

## Preface

This book is about the power of online social networks – MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, Friendster, Orkut and countless others – and how they are transforming our lives. Online social networking is revolutionizing how we see ourselves, how we interact with others, how we work and how we participate in the wider society around us.

Social networking sites are a global phenomenon. For the hundreds of millions of people worldwide who belong to sites like MySpace and Facebook, social interaction in cyberspace has become an indispensable part of their daily lives. This book examines the powerful forces driving this social e-revolution. It also describes the equally powerful reactions to it, and makes predictions about its far-reaching consequences.

We are indeed living, thanks to the Internet, at an exciting turning point in history. As *The Economist* put it: “Society is in the early phases of what appears to be a media revolution on the scale of that launched by Gutenberg in 1448.”<sup>1</sup> The Renaissance revolution, which brought the printed word to the masses, empowered collective action that triggered the Reformation and helped shape the conditions that led to the emergence of capitalism and modern nations. The printing press provided a powerful demonstration of how new communications systems, when leveraged socially, can topple once unassailable empires of received truths.

The underlying argument of this book is that the “Web 2.0” revolution represents an equally powerful rupture – which we call an *e-ruption* – in established forms of social organization. These cataclysmic changes are occurring at a time when many, empowered by new technologies, are questioning core assumptions and breaking with past practices. We are entering an era of liberating self-awareness and self-reliance. We no longer need to make personal choices and

organize our lives with deference to established values and institutions. Today, we are increasingly trusting our gut feelings and acting on instinct and intimate conviction. We have grasped that crowds, when their collective intelligence is harnessed, are frequently smarter and wiser than the most exalted expert. We have realized that everything important in life is essentially miscellaneous, unplanned, unexpected. We have learned the value of cooperating with others. And we have, above all, felt the liberating power of consumer sovereignty and citizenship engagement.

We are, in short, living in an era that marks a rupture with values based on deference to rational design, orderly markets and vertical institutions. We are embracing the exhilarating uncertainty of delightful randomness, creative destruction and horizontal networks. In a word, we are celebrating our deepest *social* impulses.

What we are describing here has been boldly declared, loudly trumpeted and sometimes unequivocally condemned, by other authors in a growing body of literature on the subject. If this book can make any claim to originality, it resides in the breadth of its analytical scope. Specifically, this book examines the impact of social networking sites at three different levels: first, our informal personal interactions; second, our formal relationships inside organizations; and third, our behaviour as consumers and citizens.

These three forms of social interaction – personal, organizational and consumer/civic – constitute the three parts of this book. They also correspond to the book's triptych thematic structure, which we have called "ISP" – *identity, status* and *power*.

At its most fundamental level, all social interaction is concerned with questions related to our personal *identity*. We need to construct our identities before we can meaningfully interact socially with others. The first part of this book examines the impact of social networking sites on personal identities.

Our place within organizations, and in society as a whole, is significantly determined by notions of *status*. How we regard ourselves is frequently determined by how others look at us. The book's second part focuses on the e-ruptive influence of sites like MySpace and Facebook on the way social *status* is assigned, acquired, maintained and enhanced.

Finally, the third part of this book examines the role of social networking sites on the distribution and exercise of power – in social relations, in organizations, in markets and in political institutions.

While this book, on the surface, is rich in anecdotes and case studies about how social networking sites are affecting our daily lives, our

analysis never loses sight of the underlying theme of how they are transforming accepted notions of identity, status and power.

Who will want to read this book? This book is written for a wide readership. It will, we hope, appeal to experts and laymen alike, to the young and old, to Web aficionados and Internet novices.

If you have heard only vaguely about the Web 2.0 revolution – Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia – but have never used online social sites, this book is for you.

If you are a parent concerned about the inordinate amount of time your children are spending on MySpace, iTunes, Bebo and other sites, this book is for you.

If you are a business professional who knows about social networking sites like LinkedIn but are uncertain about how they work and what advantages they offer, this book is for you.

If you are already a member of social networking sites and wish to gain a deeper understanding of their underlying dynamics, this book is for you.

If you work in a corporate environment where Facebook and other sites are being used by colleagues and you wish to learn more about the ramifications for the workplace, this book is for you.

If you work for a voluntary organization or government bureaucracy and you are wondering about the opportunities and challenges presented by social media, this book is for you.

If you are a corporate manager assessing how Web 2.0 tools can affect your company's performance, this book is for you.

Finally, if you are simply an intellectually curious reader who wishes to learn more about the global explosion of sites like MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Bebo, Cyworld and Orkut, this book is for you too.

This book describes, assesses and analyses the dynamics of the Web 2.0 e-ruption and explains what it means for you – today, tomorrow and in the future.