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Beyond networks: Measurement, modeling and the emerging transformation of public relations

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ABSTRACT

This editorial for the fourth issue of the Journal of Professional Communication (vol. 3, issue 1, 2013) discusses how the development of a set of metrics are the necessary next step for the emergence of an applied art and science of public relations. The author discusses how the professional communicators of the future will be the "engineers of the humanities," able to reduce the complexity of human emotion, society and interaction into their component parts using different quantitative and qualitative models. The ability to construct such models will enable professional communicators to bridge the gap between metrics measuring "return on engagement" with metrics measuring ultimate "return on investment." The author is very hopeful that these metrics will emerge from new research and expresses excitement at the fact that this is a new, open field of study.

During the last 20 years, successive waves of new, revolutionary digital communications technologies and services have completely transformed our selves, society, economy and culture. These powerful and often liberating tools have transformed mass media from a one-to-many system controlled by gatekeepers to something new – an emerging conversational arena shaped by a hybrid of mass and interpersonal communication.

The practice of professional communication has been transformed along the way, creating massive opportunity for creatives and strategists alike. However, now that the dust is settling, it is time to take stock. One of the greatest emerging opportunities is the fact that major aspects of the practice that used to be ineffable – relationships and community – are becoming measurable. This new measurability presents the challenge of developing metrics that

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capture the various aspects of the effects of actions taken during professional communication practice.

Metrics shape professions. They inform strategic planning and decision-making. They create success stories because numbers – benchmarks, results, goals – tell stories. However, before one develops an effective metric, one must understand the nature of the object of measurement. The next step is to think about what story the metric might tell and how that story fits into a larger narrative. Metrics should tell the story of what has been done in a communications effort. The web of metrics used by a communicator should, taken together, produce better, more informed and increasingly effective strategy.

Let's think about the hybrid communication model emerging from the fusion of mainstream media with digital and mobile. Parts of the former mass communications model persist in the emerging digital communications arena but much of its structure and hierarchy has been swept away. At least it seems that there is a new, less stable conversational hierarchy that is emerging which bears greater resemblance to the rolling waves of conversation and group behavior in crowds or cocktail parties than it does the more orderly world of gate-keepers and structured relations that has been the way of traditional media. We have seen the rise of influencers enabled by social media services accessed through computers, smartphones, tablets and soon, any mechanical device that can been digitally controlled and networked.

We are rapidly transitioning from a mediascape controlled by expert gate-keepers to one shaped by individuals or organizations capable of exerting influence in spheres of various size. Indeed, one example of this is that the technical expert necessary to produce the near-perfect content distributed via mass media is being joined by the citizen culture producer, who uses the latest multimedia development tools on their home computer, tablet or smartphone to generate imperfect content with an authentic feel. This trend is evidenced in the most recent results of the Edelman trust barometer, which measures global trust in organizations, roles and sources. Starting in 2006, the shimmering and shape-shifting form of "a person like me" has occupied one of the top five most trusted positions in the survey (Edelman, 2013).

Let's take a moment and examine the emerging society through the lens of the metaphors we use to characterize it.

The "information system" metaphor

Every society builds its mental representation of itself using metaphors that make sense in the cultural and technological context of the day (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Today, we think in terms of information and networks. This is largely due to the rising importance of cybernetics and artificial intelligence in our daily lives, embedded in everything from our thermostats to our cars.

The "information system" metaphor also appears to be emerging as the predominant way of thinking of society. It has become part of common speech to make allusions to one's "social networks" and "networking skills." Let us examine this metaphor, though. The "society is a network" metaphor implies two things: first, that we are all discrete nodes with boundaries around us; second, that we are all connected through bi-directional relationships between our nodes and the nodes of people with whom we maintain relationships.

This is an oversimplification of the matter. Thinking of our society as a network fails to capture the idea that our lives are completely intertwined. Each of our lives is linked to the lives of those whom we know. We make decisions based on how we assume they will impact and affect those whom we care about. We reflect on our self-worth by thinking about how we are reaching our goals and sticking to our principles.

