

Facebook: social or marketing media? (book Review: The Facebook Era by Clara Shih)

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Facebook is now much more than the world's biggest social networking site, it is a significant platform in its own right. There are alternative ways to create social networks or to market a product, person or cause, but few deliver in the way that Facebook does.



Clara Shih

This is partly because of one of the paradoxes of the Internet. While it creates much greater production diversity with gazillions of professional and amateur sources of content, the aggregation and dissemination of all that stuff is increasingly mediated through a few search engines (mainly Google), social networking sites (especially Facebook in the US and UK) and media organisations (Eg the BBC). This does not worry [Clara Shih](#).

Clara made her career thanks to Facebook as creator of the marketing application [Faceconnector](#) (formerly Faceforce) which has opened up a plethora of ways to make money via Facebook. So you won't be surprised to hear that her new book [The Facebook Era](#) is a paean of praise to social enterprise software design and its wider possibilities.

This is a very clearly written manual to 'tapping online social networks to build better products, reach new audiences and sell more stuff.' So why, dear journalism person, should you read it? Well, put simply, (and Shih has a gift for doing just that), this is exactly what journalism should be doing right now as it seeks to build a new business model for a networked world.

I have already [written at length](#) about how journalism is no longer a product but a process. It is not a manufacturing industry anymore, it is a service. And as I have [said](#), it must now find ways to be part of other networks rather than simply create online spaces of its own. This is truly [Networked Journalism](#). This book helps.

Facebook Era explains why online networks are more powerful than conventional media. Participants invest social capital in networks and the benefits accrue over time. As they become more sophisticated and transparent they are more trusted than conventional media, too. Shih is good at showing how people use Facebook in different ways. Some want 'clique' relationships, others want 'professional' interactions. Anyone who tries to use the platform to reach those people must understand the different ways that users obtain value and entertainment from the process.

So for the first 50 odd pages this is a useful primer for anyone seeking a more nuanced, calm and positive analysis of social networking and the rewards of reciprocity that it can bring. After that it turns into a rather more hard-nosed sales manual. And Shih rather skates over concerns about issues such as privacy or Facebook's disastrous attempts to monetise the network in crude ways.

In the end we have to remember that Facebook has not taken over the world. There are still significant doubts about the recent redesign. Like a lot of new media big beasts it entered the jungle only a few years ago, and could fall victim to a new predator or innovation at any moment. Who knows where public inclinations will veer next? Those who live by the meme may die by it.

But I am convinced that social networking, as opposed to simply being online, is the future for news. This book may help those people who call themselves journalists to understand how they can be where the public has gone.

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