

Reinventing public communication to reconnect with publics

A challenge for public relations as well as journalism, advertising and organisational, governmental and political communication

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Abstract

The enormous growth and popularity of social media is telling us something. It is not simply a message about new technologies, but rather a more fundamental message about *practices* of public communication. Institutions have become disconnected from their publics through perceiving communication as *voice* and information *outputs*. Many organisations have forgotten how or never learned to listen. Citizens are flocking to social media and social networks not because of the attraction of new technologies, but because they offer places to connect, have an identity, and be listened to. Professional communicators in public relations as well as journalism, advertising, and organisational, governmental, and political communication need to look beyond the technologies and reinvent how they practice public communication to reconnect with publics. Vital among a number of steps to do this are having an ‘architecture of listening’ and understanding publics through research and evaluation of communication and relationships.

Introduction

In 2011, public communication no longer looks like it did even a decade ago. And it is certainly very unlike what it was two decades ago in 1991.

In 1991, the World Wide Web was new-born. While Tim Berners-Lee and a team at the *Conseil Europeen pour la Recherche Nuclearie* commonly known as CERN in Geneva worked on building the Web through 1989 and 1990, it was Christmas Day at the end of 1990 that the first successful build of a Web server and browser was completed.

It was 26 February 1991 – the beginning of the year of the goat/sheep – that the first Web browser, *WorldWideWeb*, written by Berners-Lee was released and the Web became open to the public.

Online authors started writing what they initially called online journals, starting with Claudio Pinhanez’s *Open Diary* in 1994.

In 1997, John Barger coined the term ‘Weblog’ in his online diary-cum-journal *Robot Wisdom*, and two years later Peter Merholz abbreviated the term to ‘blog’.

¹ Presented as a keynote address to the *PR Summit 2011*, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, 16 April 2011 and to the National Higher Education Communication Officers’ Conference 2011, Sydney, 10 May 2011.

Who could have known at the time that within a decade there would be more than 300 million blogs in the world – some with more readers than the highest circulation newspapers.

In the wake of Newsgroups, an early text-only form of internet chat group, the first Web-based social networks developed such as *SixDegrees* in 1997, although it folded in 2001.

In 2001, a decade ago, the world of communications was in the midst of the dot.com crash – or ‘tech wreck’ as many called the collapse of a raft of early internet companies. However, slowly out of the ashes of the dot.com crash, a Phoenix rose in the new millennium.

Google, Amazon, eBay, Wikipedia, Napster, BitTorrent, and Apple iTunes were launched and grew, challenging the way information, music, photos, video, and other media content were distributed, and even challenging our understanding of what comprises media.

Large global social networks emerged such as Friendster in 2002, followed by MySpace, Bebo, Facebook, Cyworld in Korea, and Qzone in China – and more recently Sina Weibo, Ren Ren, and so on.

Then videos went online at public Web sites such as YouTube and Tudou.

Online search rapidly became the ‘norm’ for finding information using Google and a growing number of alternatives such as Yahoo!, Baidu, and Microsoft’s Bing.

Virtual worlds started such as Second Life.

Despite scepticism, Wikipedia grew into a global source of information challenging *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for accuracy and forcing the market leader to go online to remain up to date.

In 2011 we live in a world of newspapers, radio, television, and cinema, as well as texting, blogs, microblogging, social networks, photo and video sharing sites, and virtual online communities.

The statistics are not only convincing that these new forms of media are more than a passing fad; they are unprecedented in media history. In early 2011:

- There are more than 2 billion internet users in the world, and the number is growing rapidly;
- Facebook, the leading social network, has more than 750 million active users;
- There are reportedly 175 million users on Twitter and 100 million on LinkedIn;
- There are 174 million blogs tracked by BlogPulse, not including an estimated 162 million blogs in China;
- Three billion videos are viewed each day on YouTube.

These are circulation and audience numbers that the world’s largest TV networks and publishers can only dream about.

But it is a fading dream, or even a nightmare, for traditional media companies. Over the same period – the last decade or two:

- Newspaper circulation in all major developed markets has been consistently falling;
- TV viewing is declining;
- Radio listening is falling;
- Membership of political parties and participation in politics in many countries is falling;
- Confidence and trust in traditional media is at its lowest ebb in history, according to the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press; and
- Despite some optimism reported by the Edelman Trust Barometer, confidence and trust in business is in tatters in many sectors of the community after the Global Financial Crisis and incidents such as the Deep Horizon oil rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico.

