The Internet Imperative

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Abstract: A large part of the public relations industry is now actively involved in some form of, or the management of, what is described as social media (Curtis et al 2009).
In addition, a significant proportion of academic papers and not a small part of student and practitioner education is devoted to internet mediated communications studies. «On the skills side,» noted long time academician Kevin Maloney, «the rise of new media is the revolutionary change.» (Maloney 2010).
This paper takes this as a theme to explore both the practice and more fundamental drivers that can be explored by the public relations industry and academia.
Key words: Social Media, Public Relations in Industry, Internet Power.

1. INTRODUCTION

A large part of the public relations industry is now actively involved in some form of, or the management of, what is described as social media (Curtis et al 2009).

In addition, a significant proportion of academic papers and not a small part of student and practitioner education is devoted to internet mediated communications studies. «On the skills side,» noted long time academician Kevin Maloney, «the rise of new media is the revolutionary change.» (Maloney 2010).

This paper takes this as a theme to explore both the practice and more fundamental drivers that can be explored by the public relations industry and academia.

> «On the skill side» is a telling comment. It would suggest that the legitimacy of these new media or the internet's societal significance is not as pivotal or central to public relations practice or theoretical development as its recent practitioner popularity would suggest (Fortune Magazine 2010).

The contribution and involvement of the public relations (and communications industries in general) in the recent European Commission study 'Envisioning Digital Europe 2030' (Misuraca et al 2010) was notable by its absence. Such fundamental deliberation was not supported by the public relations industry or with PR academic or industry supported involvement. With so many organisation's constituents affected by the communications industries' digital activities both current and in the future, there is a case for examining the fundamental significance of the internet to public relations.

The considerations are underpinned by the European Union funded CROSSROAD Project (CROSSROAD, 2010a), which identifies a research area taxonomy that classifies research in ICT for governance and policy modelling. The considerations into 5 categories:

1. Open government information and intelligence for transparency;
2. Social computing, citizen engagement and inclusion;
3. Policy making;
4. Identity management and trust in governance; and
5. Future internet for collaborative governance,

The fact that so much future gazing has resonance with the objectives of the public relations' client base and The Global Alliance Stockholm Accords (The Global Alliance 2010) is significant.

This paper explores the legitimacy of the public relations' sectoral internet mediated interaction beyond the mere 'skill set revolution' and examines its significance at the heart of any future evolution of PR practice.

2. THE INFLUENCES OF THE INTERNET

It is not that there is a dearth of evidence as to the influences of the internet and its societal, economic or even social media effects in either attitude or behavioural change.

The use of social media enabling users to interact, create value and influence commercial and public institutions has been well documented (Huijboom et al. 2009). Social media facilitate creation of social identities (Castells 2001); creates a process sometimes called social contagion or viral activity (Lewis et al. 2008) and comparison (Grevet and Mankoff 2009) by allowing people to share and amortise personal effort in the process of delivering behavioural change (Garrett 2006).

Indeed the empirical evidence of behavioural change wrought through the use of social media is also documented (Cugelman et al 2009) with some considered views on influence (Cugelman et al 2009 /2) and the impact of initiatives driven by the internet including social media as a disruptive force that may affect the power balance between markets, governments, consumers / citizens and NGOs (Langley et al 2010). Other evidence from health (Richardson 2010) to business (Gillin 2010) shows how behaviourally affective internet mediated communication can be and cannot be (Christakis 2010).

From the abundance of reported evidence it would appear that internet mediated communication can and does act in changing values, attitudes, behaviours and, thereby, relationships.

There is significant anecdotal evidence of under reporting of these effects (Phillips 2011).

The evidence suggests that Internet mediated PR has a fundamental, if under-rated, place in considerations of public relations theory.

In its 2008 White Paper, the Authentic Enterprise, the Arthur Page Society (Iwata, J 2008) noted that, at the same time that, as the multinational organisation and its management systems «were taking ever clearer and more defined shape, three countervailing trends were arising that have revolutionized the environment in which businesses operate: the digital network revolution, global integration and stakeholder empowerment. Together, they call into question many basic assumptions of the 20th century corporate model.»

The Society, in promoting its 2011 conference, makes this point on its website «The world is changing faster than many of our organizations are prepared to handle, and increasingly falls on the Chief Communications Officer to help management teams develop and remain true to their culture and values, while staying on top of the dynamic pressures of an increasingly transparent and digital world.»

There is considerable literature to support evidence for such trends. As far back as 1995, when Nicholas Negroponte (1995) explored the early influences of social media to the Clue Train Manifesto (2000) to Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams recent book Macrowikinomics: Rebooting Business and the World (2010), a range of academics and business leaders have been reporting on a range of extra ordinary internet driven changes. These changes are affecting organisations in every sphere as well as a high proportion of the world's population.