This, in turn, complicates calculating the impact that a relationship is having on stakeholder publics. Perhaps a more apt metaphor is the heat map – which shows a continuum between each of our core selves and the core selves of others within our network. Coming up with a more accurate metaphor than the network will mean better visualizations that capture the fact that our identities are not clear-cut with sharp edges. Rather, our identities bleed into the identities of those around us in a fuzzy way, since we are constantly influencing one another's lives and converging on each other's values.. The idea of a topographical heat map may capture this reality better than a network graph.

Society as organism

If we accept the idea of society as a network, a common error in which many fall is to think of society as a system that could be held in some sort of optimal state of balance. One could surmise that this idea comes from the cybernetic notion of a self-maintaining system, that once perfectly balanced between positive and negative feedback, will remain in equilibrium. This idea has become quite pervasive in the field of ecology where many speak of humankind disrupting a "natural balance."

The idea that things should be in balance appeals to our natural sense of moderation, just as the yin-yang symbol does for many. It is very tempting to apply this same idea to community building or branding: that is, to structure strategy around the idea that there is a dynamic equilibrium around which a brand centers. This would be a sweet spot, at which a strategist could achieve homeostatis – a harmonious and happy relationship between positive and negative feedback, a productive spot between tension and agreement.

The problem with this idea: it is very difficult to achieve in a communications effort or a community-building campaign. Dynamic equilibrium works in a world of constraints and possibilities where one understands what those constraints and possibilities are. Achieving this understanding is very difficult in a community or even in a family, where the number of variables required to monitor and to characterize such an equilibrium grows exponentially.

When an engineer is designing an engine for a car, it is possible to understand the necessary constraints enough to be able to figure out how to balance inputs and outputs to achieve maximum efficiency. To do this in communications and relationship management, it is necessary to understand what the specific elements – constraints and possibilities – of the relationship are that can be measured and tracked so that a dynamic equilibrium can be reached.

Essentially, the public relations professionals and communications management counsels of the future will have to become the "engineers of the humanities," capable of reducing the complexity and noise inherent to certain social systems into constituent pieces so that the same predictability that the engineer has in a car engine may be approached in the areas of community building, relationship management and reputation management.

Some communications management theorists have begun to conceive of models that capture this topographical heat map of relationships. Philip Sheldrake calls the dynamic relational flows inherent to public relations practice "flows of influence" (Sheldrake, 2011). This idea appears compatible with the "topography of relationships" idea, capturing the way information flows within and without an organization. One could imagine how the flow of information between different parts, stakeholders and competitors of an organization. could be mapped topographically, with intensity or closeness being marked with hotter or cooler heat signatures. Sheldrake has also sketched a model of six influence flows within and without an organization. The ideas for metrics I am sketching here could probably be applied to flesh out his model.

A consideration of return on engagement

One of the principle strengths of public relations practice has always been in the creation and management of relationships. Since the advent of digital communications, we also often hear the word "community" mentioned – community building, community management and so on. However, in terms of achieving business objectives, relationship and community management can be undervalued as mere hidden links in an organization's value chain, since they may be misperceived as "soft," intermediary steps towards return on investment. Professional communicators know that the pejorative characterization of their contributions to organizational value creation as "soft" is not only wrong but wrong-headed. However, they are hamstrung by the fact that it has, until recently, been very difficult to quantify and represent the value created for organizations through efforts of communication, relationship-building and reputation management, etc. This is changing. Digital communications have given us the ability to measure and track the evolution of relationships and communities. We must now embark upon a research and development program that will give us an understanding of the components and mechanics of those relationships and communities, so that we can establish accurate, valuable benchmarks and goals through smart, relevant metrics.

Establishing these metrics means, on a high level, being able to quantify and then tell the story of return on engagement. That is to say, rather than measuring outputs (number of press releases, number of tweets and status updates, etc.), as is often the way professional communicators characterize the fruits of their labours, we should turn minds and imaginations to developing the metrics that will allow us to examine the outcomes of our engagement strategies. However, to get to the point of being able to accurately study engagement strategies, we need to chart out what variables and behavioural vectors are required to form measureable strategies. Up to now, we have largely been flying by the seat of our pants when it came to strategy, or looking at indirect representations of relationships and community that are presented by polls and surveys. It is time to return to the quantitative data of social and cognitive sciences to look for resources for public relations and communications management theory – an analytical and applied lens that looks to simplify complexity to allow for prediction and planning.