What does all this change mean?

So what does all this change mean?

Is this simply a technological transition?

Is it an ‘amateur hour’ in history like the rise of ‘ham radio’ and desktop publishing that will quickly pass as major communication institutions reorganise and reinstate their dominance?

Is it trivial – a place for ‘kids’ and lonely people without a life, or what the CEO of News Limited in Australia recently described as “something of such limited intellectual value as to be barely discernible from massive ignorance”.

Changes in content

Marketers are fond of saying ‘content is king’ – or queen to remain non-gendered. And there is something to the argument that content is what we should be focussing on.

Today, brands and products can prosper or die based on what is said about them in social media.

In Iran, Egypt, and Libya, social media have become a new public sphere, a modern-day *agora* where people can change the discourse of politics and their future.

Social media are being used for vital communication during disasters and emergencies such as the recent tragic earthquake and tsunami in Japan; the earthquake in New Zealand; as well as the once-in-a-century floods in Queensland and Victoria in Australia.

People are using social media to send cries for help; to find their loved ones; to organise political uprisings and expressions of democracy; to gain recommendations about products and services; as well as simply chat and keep in contact with others.

But content is not always significant, as any daily scroll through Twitter or Wall posts on Facebook will show. Along with important messages and information, there is a considerable amount of content that – let’s just say – is not world-changing.

Changes in technology

Others media theorists such as Joshua Meyrowitz argue that medium theory, popularised by Marshall McLuhan, is making a comeback and helps us understand the significance of social media. Medium theory focuses on the nature of media *technologies* and their broad effects on society.

Just as the very presence and nature of television, irrespective of its content, changed society in a number of ways ranging from eating habits (e.g. the TV dinner) to the rules and format of sport (such as night Formula One Grand Prix), and the way politics is conducted through TV debates and 10-second grabs, social media will no doubt have broad social effects far beyond their specific messages and uses.

But it is all too easy and all too common to refer to the changes taking place as being simply about new technologies. In reality, blogs, microblogging, social networks, video sharing sites, and virtual worlds all sit on the same platform as corporate Web sites and the same technology that hosts the increasing number of newspapers that have online editions. The technologies of communication and media are increasingly convergent, as Henry Jenkins has noted, and many of them have been around since the 1990s.

They are not 'new', as some claim.

I would like to look beyond content and beyond technology to suggest to you that the huge global popularity of social media, occurring at the same time as a substantial decline in public support for many traditional institutions is telling us something – something that communication scholars and practitioners as well as CEOs, government officials, and politicians need to understand because it goes to the heart of how we work and interact in society.

Changes in practices

The unprecedented growth of social media is telling us something fundamental about the *practices* of public communication – the way we go about it at an applied level.

I would like to suggest to you, and present an argument to demonstrate, that we need to reinvent public communication. We need to reinvent journalism, advertising, public relations, organisational communication, government communication, and political communication to reconnect with publics.

We need to reinvent them and reconnect because companies, organisations, institutions, and governments have in a large number of cases lost contact with citizens, with customers, with their employees, with community groups, and with many other important stakeholders who can and will influence and shape their future.

It is not all the fault of organisations. Publics, to use that useful plural term proposed by Nina Eliasoph to denote the plurality of different groups and interests with which we need to engage, have become increasingly mobile in geographic and social terms. In our globalised world, people travel more, interact more with others, and have more choices than they did in traditional societies constrained by physical borders, customs, conventions, taboos, and social structures.

Our publics have a wider range of choices in media and information sources than ever before. 'Audiences' have fragmented, content is disaggregated at multiple sites, and people are bypassing many traditional media and sources referred to as disintermediation.

But some of the reasons that we have become disconnected and need to reinvent how we do public communication *is* the fault of organisational management and the fault of communication professionals who work in organisations – whether they be journalists, public relations or corporate communication practitioners, advertising practitioners, or government and political communicators.

Communication researchers find public communication being undertaken and media used to give voice to organisations' views, interests, and concerns. But in those same organisations, researchers find much less and sometimes little capacity devoted to listening.

Here I am using listening in the sense of *hearing*, giving *attention* and *recognition* to, *responding*, and endeavouring to *understand* others, as discussed by scholars such as Charles Husband, Axel Honneth, and Philip Bobbit.

