

The ChangeThis Manifesto



Brian Solis

Sometimes it seems as though our disagreements over everything—from politics to business to the designated hitter rule—are more serious and more divisive than ever before.

People are making emotional, knee-jerk decisions, then standing by them, sometimes fighting to the death to defend their position.

And yet, we're optimists.

The team at ChangeThis are optimists because we don't believe it has to be this way. We don't believe humans evolved to be so bad at making decisions, so poor at changing our minds, so violent in arguing our point of view. We're well aware of how split our country and our world have become, but we don't think the current state of affairs is built into our very nature.

THE PROBLEM LIES IN THE MEDIA

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In the old days, we had the time and inclination to consider the implications of a decision. Everyone wasn't in quite so much of a hurry. At the same time, most conversations (and most arguments) were local ones, conducted between people who knew each other.

Today, it's very different. Television demands a sound bite. A one hundred word letter to the editor is a long one.

Radio has become a jingoistic wasteland, a series of thoughtless mantras, repeated over and over and designed to fit into a typical commute.

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Even magazines have lost their ability to present complex arguments that take more than a minute or two to digest. *BusinessWeek* would rather put another picture of Jack Welch or Bill Gates on the cover than actually teach its readers something new.

Obviously, this creates winners and losers. The winners are the media companies (that exist to sell ads and attract the maximum audience size) and the demagogues and fundamentalist leaders that gain in power when large numbers support them—regardless of the accuracy or usefulness of their position.

In the Internet (and especially blogging), we see the glimpse of an alternative. Taken over time, many of the best blogs create a thoughtful, useful argument that actually teaches readers something.

Alas, blogging is falling into the same trap as many other forms of media. The short form that works so well online attracts more readers than the long form. Worse, most blogs stake out an emotional position and then preach to the converted, as opposed to challenging people to think in a new way.

So we're launching ChangeThis. The bet?

We're betting that a significant portion of the population wants to hear thoughtful, rational, constructive arguments about important issues. We're certain that the best of these manifestos will spread, hand to hand, person to person, until these manifestos have reached a critical mass and actually changed the tone and substance of our debate.

So, are you an optimist? Do you believe that if we change the way ideas are communicated, we can challenge the fundamentalists?

Here's our challenge. When we find something your friends and colleagues need to read, will you pass it on?

WHAT'S A MANIFESTO?

ChangeThis doesn't publish e-books or manuscripts or manuals. Instead, we facilitate the spread of thoughtful arguments...arguments we call manifestos.

A manifesto is a five-, ten-, or twenty-page PDF file that makes a case. It outlines in careful, thoughtful language why you might want to think about an issue differently.

If we strike a chord, the manifesto will spread. You can email the manifesto to anyone you like, you can even post it on your website or print it out. A great manifesto says something you've wanted to say for a while, but does it eloquently and simply and saves you the trouble of writing it yourself.

Read it and pass it on.

HAVE YOU EVER CHANGED YOUR MIND?

Have you ever read something or heard something or seen something and felt the switch flip? Sometimes this happens if you're reading a particularly good business book (the way quality and excellence spread through our business culture.) Sometimes it occurs in a bar, in the middle of a thoughtful discussion about politics. Sometimes it just takes one photo on the cover of a magazine.

We're unique in our ability to consider thoughtful arguments and change long-held beliefs. This flexibility is at the core of our democratic ideals.

All too often, though, we're led to change our minds on the basis of charisma, not facts. People are so easily influenced by a charismatic leader, the kind of person we'd be eager to befriend, to have dinner with, to follow. We choose someone based on his personality and then do whatever he tells us to do.

It seems easier that way, and we all do it. We do it for the right boss or the right mate or the right political leader. We go to war or create a new product or move to Jonestown.

The problem, of course, is that in our electronic universe it's easier than ever for one charismatic demagogue to sway the opinions of millions of people—without resorting to rational thought, provable assertions or the longterm implications of their efforts.

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Television and the Internet haven't improved our ability to make rational decisions—to change our mind at the right time. They've made it worse. So what would happen if we used electronic media to return to the days of rational decision-making?

