



Trends in Public Relations in the Social Media Age: An Era of Crisis and Convergence and Strategic Communication

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Today's ever-changing media landscape impacts principles and practices of public relations, public affairs, crisis management, political communication and public diplomacy, which are converging and connecting into a seamless strategic communication mosaic. This convergence is a product of an era of perpetual crisis, real, as well as pseudo crisis –celebrity/spectacle products of a mass mediated market driven focus on ratings–. A product of digital and social media age, this crisis era, according to Brown, is characterized by the following factors: visuality, orality, instability, rapidity, conversation.

The 2008 Obama Presidential election is an historic campaign, much like the 1960 election was with the increased impact of television. The Obama campaign exemplifies such a convergence in public relations and political communication at the grass roots, people to people level, and is a prototype for campaigns and advocacy beyond the political communication sphere, with particular insights for those interested in the emerging field of public diplomacy.

KEY WORDS: grass roots, public relations, public affairs, crisis management, crisis communication, political communication, convergence, advocacy.

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Fundamental changes continue to evolve in the practice of public affairs and public relations within the crisis context that all too often is used, sometimes incorrectly, to describe the daily activities of business, government, NGO's and grass roots citizen to citizen groups. This is evident in both North and South America as social media redefine how such professionals construct



messages and select media to reach targeted publics who - with such a flattened media landscape - have unparalleled access to influence and to impact stakeholders, just as those paid public relations/affairs professionals attempt to do so. This essay will examine some of the trends in public relations, public affairs, political communication, crisis communication and public diplomacy - all part of the emerging strategic communication mosaic - as a result of the social media revolution we are now witnessing.

Suffice it to say, within the social media revolution, professionals, practitioners, as well as students, acknowledge other major factors that, like the social media revolution, have blurred the traditional lines among the various public relations disciplines. One major point of controversy is the housing of the public relations and related fields within the communication and marketing mix. The differences between the United State and Europe and South America on how public relations activities are organized is well known and a popular polemic among advocates and practitioners working in North and South America, as well as the Continent.

Europeans and their South American counterparts are more comfortable with the traditional demarcation of public relations and public affairs as distinct from marketing and advertising. Integrated Marketing Communications, popular in many areas of the US, views public relations and public affairs as an integral part of the marketing communication mosaic, subsumed within the overall marketing plan. Students and professionals from Europe and South America are often perplexed in the US as they seek work at a PR agency, but find employers expecting knowledge and practice of marketing and advertising, along with PR/PA, all within the same firm. Add to this discussion proper placement of controversial areas like lobbying and CSR, and if crisis communication/management is a separate area or subsumed within a larger PR entity and the global dialogue becomes even murkier.

Today's global network of 24-hour news and instantaneous transmission of information (not to be confused with communication which necessitates some meaning in the transmission of data) complicates the public relations/public affairs process. Inherent within this constant cacophony and ubiquitous web of messages and noise is the agent or sender's artistic requirement to compose message that resonate within the targeted publics, which in some instances are vastly different from the home audiences and publics. The result can be a credibility issue if the message is too disparate from the values associated with the brand and agent sending the message. Gone are the days of saying one thing to one public and another message to a different one. The media, as well as the pseudo media and thought police within cyberspace, will instantly identify any contradiction with a tweet, Facebook posting, or other social media venue. Recovery after such a factual outing is problematic and time consuming and sometimes impossible.

This ever changing media landscape has ushered in an era of convergence, in which the fine lines between pr, pa, advertising and marketing disappear and





further blend with political and crisis communication. Such convergence is due to many factors of the social media age. A primary contributor is that we live in an era of crisis, real as well as pseudo produced in the mediated reality conjured up to our public within the world wide media web. Why is crisis the mediated umbrella? Simply stated, crisis sells.

The death of Princess Diana, the attacks of 9/11 in the United States, coupled with the Madrid bombings and other violent/celebrity spectacles helped usher in the generally accepted mediated reality premise - that we live in an era of perpetual crisis. While echoing McLuhan's view that we are part of a global village, we nonetheless see our village as fraught with instability and unpredictability. Traditional media, fighting for survival amid the bottom up thrust of social media, see higher ratings in their coverage of real crises, as well as problematic events (with recognizable solutions), which they market, as "crises" to attract viewers. Networks such as Fox News and MSNBC have branded themselves as the public's direct link to the latest breaking crises, with the result being more viewers. Disturbingly, more credible news organizations like CNN mimic such tactics in the quest for higher ratings.

The result has been that journalists have not served the public interest, but instead provided stories that interest the public. Readers and viewers in search of objective and credible news have found that celebrity rather than credibility is a bottom line that must be considered. One ramification of this sea change in journalism has been a reexamination of curricula and training of professionals who hope to have a successful and productive career in media. The only area of consensus is that there is little agreement on what areas to invest and to divest.

