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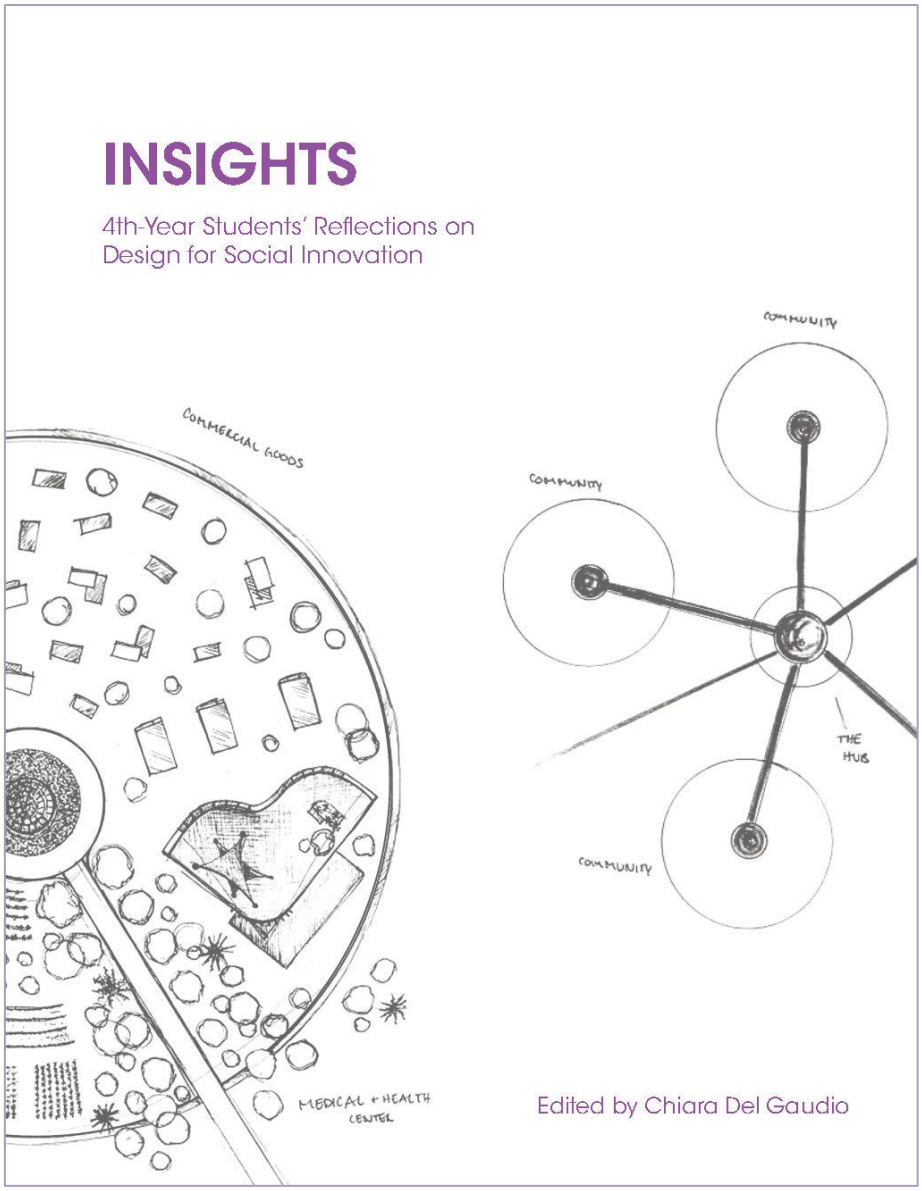

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How the Design of Social Media Enables Social Innovation

SOCIAL MEDIA - COMMUNITIES - COMMUNICATION - INTERCONNECTIVITY - USER INTERFACE

A symposium held at the Royal College of Art during April of 1976 brought together designers who questioned what design could do for society. A book by Peter Lloyd Jones (1977) called *Designing for Need* presents a collection of papers that were presented at this event where the traditional ideas of design were challenged. Here designers put forth the idea that design could solve more significant issues that plague society, this idea being commonly referred to as social change (Jones, 1977). The importance of social innovation lies in the fact that it enables transformation and growth that the traditional solutions often employed by governments are unable to provide (Urama & Acheampong, 2013). According to Urama and Acheampong (2013), the most critical social issues facing the world today require innovative solutions "that [cut] across organizational, sectoral, and disciplinary boundaries" (Urama & Acheampong, 2013, para. 20). In this regard, social media, enabled by the careful creation of proper User Experience (UX) and User interfaces (UI) can bringing people together, create new communities and serve as a catalyst for social innovation (Dentzel, 2014).