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS

1. ChangeThis releases manifestos. We share them with bloggers, with influential readers and with our subscribers.
2. If the manifestos strike a chord, they'll spread. If you don't feel moved, don't spread them. The bad ideas will just sit there. The good ones will move.
3. As the manifestos spread through our culture, they'll leave change in their wake. Changed minds are rare but powerful. The hope is that if we change enough minds, the project will be worth the effort.

WE'RE NOT PARTISANS

Partisan politics is the antithesis of what we're trying to do. Why? Because partisan politics starts with, "my party, right or wrong." We are quick to demonize companies or political parties or individuals. Government by party is too lumpy. If you agree with the Republicans on taxes but the Democrats on the environment, then what do you do?

We don't need more Democrats. And we don't need more Republicans. We need more patriots. We need more statesmen. We need more people who do what they truly believe is right, not what will help them with the party leadership.

Same thing is true in our work life. It's so easy for CEOs to embrace the flavor of the day, to stick with the pack, to keep their heads down. Far better, it seems, if they would make decisions based on reality, not tradition.

Medicine has the same problem, but far worse. Most doctors hesitate to embrace new techniques—merely because they've been indoctrinated in the old.

A big part of responding in kind is to be kind. The best discussions in science, medicine, business and politics have always been the civil ones.

So, we fail when we call people names. We fail when we invoke tradition or a higher power or superstition to explain our decisions. We fail when we decide that the ends justify the means, and when we take callow shortcuts to achieve our ends.

WHY YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE ONE OF OUR MANIFESTOS

It's not just possible, it's actually likely that one or more of our manifestos will annoy you.

Are you upset because the argument in the manifesto is flawed? Has the author shaded the truth or used unfair techniques to make her point? If so, write your own manifesto. Stick to the testable and the logical and see if you can get your alternative point of view to spread.

However, you might be upset just because you disagree with the conclusions. But if the thought process is right, if the arguments are sound, if the facts are correct but the conclusions bother you, perhaps the problem isn't with the manifesto—it may just be the discomfort people feel when challenged to change.

What we're hoping you won't do is shoot the messenger. If you get an email containing a ChangeThis manifesto you don't like, the correct response is not to call names, threaten a career, question motivations or call someone French. The right response is to embrace the anti-fundamentalist nature of the dialogue and respond in kind.

A big part of responding in kind is to be kind. The best discussions in science, medicine, business and politics have always been the civil ones. Galileo was right—the earth does

move. All the snarkiness that dogged the last twenty years of his life (including condemnation by the Inquisition) didn't change the relationship of the earth and the sun.

Embracing thoughtful discussion is still the very best way to find the truth. Bullies aren't welcome here.

CHOOSE RESPECT

That's the natural resource that is in the shortest supply, the one that is dwindling fastest.

We believe that everyone is entitled to a point of view. Even fundamentalists (in business, medicine, politics and life) approach these issues with a good heart and the best of intentions. Our goal is not to demonize the opposition—that path doesn't help us reach our destination.

Instead, ChangeThis focuses on the rational and thoughtful arguments that help people change their minds to a more productive point of view.

OUR BUSINESS MODEL

We don't have one.

It doesn't cost very much to run something on the Internet. The authors contribute their work. Our systems were built by some very dedicated summer interns. Every once in a while, we'll pay some of our expenses via a sponsorship. But the goal isn't to make money. The goal is to make a difference.

How can you help? Just do one thing for us: spread these ideas. When you find a manifesto that might change minds, spread it. Print it and distribute it. Post it. E-mail it to your friends. Until we can get comfortable talking about rational arguments, we're going to be at a disadvantage when faced with fundamentalists, who aren't at all shy about spreading their point of view.

So, please ... be an optimist. Share. ☺



Info

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ChangeThis was built in the summer of 2004 by Amit Gupta, Catherine Hickey, Noah Weiss, Phoebe Espiritu, and Michelle Sriwongtong. The original idea behind ChangeThis came from Seth Godin.

In the summer of 2005, ChangeThis was turned over to 800-CEO-READ – now Porchlight Book Company. In addition to spreading books and ideas as a bulk book retailer, they write reviews, interview authors, post book excerpts, and keep ChangeThis up and running with the words, considerable efforts, and graciousness of the authors who contribute.

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