

How the Internet Has Changed Everyday Life

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Illustration
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Zaryn Dentzel is the founder and CEO of Tuenti, a Spanish tech company centered on mobile communications whose multi-platform integrates the best of instant messaging and the most private and secure social network. Also a member of the cabinet of advisors to Crown Prince Felipe for the Principe de Girona Foundation, Dentzel is involved in promoting education and entrepreneurship among young people in Spain. He studied at UC Santa Barbara and Occidental College, graduating with a degree in Spanish Literature, and Diplomacy and World Affairs.

Sites and services that have changed my life

tuenti.com

techcrunch.com

spotify.com

Kinect Training

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What Happened?

The Internet has turned our existence upside down. It has revolutionized communications, to the extent that it is now our preferred medium of everyday communication. In almost everything we do, we use the Internet. Ordering a pizza, buying a television, sharing a moment with a friend, sending a picture over instant messaging. Before the Internet, if you wanted to keep up with the news, you had to walk down to the newsstand when it opened in the morning and buy a local edition reporting what had happened the previous day. But today a click or two is enough to read your local paper and any news source from anywhere in the world, updated up to the minute.

The Internet itself has been transformed. In its early days—which from a historical perspective are still relatively recent—it was a static network designed to shuttle a small freight of bytes or a short message between two terminals; it was a repository of information where content was published and maintained only by expert coders. Today, however, immense quantities of information are uploaded and downloaded over this electronic leviathan, and the content is very much our own, for now we are all commentators, publishers, and creators.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Internet widened in scope to encompass the IT capabilities of universities and research centers, and, later on, public entities, institutions, and private enterprises from around the world. The Internet underwent immense growth; it was no longer a state-controlled project, but the largest computer network in the world, comprising over 50,000 sub-networks, 4 million systems, and 70 million users.

The emergence of *web 2.0* in the first decade of the twenty-first century was itself a revolution in the short history of the Internet, fostering the rise of social media and other interactive, crowd-based communication tools.

The Internet was no longer concerned with information exchange alone: it was a sophisticated multidisciplinary tool enabling individuals to create content, communicate with one another, and even escape reality. Today, we

can send data from one end of the world to the other in a matter of seconds, make online presentations, live in parallel “game worlds,” and use pictures, video, sound, and text to share our real lives, our genuine identity. Personal stories go public; local issues become global.

The rise of the Internet has sparked a debate about how online communication affects social relationships. The Internet frees us from geographic fetters and brings us together in topic-based communities that are not tied down to any specific place. Ours is a networked, globalized society connected by new technologies. The Internet is the tool we use to interact with one another, and accordingly poses new challenges to privacy and security.

Information technologies have wrought fundamental change throughout society, driving it forward from the industrial age to the networked era. In our world, global information networks are vital infrastructure—but in what ways has this changed human relations? The Internet has changed business, education, government, healthcare, and even the ways in which we interact with our loved ones—it has become one of the key drivers of social evolution.

The changes in social communication are of particular significance. Although analogue tools still have their place in some sectors, new technologies are continuing to gain ground every day, transforming our communication practices and possibilities—particularly among younger people. The Internet has removed all communication barriers. Online, the conventional constraints of space and time disappear and there is a dizzyingly wide range of communicative possibilities. The impact of social media applications has triggered discussion of the “new communication democracy.”

The development of the Internet today is being shaped predominantly by instant, mobile communications. The mobile Internet is a fresh revolution. Comprehensive Internet connectivity via smartphones and tablets is leading to an increasingly mobile reality: we are not tied to any single specific device, and everything is in the cloud.

People no longer spend hours gazing at a computer screen after work or class; instead, they use their mobile devices to stay online everywhere, all the time.

Anyone failing to keep abreast of this radical change is losing out on an opportunity.

Communication Opportunities Created by the Internet

The Internet has become embedded in every aspect of our day-to-day lives, changing the way we interact with others. This insight struck me when I started out in the world of social media. I created my first social network in 2005, when I was finishing college in the United States—it had a political theme. I could already see that social media were on the verge of changing our way of communicating, helping us to share information by opening up a new channel that cuts across conventional ones.

