



Using social networks to build the new society - Are we on the right path? | The Xpragmatic View



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 by [Marc Buyens \(@mbuyens\)](#), Xpragma
marc.buyens@xpragma.com
 url: <http://www.xpragma.com/view139.php>

Number of followers, connections, reputation, influence... they all become increasingly important social metrics. However, are we measuring the right things?

With the growing acceptance and use of social networks for business purposes, we see an increased interest in all kind of metrics and tools that allow assessing the influence and the authority of the authors, the accuracy and relevancy of the information they provide and the social dynamics that link all this together.

There are several reasons for this, but one of the more interesting ones is that this might be a basis for an evolution towards a more innovative, creative, equitable and human business and society.

An interesting example of this thinking can be found in a recent blog post by Venessa Miemis, [Tapping the Network to Facilitate Innovation](#), where she writes:

A tool that would map the connections within a network combined with a 'human capital' assessment could aid in this process. By mapping the network, one would understand the relationships between individuals and groups, how knowledge flows, and spot areas where communication channels could be opened and new connections made. A human capital inventory would be like a resume, but with context. It might show an individual's past experience and affiliations and skills, but also include things like social capital, sphere of influence, reputation, inherent strengths, and personality type. This information would give clues as to how to create dynamic teams and at what stage of a process an individual's skills would be best applied.

It is a tempting idea. Very complex to do, but let's dream for a moment...

However, even when we succeed in doing this correctly, will we have mapped and measured the right things and will we have chosen the right individuals?

We don't know, but we have two concerns.

First, social networks exist because individuals want to express themselves, connect with friends and family, exchange information, etc. However, we must not forget that behind every social network there is always a company.

Now, these companies might not always have a real business plan, but at the end, their reason for being is rarely to create a better world, but to make a profit and preferably, a big one.

Therefore, given their venture capital based financials, the standard approach of these companies is always focused on growth, ruthless growth and this translates into the look-and-feel of the platform where all aspects and metrics that are growth-oriented are heavily promoted. More is always better.

So, to what extent will the resulting metrics reflect "real social dynamics" or merely the side effects of a for-growth business strategy?

Second, in all these discussions, we always seem to think that social networking is a level playing field for all participants. It is not.

Fortunately enough, our human race represents a broad mixture of cultures, preferences, ambitions and personalities. Some of us are very extrovert, others are very introvert individuals. All have their merit and their place in our society and this diversity is generally seen as an advantage, a basis for creativity and innovation.

Now, in social network environments, such differences in personality will also be reflected in the way individuals use (or do not use) these platforms. In addition, given the nature of these platforms, in combination with the above-mentioned focus on growth, small differences in personality are likely to result in huge differences in usage and metrics.

The net result will be a bias in favour of certain groups of personalities. Whether this is a bad thing or not is impossible to judge. The only thing we can say is that the resulting "influence base" will be different from what we have today. In addition, this influence base will be more homogeneous, more concentrated around specific personality profiles, hence representing a loss of diversity.

The future will tell whether we really took this path and whether it was the right path to walk. But remember, on the path of evolution, there is no coming back.

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.



<http://www.facebook.com/marcb254>



<http://www.linkedin.com/in/marcbuyens>



<http://www.twitter.com/mbuyens>

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Xpragma bvba - Mechelsesteenweg 254 - 2820 Bonheiden - Belgium
Tel. +32-(0)15-340 845 - info@xpragma.com - www.xpragma.com



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