Another useful theoretical framework in which to consider public communication is Martin Buber's description of *monologue*, *monologue disguised as dialogue*, and *dialogue*.

Using Buber's typology, research shows that most public communication by organisations and media during the era of mass media and mass communication is either monologue, or monologue disguised as dialogue.

Listening is basic, tokenistic, or even non-existent.

Therefore, terms such as *engagement* and *relationships* ring hollow.

Humans do not engage and have relationships with others who do not listen to them; who do not take notice of them; who constantly talk at them with their own agendas paramount.

It should be no surprise that in many democratic countries there has been declining interest, participation, and trust in politics and government, as identified by a number of researchers and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in the US.

Political parties and leaders are following citizens into social media in attempts to reinvigorate democracy with increased citizen participation. The 2008 Barack Obama presidential campaign in the US is held up as a shining exemplar of how social media can potentially do this.

However, while recognising some significant achievements in the Obama campaign, let me make two clarifications. First, of the two primary objectives of online communication in the 2008 US presidential campaign, the first was fund-raising. The online campaign was hailed as a success largely because a record US\$750 million was raised from individual donations.

Second, because the US has voluntary voting, a significant communication effort was devoted to persuading citizens to vote. This is in itself an important and even noble objective. But analysis of the online campaign reveals that very little of the massive public communication program enabled citizens to actually have a say and influence in American politics.

Let me share with you the findings of some research that I have been directly involved in. Again this is government-related, but I will turn to the corporate and organisational implications a little later.

In 2008 and 2009 the Australian federal government became active in what is emerging as a major global trend in public communication termed *e-democracy* or ‘government 2.0’.

This seeks to engage citizens in consultation and policy-making. The objectives are therefore very similar and parallel with those of corporations and organisations which want and need to engage with their customers, potential customers, employees, and other stakeholders.

The study found many positive signs: genuine interest and intention to improve communication by many government departments and agencies; commendable efforts to set up social media sites; and sharing of experiences by online communicators and Web 2.0 proponents worldwide.

However, interviews and content analysis of sites also found a number of significant problems. I will summarise just a few here. Analysis of 11 government online consultation sites ostensibly set up to engage interactively with citizens found:

1. **A lack of planning**, with some deciding on a blog or online forum without any audience research or pre-testing and without clearly defining their objectives;
2. Many organisations were unprepared for **response time expectations** online and were slow to acknowledge and respond, leading to citizens’ frustration and an appearance of not listening;
3. Most organisations did not provide any additional **resources to monitor and respond** to citizens online in an appropriate and timely way. For example, no additional staff were appointed to manage online public consultations within the organisations studied;
4. The **culture** of the Public Service, shaped by years of strict regulations and guidelines restricting public comment, is not conducive to engaging with citizens online in a dynamic dialogic way – and I suspect that many large corporations are little different;
5. The **language** of online communication was not accepted in most organisations. Citizens’ comments were frequently expressed in colloquial terms, in online vernacular, and sometimes even in ‘bad’ language which were rejected under strict moderation practices;
6. None of the organisations studied used **sense-making tools** such as text analysis software to process online discussion. When large volumes of comment are received, it is impossible to respond to each individual and difficult to identify key issues and themes.

One of the successes of the Obama online campaign was that those who managed it recognised the need for sophisticated sense-making tools to analyse large volumes of text and quickly provide acknowledgements – often automated – and identify common themes and issues of concern so these could be addressed.

A number of researchers including Susan Bickford, Axel Honneth, Charles Husband, and my UTS colleague Tanya Dreher point out that listening involves considerable **work**.

Also, I have concluded from this and other research that there is a need for **an architecture of listening** in organisations. Key components in this architecture of listening include policies, resources, an open culture, and tools to enable organisations to hear, consider, acknowledge and respond to, give recognition to, and understand what their publics are saying. However, this architecture is not present in most organisations.

In August 2010, I conducted a detailed analysis of social media use during the Australian federal election. This involved content analysis of all social media used by 206 federal politicians who were seeking re-election and the two largest political parties.

Australian research may seem unrelated to some of you. But it provides useful insights into contemporary media because Australia has one of the highest internet access rates in the world with more than 80 per cent of the population online, and Australia now has the highest per capita use of social media in the world.

The objective of the research was not only to identify *what* social media were used and to what extent, but to explore *how* and *why* they were used. Specifically, I was interested in the extent to which politicians and these political organisations listened and engaged in dialogue versus monologue.

