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Tuesday, April 28, 2015 -- Ben Smith

The 20th century was wildly successful on any number of counts. Global measures of health, life expectancy, wealth, employment, wellbeing, school attendance, and more grew faster than ever before. To be sure, the rising tide did not lift all boats, but if we step back and look at the global score, the century brought forth a number of big wins.

And what drove those successes? Command-and-control structures, centralized government initiatives, hierarchical organizations all played large roles in ensuring that decisions were made quickly, implemented consistently, and enforced throughout their respective communities.

With all this success, it's tempting to think that things should remain largely as they've always been, but that would be a dangerous mistake. Why? Because the world we now live in is different in such fundamental ways that the old ways just don't cut it anymore.

Global dynamics are changing in many profound ways, but there are four shifts — in power, communication, knowledge, and relationships — that require particular attention. If we can see them clearly, we may grow to understand why we desperately need an alternative to command-and-control, why we need community building.

Power

Power is simply the means to get something done. Money allows us to buy things. Skills allow us to do things. Personal connections allow us access to new groups. Political positions allow us to make decisions.

Since industrialization most forms of power have been highly concentrated. Factories, for instance, concentrated economic capital. Manufacturing many goods required enormously expensive equipment that was usually privately owned. Think about printing a newspaper.

What was true for manufacturing was also true for the concentration of knowledge in trade guilds and universities, political power in state representatives, personal connections in social circles and country clubs, and so on. In almost all social systems, power was highly concentrated and controlled by a small number of individuals.

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But this trend is now changing as power is becoming more distributed. Take social connections, for example. Research and experience both show how essential connections can be to meeting the "right" people, getting a job, or joining other groups. Until relatively recently we depended upon the serendipity of birth — what Warren Gates calls the "lucky sperm club" — for those connections.

Now social media allows us to maintain much larger circles of acquaintances and connect with people we've never met. Often these "weak connections" turn out to be of great value, even if they don't constitute meaningful friendships.

Of course, the details are immensely diverse, but the trend is still clear: many forms of power are shifting from the few to the many. This diffusion of power means that the old forms of hierarchical organization are growing less effective as their

power diminishes.

Communication

This same shift — from few to many — can also be seen in communication. Until the advent of the Internet, mass media required large amounts of capital: television towers, massive printing presses, radio stations, broadcast licenses, etc. While this was fundamentally a technological restriction, its effect was to make communication to a one-way street. This has now radically changed.

Communication is no longer a monologue. Every computer can be a printing press for millions of readers; every smart phone can upload pictures and videos for the world to see. What was a one-way street is now a free-for-all.

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Furthermore, what we see in the millions of blogs, YouTube videos, comments, Flickr streams, Facebook posts, etc. is not simply a flood of the banal, but a fundamental shift in how we can communicate as a society. Those who controlled the conversation in the Industrial Age may want to put the genie back in the bottle, but with power comes desire — now everyone wants to be heard.

In a world where everyone has a voice, the old nodes of communication power – the "megaphones" — are easily drowned out. Their ability to monopolize conversation is

diminished. If we are to maintain constructive public discourse and community conversations, we need new ways of talking with one another.

Knowledge

Third, this change in how we communicate, together with a rise in the global awareness of civil society, has dramatically shifted our view of knowledge. Throughout the Industrial Age truth was defined by dominant institutions: church leaders, government officials, leading businessmen, scholars, and the press. Of course, contrary views were always present, but they were structurally deprived of influence because dominant institutions had much greater impact on public discourse.

This motley group of influences — technological changes in communication, the growth of the international community following WWII, our knowledge of other peoples through media such as National Geographic, the changing demographics of many industrialized nations, and the flood of images from around the world — has seriously diminished the influence these dominant institutions have over the definition of what we know. Truth has slowly given way to perspectives.

For example, public attitudes toward marriage, dietary matters, parenting styles, mental health, religious belief and sexuality have all become radically more diverse over the last half-century.

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Whereas trust in the Industrial Age was developed with assurances of impartiality and objectivity, today trust can only be earned with transparency — clear, open knowledge about both the observer and the observed. If it is impossible to be objective, then the best and most responsible alternative is to be clear about one's position and leave those influences open to debate and discussion. What matters today is not a feigned truth, but a clear perspective.

Relationships

Finally, this shift from few to many has significantly impacted all forms of relationships be they between persons, companies, communities, and countries. The major institutions of the Industrial Age had a great deal of independence. Large companies, for instance, could decide to bring out a new product without consulting outside forces. They could set up factories, find resources, and hire people without knowing the price of labor in China, the political conflicts that might affect their resource availability, or the environmental impact of the manufacturing process.

Not anymore. Today, a variety of factors from globalization and futures markets to the Internet and global warming have the combined effect of making us all increasingly interconnected. The truth and insight into this interconnection of economic, political, social, and environmental relationships makes decisions all the more complicated while also increasingly the need for all of us to have a sense of the global whole even when making highly local choices.

The fundamental movement in these four shifts is from few to many. Power once concentrated in major institutions is being distributed. Communication channels are multiplying. The security of knowledge is giving way to multiple perspectives. And, the number and interconnectedness of relationships is quickly growing.

If this is the basic movement, how are we being called to respond? We think the call is loud and clear: Collaboration is the new competition.

These four shifts describe dynamics that are coursing through our communities, changing their fundamental nature. Many would argue that new, collaborative ways of organizing communities are called for on moral grounds. I would agree. But these shifts make clear that we need community building more than ever before for simple, practical reasons as well. The old structures are ill suited to the world we are becoming.

If we are to succeed today, we need structures that fit the dynamics of a world in which power is distributed, in which everyone has a voice, a world in which truth is approached through multiple perspectives and in which interconnectedness is the norm.