

whereupon she and Evan discovered that the Sidekick was now in the hands of a teen-ager from Queens, who was using it to take photographs of herself and her friends.

When Evan e-mailed the teen-ager, Sasha, asking for the phone back, she replied that his “white ass” didn’t deserve to have it back. Miffed, he set up a Web page with her picture and a description of what had happened. He forwarded the link to his friends, and they forwarded it to their friends. Someone found the MySpace page of Sasha’s boyfriend, and a link to it found its way onto the site. Someone found her address online and took a video of her home while driving by; Evan posted the video on the site. The story was picked up by the news filter Digg. Evan was now up to ten e-mails a minute. He created a bulletin board for his readers to share their stories, but it crashed under the weight of responses. Evan and Ivanna went to the police, but the police filed the report under “lost,” rather than “stolen,” which essentially closed the case. “By this point millions of readers were watching,” Shirky writes, “and dozens of mainstream news outlets had covered the story.” Bowing to the pressure, the N.Y.P.D. reclassified the item as “stolen.” Sasha was arrested, and Evan got his friend’s Sidekick back.

Shirky’s argument is that this is the kind of thing that could never have happened in the pre-Internet age—and he’s right. Evan could never have tracked down Sasha. The story of the Sidekick would never have been publicized. An army of people could never have been assembled to wage this fight. The police wouldn’t have bowed to the pressure of a lone person who had misplaced something as trivial as a cell phone. The story, to Shirky, illustrates “the ease and speed with which a group can be mobilized for the right kind of cause” in the Internet age.

Shirky considers this model of activism an upgrade. But it is simply a form of organizing which favors the weak-tie connections that give us access to information over the strong-tie connections that help us persevere in the face of danger. It shifts our energies from organizations that promote strategic and disciplined activity and toward those which promote resilience and adaptability. It makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact. The instruments of social media are well suited to making the existing social order more efficient. They are not a natural enemy of the status quo. If you are of the opinion that all the world needs is a little buffing around the edges, this should not trouble you. But if you think that there are still lunch counters out there that need integrating it ought to give you pause.

Shirky ends the story of the lost Sidekick by asking, portentously, “What happens next?”—no doubt imagining future waves of digital protesters. But he has already answered the question. What happens next is more of the same. A networked, weak-tie world is good at things like helping Wall Streeters get phones back from teen-age girls. *Viva la revolución.*

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Rhetorical Questions for Readers: Responding to Gladwell

The questions that follow help you make conscious what you do when you read rhetorically. A student has answered each question based on her reading of the Gladwell article. You may answer them differently; this is simply an example.

What do you predict about the text’s central argument as you begin to read? What do you think the author wants you to take away after reading the text?

Community is something that happens face to face, as people know and respect one another to stand together. Twitter and other social network sites don’t provoke that kind of mutual responsibility.

What specific material can you point to—literally, put your finger on in the text—that is evidence for your hypothesized central argument or main idea

The examples from the early civil rights movement are in the first three paragraphs. The Moldova example shows how technology was wrongly seen as responsible for the revolution there.

If someone were to ask you how this evidence supports the article’s central claim, what would you say?

The movement was successful, and it still produces resounding effects. Something else, not the easy availability of information afforded by networks like Twitter, must be responsible for this kind of social action for justice.

What is the tone of the text? That is, what do you think is the author’s attitude toward the subject matter he or she is writing about? How do you respond to it?

Gladwell is definite, maybe even defiant, about his position, which runs counter to what some claim about the wonders of the new technology where instant communication is possible. If I’m a reader who likes Twitter, I might be skeptical.

What specific evidence can you point to that supports your hypothesized tone?

His use of phrases like “we are told,” as he calls into question the importance of instant message in the revolution in Moldova, carries a message that suggests the media’s belief in technology is suspicious. He asks questions that put the Internet in its place: “Why does it matter who is eating whose lunch on the Internet?”

Does the author or speaker strike you as credible? Does he or she strike you as a person who is knowledgeable and who has his or her readers’ best interests in mind?

He may not be in line with popular culture or popular ideas, but his facts seem straight and his voice clear.