it's so important that social enterprise goes to where people are active, rather than creating separate initiatives that are beautiful in themselves.

WikiLeaks is a good example. A wonderful website for dumping secret documents. But no-one took any notice until it became networked into mainstream media that could add authority, community and editorial value as well as an attentive audience.

FOURTH and final MESSAGE: Are you really ready for a power shift?

Social media is not just a platform. It's not just a tool. It may have limits but it's different. Check out the history. Media keeps changing. People thought that printing would kill religion (it's doing very well). People thought that radio would bring democracy to the world (er...no, it brought us the Archers and TalkSport). People thought that TV would kill radio, newspapers and our brains. Well perhaps the last bit's true. But my point is that we always over-estimate the effect of media change, but each time the change is different in scale and impact.

The Internet seems to me to offer quite unusual effects – partly described in the report – of scale, adoption, personalisation and so on. So it is different. It is interactive, participatory and more autonomous. Social media in the Arab Spring worked because it was diffuse, formally unorganised, without conventional leaders, driven by peer networks, adaptable and endlessly shifting from online to the streets.

But my research has shown how even the most open, democratic, enabling, devolving organisations such as INGOs – especially those who are on a moral mission to save the world – can be the worst at accepting the two-way reality of social media – they are so committed to a project and goals that they won't allow any real autonomy for those its supposed to help.

So my final thought is to ask you, 'how far do you want to go with the shift of communicative power?' How ready are you for a communications environment where open data and transparency should be the default? We celebrate the unexpected and unprecedented power of social media in the Arab Spring as it helped a new generation of social media using Arabs to topple the status quo – but how do we feel and how do we respond to a new generation of social media savvy young Britons who use it as they loot their local JD Sports?

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