



EuroBlog International Research Symposium 2006

**Public Relations and Social Software:
Meeting the Challenges of Weblogs, Podcasts, Wikis and RSS**

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Abstracts

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A book with full versions of selected papers and additional articles, edited by Ansgar Zerfass, Philip Young and Swaran Sandhu, will be published later in 2006

Elizabeth Albrycht
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Weblogs and Participatory Communications: A Theoretical Framework

Abstract

Over the past few years, many changes have confronted communications professionals due to the Internet, the web, mobility, etc. (basically all of the new participatory communications tools). Because of these new tools, a fundamental shift in the entire model of communications (including marketing, PR, advertising, etc.) is now possible. This is a movement from the old command/control, uni-directional, war-metaphor driven practices of the past to a cooperative, multi-directional, network-based framework for action. When we move to this new framework, we must address a series of assumptions and questions, including:

- We hear "markets are conversations", but what does that mean in practical terms about how we re-structure corporate communications?
- We issue calls for "transparency", but what assumptions are underlying this call that come from the old command/control approach?
- We (culturally) celebrate (at least in the US) individualism in terms of "superstars" and "experts", but success in this new world may just rely on collective effort.
- Our strategies for success, e.g., for delivering messages, relies upon an objectification of the audience (people are things, without agency). But now, the audience is no longer passive. What does it mean to have an active audience (people with agency)? How must this new assumption change our strategy for communications?
- McLuhan famously stated, "the medium is the message." What is the message of the tools we are adopting e. g., blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, etc.? How does the tool itself change the interaction between transmitters - receivers of information? What does that mean for communication practice?

This presentation will present the beginnings of a theoretical framework for understanding participatory communications, as well as explore the changes in communications practice demanded by this new framework.

Swaran Sandhu

University of Hohenheim, Stuttgart, Germany

EuroBlog2006: Results of the first European survey on weblogs in Public Relations and Communication Management

Abstract

How are weblogs perceived by public relations and communication professionals across Europe? This was the lead question of the first European survey on weblogs in public relations and communication management. The survey was a pro bono project initiated by Euprera and conducted by research team in the U.K. and Germany as well as national multipliers in participating countries.

Nearly 600 communication professionals did participate in the survey. Weblogs are currently much en vogue in professional communication settings and academia. However, most discussions evolve around a few selected weblogs that are deemed to be best-practices cases. We only have little indicators on the perception of weblogs by communicators. Some of the questions of the survey were:

- Are blogs a viable communication tool?
- How can blogs be integrated into the overall communication strategy?
- What are the perceived limitations and the benefits of weblogs?
- What kind of weblogs are used?
- What are the most favourite weblogs by the sample?

The presentation will provide a short overview of the main findings of the survey as a first empirical frame of reference for the following presentations.

Philip Young

University of Sunderland, Sunderland, Great Britain

Weblogs, Podcasts and Communication Management: Conclusions from the EuroBlog2006 survey

Abstract

Although many commentators point to the US Presidential campaign of 2004 as the period when weblogging began to make a quantifiable impact on media culture it is arguable that the Euroblog 2006 survey of November/ December 2005 broadly coincided with the emergence of weblogs into European social media discourse. In this context Euroblog 2006 findings provide a useful 'snapshot' of practitioner attitudes and perceptions that will have lasting value as a benchmark for future research.

Despite challenges in gaining a robust sample, one of the most significant conclusions to be drawn from Euroblog 2006 is the concept of a 'two-speed Europe', with a noticeable divergence between those who see tangible potentials in the social software technologies (notably weblogs), and those who remain unconvinced that such innovations will come to represent a substantial channel for public relations/ corporate discourse. As well as providing useful statistical data Euroblog offers a wealth of qualitative information, revealing both enthusiasms and scepticisms; it is expected that analysis of the tone of comments will offer a useful 'historical' framework for future comparative studies.

This paper seeks to identify themes for future research including the systematisation of perceived drivers for take-up of the new channels, and an analysis of perceived threats, including the difficulties Public Relations practitioners are experiencing as they adapt and reframe strategies to meet a changing environment which privileges transparent dialogue and engaging publics in open 'conversations'. It appears that organisational structure, perceptions of the role of Public Relations and tensions with institutional culture are all playing a role in inhibiting the wider adoption of weblogs; the evidence seems to suggest that those organisations that can work through such challenges are seeing benefits from adopting new social software technologies.

