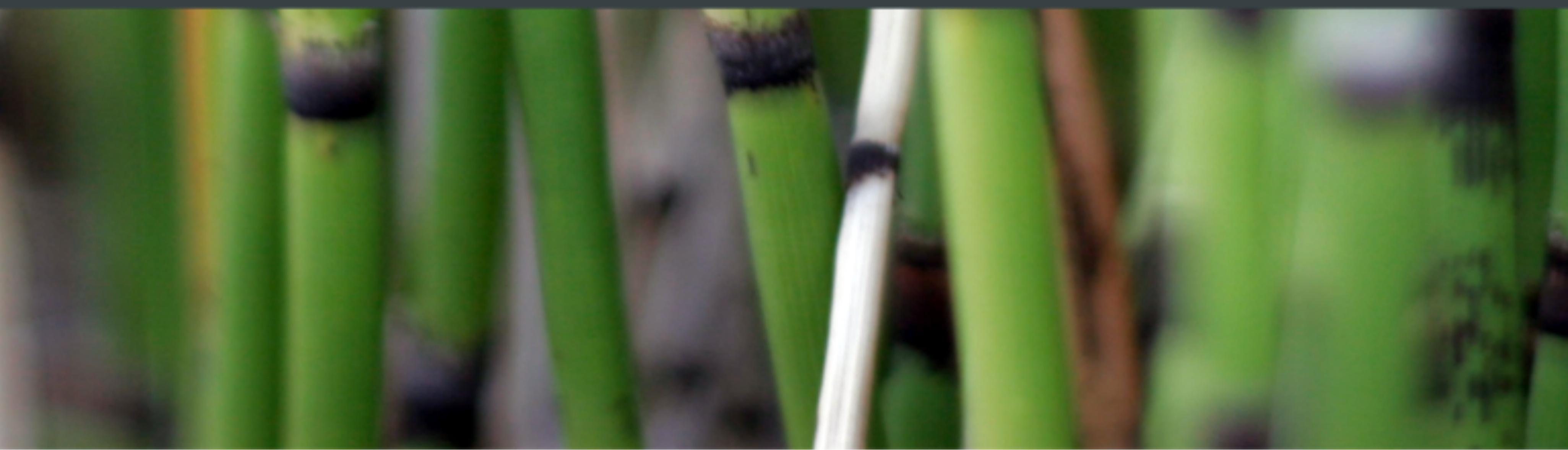




Zen and the Heart of Social Media

A small MediaSnackers publication offering clear and awakening insights into online practices and strategies



Cover image by [Jason Barnhart](#)

ZEN AND THE HEART OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Introduction

"What's new?" is an interesting and broadening eternal question, but one which, if pursued exclusively, results only in an endless parade of trivia and fashion, the silt of tomorrow.

I would like, instead, to be concerned with the question "what is best?", a question which cuts deeply rather than broadly, a question whose answers tend to move the silt downstream.

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Robert M. Pirsig pg.98

Sharing experience is the foundation of wisdom.

This book expands and explores the reasoning behind our approach as social media practitioners and zen adventurers.

Presented as a collection of mantras / insights / statements / principles / standards which have evolved through our experience of working with a cross-sector group of clients and which have their roots in a decade of online activity plus roles in the public & private sector.

In the last couple of years the social media space has become populated with so many consultants, agencies and individuals all offering guidance and advice.

This book simply describes our way.

Use it to evoke discussions.

As a review.

As a guide.

To inspire.

To start.

“Social media is about people”

This is the first principle of understanding this stuff.

Social media is created and used by people.

People who work in organisations. People who work in companies. People who work for themselves. People who make and break the rules. People who manage budgets. People who write strategies. People who manage people.

Without people social media is value-neutral.

It's a tool which provides a way of augmenting and embellishing current operations so they are quicker, cheaper, better.

For some organisations it's a set of services which provides a plethora of opportunities for their employees to develop skills, practices, transparency and trust. It also offers new ways to communicate with other people who are their clients, customers, members etc.

For others it's seen as a space that requires rules and governance to curtail use and access. Policies are created which block or filter any interactive sites, budgets are routed elsewhere and new ways of collaborating are never explored—it's email all the way.

Both approaches are still created by people though.

We encourage some of our clients to create internal development sessions like "social media Tuesdays" (it can be any day) : one lunchtime every month where everyone presents on a new platform they have found and discuss the possible benefits which could be gained.