This research found that, like many businesses and commercial organisations, politicians and political organisations have flocked to social media.

However, they overwhelmingly use social media, like traditional media, for *broadcasting* their messages. For instance, on Twitter almost two-thirds of ‘tweets’ by politicians were broadcast messages, with just one-third being responses or direct messages to citizens.

There were some notable exceptions. For instance, the prominent Liberal MP Malcolm Turnbull posted 439 tweets in the final three weeks of the campaign, of which 248 were responses to others – evidence of significant response and engagement. However, that was far from typical.

The second most prolific user of Twitter, Scott Morrison responded to others only 33 times compared with 125 broadcast tweets.

The third highest user of Twitter, Andrew Robb responded to another only once, compared with 141 broadcast tweets.

The Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, also mainly broadcast messages on Twitter, with just 12 responses to others.

Another measure of listening and engagement is the number of others who a Twitter user is ‘following’ compared with the number of ‘followers’ they recruit. Analysis of ‘following’ versus ‘followers’ found most politicians sought ‘followers’, but most followed far fewer people – and some followed very few at all.

For instance, the Leader of Opposition in Australia, Tony Abbott, had almost 20,000 followers at the time of the election, but was following only 20 people. What does this say about his interest in hearing the views of others? What does it say about engagement?

It was much the same story in Facebook. Politicians sought ‘likers’ (fans) of their community pages where they posted political slogans, speeches, and lists of their achievements.

Analysis of the online sites of the two major political parties also found a predominance of ‘broadcasting’ and information transmission, with comparatively little listening to citizens.

Moderation policies of the major political parties have loosened since the 2007 election resulting in some critical citizens' comments being accepted. But, in most cases, citizens' comments posted online were those of carefully recruited supporters and 'fans'.

These findings are also borne out in analysis of the 2010 UK election. A study by Rachel Gibson, Andy Williamson and Stephen Ward in 2010 reported that "the internet has become an organisational necessity for election campaigning but ... it has not brought about that strategic change some have argued we should expect". Gibson and her colleagues found UK political leaders and organisations engaged primarily in broadcasting their messages and not listening or engaging in dialogue.

These studies were done in relation to government agencies and political communication. Are corporations and other types of organisations different? Are CEOs and public communicators in companies, associations, NGOs, and other types of organisations more open, more dialogic, more engaged, more receptive?

Studies undertaken by Jordi Xifras and Assumpcio Huertas in 2008 and Donald Wright and Michelle Hinson in 2009 indicate that the same pattern exists in the corporate world. Many corporations and large organisations see social media as "just another channel" for marketing communication and corporate communication.

The practices of marketing and corporate communication have become primarily one-way 'mass communication' – or, more accurately, one-way *transmission of information* and views of those with the deepest pockets and the most clout.

This form of practice also has existed in traditional media throughout the 20th century and through most of the first decade of the 21st century. In an historic speech to the American Society of Newspapers Editors in New York in 2005, Rupert Murdoch acknowledged that today's citizens "don't want to rely on a god-like figure from above to tell them what's important". He added: "to carry the religion analogy a bit further, they certainly don't want news presented as gospel".

Geert Lovink has similarly and provocatively described mass media content as "lecture" and Hotmail founder Sabeer Bhatia refers to traditional journalism as "sermon".

What is all this saying?

It is saying that organisations and professional public communication practitioners have lost touch with their publics.

They are *talking at* them, and not *listening to* them.

The unprecedented growth of social media across all levels and demographics of society is not a story of technology or content. In many cases, the content is largely inconsequential – as we can see on Twitter most days.

It is a story about *practices* of communication.

The popularity of social networks and interactive online environments filled with ‘user-generated’ content is the result of pent-up frustration among people with the way public communication is practised. And they are voting with the feet – and their fingers.

There is an innate human desire in people to want to have a say, to be listened to, to have their views taken on board, to have their moment in the spotlight – not be relegated to the shadows on society or treated as objects.

Think about how public communicators most often describe people outside their organisation.

They are referred to generically as *the public* – a mass aggregated impersonal lump of humanity. Or ‘our *audience*’. (They are there to listen to us!)

They are called *consumers* – implying that their sole identity and role is consuming the products and services and information that organisations produce.

They are described as *markets* – again reflecting the widespread acceptance of the values and agenda of neoliberal capitalism and reducing groups of people to gatherings where businesses can do trade.

