Book Review: Here Comes Everybody: The Power Of Organizing without Organizations by Clay Shirky (2008)

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Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations might not, on the surface, be an obvious choice for instruction librarian reading, but then, the author Clay Shirky wouldn't have been an obvious choice for writing about the Internet, having graduated with a degree in art and originally working as a theater director and designer. The truth is that Shirky is knowledgeable and his book has some fascinating insights into the emerging world of online social networks, an important topic for instruction librarians. The essence of Shirky's message in Here Comes Everybody is that the traditional costs and barriers of two key social activities, communicating to large audiences and the ability to connect to others with similar interests and form groups, have become very low. Communicating to large audiences has become incredibly easy thanks to the Internet and more specifically Web 2.0 tools like blogs, wikis, and other social software. Many positive developments have come about as a result, such as people with rare diseases more easily establishing connections with other people who are similarly afflicted or ordinary citizens being able to communicate and challenge the State (e.g., uprisings and demonstrations about the Iranian elections in the summer of 2009); however, it has also resulted in some not-so-lovely developments such as facilitating communication between people who might want to do harm, e.g., terrorists.

An additional development resulting from the increased ease of communicating is that professions that have traditionally relied on the relative scarcity of communication channels and the ability to reach wide audiences (artificial though it may have been) are now struggling with "self-conception." Some of these professional groups respond by becoming "defensive." Sound familiar? Although Shirky focuses on the profession of journalism and describes the recent blurring of the lines so that now anyone can be a producer of information and, theoretically at least, attract a large audience, the parallels to librarians are too clear to ignore. Shirky discusses the idea of publish then filter, which is in response to "the brute economic logic of allowing anyone to create anything and make it available to anyone" and he claims "no group of professionals will be adequate to filter the material" (p. 98). Later, he goes on to say that "the more an institution or industry relies on information as its core product, the greater and more complete the change [restructuring] will be" (p. 107). Librarians, traditionally,

have been in the filtering business. By choosing materials for our collections, whether print or electronic, we filter information for users of our collections. The job of instruction librarians has been to teach students how to access these filtered materials as well as to show why these filtered materials are generally "better" than the rest. With so much material now outside of this traditional model, how will instruction librarians change their practices in response?

Another significant change that has resulted from the lowering of traditional communication costs and barriers is that people are much more able to form groups and take action, whether in an informal or formal way. Shirky discusses Wikipedia as an example of how people can take individual action without much organizational structure (although interestingly he points out that naming it with the "-pedia" suffix was key in helping contributors have a common frame of reference for the goal of the project). He cites examples of collective action such as the group Voice of the Faithful that challenged the Catholic Church after the priest abuse scandals in 2002 and the seemingly less coordinated political protests in Belarus including the formation of "flash mobs" based on mobile phone communications. He also looks at how groups are able to form whose members previously would have had difficulty finding one another because of their lack of social approval (e.g., pro-anorexic girls who want to give each other advice and encouragement). As a further example of group formation and resource sharing, Shirky uses the example of the formation of communities of practice which are, he says, "…inherently cooperative, and are beautifully supported by social tools." These communities (be they professional or amateur) are a rich source of information because "[b]y providing an opportunity for the visible display of expertise or talent, the public asking of questions creates a motivation to answer in public as well, and that answer once perfected, persists even if both the original asker and the answerer lose interest" (p. 101). Ultimately, Shirky concludes that the changes we are experiencing will be on the balance positive, but that we need to recognize the significance of them, rather than just regarding them as fads. Instruction librarians have at least two issues at stake here. One, can we find better ways to form our own communities of professional practice that will help us individually increase our effectiveness by sharing good teaching practices? For the past several years, we have used listservs and confer-

ences, but now blogs, social networking groups, and even virtual worlds provide a wealth of additional venues. How do we choose where to focus our attention? Two, how do we develop an awareness of other disciplines' communities of practice in order to better assist our students?

For instruction librarians, this book serves as food for thought. If we are teaching students the "traditional" structures of information only, are we really providing them the tools that they need to live in what Shirky calls "revolutionary" times? Some professors (and perhaps even a few librarians) are still proposing that Wikipedia not be taught as an information source with one of the rationales being that students shouldn't be encouraged to use it when there are more "authoritative" sources. Shirky would, I believe, urge us to think much more creatively about this resource in particular and some professors and librarians are doing that. William Badke's article on this subject started a lengthy discussion on the Information Literacy Instruction listserv in March of 2008 (http://lists.ala.org/wws/arc/ili-l/2008-03/thrd2.html) where most voices agreed with Badke's suggestions of ways to teach and use Wikipedia. Badke's suggestions include professors and students engaging with Wikipedia by discussing an article related to their class in depth and then adding to it or rewriting it. The article could then become a resource for future classes. This would be one venue for helping students understand how information is constructed and the impact of an author's choices.

Wikipedia is just one example though and one that may or may not last in its current form… what about the growing mountain of information available via blogs, wikis, Twitter, and other similar sources? How do we help students find appropriate communities of practice to use as valuable sources of information? How do we now teach this new world where amateurs and professionals intermingle and credentials become less relevant or at least less expected? A world where everyone's information might be seen as equal?

While I don't have the answers, this book encouraged me to consider teaching students how information comes to be created, how information is a social product, and how students might be able to contextualize the information they find, by whatever means they find it. This then becomes the foundation for all other IL instruction. Teaching students to evaluate information becomes incredibly important but that process of evaluation will need to undergo revision as well because our previous

schema for doing that (focusing on the traditional publishing models) at least in Shirky's view is not entirely valid anymore.

Badke, W. (2008) What to do with Wikipedia? *Online, 32*(2). Retrieved from http://www.infotoday.com/online/mar08/Badke.shtml

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