Work with people and not the systems to sow the seeds of change.

“Playing is learning by stealth”

As children we learn via play.

It's essential to the educational process.

The older we get the less we play as a learning strategy. Why?

Social media is all about playing.

When we sign up to new platforms and explore these spaces we are again like a kid on a beach in a rock-pool, turning over every stone to see what wonders await.

Push those buttons on your friend's new camera to understand the benefit and value through experiencing the process.

Create a dummy account, to 'play' around and to discover all the features and functionalities of that platform. Then start again with a work account and do things with your newly acquired knowledge (or not as the platform might not be appropriate—you never know if you don't play).

Playing is good.

Playing is healthy.

Play with purpose.

Learn by stealth.

“It's not a mountain to climb but a wave to catch”

Many people fear social media.

They think it belongs to another generation—even though we are all digital immigrants.

Others think it undermines or devalues their approach and operations—even though it's a set of tools to augment and embellish what you currently do.

The only divide is attitudinal.

It's the perceived scale of the task: all this new technology, different websites, confusing semantics—it seems insurmountable.

Which is why we use the wave metaphor.

The online world is fluid, ever shifting with continuous momentum to help those already involved.

Waves are powerful things: fun, constant and sharable.

Even when it's choppy out there, storms pass.

Mountains rarely move.

We once had a youth worker on our training course that was based on a remote island. She couldn't see the benefits of social media, thought she was of the wrong generation to learn and had missed the boat of operating in these spaces.

At the end of the 2 days, she didn't use her isolation and age as an excuse, and also saw it as a huge opportunity to share examples of good practice with others on the mainland.

“A bad idea is one that's never shared”

What are the internal organisational processes for developing and aggregating ideas?

Does this only happen during certain company meetings or allocated time in the diaries?

We hope not.

Ideas need to be shared to grow.

If they remain in your head, they are never given life.

Encourage and cultivate a collaborative approach by moving away from email and / or Word—radical thinking for many places but we guarantee it's a step in the right direction.

Explore using wikis, department blogs, virtual timelines, shared google docs etc. all of which can be marked as private and worked on when inspiration takes hold.

On certain project with clients we create a shared wiki to reduce email traffic, share and test ideas, plus allow for everyone to contribute. There is no hierarchical process or time constraints to this approach plus all ideas are given equal weight and a chance to be heard.

“Strive to become expert students”

There are more and more people / agencies who claim to be social media experts.

However, no-one knows it all, and there is always more to learn.

Everyday we learn something new about online platforms and technology, and their potential application.

For any individual or organisation / company, it's not about becoming an expert : foster an environment of curiosity and embrace being life-long students.

We guarantee in this ever-evolving-web-world it will all change anyway.

A client who worked with socially phobic young people informed us how they could utilise instant messaging to get those individuals talking, then move to Skype to voice and then video chat, before finally arranging face to face meetings.

We had no idea that these platforms could be used in this way, and we have since added it to our examples in all our training courses.

“Echoes never tell you anything new”

There's a lot of repetition online.

People talking about the same things. Re-posting existing news and opinions then patting each other on the back for a job well done.

Be careful of the echo chamber.

Seek out fresh new territories.

Don't bother with the tweetup of social media fanboys / girls and gatecrash the plumbers AGM instead.

Frequently crop your followers, friends, mailing lists, RSS feeds for people who aren't offering anything fresh to the conversation.

Whilst working with a client who were receiving the same press releases and assets as other agencies, we advised them to delay posting the content immediately like everyone else. By waiting for the conversation and opinion of other recipients to surface our client could create new copy to reflect that public opinion. This gave a unique angle and voice on the same assets, compared to all the other agencies approach.

“The how is more important than the what”

When exploring case studies and project examples there is a tendency to focus on what was done.

This separates you from them. Provokes distance.

With a slight shift ask how it was done.

Why?

Because then you are discovering a model of delivery.

Models are good.

Models are transferable.

Find new models by asking how not what.

MediaSnackers created an online training course for young people in Papua New Guinea and Tonga, called **Pacific Youth**. Which explored media literacy, blogging, digital story telling, video and podcasting.

This is what we did.

More importantly this is the model of how it done:

We used online tools and platforms to deliver presentations, course content, communicate, evaluate and monitor the outcomes.

Without social media it would have cost us a lot of money, time and resources to travel and deliver this training, but we did all the above for free.