They are even referred to in militaristic terms such as ‘target’ audiences, ‘target’ publics, and ‘target’ markets. We line them up in our sights. Like the military, we seek out ‘target rich’ environments.

These terms resonate with self-interest, lack of mutuality or reciprocity, and exploitation.

The fourth media revolution in human history after the invention of writing, the printing press, and broadcast – the 21st century media revolution – is a revolution in the *practices* of media and communication.

British media scholar, Nick Couldry, has noted this in a seminal article published in 2004 and in his recent books including *Why Voice Matters* published in 2010. Couldry argues for a new way of thinking about media and public communication. He proposes that beyond the major traditions of media studies which focus on *political economy* of media, *medium theory*, *media texts* and their *effects*, and *audiences*, the most informative and holistic way to understand media and public communication is to look at *media as practice* – or, more accurately, a set of practices.

Specifically, Couldry urges us to re-examine and think about the practices of media production, media distribution, and media consumption.

Today, the practices of production, the practices of distribution, and the practices of consumption of information are all undergoing major change.

So what characterises the practices of media and public communication in this new environment in which we find ourselves?

A useful model to inform such analysis is Mark Poster’s description of the First and Second Media Age. Poster and a number of others have identified the First Media Age – the *mass media* age – as characterised by:

- **One-way** mass transmission of information;
- Predominantly **top down** information flow;
- **Monologue**;
- Content primarily produced by **elites**;
- **Gatekeepers** guarding the gates;
- **Push** rather than pull methods of distribution; and
- **Control** of messages.

In contrast, the Second Media Age – the age of social media – is characterised by:

- **Two-way interactive** communication;
- **Bottom-up and side-to-side** communication, not just top-down information transmission;
- **Dialogue and conversation** rather than monologue;
- Content produced by what Alvin Toffler described as far back as 1970 as *prosumers*– or what Axel Bruns calls *producers* – who both produce content as well as consume and use content;
- **No, or few gatekeepers** restricting access and information flow;
- **Pull** rather than push distribution; and
- Little or **no control** over content.

In almost every respect, the practices of public communication have changed.

As the technologies have converged, the practices have diverged. This is the nature of the fourth media revolution that we must understand.

Today, everyone can be a content producer.

You can ‘broadcast yourself’ on YouTube.

And, as Nicolas Negroponte forecast, ‘prime time is now my time’ with the shift from ‘push’ to ‘pull’ in terms of consumption.

So what should we do?

As I have already identified, organisations need an ‘architecture of listening’ as well as an architecture of talking – that is, they need policies, a culture, resources, and tools to process information contributed and distributed by their publics. In social media, that can be diverse, located on multiple sites, and in large volume.

The more people talk to us, and about us, the more work has to be done to *listen, recognise, respond, and understand* what is being said. That cannot be done by one person with a pair of scissors in the way PR practitioners used to go through the press clippings each morning. In the diverse global world of social media, it requires a much more open and sophisticated approach.

In addition to establishing an architecture of listening and doing the work of listening, organisations need to engage actively in evaluating *inputs* and *outcomes* – not simply focus

on their own *outputs*. The most organised, rigorous, and reliable way to gain input from publics and understand outcomes of communication is *research*.

While market research is undertaken extensively to inform the selling of products and services, research to inform public communication is under-utilised in most fields of public communication. Public relations, in particular, has lagged in use of research for both planning and evaluation.

In 1983, prominent US Professor Emeritus in public relations, Jim Grunig, wrote what PR measurement specialists Tom Watson and Paul Noble refer to as his “celebrated *cri de coeur*” – a cry from the heart. Grunig said:

... I have begun to feel more and more like the fundamentalist minister railing against sin; ... I have railed for evaluation in public relations practice. Just as everyone is against sin, so most public relations people ... are for evaluation. People keep on sinning, however, and PR people continue not to do evaluation research.

Of course, that was 1983. It is different now, isn't it? Not much I'm afraid.

In a large 2009 international study sponsored by the Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC), Donald Wright, Richard Gaunt, Barry Leggetter, Mike Daniels, and Ansgar Zerfass found that the most common method by far for evaluating public relations activities remains the collection and counting of media clippings.

Analytical tools and practices, particularly *qualitative* analysis, are used by less than 10 per cent of PR practitioners on a regular basis.

