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Being social, going global

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ABSTRACT

This critical review compares two books that predict the future of global connectivity: *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations, and Businesses* (Knopf, 2013, 336 pages) and *Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection* (W.W. Norton, 2013, 312 pages). The reviewer contrasts the pragmatic approach of *The New Digital Age*, which describes the current reality of political connection, and the more idealistic *Rewire*, which calls individuals to embrace global connectivity for the sake of innovation. The reviewer determines that both perspectives offer an essential reminder to communications professionals: unprecedented opportunities and challenges will arise as more of the world's population comes online

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How widely do we socialize in this era of social media? Most people move within digital networks that are more or less known: the personal spaces where we share with family and friends or the professional networks where we seek to grow businesses. Yet our potential networks are much larger: already two billion people use the internet with a possible five billion more on the way. Two new books look at connectivity in this wider, sometimes overwhelming, global context and ask, to what degree do we – and should we – interact with the rest of the world online?

The New Digital Age (2013) by Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen and *Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection* (2013) by Ethan Zuckerman both present descriptions of our current connected lives and offer predictions into our future. The two books, though complementary, approach global connectivity from different perspectives. Schmidt, executive chairman of Google and Cohen, a foreign policy expert and director of Google Ideas, offer high-level predictions on the future of selves, identity, citizenship, reporting, states, revolution,

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terrorism, conflict and reconstruction. Looking into the future of *The New Digital Age* is like gazing into a spinning, mesmerizing crystal ball. The predictions of *Rewire*, meanwhile, could be compared to a focused palm reading. Zuckerman, director of MIT's Center for Civic Media, traces our current lines of digital connectivity, diagnoses the problem of our insular networks and prescribes ways to "rewire" our internet relationships for the benefit of society.

In *The New Digital Age*, Schmidt and Cohen describe connectivity at the level of global politics. The book's strength lies in the authors' access to power: they interview former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger, Wikileaks founder Julian Assange and a host of current and former heads of state. With fascinating anecdotes from Afghani jails, Egyptian telecom companies and Iraqi battlefields, the authors outline the many ways in which countries are and will be connected. For example, as cyber-terrorism creeps across boundaries, countries will continue to team up and track down criminals who, like everyone else, will become more traceable through their data trails. Schmidt and Cohen also predict the balkanization of the Internet, where autocracies limit internet service for citizens—even across state lines. For example a closed Sunni internet may emerge that offers approved content for residents of Persian gulf states. The authors also see more connection occurring between diaspora communities and their homelands, which may aid reconstruction in post-conflict situations. They describe how after the 2010 Haiti earthquake, thousands of Haitian-Americans provided Creole-to-English translation on Ushahidi disaster mapping platforms, thus helping locals who were displaced or even trapped.

After providing such fascinating, wide-ranging descriptions, the closest Schmidt and Cohen come to a conclusion is this: technology complicates almost every aspect of human behaviour. These descriptions do not naturally culminate into a clear imperative about our connected lives. They do acknowledge that with the guiding hand of humans, technology can bring positive change. They argue that "the case for optimism lies not in sci-fi gadgets or holograms but in the check that technology and connectivity bring against the abuses, suffering and destruction in our world" ("Conclusion" para. 1). Schmidt and Cohen end their book by hoping that the spread of the internet will better society, as individuals learn how to leverage connectivity to address local challenges. This is a fine hope, though vague—a version of the Google corporate motto "don't be evil," reframed as a hope for the future of the internet, that it "won't be evil."

The New Digital Age doesn't prescribe how citizens can create a better society through their personal choices on the internet. Schmidt and Cohen are

understandably more interested in describing how individuals are connected as political actors, engaging with the state as voters, protestors, or terrorists. When it comes to examining how individuals function as consumers or creators the book rings hollow. The first chapter, "Our Future Selves," offers a utopian vision replete with driverless cars, electronic pills and mattresses that rouse sleepers at the perfect moment after an REM cycle – a life they acknowledge would only be available to the affluent.

Yet it is this personal side of digital life that is at the heart of Zuckerman's argument. In *Rewire* he makes a compelling case that our digital experiences are unnecessarily narrow as internet users tend towards "homophily" – being with people like themselves. Zuckerman describes how this plays out in our online communities and news consumption patterns. He speaks from experience as a media researcher and activist for global connectivity – in fact he co-founded *Global Voices*, a blogging community that translates and shares news from around the world, especially under-reported regions. Zuckerman argues that despite the fact that we have so much potential to connect widely online, our worlds are getting smaller: not only is our consumption of international news declining, but social media has made us more parochial. There are several complex reasons for this problem, including major changes to the news industry, the Internet trend of personal customization and what Zuckerman calls "the caring problem": it's hard to get people interested in topics that are foreign to them.

For Zuckerman, the goal is to have users adopt a mindset of "digital cosmopolitanism." Borrowing from Ghanaian-American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, Zuckerman defines this as not only taking an interest in others but also acting on an obligation to help them. This, for him, is a social imperative: global awareness and interaction is both culturally fruitful and necessary because it helps understand and solve the mysteries of our connected world. To achieve this ideal, Zuckerman suggests that users and institutions must "rewire" by embracing translation in languages other than English, celebrating bridge figures and rediscovering serendipity.

This is a compelling vision, but Zuckerman's challenge is describing why digital cosmopolitanism is in fact a reasonable goal when it is such a hard sell: why would users make virtuous internet choices when they could watch a cute cat video? Zuckerman does show some benefits of global cross-pollination, first from the art world. Two examples are Picasso's game-changing encounter with Côte d'Ivoire masks that led to his productive African period and Paul Simon's collaboration with South African musicians for the seminal album *Graceland*. In his final chapter, "The Connected Shall Inherit,"

Zuckerman describes how businesses benefit from digital cosmopolitanism. His argument for the power of bridge figures is particularly strong here, as he shows how immigrants and citizens with experience in multiple cultures often thrive in bringing innovation and connecting to new global markets – an argument that Schmidt and Cohen also advance. Zuckerman cites the success of Indra Nooyi, the Indian CEO of Pepsi and Muhtar Kent, Turkish-American CEO of Coca-Cola. This section is a welcome grounding of Zuckerman’s concept of digital cosmopolitanism. It pulls the concept down from an unattainable ideal to a desirable and rewarding mindset for businesses as they make decisions around innovation and research.

As our connected society explores the potential of a social internet, it seems that popular discourse is saturated with tactical top-ten lists and attempts at strategic approaches. Yet it profits all users to look up from managing our current networks to consider the broader context offered by these two books. Both challenge us to consider the global possibilities of social media: to whom are we in fact connected? To whom should we be connected? With its broad scope, *The New Digital Age* may be a good first read that sets a framework in which to hang the more focused *Rewire* – though the two books do exist in some tension. If they were in dialogue, the pragmatic Schmidt and Cohen might challenge Zuckerman about whether his vision of digital cosmopolitanism is realistic. In response, Zuckerman might challenge Schmidt and Cohen to be braver in defining the potential of the internet and setting steps towards achieving it. However, the books are complementary and ultimately edifying: communicators and executives would do well to consider what global vision is implicit in their social media engagement and how this might need to change – especially as we will soon be joined by billions.

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