Explosion of the digital era public relations

Public Engagement is a modern paradigm in the PR context and sets out how professionals should be listening and engaging with their key stakeholders in the 21st Century. Marshall Manson, Director of digital strategy at Edelman UK, describes the terminology as " advancing shared interest moving from an influence pyramid to a world of cross-influence" (pg 5).

According to Edelman there are four attributes of Public Engagement; it aims to be democratic and decentralized, inform the conversation, call for engagement with stakeholders and finally make it clear how reputation is important. Public Engagement has to work in all four areas (Richard Edelman, 2008). Trust building both internally and externally, reputation management and transparency are the hallmarks of successful PR initiatives besides positioning the CEO.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill and G D H Cole (1968) came up with the term Participatory Democracy, which was the forerunner of Public Engagement. Mills supported a representative government with some form of public participation but on a limited scale. Wholesale participation could endanger political decision making and hence democracy. (Pateman1970) Engagement in politics had been regarded as reactive but it is now perceived as proactive. Dialogue and engagement with all parties is important to prevent loss of public trust (Edward Andersson, Simon Burall & Emily Fennell, Involve 2010). The ' Big Society ' introduced by David Cameron 19 July 2010 sought public dialogue and involvement in decision making. Business and government rely on PR to establish trust and dialogue. Public engagement, like any conversation, is all about listening. Our world can be likened to a conversation and in order to be successful we need to listen (Richard

Edelman 2008). New technology has presented the public with effective tools for engaging in these conversations at a level never experienced before.

A white paper published by Arthur W Page Society (2007) is a good example of how Public Relations practitioners and company leaders must change their strategies and business goals to be more authentic in the 21st century. The study looked at how CEO's saw their roles change with the culture of the environment. Environment is changing because of the emergence of ' all things digital', a global economy and a new breed of stakeholders". However, what it fails to do is to provide a way that can be used to enhance the role of the communication department in the future. According to the paper it believes that communication departments have lost control. In order to move forward they must adapt to new technologies, audiences and engagement models.

Transparency is a key part of performing well in the 21st century, it encourages trust on behalf of employees and the public and is in demand more than ever (Michael Smith, Richard Hunter, Ken McGee, Gartner 2010). Public opinion surveys have confirmed the need for transparency in business and managing trust (Grunig, J. E 2009). For organisations to succeed in Public Engagement, they need to be ' informed, transparent, prospective and adaptive' to their key stakeholders' (Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, 2008).

Prior to current publications on Public Engagement, the term was mainly connected to the science world. A report written by Demos (2009) stated that the UK was now seen as a leader in public engagement within the

science world. Public Engagement, it argued would only work when interest groups were included. Matthew C. Nisbet & Dietram A. Scheufele (2007) argued that communication must be accessible to all sections of society.

Advocacy, a term used by PR company Weber Shandwick, is defined as " Public relations caught the first wave, the adoption of new technology to spread information... But that first wave, sharing information with more segmented audiences, is cresting. A new one, a fundamental transformation of communication from information to advocacy, is rising" (Jack Leslie, Chairman, Weber Shandwick Worldwide). It argues that personnel engagement is needed in order to be able to communicate with their audiences.

It is evident that universities are becoming involved with the term Public Engagement. The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) is part of the Beacon for Public Engagement project. Their aim is to encourage a change in how universities engage with the public and their stakeholders.

_____
_____

Social Media

Traditional PR skills are still helpful in bringing transparency to communications with stakeholders (Schlesinger 2010) but the introduction of Web 2. 0 technologies has changed the world of communications for PR (Pavlik 2008) and Philips and Young (2009). Grunig, J. E (2009) noted that digital media " has the potential to make the profession more global,

strategic, two-way, interactive and socially responsible" (pg 1 Paradigms of Global Public Relations in an Age of Digitalisation). However, he comments that this new media is being used ineffectively by practitioners. Some are using it, as they did with the old media, as a place to write messages rather than using it to interact with the public strategically. Grunig (2009) concludes that it can only be used effectively if social media is used to its full capacity.

Public engagement has created new networks of influences and special online forums leading to a world of communication through Blog, Twitter and Facebook among many, impacting all walks of life (Edelman, 2009.) In 2009, 625 million people worldwide had access to the internet (McCann 2009). Sharing of social networking sites has created huge paradigms for PR. It has increased challenges for organisations for the crucial role played by transparency, quickness and clarity in response (Pavlik 2008).

The rise in digital interaction and the surge in social media present the practitioners with enormous opportunities. According to McCann's Wave 4 report (2009), social media platforms are becoming the' norm' to create and share. In his study he noted how they presented unique opportunities to listen and observe. One way messaging is now outdated and anyone understanding this new communication world will succeed (Weber Shandwick).