The manner in which the internet and social media in and of themselves are designed creates an opportunity for various communities, groups, and like-minded individuals to become connected (Dentzel, 2014). How these social media platforms, such as Facebook, are designed, for instance, enables them to be catalysts for social change. Facebook is a large website with billions of active users monthly (Facebook, 2004). Reaching all over the world, Facebook and other social media platforms have a similar goal: interconnectivity. Illustrating this, Facebook's mission statement is, "Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" (Facebook, 2004, para. 22). The way Facebook is designed, using computer algorithms and networking, makes it easier for like-minded individuals to discover other people who share the same values, ideas, or beliefs as them and allows for peer education and collaboration (Ram & Liu, 2018).

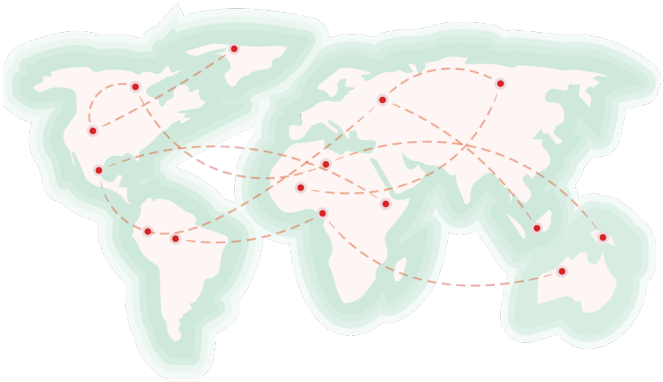
Facebook is designed in a way that encourages people to connect and communicate the minute they open the website. Its website states that: "A high-quality onboarding experience can lead to conversion rates above 90% and encourages people to become more engaged and profitable" (Facebook, 2019, para. 1). Furthermore, in 2010 Facebook released a new UX design that allows everyday people to create *Community Pages*. These pages can be used for anything, with little moderation happening (Grosser, 2011). The design decision to allow any user to create a page allowed Facebook to act as a gathering point for even some of the most niche of interests. People were encouraged to like pages that related to their interests and hobbies (Grosser, 2011). The importance of this lies in the idea that social design initiatives should be facilitated by designers but created by citizens. One way for designers to do this is to create platforms for social innovation (Manzini, 2015). Speaking on a fundamental level, Facebook had designed a space that allowed users to design their own spaces within the greater Facebook sphere. By creating this open platform, Facebook allows information and ideologies to be shared, which can bring about change in ways that the world has never experienced before. Sites like Facebook permit people to gather and discuss change, opening the possibility for communication in places where discussing this sort of topic may be discouraged or even illegal.

It is essential to mention the potential for these sites to

be abused (O'Sullivan, 2019). Since Facebook and social media are relatively new, learning how to monitor and prevent mistreatment is often done on a trial-and-error basis (O'Sullivan, 2019). Stories like that of the Russians using social media to affect the outcome of the 2016 US elections show how easily these sites can be abused (O'Sullivan, 2019). In situations like these, Facebook is able to look to the past misconduct and attempt to create safeguards to prevent similar situations in the future (O'Sullivan, 2019).

To illustrate that social media can be a catalyst for social innovation we can look to the Middle East during the early months of 2010 (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). The Arab Spring was a series of uprisings in response to the living conditions and oppressive leadership in various Middle Eastern countries (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). It all started with one man in Tunisia who lit himself on fire after being mistreated by the government, creating tension among the population (2019). Social media allowed citizens to organize and mobilize, and they successfully overthrew their government and held a free election to choose council members all in the span of a week (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). Although the Arab Spring did not bring about an immediate improvement in standard of living, it can still be considered as a "catalyst for long-term change" (Manfreda, 2019, para. 10). This Revolution was directly affected by citizen's ability to connect and form online networks that were critical in organizing activists in addition to allowing citizens to speak freely and provided a space for civic engagement (Brown et al., 2012).

The way Facebook is designed may promote the interconnectivity of its users. It may act as a gathering place for people of various backgrounds and social status to speak freely with little regulation from governments and organizations. The way it has designed its community pages and methods of categorizing various users' interests allows for people to easily find groups and communities that have the same ideologies as themselves. These communities can act as hubs for social innovation that start with the people who are experienced in the problems in society. The use of social media, when used to bring people together in unfavourable circumstances, can promote change since it changes society and culture for the better by allowing the average citizen to have a voice. This can lead to revolutions like those that were seen during the Arab Springs, but it is important to keep in mind that abuse of platforms is a real possibility.



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