

Foreword

Imagine that you have been given the task of designing a new restaurant. The owner of the restaurant is willing to adopt a radical new concept and wants you to dream big. You're given a completely blank slate. Not just the look and the theme, but everything about the processes and business model are open to you to change as you wish.

Maybe you think to yourself, "Hmm, this restaurant will be serving steak. And since it's serving steak, the customers will need to have access to knives. And one thing we know about people with knives is that they might stab people. Therefore, in order to make the restaurant safe, we'd better put a cage around every table in order to keep the customers from hurting each other."

We chuckle at this idea because, when designing a restaurant, it is patently absurd to think this way. Yes, of course it is true that from time to time people go crazy and stab others in restaurants, but we have chosen – correctly so – not to make the threat of bad behavior the central element in the design of our social institutions.

And yet, it is exactly this kind of erroneous and flawed thinking that so often seems to grip people's minds when they think about the design of software for social interactions. Rather than start with the default assumption that we all correctly have when we drive our cars, or walk the streets, or eat in restaurants – the default assumption that virtually everyone we meet means us no harm and is not going to hurt us – some web designers (and their managers) want to start social software projects with the premise that if everything isn't locked down under a very carefully designed permission-based model, if every piece of information is not tightly controlled, something dreadful is going to happen.

But this simply is not true, something horrific is not going to happen. As it turns out, most people are not lunatics or mean. Most

people are reasonable and nice. And we should count on that and act accordingly.

A few years after Jimmy founded Wikipedia and it was becoming successful, he was invited by a major media corporation to come and advise them about wikis inside the company. Executives had noticed that, unlike some of the top-down, pseudo-revolutions that had flopped in knowledge management in the past, wikis were creeping steadily into the enterprise from the bottom-up. Employees were finding wikis immensely useful and started installing them on departmental servers themselves. And this was apparently quite scary.

In one meeting, someone from human resources suggested that if the employee handbook were placed in a wiki, perhaps someone might edit it to double the number of vacation days allowed. What could be done if that occurred? The answer is quite simple – if an employee pours coffee on a colleague in the lunch room, or participates in any number of other ridiculously unprofessional behaviors, he is reprimanded, and told to stop it immediately or risk termination. But in reality, with properly designed social software, one doesn't need to forbid such activities, because the inherent transparency and accountability built into the software makes it clear to people that such behavior would be quickly noticed, frowned upon, and censured.

What makes *Throwing Sheep in the Boardroom* a timely business book is that the authors Matthew Fraser and Soumitra Dutta recognize the deeply-embedded reluctance by some organizations to embrace Web 2.0. They explain why this cautionary approach must be tackled head-on in order to fully harness the benefits of collaborative environments encompassing information-sharing and problem-solving, and wisely state that “social interactions, like financial transactions, must be founded on some basic notion of mutual recognition and trust.”

What also makes this book appealing is that the authors take a very balanced and reasoned approach in their analysis. By neither underplaying the challenges faced by individuals and organizations participating in the online space, nor by being sensationalistically effusive about the positive social and collaborative opportunities offered, Fraser and Dutta provide an honest interdisciplinary framework that successfully blends theory with real-world examples and case studies.

To their credit, Fraser and Dutta don't hold back in pointing out some of the questionable behavior one can observe online, such as the phenomenon of competitively collecting friends. But they also make the effort to explain that there is a deep-rooted sociological

motivation behind such behavior, namely the recognition that throughout history, status is in part measured by the breadth of one's influence, and that the desire to solidify one's social capital has now migrated to the online world where it is hoped by many that a large circle of friends, albeit sometimes tenuous and fragile, translates into greater influence and power.

Ultimately, however, Fraser and Dutta are optimistic about the long-term benefits of social networking sites – and rightfully so. Approaching Web 2.0 adoption from a position of innovation and opportunity reaps benefits manifold.

Organizations that refuse to regard Web 2.0 implementation as some sort of disconcerting, free-for-all endeavor have correctly recognized the positive potential of embracing collective intelligence and collaboration on their employees, customers, clients, and business partners.

Simply put, the basic fact is that all societies, ranging from private corporate entities, to local communities, to nation states, and finally to the global community as a whole, are best served by vigorously employing openness and a free exchange of ideas unhampered by fear of negative repercussions or censorship. Only by creating safe environments for the expression of ideas, even occasionally controversial ones, can we hope that the most valuable ideas will rise to the top. A free marketplace of ideas, supported by the Internet and social networking tools, is what we are ultimately striving for. And this is certainly achievable if we all, as participants in this new hyper-connected world, act responsibly with personal accountability.

**Jimmy Wales, Founder of Wikipedia
and Andrea Weckerle, Communications Consultant &
Entrepreneur
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