THE PATH FROM INFORMATION TO ACTION IS A CONVERSATION

By Christopher Wilson
Senior Consultant, Christopher Wilson & Associates
&
Research Fellow, Centre on Governance, University of Ottawa
July 24, 2010

In an article entitled "Information Overload - Action Deficit" Lloyd Nimetz, writes[1] about the gap between our growing access to information and our ability to apply that information to effective action. He says, "*action* is the next big thing to get changed by the Internet. We're slowly going to enter another phase of the information revolution, the age of 'intelligent and organized action'.

How's it going to happen? ... We need to come up with much more enlightened ways (tools) to organize information to help people find the best actions for them. After reading an article in the newspaper, you should be able to click on an action button that gives you a customized list of the best actions you can do to help. An ever-expanding database of actions should exist as well as complex algorithms churning away in data warehouses to figure out which are the best actions for you based on where you live, the skills you have and the issues you care about."

I find this is a fundamentally important question - how do you turn the terra bytes of information accessible on the web into useful action?

However, the problem is not quite as straightforward as it sounds because information is often packaged or isolated and it often needs to be contextualized for better understanding and incorporation into social discourse. Information also needs to be churned, ie exposed to multiple perspectives, to produce useful, comprehensive knowledge and hopefully even wisdom. Both contextualization and churn require dialogue -- among people, among organizations, among institutions and among communities. Further, translating that knowledge into needed action is rarely about just individual action and almost always involves collective action and cooperation.

That collective action may take the form of events like the SMS facilitated protests in the Philippines that ousted President Estrada in 2001, or last year's spontaneous protests of the rigged Iranian election results. However, the most significant and chronic problems of human society don't fall neatly into the profile of like/dislike events that these protests typify. Most chronic or 'wicked' problems require the messy coordination of many people with the knowledge, power and resources to contribute to a complex and shared solution. People need to learn together first before solutions become viable.

---

[1] in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, June 13, 2010

The notion that reading about an issue like crime or poverty or climate change can generate window pop-ups that direct the reader to actions that feed into pre-established solutions is, well, naive. Complex solutions get generated as a result of shared understandings of a problem evolving, and as those solutions get jointly implemented that shared problem understanding continues to grow, modifying both the nature of the solution and its implementation in due course. It's a continuous learning loop.

If pre-established solutions existed and were effective, then we'd already be using them to solve these issues. If the solution to these problems was simply about throwing more money at it, then governments (which can tax at any level or even print money) would have dealt with them long ago. The problems continue largely because they require the willing cooperation of many people and organizations in a process of distributed governance. In essence, the real problem in translating information to action is that we really don't understand how to work together effectively. So how can the Internet help?

If we think Internet basics, then the Internet allows us to connect, to share information and to coordinate. Therefore, it seems as if there are two routes for translating information into effective action depending on the nature of the action under consideration (even though the exact nature of the action may not be clear at the outset requiring movement along both routes). Some actions are about changing shared understanding while others are more about shared doing.

The first route is the open source, wiki-like approach of stigmergic collaboration which invites large numbers people (tens of thousands to millions of people) to make contributions and then have others affirm, reject or modify those contributions. Stigmergic collaboration does not require prior relationships among the collaborators only simple rules for adding, deleting or changing contributions.

This route may be particularly amenable to knowledge-oriented actions like policy formation, collective visioning, or evoling social and cultural norms. One could imagine, for instance, that in response to some undesirable situation, people might be asked to co-create online a different vision of possibility that could be shared among many stakeholders. That shared possibility could then be used as a means to coordinate the commitments, activities, results and mutual accountabilities among those same stakeholders in their offline actions that are directed towards the shared goal.

A second route uses the networking capacities of the Internet to augment more traditional methods of cooperation. Traditional cooperation involves smaller groups of up to 25 people (a limit established by Lipnack & Stamps, 2000) and is heavily relationship based. Typically it requires: trust to be built; understanding of problems and solutions to be shared; mutual commitments of knowledge, resources and authority to be made and verified; mechanisms for joint decision making established; performance feedback loops put in place -- all before collaborators ever undertake anything. This is why large groups do not yield effective cooperation (think Congress or Parliaments). Large groups simply have too many relationships that need to be maintained (*n* X *n-1* relationships). With smaller groups there's time and resources to develop relationships through processes which foster authentic conversation and shared learning.

Here the Internet can be helpful in two ways:

a) by catalyzing the human conversations required by connecting together those with knowledge and expertise with those interested in changing the status quo. For example, one might think of match-making services *a la* Amazon; and

b) since effective learning does not occur in large groups and yet the involvement of large numbers of people may still be necessary for social change, the Internet could be helpful to network together many small conversations and dialogues and scale them into larger community-wide, national or international dialogues.

The real challenge I see in all of this is finding the right balance between the at-a-distance networking and sharing via web 2.0 tools and the very human need to reach out and touch someone - intellectually, emotionally and spiritually - as a condition for working together. Our communities are after all living, evolving ecosystems and not linear systems like factories.

###