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Introduction

OFTEN the details of new media get lost in an alphabet soup that usually begins with an “i” - the iPod, the iPad, the iTouch - but new media also includes URLs, YouTube, and so on. Yet the essence of new media is not *in* these devices, but in their *use*. Thus I intend this short book to be a primer on how to *think* about new media.

I emphasize “think” because this book isn't about technique. You won't learn best practices for Facebook or Twitter. Surely by the time the ink even dries on this page a new generation of devices and web applets will be available. So, I focus on the deeper issues of communicating in a user-generated era. My hope is for engineers to design rich new media entities that revolutionize how they communicate with the public and that attract the next generation of engineers.

To do this, engineers need to grasp the mindset of new media and to understand the underlying changes in the media landscape that will outlast the latest social networking tools. I carefully separate two related but independent questions. First, what *exactly* is new media? Second, regardless of the medium, *what* should engineers communicate to the public? Thus, chapters two and three serve as a quick guide to understanding the Web 2.0

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landscape; the fourth chapter addresses at length what engineers should be telling the public. The “what” doesn't depend on whether we tweet in the blog-o-sphere or make good old-fashioned television shows - although eventually the impact may differ a great deal between the two approaches. Clearly, future growth lies in new media.

Thus, I hope this book encourages practicing engineers to develop new, powerful ways to reach the public and to help them understand what engineers do and why engineering is important. I hope that educators - both classroom teachers and engineers educating informally - use the ideas here to create the next generation of innovative engineers.

A generation ago, Marshall McLuhan famously said, “The medium is the message.” Never has this been more true than today. While someone of my age may look at a YouTube video as a novelty, to a younger person it is *the* way to communicate. America's youngest generation expects to get their information from content-rich social media. As Clay Shirky has pointed out, new communication tools become socially interesting when they become technologically boring. For young people today, the new social tools are beyond normal: they are heading to ubiquitous and will likely be invisible soon.¹ The engineering profession needs to have a meaningful presence in Web 2.0 before invisibility fully arrives, otherwise our use of the medium will appear ham-handed and graceless.

With this book, I hope, perhaps immodestly, to prevent such an outcome.

¹Shirky, Clay, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).