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## CHANGE AGENTS ACTING VIRAL

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**Abstract:** *In a world of technology, of fast access to almost any kind of information and, virtually, to anyone, one may say that change is an easy thing to do... Yet, if we take a closer look to the struggle that some organizations are doing in order to generate change we'll observe that in this new environment of high competition for resources the necessity of generating high level of trust and a viral spread of your message is vital in order to succeed. In an era of technology that is empowering the well connected ones (Zinnbauer, 2007), just a good cause and good work are not enough anymore.*

*This article is a case study about the use of social networks, especially online social-networks, by one of the largest philanthropic organization in the world in order to generate trust, greater awareness and bigger funds for their humanitarian: their fighting to eradicate poliomyelitis in the world.*

**Keywords:** *Trust, Online-networks, Social-capital, Brand Ambassadors.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Poliomyelitis, or simply put: polio is a devastating, potentially fatal disease that cripples infested children, mainly under the age of five, in Asia and Africa. The paralysis can appear within hours from the infection and it is, in most cases, irreversible. Historically, polio has been the greatest cause of disability.

Researches about polio accelerated in 1916, after the polio epidemic in New-York, USA, first vaccine being developed in 1954 and in 1961 being developed the Oral Polio Vaccine (OPV) by Dr. Albert Sabin – which rapidly becomes the vaccine of choice for most national immunization programs in the world.

World health organization's start fighting with the virus and Rotary International join them for the first time in 1979 when Rotary

clubs take on a project to buy and help deliver polio vaccine to more than six million children in the Philippines. In 1985, Rotary International launches "Polio Plus", the first and largest internationally coordinated private-sector support of a public health initiative, with an initial pledge of US\$120 million. In almost 28 years, Rotary International spend more than one billion of US Dollars and help immunize more than 2.5 billion children, reduces the polio world-wide cases from more than 350.000 from 125 countries in 1988 to 223 cases from 3 countries in 2013.

The fight to end polio, under the umbrella of Global Polio Eradication Initiative, includes Rotary International, UNICEF, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and governments of

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the world, with the support of many others around the globe; but the “war” is not ready yet, so Rotary International launches, what they called, “the world’s biggest commercial” in order to get trust and power over the internet (Zinnbauer, 2007).

## **2. TRUST EQUAL MONEY**

Estimations of World Health Organization are showing that stopping the anti-polio vaccine campaign without complete eradication of the disease, in a decade from now more than 200.000 children / year can suffer from paralysis. Continuing the vaccine campaign means money. A lot of money!

In order to reach any kind of objective that include spending money, either you’re a company or a philanthropic organization (like, in our case, Rotary International) you need to get/raise those money. In order to raise any amount of money you need to have a good story (“way are you doing this for?”), access to the money sources (in this case: the donors) and beneficiate by a great amount of trust.

But way all of this and how those three elements are working together to generate funds?

Sociologists and economists are all recognising the dependency between social capital and wealth (Grootaert, 1998, Putnam, 193, Robinson, 1999, Zak and Knack, 2001) which means that the bigger the social capital, the bigger are the chances to have access to bigger funds.

Studies about social capital, respectively social network as part of social capital, have been developed since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, if we consider Comte or Durkheim, but it is Moreno (Moreno, 1934) who pinpointed a way of making this abstract tangible.

Developing and successfully using the social network means to rationalise (Parsons, 1951) the necessity of networking (Blau, 1972).

Social networks (that are generating trust – as in social capital) are working as a economic lubricant generating lower transactional costs, new ways of collaborating and business opportunities – prosperity, in general

(Fukuyama, 1996), but it needs a sustainable effort in order to “establish or reproducing social networks that are going to be used on long term” (Bourdieu, 1985).

The same rule of the “weak ties” that Granovetter (Granovetter, 1973) developed to explain how people find a job applies to organizations when came to raise funds for their activities, perform better, solve a task faster, find volunteers to involve and so on.

Rotary International may be the biggest philanthropic organization in the world, but if it wants to reach its goals, it need go out of its close network and spread its message: this is the way “the world’s biggest commercial” came to life!