That first attempt did not work out, but I learned from the experience. I get the feeling that in many countries failure is punished too harshly—but the fact is, the only surefire way of avoiding failure is to do nothing at all. I firmly believe that mistakes help you improve; getting it wrong teaches you how to get it right. Creativity, hard work, and a positive attitude will let you achieve any goal.

In 2006, after I moved to Spain, I created Tuenti. Tuenti (which, contrary to widespread belief, has nothing to do with the number 20; it is short for “tu entidad,” the Spanish for “your entity”) is a social communication platform for genuine friends. From the outset, the idea was to keep it simple, relevant, and private. That’s the key to its success.

I think the real value of social media is that you can stay in touch from moment to moment with the people who really matter to you. Social media let you share experiences and information; they get people and ideas in touch instantly, without frontiers. Camaraderie, friendship, and solidarity—social phenomena that have been around for as long as humanity itself—have been freed from the conventional restrictions of space and time and can now thrive in a rich variety of ways.

Out of all the plethora of communication opportunities that the Internet has opened up, I would highlight the emergence of social media and the

way they have intricately melded into our daily lives. Social media have changed our personal space, altering the way we interact with our loved ones, our friends, and our sexual partners; they have forced us to rethink even basic daily processes like studying and shopping; they have affected the economy by nurturing the business startup culture and electronic commerce; they have even given us new ways to form broad-based political movements.

The Internet and Education

The Internet has clearly impacted all levels of education by providing unbounded possibilities for learning. I believe the future of education is a networked future. People can use the Internet to create and share knowledge and develop new ways of teaching and learning that captivate and stimulate students' imagination at any time, anywhere, using any device. By connecting and empowering students and educators, we can speed up economic growth and enhance the well-being of society throughout the world. We should work together, over a network, to build the global learning society.

The network of networks is an inexhaustible source of information. What's more, the Internet has enabled users to move away from their former passive role as mere recipients of messages conveyed by conventional media to an active role, choosing what information to receive, how, and when. The information recipient even decides whether or not they want to stay informed.

We have moved on from scattergun mass communication to a pattern where the user proactively selects the information they need.

Students can work interactively with one another, unrestricted by physical or time constraints. Today, you can use the Internet to access libraries, encyclopedias, art galleries, news archives, and other information sources from anywhere in the world: I believe this is a key advantage in the education field. The web is a formidable resource for enhancing the process of building knowledge.

I also believe the Internet is a wonderful tool for learning and practicing other languages—this continues to be a critical issue in many countries, including Spain, and, in a globalized world, calls for special efforts to improve.

The Internet, in addition to its communicative purposes, has become a vital tool for exchanging knowledge and education; it is not just an information source, or a locus where results can be published, it is also a channel for cooperating with other people and groups who are working on related research topics.

The Internet and Privacy and Security

Another key issue surrounding Internet use is privacy. Internet users are becoming more sensitive to the insight that privacy is a must-have in our lives.

Privacy has risen near the top of the agenda in step with an increasing awareness of the implications of using social media. Much of the time, people started to use social media with no real idea of the dangers, and have wised up only through trial and error—sheer accident, snafus, and mistakes. Lately, inappropriate use of social media seems to hit the headlines every day. Celebrities posting inappropriate comments to their profiles, private pictures and tapes leaked to the Internet at large, companies displaying arrogance toward users, and even criminal activities involving private-data trafficking or social media exploitation.

All this shows that—contrary to what many people seem to have assumed—online security and privacy are critical, and, I believe, will become even more important going forward. And, although every user needs privacy, the issue is particularly sensitive for minors—despite attempts to raise their awareness, children still behave recklessly online.

I have always been highly concerned about privacy. On Tuenti, the default privacy setting on every user account is the highest available level of data protection. Only people the user has accepted as a “friend” can access their personal details, see their telephone number, or download their pictures.

