

The Challenges of New Media The Age of Participation

“It began with conversations.
Then we got into broadcast media.
Now we are going back to conversations.
It’s a full circle.”¹

THERE’S NO ESCAPE

Statistics on the size of the Blogosphere are staggering. In May 2006, Technorati, the blogger’s equivalent of Google, was tracking 49.8 million blogs and more than 2 billion links. A total of 75,000 new blogs and 1.2 million posts are created every day, or one new blog every second.² Technorati predicts that the total number of blogs will double every six months.

Today, experts and amateurs alike can be both producers and consumers of information. The Internet has spawned a new social phenomenon, one that is constantly “constructing interpretive frames for understanding current events”³. Through their interpretations and commentaries, these voices are redefining social groupings and re-shaping identity. Once-familiar social networks and frameworks have become more contested and increasingly fragmented.

It’s a different way of thinking, a different approach to life. How we get to know one another, how we establish trust and links with one another has changed.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong
National Day Rally
20 Aug 2006

Mainstream Media - defined in this paper as newsprint, television, radio and corporate websites – has its limitations. Information is disseminated top-down, where media owners receive, filter and interpret the information, before distributing it to the masses. This means that not everyone gets published; it lacks speed, geographical coverage and is a slave to time. It is also characterized by impersonal ‘corpspeak’.

In contrast, blogs, podcasts and other consumer-generated Internet media are personal, real and revealing, making them more interesting. As netizens converse, they freely generate information which are posted on the Internet. They have effectively reversed traditional information flow – from gazetted mass media to unrestrained word-of-mouth. Control of information now lies in the people’s hands.

¹ Quote by Terry Catchpole. Terry Catchpole is the founder, President and CEO of The Catchpole Corporation. Previously, he was Editor In Chief of Computerworld newspaper the Editor and Editorial Director of Business Computer Systems and PC Products magazines.

² Figures correct as of 30 July 2006.

³ Daniel W. Drezner and Henry Farrell, “The Power and Politics of Blogs”, presented at the 2004 American Political Science Association. Aug 2004.

A parallel trend is people's increasing lack of trust in authority – largely governments, institutions and organisations, as well as the mainstream media, a long-time ally of well-established opinion leaders. People prefer to listen to the views of like-minded netizen peers. As the perceived credibility of formal media channels fall, that of informal networks rises, with profound implications for the way the government communicates with the citizenry.

This phenomenon did not happen overnight. As early as 1955, political scientists Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz surfaced their theory that media messages delivered through word-of-mouth channels were more influential than through the mass media.⁴ In the 1995 seminal publication *Netizens: On the Impact and History of Usenet and the Internet*, Michael Hauber discovered that “there were people online who actively contribute towards the development of the Net. These people understand the value of collective work and the communal aspects of public communications.”⁵ More recently, in 1999, ‘the cluetrain manifesto’ – a set of 95 theses of how people are using the Internet to share information at blinding speed - became a cult expression among netizens, especially among net savvy business executives who were concerned with using the Internet to ‘gather eyeballs’.

A TOOL FOR BUSINESS EMPIRES

Organisations are becoming more advanced in their Web engagement strategies. In 2004, two months after he became the president of Sun Microsystems, Jonathan Schwartz started his own blog. Why? Because that was where the tech developers and financial analysts hung out, and he wanted to reach them.

Summary of Sun Microsystems's Policy On Public Disclosure

(www.sun.com/aboutsun/media/blogs/policy.html)

- Don't Tell Secrets
- Be Interesting
- Write What You Know
- Quality Matters (use a spell checker)
- Think About Consequences
- Use your judgement

With Schwartz leading the pack, blogging was soon a strategic initiative in Sun that was widely encouraged. Within a year, 1,000 of its 32,000 employees were blogging. These bloggers wrote about business strategies, product development, company values, successes and even organisational mistakes like installing sidewalks before observing the routes taken by employees. They gave a peek into Sun's culture, from the frontline staff all the way up to the President.