If you are inspired about what someone else has done online, ask the how question.

“Constraints liberate your imagination”

Haven't got the money to buy the latest HD video camera?

No cash to hire an agency to develop that flashy website for you?

Access blocked to YouTube or Flickr in your classroom?

Get creative!

Use the phones in your pockets.

Create fan pages or profile sites across several free platforms and link them all together.

Explore other video / image hosting options out there.

The breadth of social media ensures there are lots of ways to get things done.

In our **Proper Clever** project we created a mobile phone-voucher campaign to promote a play to young people in Liverpool. These vouchers cost nothing to create and to distribute out to a couple of existing youth groups using bluetooth. The receivers were encouraged to virally spread the vouchers to their friends using the same method.

Even though the run of the performance had already started we still had over 200 young people attend the theatre redeeming their voucher at the box office.

Constraints drive creativity and make the success more rewarding.

Paraphrased from "When I have something to work against, it liberates my imagination", Jørgen Leth.

“Circle Your Content”

Having your content on many social spaces is great, although if you don't create links back to your main website, people may never find you or understand the context about what they are seeing / reading / watching.

Build links from your YouTube channel back to your Twitter stream, from Flickr sets over to your YouTube profile, and from your SlideShare account to your FaceBook fan page.

To make the most of your social spaces, create paths for people as a guide.

For every training session we deliver a photo set is created on our [Flickr account](#). Each photo uploaded to that set has a full description and a link back to the relevant blog post. Keeping people in the 'loop' and enabling them to explore the story behind the image.

These link-backs help with our search engine optimisation as well—in other words, we climb higher up the google rankings.

“Free the power”

The guys at the top know stuff.

They know how the game is played and have the history of their experience to rely on.

The best leaders devolve power to make things happen because they also are aware there are always new ways to do what they have learned (usually at a fraction of the cost and in far less time).

It took 8 years to get from sub orbital flight to man on the moon and the team who did it had an average age of 26 (ref). They had no constraints of experience.

To emulate this, companies need to embrace the knowledge of all its staff.

Hewlett Packard and Microsoft are two companies which taps into the wisdom of the crowd by allowing internal blogs which enable ideas to flow between departments and up & down the hierarchy.

We've set up internal and private blogs to reproduce this and which is built on the understanding that a good idea is a good idea no matter where it comes from.

The people most at threat from this 'change' is middle management because they are the ones who are often the controllers of knowledge between the powers at the top of the company and workers at the coal face.

Challenge the system with the understanding new practices will arise and benefit the company as a whole.

This is the true value of social media internally and releasing power.

Ref. Peter Diamandis, TED talk

“Analysis Paralysis”

Some companies and many organisations—especially public sector ones—are slow moving beasts. The decades of bureaucratic operations and systems created in an attempt to be transparent and accountable, has ironically caused a bottleneck of idea-movement and implementation.

The size and structure of the company is effectively paralysing it from moving forward. You can change this by proving the benefit and value of social media use, with minimal or no impact on your current work.

Use RSS feeds to create different reports: detailing online brand mentions (or maybe the lack of response to them), the evolving industry / sector developments, and also specific project / product line coverage.

If the powers-that-be don't listen, or care more about retaining the status quo even after you've showed them how to save time and money, then maybe other organisations/companies would welcome an idea-rich individual like you...

“Focus on outcomes not output”

On Twitter? Have a Facebook fan page? Got a weblog? Have a channel on YouTube? blah blah blah...

With the greatest respect, so what!?!?

All output.

What's the outcome?

Nearly a third of mediasnackers.com traffic comes through our twitter streams. An actionable outcome from our output.

Our aim is to influence our audience by aiding their learning, thus changing behaviour and getting more people to come and check out our stuff.

The same analysis should be applied if you're using any social media channel : what is the return on investment in creating the content?

Challenge the assumption of being in these spaces and spending time creating digital content by first asking : what are the outcomes I am trying to achieve?

If your total output outweighs the outcome then there is an unhealthy balance. Although remember negative outcomes offer a good learning experience.

Monitor your spaces to determine which platforms will assist in achieving those aims.

“Inspiration creates lasting change”

Inspiring people is the hardest thing to do.

It's also the most impactful in terms of ensuring change.

Most organisations and companies still rely on big pay checks, heavily-scrutinised systems and tables of KPI's.

All good stuff but hardly inspiring. Where's the passion?