This means that, by default, user information is not accessible to third parties. In addition, users are supported by procedures for reporting abuse. Any user can report a profile or photograph that is abusive, inappropriate, or violates the terms of use: action is taken immediately. Security and privacy queries are resolved within 24 hours.

We need to be aware that different Internet platforms provide widely different privacy experiences. Some of them are entirely open and public; no steps whatsoever are taken to protect personal information, and all profiles are indexable by Internet search engines.

On the other hand, I think the debate about whether social media use should be subject to an age requirement is somewhat pointless, given that most globally active platforms operate without age restrictions. The European regulatory framework is quite different from the United States and Asian codes. Companies based in Europe are bound by rigorous policies on privacy and underage use of social media. This can become a competitive drawback when the ground rules do not apply equally to all players—our American and Japanese competitors, for instance, are not required to place any kind of age constraint on access.

Outside the scope of what the industry or regulators can do, it is vital that users themselves look after the privacy of their data. I believe the information is the user's property, so the user is the only party entitled to control the collection, use, and disclosure of any information about him or herself. Some social networks seem to have forgotten this fact—they sell data, make it impossible to delete an account, or make it complex and difficult to manage one's privacy settings. Everything should be a lot simpler and more transparent.

Social networks should continue to devote intense efforts to developing self-regulation mechanisms and guidelines for this new environment of online coexistence to ensure that user information is safe: the Internet should be a space for freedom, but also for trust. The main way of ensuring that social media are used appropriately is awareness. But awareness and user education will be of little use unless it becomes an absolute requirement that the privacy of the individual is treated as a universal value.

The Internet and Culture

As in the sphere of education, the development of information and communication technologies and the wide-ranging effects of globalization are changing what we are, and the meaning of cultural identity. Ours is a complex world in which cultural flows across borders are always on the rise. The concepts of space, time, and distance are losing their conventional meanings. Cultural globalization is here, and a global movement of cultural processes and initiatives is underway.

Again, in the cultural arena, vast fields of opportunity open up thanks to online tools. The possibilities are multiplied for disseminating a proposal, an item of knowledge, or a work of art. Against those doomsayers who warn that the Internet is harming culture, I am radically optimistic. The Internet is bringing culture closer to more people, making it more easily and quickly accessible; it is also nurturing the rise of new forms of expression for art and the spread of knowledge. Some would say, in fact, that the Internet is not just a technology, but a cultural artifact in its own right.

In addition to its impact on culture itself, the Internet is enormously beneficial for innovation, which brings progress in all fields of endeavor—the creation of new goods, services, and ideas, the advance of knowledge and society, and increasing well-being.

The Internet and Personal Relationships

The Internet has also changed the way we interact with our family, friends, and life partners. Now everyone is connected to everyone else in a simpler, more accessible, and more immediate way; we can conduct part of our personal relationships using our laptops, smart phones, and tablets.

The benefits of always-online immediate availability are highly significant. I would find a long-distance relationship with my life partner or my family unthinkable without the communication tools that the network of networks provides me with. I'm living in Madrid, but I can stay close to my brother in

California. For me, that is the key plus of the Internet: keeping in touch with the people who really matter to me.

As we have seen, the Internet revolution is not just technological; it also operates at a personal level, and throughout the structure of society. The Internet makes it possible for an unlimited number of people to communicate with one another freely and easily, in an unrestricted way.

Just a century ago, this was unimaginable. An increasing number of couples come together, stay together, or break up with the aid—or even as a consequence—of social communication tools. There are even apps and social networks out there that are purposely designed to help people get together for sex.

Of course, when compared to face-to-face communication, online communication is severely limited in the sense impressions it can convey (an estimated 60 to 70 percent of human communication takes place nonverbally), which can lead to misunderstandings and embarrassing situations—no doubt quite a few relationships have floundered as a result. I think the key is to be genuine, honest, and real at all times, using all the social media tools and their many advantages. Let's just remember that a liar and a cheat online is a liar and a cheat offline too.

