



Where are the learners?



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Social networks are complex environments with a lot of emergent behaviour. Today, we are only uncovering the first wrinkles of what might later become an in-depth transformation of our society. Yet, instead of using this as an accelerator for knowledge building, we are already retrenching in old habits.

The dynamics of social networks are complex and, as for today, nobody is really able to articulate the laws that will make a certain approach successful or not. The Facebooks and the Twitters of this world are prime examples of initiatives that had (and still have) all the necessary characteristics for failure, yet made it to the top. To today's top.

Still, we have a lot of "experts" explaining us how we should use social media, what is the untapped wisdom hidden in these networks and what will become the next big thing.

Being an expert is something we all seem to be longing for and therefore, our activity in social networks is largely focused on building a personal brand instead of becoming a more knowledgeable, yet perhaps less known, individual.

Twitter lists, number of followers or connections, influence rankings... they all are becoming increasingly important metrics. But is there anyone learning in these networks or are we just confirming what we already know?

Eat your own food

It is all very human. However, sometimes, our behaviour gets a bit in direct conflict with the wisdom that we preach.

As an example, over the past few months, we have spent some time exploring the ins and outs of the Enterprise 2.0 space. We admit, we are likely part of the more sceptical part of the equation. For the real believers, the unlimited, fully transparent and open interaction of individuals would transform the enterprise and raise it to new levels of competence.

However, exactly in this space of believers, an initiative was started called the Enterprise 2.0 Adoption Council, which is essentially a closed community of like-minded individuals.

"The unlimited, fully transparent and open interaction of individuals..."

OK, there are of course numerous good reasons for doing so. Still, it gives us an uneasy feeling. It seems a bit weird. It is a bit like software vendors not using their own products.

Follow me, but with respect

And more recently, we stumbled upon this post by Dean Pomerleau, titled [Social Media Etiquette](#).

We won't go into the details of what is written there. We suggest you all read this for yourself and make your own conclusions. Yet, again, we have the uneasy feeling that we are observing some weird behaviour.

Networks should be just what their name says: a network, a connection mechanism that links participants. Of course, there must be a minimal level of rules regarding the way we communicate, such as not using offensive language, etc. But for the rest, we should avoid other rules or constructs. Every additional rule adds to the noise and reduces the real potential of the network.

Of course, we all have a job (or are looking for one) and personal branding is important. Yet, at what cost? Already today, the vast majority of the messages on Twitter are posted for personal positioning purposes and add very little to the build-up of knowledge within the network.

The next big thing

Follow me and I'll tell you about the next big thing.

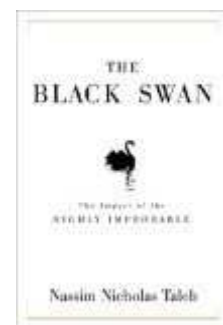
Unfortunately, as we can learn from the past, evolution is not a process of incremental change and therefore, our future is very difficult to predict.

In the past, our evolution has been largely determined by a limited number of disruptive changes or discoveries that fundamentally redefined our evolution path. In nearly all cases, none of these changes or discoveries were things we were anticipating. But they happened. There is no reason to expect that this will be different in the future.

Therefore, as Nassim Taleb rightfully explains in his book *The Black Swan*, making predictions about the future is not really a sensible thing to do. Whatever the brilliant ideas we have about the future, we will have to express them in terminology of the things we already know today. We are talking the future in a language of the past.

Therefore, use social networks for learning, but don't predict the future. It doesn't make sense.

Just be part of it.



[The Black Swan](#)
[The Impact of the Highly Improbable](#)
 Nassim Nicholas Taleb

About the author



Marc Buyens is analyst, management consultant and owner of Xpragma. Marc started Xpragma in 1999 after a 20+ years career in the IT sector. Today, he provides advice, training and mentoring services focusing on the intersection of technological evolution, organisational change and business strategy: a messy world of unfulfilled promises.

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