This paper attempts to compare and contrast the key strengths and weaknesses of weblogs as a communication conduit by analysing two constructs, that of the 'blog evangelist', and the 'sceptical' position adopted by a significant number of Euroblog 2006 respondents. This dialectic can be analysed in the context of classic models of Public Relations.

Olaf Nitz & Michael Schuster
Knallgrau New Media Solutions, Vienna, Austria

Cross media communication using weblogs and podcasting: antarctica2005.com

Abstract

In our paper we present new possibilities of communicating continuing events to a public audience. These possibilities will be demonstrated with a case study of Antarctica 2005, an expedition made between November 2005 and January 2006. This expedition was covered in a weblog and supported with a podcast, recording satellite phone conversations with one of the expedition members. Weblogs, as a part of social software, have recently gained a greater momentum in the public awareness in Europe. In contrary to the US, where blogs are commonly accepted, in some cases already expected, Europe lags the use of Social Software in a corporate environment. They prove to be especially useful where a more conversational style of communication is appropriate and the communication effort is rather long termed.

The Case:

In the case of Antarctica 2005 the main sponsor, Bank Austria-Creditanstalt, Austrias largest international bank, wanted to communicate their claim being "The path to success" ("Der Weg zum Erfolg") by covering the experience of Wolfgang Melchior, a expedition team member from Austria, throughout the whole polar expedition. With common weblog technology this proved to be rather difficult, because carrying a computer and connecting to the internet would have been impossible, facing the weather conditions of up to -50° C and the restrictions for carrying luggage on the 40 day journey to the south pole. We decided to incorporate the latest development in the blogosphere, called podcasting, into the weblog. This technology means that audio files are published in the weblog by using enclosures in the RSS feed of the site. Those RSS feeds can be retrieved by users through a flash-based audio player in the weblog or by using either feedreaders or the iTunes podcast directory. The podcast entries were satellite telephone conversations, recorded and published in the weblog.

Main Findings:

From November to January 44 entries were posted, visitors made 186 comments (on average 4 per entry, which is above average) and 24 podcast episodes from every part of the expedition were posted. Over 31.500 unique visitors followed the "path to success" of Wolfgang Melchior, about 500 every day, mainly from Austria (71 %), but also from other countries. The project is definitely a cross-media approach to integrated communication. Radio stations used the files for their coverage of the story, the weblog was cited and referenced in newspapers and on online news pages.

Simone Happ

T-Systems Multimedia Solutions, Dresden, Germany

E-Channel concepts for customer relationship management: catablog.de

Abstract

Blogs modify communication. Even while more than 95% of blogs are private and covering non-commercial topics they do have a major influence on business communication too.

A blog is a new kind of channel to give experts a voice for communication and build relationships to colleagues, customers or interested people at all. In T-Systems Multimedia Solutions GmbH this led to the decision to launch a blog for project expertise in the field of e-procurement. Objectives are as follows:

- Describe competence and expertise
- Reach the adequate target group
- Give information in user-oriented views
- Refer know-how to our customers in personal consulting: genuine, earnest and authentic
- Space for new subjects and ideas
- Place for innovative and provocative issues
- On the long-tail community building
- Experience delivers tips and tricks but also obstacles and failures
- Put blog information in context to our unemotional and businesslike portfolio content
- Separating the marketing and sales of products from qualification of customers

Of course, possible negative impacts and risks of launching a business blog were discussed. Risks are too much insider information spreading outside or an angry customer, who can damage the image. But pull marketing is based on a live and open communication paradigm and that means

- New interactivity within and outside the company
- Dealing with a customer complaint
- Sharing know-how needs giving know-how first.

The blog is part of an overall E-Channel concept and has its specific role and function for customer relationship management within the marketing strategy. The approach is influenced by pull marketing technologies, Web 2.0 paradigms and an overall concept for customer retention.

Steffen Büffel

University of Trier, Trier, Germany

**Weblog strategies of print media corporations:
<http://blog.intrinet.de>**

Abstract

German media - compared to media in the United States and elsewhere - have been slow to adopt new social software and network communication technologies. It has only been recently that German print media corporations have discovered weblogs and social software not only as a topic that ought to be covered journalistically but also as a new genre in online journalism. The hope is to promote the newspaper and brand among a young, educated and tech-savvy audience, a target group that traditional print media corporations increasingly fail to address and lose access to. According to a survey by AG.MA/BDZV/ZMG (2005) newspapers in Germany have lost 9-12 percent in their reach of audiences in the age ranges of the 14-19, 20-29 and 30-39 year olds over the past 10 years. Print media markets around the globe face similar problems (cf. World Press Trends 2005) and figures for German regional newspaper markets are even more dramatic.