What is return on engagement? Conceptually, it is the idea that our engagements with various publics should engender certain pro-social gains. We see many so-called metrics being bandied about, such as "participation," "authority," "influence" and "positive sentiment," etc., but these are as meaningless to calculating the real value of an engagement strategy as counting the number of wheat sheaves in a bale as the indicator of how successful a farmer's watering and fertilizing strategy were. Without a sense of the context in which these values are situated, they are relatively less meaningful to strategy. They reveal little about the nature of the relationships of which they are the result.

A more fundamental way to measure the context within which one's engagement strategy revolves around social capital – a concept popularized by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1972). Social capital is a calculation of the net score of positive social interactions that accumulated around a social object, such as a campaign or a brand. Another concept is that of cultural capital, that is, what cultural knowledge is necessary to better function in society? This can include things such as knowing how to approach a superior, to understanding networking, to knowing how to behave in polite company. How do we get to a calculation of social and cultural capital is an open question that used to be very difficult to answer in the pre-Internet world of ephemeral conversations and unrecorded interactions. It meant expensive polling, survey and focus group research. However, with the advent of the internet and social media, measuring and evaluating the data necessary for calculating the social and cultural capital exchanges around a brand or campaign is becoming quite feasible. The great question before us now is what are the metrics that are necessary to make these calculations? This is a fundamental question for theorists, scholars and practitioners of professional communication. In many ways, this question heralds a return to the statement made by Edward Bernays, one of the founders of public relations, that our field should be steeped in the social sciences (Bernays, 2013).

From return on engagement to return on investment

The next challenge when designing effective metrics for calculating and representing return on engagement will center on how and whether those calculations can be logically linked to return on investment, given that yield is the ultimate calculation of value in any organization. However, connecting ROI to ROE is anything but obvious. How can a professional communicator demonstrate that the relationship-building and community management efforts are directly linked to return on investment? Many metrics that establish return on engagement, such as conversational listening or share of voice, bear only a tenuous link to sales, votes, donations or other forms of direct return on investment, depending on the nature of the organization. The art and craft of the new "engineers of the humanities" will be to gain an understanding of how to construct a framework and a set of bridge metrics between return on engagement and return on investment. That is to say, how the intermediary relational outcomes achieved in the pursuit of sales, votes or donations can be linked to the final yield.

To approach this objective, we must model the cognitive, cultural and social environment from which a community emerges and within which it operates. Again, this means arriving at a necessarily reductive understanding of a complex system, rich in meaning: an understanding of the context, as well as the mental representations that populate the imagination, feelings and behaviours of a public when it interacting with a brand or in a community constructed around a brand. Such an endeavour is similar in spirit to the task of automotive engineers who build reductive models of the many flows of noisy information in the natural and physical sciences to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions, constraints and principles for understanding the typical functioning of an engine in a complex and changing natural environment.

This may appear to be a reductive approach to studying the beautifully complex and intricate, ever-shifting landscape of human emotion, perception and cognition that makes up people's lives and relationships. It may be perceived as quantifying that which should remain ineffable. I wouldn't deny that the approach suggested here is reductive. Nor would I deny that the work of some public relations practitioners is fundamentally poetic in nature and perhaps attempts to capture the ineffable, but analysis at this eneffable level is cannot be the goal of the communications manager, strategist and counsel.

The fruit of such a person's strategy, management and counsel may very well be, for example, a beautiful campaign that surprises the senses and elevates the spirit, but the strategy behind that campaign must be designed according a conceptual plan operating with variables that are understood in the context of the arena in which the plan will be deployed. This requires empirical research – both quantitative and qualitative – and an analytical approach to culture, society and relationships that will allow us to model social and cultural capital in fine enough grain to understand and predict the interactions around a brand relationship, community or campaign.

Some may say that this is an impossibly complex task, given that as humans, we inhabit and adapt to our ever-changing mental and physical worlds. However, the success of the field of actuarial science has proven that order can found in the chaos of human life, that theories of human behavior and its eventual outcomes in well-defined contexts can be developed fruitfully. This is what a science of public relations could look like. It is up to the researchers and practitioners in the field to adopt this way of thinking and move our field to a more empirical ground of modeling and prediction.