The flattening of the media landscape brought about by social media revolution and grass roots citizen journalism has provided alternative venues of reporting and advocacy. One early example of citizen journalism occurred in the wake of the Madrid bombings, which, according to initial reports by the Aznar government, were a product of ETA, the Basque separatist group in Spain. The Aznar narrative was not accepted by the Spanish public, who equipped with MSS capabilities, were able to provide their own bottom up rebuttal and alternative explanation to captive and engaged cohorts. The result was a defeat for the Aznar government and an impressive precedent for an engaged citizenry in providing alternative sagas to those offered by the established media and power elites. Our era represents what writer C.W. Mills described in his classic political treatise, *The Power Elite*, as the age of "public communication," which is bottom up and grounded in the masses, rather than top down, mass communication, controlled by the top echelons in politics, business, government and education prior to the internet and advent of social media.

Such grass roots, people-to-people advocacy was the foundation of Barak Obama's 2008 US presidential election. Through the use of social media, Obama was able to check the traditional advantage of the favorite, Hillary Clinton, former first lady and Senator from New York. The Illinois Senator's



advocate's utilized social media as an important venue to build grass roots support of Obama, and eventually as a means of shaping and framing the agenda of the traditional media to benefit the candidate. After gaining traction as the only Democratic candidate running in 2008 who was opposed to the war, the Obama campaign utilized emerging strategies and tactics more akin to marketing and product advertising that were new to the American political scene. The result was a 2008 presidential campaign that redefined the requisites for political communication success in the future. In addition, the Obama presidential campaign won the American Marketing Association's campaign of the year award, thereby further demonstrating the convergence of pr, pa, marketing and advertising within the political communication mosaic.

The Obama campaign also sported another important element of the crisis era: reliance on visuals. Past presidential campaigns in the United States have been replete with well known figures, sketches and phrases depicted on colorful posters, that were often prize possessions of voters infatuated with particular candidates like Nixon and Kennedy in 1960. Yet, the 2008 Obama campaign ushered in another agent into the poster producing process – the average citizen. Over 200 citizen-produced posters characterized the Obama campaign, as groups crafted designs and phrases that complimented their own particular appeal to Obama. The collection was so impressive that it has toured Europe and other countries as evidence of the grass roots appeal of the 2008 Obama presidential campaign.

The convergence of our era also requires dialogue and conversation, which social media enables us to have at the local level as well as an unprecedented global reach. Convergence also is characterized by rapidity. We have the ability to send messages instantly across the room as well as around the globe. Of course, transmitting information is not equivalent to effective and meaningful communication. For such data to resonate within a public, the message must be meaningful and of value, as reflected by the appeals and language selected to convey the message. Kenneth Burke's "pentad" helps us understand that such conversations can be rhetorically analyzed by examining the constituent parts of the communication: 1) act; 2) agent; 3) agency; 4) scene; and 5) purpose. Successful communication, now, as has always been the case, depends on the credibility of the source or ethos (expertise, trustworthiness and charisma). To be successful, the message within this communication encounter must contain an emotional appeal to motivate the targeted public to take action. Veteran political consultant Tony Schwartz identifies such an appeal as the "hot button" that resonates within the target audience.

The democratization of media in the age of convergence also provides each of us with internet capabilities to be our own television station, and with twitter, Facebook and emerging social media to launch virtual media campaigns that can influence traditional media from the bottom up, rather than top down. Again, the political campaign of Obama in 2008 has many examples of such activities, albeit not all were actual campaign sponsored. The "Obama girl," "1984 Hillary



Ad” as well as the “Yes We Can” celebrity video generated stories and press coverage that enhanced Obama as a young and vibrant candidate. The 2008 historic election ushered in social media as a requirement for any successful candidate as did the 1960 election dictate the importance of being telegenic in the new era of television. The same holds true for any successful advocacy campaign.

It is not surprising that within an age of crisis that empowers average citizens to be change agents, that public diplomacy would also emerge as an important constituent within the strategic communication mix. In contrast to traditional diplomacy, which is top down and carried on by trained diplomats and saddled with political ideology and history, public diplomacy is more bottom up, with ordinary citizens as agents whose mission is simply to “further understanding through communication.” Those citizens involved are change agents whose primary objective is to establish and nurture relationships that can ensure open conversation and dialogue from a trusted source.

Within the crisis – convergence context is the need to be efficient and practiced in risk and crisis communication management. The 24 hour news cycle and social media web demands that businesses, organizations and campaigns have in place a crisis team knowledgeable of the crisis plan that has been worked out in advance, based on vulnerable risks, and a competent spokesperson with media training who best represents the values of the entity. Especially important within this convergence context, the global media umbrella and the citizen journalist capabilities is the ability of the spokesperson to be on-site of the crisis, to “identify” with the audience impacted by the crisis, to be proactive rather than reactive, and to be credible in presenting a clear and consistent message which not only explains, to the best of one’s abilities based on the information what has happened, but also provides a vantage point to see the “new normal.”

The trends summarized above suggest those successful in the social media revolution will be practioneers who can adapt to the constantly changing communication mix and evolvment of new media venues to reach stakeholders and targeted publics. Even with such rapid change, one must remember that the most important factor in an audience accepting information is the credibility of the source and the trust evident between the speaker and the audience, a precept as old as Aristotle’s Rhetoric.