The Internet and Social and Political Activism

Even before the emergence of social media, pioneering experiments took place in the political sphere—like *Essembly*, a project I was involved in. We started to create a politically themed platform to encourage debate and provide a home for social and political causes; but the social networks that have later nurtured activism in a new way were not as yet in existence.

Research has shown that young people who voice their political opinions on the Internet are more inclined to take part in public affairs. The

better informed a citizen is, the more likely they will step into the polling booth, and the better they will express their political liberties. The Internet has proved to be a decisive communication tool in the latest election campaigns. It is thanks to the Internet that causes in the social, welfare, ideological, and political arenas have been spoken up for and have won the support of other citizens sharing those values—in many cases, with a real impact on government decision making.

The Internet and Consumer Trends

New technologies increase the speed of information transfer, and this opens up the possibility of “bespoke” shopping. The Internet offers an immense wealth of possibilities for buying content, news, and leisure products, and all sorts of advantages arise from e-commerce, which has become a major distribution channel for goods and services. You can book airline tickets, get a T-shirt from Australia, or buy food at an online grocery store. New applications support secure business transactions and create new commercial opportunities.

In this setting, it is the consumer who gains the upper hand, and the conventional rules and methods of distribution and marketing break down. Consumers’ access to information multiplies, and their reviews of their experience with various products and services take center stage. Access to product comparisons and rankings, user reviews and comments, and recommendations from bloggers with large followings have shaped a new scenario for consumer behavior, retail trade, and the economy in general.

The Internet and the Economy

The Internet is one of the key factors driving today’s economy. No one can afford to be left behind. Even in a tough macroeconomic framework, the Internet can foster growth, coupled with enhanced productivity and competitiveness.

The Internet provides opportunities for strengthening the economy: How should we tackle them? While Europe—and Spain specifically—are making

efforts to make the best possible use of the Internet, there are areas in which their approach needs to improve. Europe faces a major challenge, and risks serious failure if it lets the United States run ahead on its own. The European Commission, in its “Startup Manifesto,” suggests that the Old World be more entrepreneur-friendly—the proposal is backed by companies like Spotify and Tuenti. Europe lacks some of the necessary know-how. We need to improve in financial services and in data privacy, moving past the obsolete regulatory framework we now have and making a bid to achieve a well-connected continent with a single market for 4G mobile connections. We need to make it easier to hire talent outside each given country.

The use of e-commerce should be encouraged among small and medium-sized enterprises so that growth opportunities can be exploited more intensely. Following the global trend of the Internet, companies should internalize their online business. And much more emphasis should be placed on new technologies training in the academic and business spheres.

Modern life is global, and Spain is competing against every other country in the world. I do not believe in defeatism or victim culture. Optimism should not translate into callousness, but I sincerely believe that if you think creatively, if you find a different angle, if you innovate with a positive attitude and without fear of failure, then you can change things for the better. Spain needs to seize the moment to reinvent itself, grasping the opportunities offered up by the online world. We need to act, take decisions, avoid “paralysis through analysis.” I sometimes feel we are too inclined to navel-gazing: Spain shuts itself off, fascinated with its own contradictions and local issues, and loses its sense of perspective. Spain should open up to the outside, use the crisis as an opportunity to do things differently, in a new way—creating value, underlining its strengths, aspiring to be something more.

In the United States, for instance, diving headfirst into a personal Internet-related startup is regarded as perfectly normal. I’m glad to see that this entrepreneurial spirit is beginning to take hold here as well. I believe in working hard, showing perseverance, keeping your goals in view, surrounding yourself with talent, and taking risks. No risk, no success. We live in an increasingly globalized world: of course you can have a Spain-based Internet startup, there are no frontiers.

We need to take risks and keep one step ahead of the future. It is precisely the most disruptive innovations that require radical changes in approach and product, which might not even find a market yet ready for them—these are the areas providing real opportunities to continue being relevant, to move forward and “earn” the future, creating value and maintaining leadership. It is the disruptive changes that enable a business, product, or service to revolutionize the market—and, particularly in the technology sector, such changes are a necessity.