It sounded risky to allow such ‘blog’ freedom. But to Schwartz, it was riskier *not* to blog because “if you are not part of the conversation, others will speak on your behalf”. He believed that blogging was the new way of cultivating employees, potential employees, customers and journalists, and even managing the competitors. The more blogging the corporation undertakes, the more stakeholders would value the organisation and its leader for their candour and the more their craving for greater engagement and information be satisfied. At the same time, Sun maintained an integrated communications strategy and did not bypass conventional journalism. It emphasized building communities, regardless of the channel:

⁴ Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence*, Free Press, New York, 1955.

⁵ Michael and Ronda Hauben, *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*, IEEE Computer Society, 1997.

"A key function of the communications team is to be an information gatherer, analyzer and counsellor on participating in these communities. A bad way to do PR is to blast press releases every Thursday. We help feed the right information into the right channels."⁶

Other organisations, such as General Motors (GM), have also been experimenting with a shift in power from mainstream to new media. In 2005, GM's vice-chairman Bob Lutz, started a blog called Fastlane where he posted complaints from outsiders, and asked readers for suggestions and opinions. He was applauded for the move and gained a reputation of fair play. In 2006, GM used a podcast to introduce the 2006 Buick Lucerne. Autoweek also reported that GM would cut US\$200 million from its 2006 national marketing budget, partly due to the shifting of some brands from magazine and TV advertising to digital media and events.

Similarly, Samsung established relationships with some 1,500 websites that serve its target markets – from fly-fishing sites to the home pages of rock bands. Its objective was to get closer to customers and speed up the feedback loop.

Increasingly, large multinationals are hiring Net savvy marketers to help them better market their brands and products through 'collective curation' – the idea that a loyal, intimate and motivated base of engaged stakeholders is a better judge of quality than a single individual. The Internet proves to be the best way to engage such stakeholders.

Politicians like Hilary Clinton, Tory leader David Cameron and French presidential candidate hopeful Lionel Jospin also use blogs to communicate directly with voters, and hopefully, to close the politician-public gap. Although there is no index at the moment of how successful they are, they are making their presence felt in the blogosphere.

THE RACE FOR MINDSHARE

As organisations race for mindshare, governments face a new communication dilemma – how to establish an online presence to engage the citizenry on policy issues, in a manner that it feels is constructive and avoids frivolity.

During Singapore's May 2006 General Elections (GE), podcasts and videocasts were banned and political parties were only allowed to use their websites for publicity. Ironically, the number of blogs that ran commentaries, satires, polls and photographs of election rallies increased exponentially. ChannelNews Asia Online reported that the number of blog articles on the GE grew nearly ten-fold during the nine-day campaign, compared to before Nomination Day. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) reported that there were about 50 websites and blogs that had "political" or "semi-political" content during the election.⁷

The archetypal political blog favours instant response over reflection, commentary over original research as well as stream-of-consciousness over structure.

Gideon Rachman
Financial Times

⁶ Noel Hartzell, executive communications director, Sun Microsystems.

⁷ Sim Chi Yim and Elgin Toh, "From light to lighter, to no touch?", Insight, *The Straits Times*, June 17, 2006.

The vast number of conversations in the Web everyday and the speed which they are generated make it impossible for governments to hear, sift through and respond on every issue. Understandably, it is apprehensive of how this power shift to the everyman will change the nature of 21st century politics and governance.

The extent to which governments can make the distinction between mainstream and new media is debatable. For instance, would such a dualistic approach result in a migration of eyeballs from the more controlled, state-directed mainstream media to the less-controlled, free-wheeling, unregulated space? Also, if mainstream media did not reflect a broad enough range of views of the citizenry, there is also the risk that the online space provides an alternative narrative of developments in a country, significantly reducing the scope for the mainstream media to bond through "shared experiences".

New media can never replace mainstream media, but the emergence of the former surely has implications for how governments manage the latter. The real question – beyond asking how governments should establish a credible presence in new media – is how governments' attitudes towards and management of mainstream media, including its existing media policy, should evolve over time. Arguably, with new media's emergence, there will be growing demands for a mainstream media that is more diverse, more pluralistic, more competitive and reflective of society's increasing heterogeneity.