The explanation to success of this campaign stays in the power of the network system (Uzzi and Dunlap, 2005). Networks seem to deliver three unique advantages: private information, access to diverse skill sets and power.

When taking a decision we are using two different type of information: public and private. As public information is at a click away from everyone – meaning that it is easily available from various sources – it gives, precisely because of its easiness to get character, significantly less competitive advantages in today’s “battlefields” than the private information.

Private information is, in the same time, more subjective than the public information because it is not verified, validated by an independent party. This means that the value of private information is in close connection with the amount of trust existing in the network of relationship. (Uzzi and Dunlap, 2005) Trust allow partners to concentrate on getting tasks done because it acts as a “screening-off device in relation to the risk and dangers in the surrounding settings of action and interaction”, a sort of “protective cocoon”. (Giddens, 1991) Trust it is not in information itself or into the technology that it delivers it, but it is into the individual that is delivering it. (Fukuyama, 1996, Sztompka, 1999)

Networks give access to the other connections set of skills. Success is close to be



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granted to those having the ability to transcend this limitation through others. This advantage offered by a network is in fact an exceptionally valuable resource.

Power is huge advantage offered by a correct developed network. A strongly clustered network is less valuable than a network made up from a wide range of clusters, due the strong relation between the individuals (Ilut, 1997). When an individual is linked in a limited or, extremely, only one cluster, he/she is in fact into a "family network" in Granovetter perspective.

According to the "Six Degree of Separation" principle (Milgram, 1967) everyone's contacts are as valuable as it can help him/her to reach an individual outside his/her network in as less possible steps. So, the wider the network, the easier is to reach a bigger amount of people in fewer steps.

Rotary tried, and succeeded, to use its network like leverage: it uses one/more connection(s) from inside the network to get individuals from outside the network to hear their message, to get support and resources from another part of the network. This involves a big amount of generating trust and a great capacity of crossing through a big number of clustered networks (Blau, 1972, Grootaert, 1998, Putnam, 1993, Zak, 2001).

Researchers have recently underline the importance of Internet-based linkages for the formation of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973), which serve as the foundation of bridging social capital (Putnam, 1993). Online relationships are supported by technologies like distribution lists, photo directories, and search capabilities (Vieweg, 2008), so new forms of social capital and relationship building will occur in online social network

sites.

Studies are suggesting that the development of social capital into the online principally benefits those already privileged (Zinnbauer 2007), which may be the case of Facebook – the bigger social capital one's have, the bigger the chances are to have more friends and fans.

As the connection between social capital / networking and wealth is no longer questioned, this case study will try to answer another key question: how to raise the wealth through social capital?

### 3. FIGHTING VIRAL WITH THE VIRUS

Rotary International decided to initiate a huge viral campaign over the internet, in order to reach as many people as possible. The only goal of the campaign: to raise funds for the End Polio Project.

The main chosen channel was the Facebook network, as the biggest worldwide online social network.

Facebook statistics by continents			
#	Continent	Users	Penetration
1	Asia	276.031.440	6.81%
2	Europe	250.355.240	30.25%
3	North America	235.381.240	43.59%
4	South America	150.463.640	37.94%
5	Africa	52.047.640	5.11%
6	Oceania	14.521.080	39.18%

Largest Countries on Facebook		
1	United States	159.710.480
2	Brazil	70.411.620
3	India	63.868.420
4	Indonesia	48.191.160
5	Mexico	41.954.140
6	Turkey	32.817.160
7	United Kingdom	31.171.400

8	Philippines	30.565.500
9	France	25.398.580
10	Germany	25.041.020

Tab. 1 & 2. Facebook statistics.

Source: <http://www.socialbakers.com>

As it can be easily seen in the statistics of the United States of America, (Fig. 1) Facebook has a vast majority (round 80%) of its members aged 18 to 54 – exactly the “active” members of a society.