The Future of Social Communications, Innovation, Mobile Technologies, and Total Connectivity in Our Lives

The future of social communications will be shaped by an *always-online* culture. *Always online* is already here and will set the trend going forward. Total connectivity, the Internet you can take with you wherever you go, is growing unstoppably. There is no turning back for global digitalization.

Innovation is the driving force of growth and progress, so we need to shake up entrenched processes, products, services, and industries, so that all of us together—including established businesses, reacting to their emerging competitors—can move forward together.

Innovation is shaping and will continue to shape the future of social communications. It is already a reality that Internet connections are increasingly mobile. A survey we conducted in early 2013 in partnership with Ipsos found that 94 percent of Tuenti users aged 16 to 35 owned cell phones, 84 percent of users connected to the Internet using their phones, and 47 percent had mobile data subscriptions for connecting to the Internet. A total of 74 percent of users reported connecting to the Internet from their phone on a daily basis, while 84 percent did so at least weekly. Only 13 percent did not use their phones to connect to the Internet, and that percentage is decreasing every day.

Mobile Internet use alters the pattern of device usage; the hitherto familiar ways of accessing the Internet are changing too. The smartphone

activities taking up the most time (over three hours a day) include instant messaging (38%), social media use (35%), listening to music (24%), and web browsing (20%). The activities taking up the least time (under five minutes a day) are: SMS texting (51%), watching movies (43%), reading and writing e-mail (38%), and talking on the phone (32%). Things are still changing.

Smartphones are gaining ground in everyday life. Many of the purposes formerly served by other items now involve using our smartphones. Some 75 percent of young people reported having replaced their MP3 player with their phone, 74 percent use their phone as an alarm clock, 70 percent use it as their camera, and 67 percent use it as their watch.

We have been observing these shifts for a while, which is why we decided to reinvent ourselves by placing smartphones at the heart of our strategy. I want to use this example as a showcase of what is happening in the world of social communication and the Internet in general: mobile connectivity is bringing about a new revolution. Tuenti is no longer just a social network, and social media as a whole are becoming more than just websites. The new Tuenti provides native mobile apps for Android, iPhone, Blackberry, Windows Phone, as well as the Firefox OS app and the mobile version of the website, m.tuenti.com. Tuenti is now a cross-platform service that lets users connect with their friends and contacts from wherever they may be, using their device of choice. A user with a laptop can IM in real time with a user with a smartphone, and switch from one device to another without losing the thread of the conversation. The conversations are in the cloud, so data and contacts are preserved independently of the devices being used. This means the experience has to be made uniform across platforms, which sometimes involves paring down functionalities, given the processing and screen size limitations of mobile devices. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and so on are all evolving to become increasingly cross-platform experiences. But Tuenti is the first social network that has also developed its own Mobile Virtual Network Operator (MVNO)—the company is an Internet service provider over the mobile network. Tuenti is an MVNO with a social media angle, and this may be the future path of telecommunications.

Social media are evolving to become something more, and innovation must be their hallmark if they are to continue being relevant. Tuenti now

embraces both social communications and telecom services provision, offering value added by letting you use the mobile app free of charge and without using up your data traffic allowance, even if you have no credit on your prepaid card—this is wholly revolutionary in the telecom sector. The convergence of social media with more traditional sectors is already bringing about a new context for innovation, a new arena for the development and growth of the Internet.

Just about everything in the world of the Internet still lies ahead of us, and mobile communications as we know them must be reinvented by making them more digital. The future will be shaped by innovation converging with the impact of mobility. This applies not just to social media but to the Internet in general, particularly in the social communications field. I feel that many people do not understand what we are doing and have no idea of the potential development of companies like ours at the global level. Right now, there may be somebody out there, in some corner of the world, developing the tool that will turn the Internet upside down all over again. The tool that will alter our day-to-day life once more. Creating more opportunities, providing new benefits to individuals, bringing more individual and collective well-being. Just ten years ago, social media did not exist; in the next ten years, something else radically new will emerge. There are many areas in which products, processes, and services can be improved or created afresh. The future is brimming with opportunities, and the future of the Internet has only just begun.