What should governments do now? How best should they establish a credible presence in this new space?

BLOGGER RELATIONS

To deal with netizens, we have to understand why and how they behave. An ethnographic study of bloggers showed that people blog for five main reasons:⁸

1. to document one's life
2. to provide commentary and opinions
3. to express deeply felt emotions
4. to articulate ideas through writing
5. to form and maintain community forums

Intelliseek, an enterprise market intelligence company specializing on Internet issues, recommends that organisations first listen to identify who is talking in the blogosphere and what about, before deciding on an engagement strategy.

⁸ B. Nardi, "Why We Blog", *Communications of the ACM*, 47, 12 (2004), 41-46.

Intelliseek**3-phase approach to engaging netizens**Phase 1: Identify who is speaking

- What are the top 10 sites/forum that are discussing you and your organization?
- What is the motivation and objective of what the bloggers are saying?
- Who in your organization is monitoring the conversations?

Phase 2: Identify and flag out key issues

- Which issues fuel the most discussion? Which are the most emotional?
- What issues are most likely to prompt consumers to spread information to others?
- How do issues change over time and can you track the changes and trends?
- Do you have a system to listen and act?

Phase 3: Deepen the relationship

- How do you choose to act or change based on the discussions?
- What is your engagement strategy?
- What is your intended outcome in the short term and long term?

Increasingly, public relations professionals are also integrating blogger relations with traditional media relations strategies. Richard Edelman, president and CEO of Edelman PR, gave this advice: "Companies need to move away from sole reliance on top-down messages delivered to elites toward fostering peer-to-peer dialogue among consumers and employees, activating a company's most credible advocates."

Rules for Engaging Netizens

(by Hill & Knowlton, a public relations consultancy)

1. Demonstrate your willingness to participate.
2. Consider the impact of what you are going to say.
3. Be clear why you are doing it.
4. Fight fire with fire; have your say but on your own terms.
5. Use an informal tone and language.
6. Praise as well as defend.
7. Identify yourself to build credibility.
8. Find bloggers who are passionate about your topic, decide how to approach them and ask them to participate.
9. Give them ways to tell you how they want to be communicated to, what they want to hear from you, and what they do not want to hear from you.
10. Develop platforms to help them communicate with you (e.g. corporate websites), not the other way around.

In Singapore, agencies such as the National Heritage Board (NHB), Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, National Library Board, Singapore Tourism Board, Health Promotion Board, have been engaging their respective communities through blogs and podcasts and establishing new links and trust. NHB's blog www.yesterday.sg hosts conversations on Singapore's museums and heritage and is home to 2,000 registered members. It attracted 56,000 unique visitors in its first month of launch.

The challenge for governments is to cultivate a public that is passionate for its causes and committed enough to take ownership of issues. This new age of participation also demands new perspectives and competencies of organisation leaders. The Harvard Business Review ranked “the synthesising leader” as the number one Breakthrough Idea for 2006. Such a leader has “the ability to decide what information to heed, what to ignore, and how to organise and communicate that which we judge to be important.”⁹ A conscious and deliberate overhaul is needed in the way organisations receive, distribute and manage information, and say things, to support a more interactive and creative dimension.

OLD VERSUS NEW

As new media grow in standing, its rift with mainstream media widens. Today, some newspapers are predicting their own demise. Worldwide newspaper circulation fell by 5% from 1995 to 2003. The net savvy prefer to go to the Web for quick, short bursts of information and news, not unlike MTV images, rather than lengthy and well laid-out articles. Institutions that have depended on the mainstream media for communication appear to be losing their audience.

On the other hand, research suggests that we should not over-react. An IPS survey after Singapore’s 2006 GE showed that 75% of voters felt that mainstream media was important in shaping their decision during the GE, but only 33% felt so of Internet media. “Never have so many people written so much to be read by so few”.¹⁰ Perceived credibility, professionalism, reliability and integrity remain important to information consumers.