Even worse, some of the most used methods of evaluation in public relations are spurious. For instance, Advertising Value Equivalents (AVEs) remain the third most used method of evaluation according to the Wright et al study.

Some practitioners even inflate these so-called values further by applying what they call ‘credibility multipliers’ – multiples of the advertising rate ranging from three times to 13 times based on an assumption that editorial coverage is more credible and impactful than advertising.

The basis of this method is precisely that – an assumption. After scouring the research literature, Jim Grunig has concluded that ‘credibility multipliers’ are “totally made up”.

Repeated studies over more than 40 years from Carl Ruff in 1968 to sophisticated experiments by Don Stacks and David Michaelson in the US in 2006 and 2007 have found that editorial is *sometimes* more effective in communicating messages than advertising, and sometimes it is not.

Sometimes editorial communicates **negative** messages, which advertising never does.

Sometimes editorial contains mentions and even favourable comparisons with **competitors**, which advertising never does.

Sometimes editorial is gained, but it **does not contain the organisation's messages**, which never occurs with advertising. (If it does, you need a new advertising agency!)

Sometimes editorial is positive, but it is in **unimportant media**, which advertising never is.

Sometimes editorial publicity is gained, but it is **poorly placed**, whereas advertising is always prominently placed and designed for maximum impact.

Public relations practitioners do themselves and their field of practice a great disservice when they use methods such as Advertising Value Equivalents and make grandiose and inflated claims for the 'value' of publicity.

Is it any wonder that public relations does not have the reputation practitioners want, and is not in the boardroom as often as they would like.

Missing in methods such as counting press clippings and AVEs is interest in understanding what our publics are saying and the *outcomes* of attempts at communication. What effect, if any, do activities have on publics and stakeholders?

Here we return to my points made at the beginning. Public communicators and organisations are focussed on their own voice and what they have to say, rather than really understanding and engaging with their publics.

My suggestion to you is that the lack of research for planning and evaluation in PR is a reflection of a deeper more fundamental issue – a lack of listening and engagement in a field of practice that still mostly sees its role as distributing information.

Research, in its simplest sense, is organised systematic listening. It is one of the key ways that we recognise others; listen to them; try to understand them and their interests, concerns and needs; and engage with them.

Public relations practitioners in particular have paid lip service to organised systematic listening – although journalists and traditional media proprietors also have ignored their publics and are now paying the price.

The road to research for informed strategic planning and evaluation in PR has been a long and winding one. In 1994, I was involved with the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) in producing a Gold Paper on Evaluation. We were confident that formative and evaluative research was about to 'take off' in public relations.

I was so confident that I sold my shares in a successful public relations agency and set up the Asia Pacific office of CARMA International, a specialist media and communication research company. My bank manager was not very happy about that decision for quite a few years.

However, there have been improvements since 1983 and 1994 and some contemporary developments in PR research.

Media monitoring companies are increasingly able to offer monitoring services for social media.

Content analysis can be done of both traditional and social media content, quantitatively and qualitatively, to identify issues, trends, the sources of comment, the presence and profile of competitors, and the key messages presented to various publics.

There is growth in these areas and, fortunately for me, I was able to build up my company and in 2006 I sold it to Media Monitors, now one of the largest media intelligence companies in the region with operations in Hong Kong and China as well as Australia, New Zealand, and South East Asia.

However, a further troubling development in contemporary public communication is an emerging preoccupation to discover the Holy Grail of measurement – a single magic formula that will tell us that public communication is working and convince management of how important we are.

This endeavour is reflected in a range of new metrics and buzzwords and ‘black box’ methods that are appearing in the market at an almost frenzied rate.

A study of the public communication measurement and evaluation market finds numerous metrics and analytics that measure:

- Hits;
- Stats;
- Views;
- Visitors;
- Buzz;
- Tone;
- Sentiment;
- Media score (whatever that is);
- Weighted media score;
- Media index;
- Impact score;
- And even supposedly influence.

There are two key concerns with many of these so-called methods of measurement.

First, quite a few are based on secret algorithms that may or may not have statistical validity. Because they are hidden in a ‘black box’ of software or the internal systems of service providers, there is no way to tell. But researchers have grave suspicions that many are ‘mumbo-jumbo’ and ‘hocus-pocus’.

A feature of ethical research is transparency. Any researcher should divulge the details of their methodology. If they don’t, I suggest avoiding them.