When was the last time your internal newsletter featured something which made the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end? Or made you laugh out loud or shed a tear?

Maybe you can create that change and share the next thing which makes your eyes wide with your colleagues.

In our training courses we always create an 'inspiration session' where we share videos which have very little to do with social media specifically, and everything to do with motivating people to be creative.

“Aim for better, not perfection”

If you're new to this then you're going to make mistakes.

You know that, right?

Here's a little secret—if you're open and honest in telling your audience you're new and exploring this stuff then mistakes won't matter that much.

Sounds obvious but you'll learn more this way and establish trust amongst your community.

Like most things which matter it's a slow-burn, a commitment of staying the course. There will always be new things to learn and people to help you on the way.

“You are the experts on you”

Why are you paying agencies loads of money to define who you are in these social spaces?

Social media is not something you outsource. It should be a built-in not bolt-on approach and part of your daily routine.

This is more authentic and financially sustainable.

We trained a client on how to represent themselves well on Twitter, who then outsourced the account to their existing PR agency. The agency tweeted on their behalf, but not very well and didn't understand the online etiquette of the space.

We advised the client to take back control of the account, once we illustrated there was no monitoring and response to the negative comments which started to appear.

Social media practice should enable you to share your workload, reduce email and save time. Time you can spend on being transparent online.

“Show don't tell”

Social media enables you to tell your story in dynamic ways, rather than just text.

Cater to as many senses as you can in your content by exploring the use of images, words, video and sound.

A client recently created a quick **video of photo responses** from young people in their area around a specific question. This was then presented in a meeting instead of the usual option of writing a report.

Using this approach, the process was quicker, easier to digest by others and demonstrated their new skillset.

“Direct your message don't spread it”

It's easier to find communities of interest with social media.

This enables you to direct your message not think about spreading it thin. Here's an example:

We were conversing with a leading online recruitment brand exploring helping them out with their social media strategy (they didn't have one and the board had requested a presentation on the topic).

After some initial discussions it went quiet.

We then shared the idea [on our blog](#) to illustrate the awesome power of social media in relation to finding new customers and with the hope to reignite the conversation.

The idea was simple, by typing "lost my job" into the Twitter search engine we could straight away find potential customers of their service.

Easily contactable, open and available for offers.

Here numbers don't count as much as the possible real-life connections you can make.

“Story tell to story sell”

Telling other people's story is great. It will give you that warm feeling inside to introduce your audience to someone doing good.

You don't want to be always talking about you.

They will tell their audience about being featured which in turn gives you exposure. This should make the smile grow.

From pull to push and back again.

The [MediaSnackers podcast](#) does exactly this. We get to chat to some interesting and great people doing some awesome things, and get to piggy back their audience when they listen to them.

“Real life has more bandwidth”

Don't get us wrong, we think social media is amazing.

Enabling us to reach out to the world, traverse so many boundaries, create new communities and tap into existing ones, have a global voice instantly, find help and information, collaborate with like-minded individuals... you get the idea.

However, nothing can beat the pressing of palms and being in the same room as people.

Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

The **MediaSnackers** team is made up of a half dozen social media ninjas. We all work remotely and stay in touch constantly through Skype, wikis and Google Docs as there's no central office. Although every few months we get together for real to work up ideas and develop our skills and services.

“To go forward look sideways”

How many industry journals do you read each month? Are you only reviewing that newspaper section which focuses on your sector? Do you always attend conferences related to your area of work?

There are always more examples of innovation outside your industry and sector than in it.

If you're working for a small charity then check out how Ford (yes the car manufacturers) are creating **social media press releases** and use it as a model in your own work.

In our training sessions with public sector workers we introduce ideas and case studies from the commercial sector.

During one of our early youth professionals training courses we introduced how commercial organisations were using instant messaging software to communicate about projects and keep in touch. However, one of the attendees shared how she would use chat, then Skype audio, then video, as transitional tools with socially phobic young people prior to meeting in the flesh. This is a great example of how models can transcend sectors.

There are multiple routes to your destination, allow yourself to explore and be inspired by what others are doing, which may reveal new pathways.

“Design from the actual rather than the perceived”

This is a big one.

Many clients contact us exploring assistance in writing a social media strategy. Here's our response:

START USING SOCIAL MEDIA.

OK, we're being glib. Forgive us.