The nature of such change provoked by the network effects of internet communication is empirically validated in PR literature by, among others, Amaral and Phillips (Amaral and Phillips, 2009). Global integration is reported as a corporate pinch point at the start of 2011 according to a Forbes report (Forbes, 2011), In addition, in PR literature Van Dyke and Vercic, (Van Dyke and Vercic, 2009) offer a well argued case.

Evidence offered by Patrizia Nanz Jens Steffe as far back as 2003 argued the extent to which democratisation of global governance will ultimately depend upon the creation of an internet mediated transnational public sphere and is well documented in the PR literature from Dahlgran (2005) to Jackson (2010).

The forgoing offers considerable evidence to demonstrate why the internet is important to PR and PR theory. It demonstrates that, without much by way of the PR industry's actual engagement, the effects of these technologies have begun to changed the practice of managing relationships, reputation,

constituent engagement, development of trust and organisation's licence to operate. Equally one must not dismiss the significance of the changing face of all forms of media.

3. PR INDUSTRY

The evidence suggests that the PR industry has some way to go. In the UK, consumers used the Internet extensively to buy things in December 2010.

Graham Charlon at eConsultancy in a report 'Christmas e-commerce stats round up' (Charlton 2011) revealed that consumers had continued to engage with ecommerce at a very considerable rate.

— 44% of Britain's online adult population upped their online spending this Christmas compared to 2009, pushing the total amount spent online to £2.8bn.

— 45% of those who shopped online encountered website problems while doing their Christmas shopping, and 32% abandoned purchases as a result.

— 86% of UK consumers logged onto the internet over Christmas Day and Boxing Day this year, an increase of over 10% when compared with figures from 2009.

— 22% of online users accessed the internet on their phones, confirming the importance of mobile commerce for retailers.

— 30% of online consumers used the internet to shop online on Boxing Day, while 62% of online consumers shopped for sale items and discounted products across the two days.

— Online sales at John Lewis reached £500m this year, and sales in the five weeks to January 1 were up 42% on the same period last year.

— On Boxing Day, eBay and Amazon were the most visited e-commerce sites, with 9.96% and 7.02% of visits respectively.

These data would suggest that social media among many other things had some considerable effect (Gillin 2010) which would lead the observer to imagine that advisors to companies would be making the case for significant activity.

The evidence suggests otherwise.

The 2010 Econsultancy's Social Media and Online PR Report (eConsultancy 2010) revealed that:

— Some 40% of companies say they have «experimented with social media but have not done much», while just over a third say they have done an «average amount».

— Around a quarter of company respondents (26%) said their most senior managers were «very interested indeed» in social media, compared to 19% who said there was «very little interest».

— Social network profile creation and management is still the most widely used social media tactic, although the proportion of companies who do this has decreased from 65% last year to 56% this year.

— Direct traffic (72%) is still regarded as the most important metric for assessing social media activity. Almost three-quarters of respondents say this is one of the three most important metrics they use.

— 45% of responding companies don't have any policies or guidelines for the use of social media.

This is not a British phenomenon. Online retail sales in France grew 24 percent in 2010 to 31 billion euros ($43.31 billion) according to the French e--Commerce Federation (Fevad) and reported by Reuters (Reuters 2011).

It is reasonable to ask if the PR industry is supporting such sales evidenced in near comparable growth.

The PR industry has been, it might be said, dragged along by a force it does not comprehend very well.

Maloney (ibid) suggested that «On the skills side the rise of new media is the revolutionary change.»

In many ways PR is overwhelmed by the pace, extent and implications of this change and has to include and develop skills in response to this evolution.

Skills are by no means enough. The industry has to understand the economic, societal, political and technological developments as well and must prepare for even and evermore fundamental change. To be taken seriously, the PR sector has to invest in developing theory and practice before it is overwhelmed by each successive evolution.

For any industry sector to invest heavily in anything radical it has to be sure that such an investment is grounded.

Perhaps, given the evidence we can challenge the assumption that «new media is the revolutionary change.» (Maloney ibid).

Is it that the rise in use and application of 'new media' is a revolution? Indeed, is it that the internet and its technologies are revolutionary or, in human evolutionary terms, a human an inevitability?

To be able to argue that the $ multi-billion PR industry needs to take a more fundamental look at the significance of the internet, we need to address some of the assumptions about the internet and its effects.

There has to be some consideration as to why the internet evolved and the nature of its evolution in human as well as technical terms to be able to identify if new media is the extent of the revolution.

Will the internet die and go away?

What will there be when search and social media, as it is now known and recognised today, loses its current relevance?

And what does the industry and notably its research base need to know and do in preparation for such evolutionary events?

As things stand, the PR industry urgently needs to recognise it has to do more, collaborate with other initiatives and develop an agenda that will take it from failing to recognise the significance of the internet to a point where it can play a complete, even leading role, in societies' evolution wrought by the still growing power of the internet.

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