Second, even those methods that have some statistical basis are most often measures of *outputs* – how many mentions appeared; how many times certain key words were present; how many times items were clicked.

The appearance of key words and even the volume of visitors does not identify influence or impact.

Again, these methods focus on what organisations are saying and putting out – not what publics actually think, feel, and know.

There is a range of well-established reliable social science and interpretative research methods available to public communicators, such as surveys, focus groups, and interviews,

that can be used to listen and engage broadly and deeply with publics and gain understanding and insights.

In addition, it is important to remain innovative and look for new methods. This is happening with new research methods such as *netnography* – an online derivation of ethnography that observes and records user behaviour. But any new methods need to be rigorous and reliable.

Plans to cooperate globally in developing standards for measurement and evaluation are commendable initiatives and I urge you to take an active interest in them and support them.

But even though we need to do more in terms of standards and education of practitioners as well as client organisations, we have tools for listening and engaging. We are simply not using them in many cases.

Public relations preaches two-way symmetrical communication. But it is still rarely practised.

Despite the admonitions of Jim Grunig and other advocates of *two-way symmetrical* public relations as the hallmark of excellence, organisations grounded in management theory, systems, and modernist beliefs in technology push their agendas and messages using the practices of *mass media* and *mass communication* that dominated the 1920s–1980s.

But a *mass society* does not exist. It never did.

Mass media are holding on with their fingernails.

Mass communication, despite still being taught in some universities – particularly in the US – is a myth; a delusion of the Industrial Age that we must abandon in the Information Age.

We need to reinvent public communication.

We need to do so because our publics are leaving us.

They are abandoning traditional mass media which see them purely as audiences and markets and finding new places to congregate and communicate.

They are abandoning traditional politics.

They are abandoning traditional forms of advertising and public relations which have besieged them with a barrage of one-way information that is often thinly-disguised propaganda.

They are abandoning us because we have focussed on understanding people only so we can convince them to do what we want. We have become manipulative social scientists, and forgotten the humanities. We have the technologies, but not the heart and soul of communication.

The good news is that the reinvention of public communication needs no new theory, or new technology. It simply requires a rediscovery of the practices that define humanity and society.

In his book simply called *Communications* written more than half a century ago, Raymond Williams profoundly told us that “society *is* a form of communication”. He said: “many people seem to assume ... that there is, first, reality, and then, second, communication about

it” (p. 10). He challenged this notion, arguing that communication is what constructs reality and society.

In another influential book titled *Speaking into the Air*, John Durham Peters said communication theory is “the natural history of our talkative species” (p. 9). We each talk and write ourselves into existence. We construct our world word by word and image by image, as well as stone by stone and brick by brick.

All humans are involved in communication, every day.

This has occurred since the time that our ancestors made their hand prints on cave walls and carved their messages in stone. It has been human practice to want to have a say and make one’s mark since humans sent smoke signals and beat out messages on drums. It continued with ancient hieroglyphics carved by travellers in Egypt and the scripts developed in Sumeria and Mesopotamia and China.

Hand prints on cave walls, carvings in trees and on stones, stories told around a campfire, folk songs shared and passed down over generations – these were the first social media and social networks.

Social media and social networks are not a new invention – they are a *reinvention*. A reinvention by people who want to have a say; who want to forge their own identity and space beyond the commoditised, capitalised and monopolised spheres of mass media and mass communication.

Communication is the oil and the balm that enables societies to function and trade to occur. It is the shared social space between us as people and as organisations. It is a space in which we must allow others to participate, to speak. And we must be prepared to listen. As well as focussing on distributing their messages, organisations, whether they are governmental, community or corporate, need to:

- Have an **architecture of listening**;
- Do the **work of listening**; and
- Use the **tools** of listening – research methods that can insightfully and reliably inform planning and evaluate our activities, brands, reputation, and the attitudes and concerns of our publics.

Otherwise, public communicators are little more than messengers and post offices distributing the confetti of corporate communication into social spaces and cyberspace.

As one piece of cyber-graffiti says: “Today, your brand is not what you say it is. It is what Google says it is.” And it is what Wikipedia and Facebook and blogs and Twitter say it is.

And Google, Wikipedia, Facebook, blogs, and Twitter are but the clicking fingers of our publics writing our history, or our epitaph.

There is a need – and an opportunity – more than ever, to re-engage and be true communicators.

Thank you.