The challenge before us is tantalizing and exciting. Digital communications have provided the data and the arena. Powerful tools such as Wolfram Language are becoming available (Wolfram, 2013). We must begin to develop theories to spawn the models that will inform the strategies that will shape the tactics that will deliver the magic to our various stakeholder publics.

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This is the fourth issue of the Journal of Professional Communication. With each issue, we have published more thought leaders from the academy and from the practice. We pride ourselves on maintaining the strictest standards of academic and trade publishing. All commentaries, interviews and book reviews are subject to review by members of the editorial advisory board and often go through several revisions and resubmissions before finally being published. All practical papers and research articles are subject to double-blind peer review by at least two peer reviewers. For this issue, twelve submissions were considered of which five were accepted for publication. Since the launch of JPC in November, 2011, this ratio has been increasing steadily. Our goal is to publish papers of the highest quality from around the world, while maintaining a focus on Canadian examples to help build a knowledge base for the practice in Canada.

In this issue, you will find much matter for reflection on the theory and practice of professional communication. This issue's commentaries are from: Aaron Henninger (The Air University and The United States Air Force) who makes the argument that if Western militaries are focused on winning hearts and minds, then they are destined to fail; Patricia Parsons (Mount Saint Vincent University), who discusses the complexity and the challenges inherent to teaching ethics to public relations students; and Daniel Tisch (Argyle Communications), who discusses how public relations and communications management can play a beneficial role in resolving conflicts and improving mutual understanding around the world. We also have an interview with Rob Kozinets, Chair of Marketing at the Schulich School of Business, conducted by Jessica Langer (McMaster University and Ideas In Flight).

Among the peer reviewed articles, Emily Bourassa, Elyse Amend and David Secko (Concordia University) conduct a thematic and synthesis of best practices in environmental journalism; Wendy McLean-Cobban (CPA Canada and Ryerson University) presents a case study that examines the importance of developing thought leadership in professional service organizations; Fraser

Likely (Likely Communication Strategies) analyzes the effectiveness of Canadian government communications through the lens of the five generic principles of excellent public relations, as drawn from the seminal IABC study (Grunig, 1992); Anne-Marie Males (Ryerson University) examines the factors necessary to forming a hospital's reputation; organizations; and Kim Morris (Collège Boréal) presents a practical paper examining whether the not-for-profit sector should engage in corporate social responsibility activities.

We also feature five book reviews in this issue: Tala Chebib (McMaster University), compares *What Would Google Do?* by Jeff Jarvis, with Chris Anderson's classic, *The Long Tail*. Judy Gombita (PR Conversations) delivers an thoughtful combination of book review and commentary on the profession by examining Scott Berkun's *The Year Without Pants* and linking the book's many insights to modern public relations practice. Andrew Laing (Cormex Research) discusses how "celebrity statistician" Nate Silver's *The Signal and the Noise* is a useful introduction to the power of statistics and probability for public relations professionals; Kelly Rowe (Universitat Pompeu Fabra inBarcelona) criticially evaluates Sasha Issenberg's *The Victory Lab*, noting that the book's major strength is also its greatest weakness: the author's reliance on insightful in-depth interviews with senior practitioners. Finally, Ali Symons (World Vision Canada) provides an insightful comparative review of *The New Digital Age* by Google CEO Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen and *Rewire* by Ethan Zuckerman wherein she notes a productive tension between the two books: Schmidt and Cohen are quite modest in their predictions of what the internet can do for society, while Zuckerman is more utopianist in his thinking.

Of course, no issue of JPC can be produced without a round of thanks for those who participated in its creation. First, a big note of gratitude to all authors who submitted their manuscripts to the Journal – without your submissions, not only would there be no Journal, indeed, we would have no field. Next, a note of sincere thanks to all those who participated in the peer review process – your labour, generously donated, makes possible the academic rigour maintained in the Journal, while we operate on the proverbial shoestring. Thanks to our editorial advisory board, which is constantly providing advice and guidance on how to improve, develop and promote the Journal. Of course, a note a special note of thanks is necessary to Faculty of Humanities at McMaster University, which houses and funds the Journal though our McMaster-Syracuse Master of Communications Management program. Finally, a huge word of thanks to our assistant editor, Shelagh Hartford, whose command of the APA style guide, Adobe InDesign and English grammar make each issue of this Journal beautiful, elegant and inviting.

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