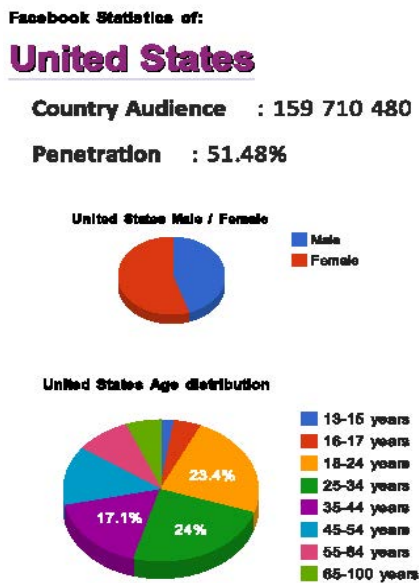


Fig.1. USA Facebook audience.

Bridging and linking social capital can eliminate poorness from communities (Szreter & Woolcock 2004), being strong social empowerment instruments (Woolcock 2001). By using Facebook’s friends of friends networks the “world’s biggest commercial” is generating bridging and linking connections (Woolcock 1998), which can provide access to wide informational support (Granovetter 1982).

The campaign started on Facebook was named “This Close” and is meant to show people around the world that the humanity is extremely close to eradicate for good one of the most terrifying disease: polio. One special application was created for Facebook so the users, fans of Rotary International Facebook page, could take and upload a picture with

them self indicating a “space” between the left hand thumb and the index finger, picture that was further used to apply the message “We are *this close* to end polio” – with “*this close*” text being shown into that “space” between the left hand thumb and the index finger. That picture, with the Rotary International sign on it, could have been send later to friends on Facebook to promote the message. The campaign was promoted as shown in fig. 2.



Fig.2 Promoting “This Close” campaign.

Intuitively or not, Rotary International somehow knew the Zinnbauer law about benefits those already privileged (2007) so they assured themselves to have as many “privileged” supporters with them; so they convinced to join the campaign “brand ambassadors” like, beside many others, Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan, Jackie Chan, Ziggy Marley, Bill Gates or, the most rated star of the moment: Psy. (fig. 3)



Fig.3. Brand Ambassadors of “This Close”



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Fig.3. Brand Ambassadors of "This Close"

As trust is not in information itself or into the technology that it delivers it, but it is into the individual that is delivering it (Fukuyama, 1996, Sztompka, 1999) those public figures comes to offer trust and add value to the network of relationship that Rotary build online. (Uzzi and Dunlap, 2005)

By gathering around them highly known "brand ambassadors", Rotary managed by "likes" and "shares" they received online to reach millions of other people, which is, potentially, a huge financial success for the project.

A business-like Rotary analysis shown that from the number of people that find out about polio, round 8% are offering a donation at an average of 25 USD per person. (Information on: [www.endpolio.org](http://www.endpolio.org))

So, this the way I found out that for Rotary International, by giving them access to my network of connection on Facebook, my network worth (potentially) 836 USD. (Fig. 4)



Fig.4. Facebook connections (potential) value.  
**4. CONCLUSIONS**

Global Polio Eradication Initiative is one of the largest public-private initiatives of its kind that succeeded to save millions of children's lives and save millions from paralysis. The cost of a single vaccine is USD 0.60 yet, the total cost is huge. Rotary International, on its own, invested more than one billion USD since 1985; and this represent just round 14% of the total amount spend to eradicate polio.

Global Polio Eradication Initiative and Rotary's International work is a "by the book" example of how the power of network was used in the attempt to reach a great objective.

"The world's biggest commercial" is a masterpiece of getting trust and power through internet the social networks (Uzzi and Dunlap, 2005) by communicating "viral" and motivating people to involve and using the resources of each member in a way that created the most privileged campaign (Zinnbauer, 2007).

Polio is still out there and, even if it looks like being so little to do until definitely eradicating it, a heavy work it still need to be done. And the major challenge is not represented by money! No, this can be solved, as had already been done. The major challenge that Global Polio Eradication Initiative is now



facing is the poorness (if not total lack) of connections, as in network, into the three remaining countries with polio cases: Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan – countries devastated by wars, with totalitarian leaders and low level of trust.

Succeeding to create strong connections into those three countries and keeping good and functional relations into the rest of them is the real key in eradicating polio and generate prosperity. (Fukuyama, 1996)

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