Many media owners are not leaving their future to chance but are actively investing in digital platforms. The Straits Times’ Stomp (Straits Times Online Mobile Print), its new interactive website, was launched in mid-2006, featuring blogs and discussion forums, to “connect and engage with readers on the web”. More significant is the driving force behind it: to transform a 161-year-old newspaper into a medium beyond paper. Whether this goes beyond a change in platform to a transformation in identity, role, content and culture remains to be seen.

New media provides a virtually infinite space for airing of views, and naturally attracts greater diversity of views, especially those – whether credible or not – that are marginalised by mainstream media. Ultimately, activity in the new media is driven by eye-witness accounts, official websites and other mainstream media channels, which form bloggers’ primary information sources. Mainstream media channels, can develop and maintain a strong reputation of credibility and trust by adjusting the way they distribute and manage information. A smart and effective engagement strategy should aim to preserve the credibility and relevance of mainstream media while harnessing the power of new media.

⁹ “The HBR List: Breakthrough Ideas for 2006”, *Harvard Business Review*, Feb 2006.

¹⁰ Katie Hefner, “For Some, the Blogging Never Stops”, *New York Times*, 27 May 2004.

SAVING THE EMPIRE

Microsoft Corporation's Channel 9 is generally known as one of the most innovative forms of blogger engagement using the Internet. For years, Microsoft has been plagued with a negative reputation of being monopolistic and exposing its customers to security flaws and glitches, so much so that the name Microsoft was synonymous with the words 'evil empire'. One option was for Microsoft to continue to ignore these evil empire conversations in hopes that they would die out eventually. However, five Microsoft employees were crazy enough to decide otherwise.

In Apr 2004, Microsoft quietly launched an official company blogsite called Channel 9 to facilitate communication between Microsoft and its developer and customer communities. Channel 9 started as a text blog which later moved on to video. Its intent was to invite people to look inside Microsoft the company, to see and hear the Microsoft people, their thoughts and passions. There were 2.5 million logins to Channel 9 in the first six months. At 2005, there were 1,500 active bloggers within Microsoft's staff strength of 5,600. By January 2006, the Edelman Trust Barometer, a survey of nearly 2,000 opinion leaders in 11 countries, found Microsoft Corporation to be the most trusted global company. Microsoft the Corporation is humanized.

WHAT NEXT?

While some organisations have fully embraced the Internet as a corporate culture, others like Google, Apple and Hewlett Packard are less effusive. The most common reason is a fear of accidental disclosures or conflicts with other communications channels. There is also the issue of time commitment and a very real fear of losing control, especially if the organisation's communication policy is founded on the principle of central command-and-control. In other instances, some decision makers are just uncomfortable with the cultural change it entails. "Being personal in public is just not Target's way".¹¹ Blogs may have taken off in the US, England, France, Japan and Korea, but are less prolific in Ireland, Germany, Russia and China. On the other hand, against a backdrop of activity, the silence of leaders and organisations – be it in business, politics or government – can be deafening.

Culture and leadership could be two of the key driving forces to new media adoption. Corporations and governments have to understand the maturity level of their stakeholders and decide what type of culture and policy they want to embrace, while preserving a strong sense of identity and values.

Ultimately, the challenge of the new media goes beyond a government's media policies. It is ultimately a challenge of how much the government needs to adjust and adapt its stance towards divergent, possibly dissenting views.

¹¹ Target is America's fourth largest general merchandise retailer with over 1,300 stores in 47 states.

ANNEX A
LIST OF BLOGSITES MENTIONED IN THIS PAPER

Channel 9

<http://channel9.msdn.com>

Health Promotion Board

www.npb.gov.sg

National Heritage Board

www.yesterday.sg

National Library Board

<http://dl.nlb.gov.sg/highbrowseonline/>

<http://dl.nlb.gov.sg/ask>

<http://dl.nlb.gov.sg/digitalk/>

<http://dl.nlb.gov.sg/victoria/>

www.ramblinglibrarian.blogspot.com

Stomp

www.stomp.com.sg

Sun Microsystems

<http://blogs.sun.com/roller/page/jonathan>

www.sun.com/aboutsun/media/blogs/policy.html

Technorati

www.technorati.com