Once you start using something you gain a crucial insight into the actual nuances of its function, its form, the limits, the possibilities, how adaptable it is / is not etc. Most of the times this is different to what you first thought and perceived. Think of it as field research.

Before April 2008 there was not one UK youth worker blogging. Just by talking about this issue, in the conferences and events that we speak at, someone took up that challenge with no prior experience and became the **first ever youth worker** to blog.

There was no strategy in place that inspired this, simply a need to explore new platforms to aid her work and professional development.

How can you possibly know what online platforms to use to use without actually testing them out first.

“Familiarity breeds content”

Your content is a reflection of you and your branding—define it, decide it and stick to it.

Most social spaces have a method of 'tagging', 'labeling' or adding useful search terms to the content you produce. These shouldn't be random. They should match the content and be consistent across your company, departments, communications, promotions and websites.

Why? So you not only make life easy for people internally but also externally. Once people outside your circle understand the tags they will use them if they feature or cover your work online, thus making it easier for you to track and join the conversation.

For **The Web Makes Me Feel** project, we used the acronym of 'twmmf' across all internal and external discussions, on or offline. This not only created an easy way of following conversations across all social spaces, but also set a benchmark for measuring the success of the campaign. Are you doing the same for all your projects/initiatives/campaigns?

“Process over product”

Nearly all of our clients focus every ounce of their energy and budget on the wrong part of the story.

All promotional material and marketing effort is pushing the product or service which is now available.

They spend huge amounts of time and energy attempting to spread a message of availability to as many people as possible, interrupting our viewing time, surfing habits, magazine browsing etc.

The model is backwards, upside down...

This is the end product.

The last piece of the puzzle.

Feature the whole story instead.

Engage your community by sharing the process and the moments which make up this journey.

For the promotion of this publication, we blogged about it, told existing clients via our monthly digest, kept people informed of its progress on Twitter, asked our community for contributions to the photography and made extracts available. All this added up to being more valuable for **MediaSnackers** in terms of promoting the project and kept the topic in the minds of our audience who will hopefully purchase it.

“Create conversation, not numbers”

In this networked age, numbers are easy to create simply by a click of a button.

Due to this, their value is being diluted.

What would you prefer: 20 engaged and receptive people rather than 15,000 who are not?

For a personal blog project about human movement, the articles were written based upon what people were interested in. This was done by monitoring the search terms of how people arrived at the site and content was created accordingly which naturally increased the readership of the site.

A simple reversal of thinking and approach, giving visitors what they want, and creates conversation online which keeps them coming back for more.

“It's called MySpace for a reason”

Clients used to say to us (when we first started this stuff three years ago) "we need to be on MySpace", we used to ask them why?

The idea around 'fishing where the fish are' is great if you don't care about killing fish.

People then and now still primarily use social spaces to stay in touch with their friends. Many are open to receive marketing messages or information on services although only through trusted sources.

We're not saying don't be there just be aware why other people are there.

Explore the spaces first as users before diving in as a marketer.

Be transparent and authentic about who you are and aim to build relationships through conversations not just fire out messages.

Yes it's more time consuming but the rewards are bigger.

Remember, churches are great places to sell bibles but you don't see any bible-salesman there for a reason.

Many of our clients start using Twitter like a traditional marketing channel—pushing out their press releases and never really engaging in conversations. They fail to realise brands and organisations can't tweet, people do (on their behalf). Don't be afraid to be human and let the world know who you are—you'll get more credibility and a deeper experience that way. We guarantee it.

*We're not just talking about MySpace here but all the social networking sites and forums which aggregate communities of interest.

“It's about what's best not what's new”

If you spend all your time on the latest blogs, exploring the newest platforms and social networks then where is the time to understand what are the best.

Please do continue to sign up for all the latest platforms which appear, explore their functionalities and offerings. Just don't neglect the ones which work for you.

"What's new?" is an interesting and broadening eternal question, but one which, if pursued exclusively, results only in an endless parade of trivia and fashion, the silt of tomorrow.

I would like, instead, to be concerned with the question "what is best?", a question which cuts deeply rather than broadly, a question whose answers tend to move the silt downstream.

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Robert M. Pirsig pg.98

This idea is taken from the opening quote in this book.

The spark that set this all off.

Closing the loop.

Afterword

ZEN AND THE HEART OF SOCIAL MEDIA is written by **MediaSnackers**, the go-to guys for companies and organisations who want to understand & effectively use social media.

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