It is important to recognize that social media is also important within organizations, encouraging employee engagement. Enterprise 2. 0 is a form of web 2. 0 which is used for businesses only. They provide services such as

Yammer, a corporate version of Twitter, and Chatter- a social-networking service (Economist 2010). According to Mashable (2010) the top five engaged brands in social media are Starbucks, Coca- Cola, Oreo, Skittles and Redbull. Starbucks have created a digital platform for the participation of public through ' My Starbucks Idea' for communicating with customers by just listening to customers' suggestions. Companies are benefitting from listening and improving their services for all stakeholders including customers.

Richard Sambrook (the former head of BBC news) believes that every company should be a media company he says. " Big companies are going directly to the consumer to engage them now, rather than through display or spot ads and the traditional means of trying to reach consumers. You can't just be out there shouting at people about your brand, you've got to engage with them quite carefully" PR is there to help organisations to be honest and engaged with the Public in this new age of media and should not spin stories to the press (Independent 2010)

A Stakeholder can be defined as anyone who is affected by the actions arising from any organisation, whether a public or private entity. When engaged, stakeholders can provide organisations with valuable feedback on society expectations leading to the generation of creative solutions and earning the organisation valuable stakeholder support (Lawrence & Weber 2008). With the advent of technologically enabled tools there has been a democratisation and socialisation of the media leading to a greater involvement by all participants. Breaking news is today likely to be captured first on Twitter, or the like, rather than a news agency (Wright&Hinson 2009).

This in turn has necessitated greater transparency and in turn enhanced the role of PR professional teams in the management of organisations day to day operations. The status of employees and customers has now been placed on an equal footing with shareholders and other governing participants. (Authentic Enterprise 2007). Evolving through public engagement, the corporate communication function is set to play the role of catalyst in this new environment and the PR practitioner can help empower corporate culture and stakeholder confidence (Miller 2010).

At a local level internal communication has become more significant in shaping the management and image of organisations (Authentic Enterprise 2007). Trust is a valuable commodity which needs to be nurtured; in times of crisis the trust relationship will play a significant role in shaping the outcome of adverse events. Encouraging a ' listening ' culture within management will enhance the perception of trust (Mazzei and Ravazzani 2010). This is a function that PR needs to develop to accommodate changing communication platforms and models. Strategies need to consider the social and behavioural changes brought about by the internet.

There have been many communication models put forward over the past 60 years the principal ones being the Shannon and Weaver model 1949, Shramm's Interactive Model 1954 and Grunig's and Hunt's 4 Models (1984). It is important to look at communication models to see whether Public engagement is a new paradigm or simply an extension of these.

Shannon and Waver's (1949) Mathematical theory of Communication is accepted as one of the most important models from which communication

studies has grown (Johnson and Klare 1961), albeit biased towards the technical aspects of communication research (John Fiske 1982).

In contrast to the above models Schramm went on to create his model which emphasised two-way communication (1954) and introduced the concept of feedback. In problem solving scenarios open ended questions need to be asked in order to gain feedback and results.

The two-way symmetric model, Grunig and Hunt (1984) is probably the most popular and widely used in today's PR industry. This model is described as being one that can build relationships and resolve conflicts. It is where the stakeholders have a say in what an organisation does and can have some power over policies. This model employs research, listening, and dialogue as tools to cultivate relationships with both internal and external strategic parties. Pieczka (1996) criticised the model as she felt that the study was biased to the two way symmetrical model and questioned the validity of his model.

According to Phillips and Young(2009), social media is causing a new communication paradigm. They believe that communication is shifting from the traditional hierarchical arrangement to an audience model encouraging horizontal discourse. This is confirmed by Edelman (2009).

A further study by Grunig developed a model for ' excellent public relations' (Grunig 2002 , Grunig& Dozier) It was found that the most successful PR departments took part or contributed to the strategic decisions of the company. Once stakeholders had been identified the study showed that successful PR departments developed programmes to communicate with

them. According to Grunig (2002.) ' Excellence' is seen as the balance between an organisation and the public. It was seen as the management of communications on a level that aided the strategic management role whilst maintaining the attention and cooperation of the public. As such the PR role was enhanced and perceived in commercial terms whereby long term relationships could be forged between strategic parties. Philip and Young (2009) argued that the new PR challenges the Excellence model.

L'Etang (2006) was also critical stating that the power imbalance between organisation and public was a flaw in the theory of two-way communication. However Grunig insisted that the model was revised over the years. There appears to be a gap in communication models in regards to Public Engagement although Grunig's fourth model is possibly the closest to it. It is evident that a new model of PR is needed. Whether it is to be called Public Engagement is something which has to be decided.