With the advent of Web 2.0, user-generated content, collaboratively created meta-data (folksonomies), syndication of content, dynamic social network structures and new online communities emerge. The monopoly of traditional mass media communication as gatekeepers seems to erode since those self-organized peer-to-peer and grass-roots movements gain momentum in reaching and creating different public spheres. The shift from hierarchical, unidirectional and thus monologic one-to-many communications to networked multi-directional and thus dialogic many-to-many communications brings new challenges to media corporations in regard to their journalistic as well as their marketing and public relations strategies. To face those challenges, traditional concepts of marketing and public relations have to be rethought and extended into the direction of interactive corporate communications (cf. Krzeminski/Zerfaß 1999; Zerfaß 2005; Zerfaß/Boelter 2005). This means that media corporations have to develop strategies to join the networked conversations of bloggers and thus try to get in direct contact with their respective stakeholders.

In my presentation I will first give a brief overview of print media corporations and their usage of blogs in the German blogosphere. I will then classify their approaches from a media studies and mass communication theory perspective. Following that I will use the weblog project of German regional newspaper "Trierischer Volksfreund" (<http://blog.intrinet.de>) as a prime example of how journalistic uses of blogs, marketing goals and the management of a local weblog community of stakeholders can be integrated into an overall strategy of interactive corporate communications. The drawback is that the line between journalistic ideals, marketing goals and public relations seem to blur. This may serve as one important aspects (among others) to be addressed in the concluding discussion with the audience.

**Børge Kristensen, University of Copenhagen &
Trine-Maria Kristensen, Social Square, Copenhagen, Denmark**

Blog Usability

Abstract

Weblogs, so far, have been created by enthusiasts. And people who read blogs have to a great extent been other bloggers. While the number of weblogs is increasing rapidly every day, the number of blog readers is not growing at all, according to a Gallup survey.

Why not? - The usability of blogs might be an issue.

"Weblogs are often too internally focused and ignore key usability issues, making it hard for new readers to understand the site and trust the author", usability specialist Jakob Nielsen recently wrote in his reputable bi-weekly Alertbox column.

A study by Catalyst Group from 2005 confirms his view. The New York based consultancy tested one of BusinessWeek's blogs with regular users of the Internet who had no, or limited, experience with blogs. None of the users understood how to subscribe to the blog using it's RSS feed. Most users were so confused by terms like "recent posts", "trackbacks", "categories", "comments" and "archives" that they were unable to navigate the blog. Few of the participants in the study even recognized that they were on a blog, even though they were familiar with the term.

The University of Copenhagen and blog consultancy Social Square are doing a series of usability tests. Several types of blogs are in focus: corporate blogs, media blogs, personal blogs and knowledge blogs.

The project is in its early stages, but we are able to share some of our first findings. We would be enthusiastic to get feedback and input on methodology - one of the challenges being that, contrary to a normal usability test, users and publishers are often the same people. Also, users read the same blog from different platforms - as RSS is becoming the default way of accessing Web sites for advanced users.

Our Blog Usability session includes video recordings of usability sessions with blog users.

At the end of the project we hope to be able to build a set of blog usability guidelines. We believe that as corporate blogs and media blogs become strategically important, blog publishers need to embrace the full circle of user experience: Blogs need to be usable, credible, well-written, have a stylish graphic design and a logical structure.

Dr Tim E. Fischer
University of Munich, Munich, Germany

Weblogs, the Attention Economy and Public Opinion

Abstract

Although Weblogs have become popular in the US and have become a valuable source for commentary and information among US netizens and a strong two digit growth of weblogs in the European blogosphere gives rise to further discussions whether blogs drive public opinion, change the overall media landscape and have an impact on journalism.

The session will present a framework for public relations work based on Franck's works on the attention economy and institutional economic aspects. Fischer will show that weblogs can be constituted as a new emerging media with new distinctive functions within the media economy that can be used by corporations within their public relations work. The author will show that due to the easy to use technology (creation, handling, updating) and the low cost for production and distribution of content, the entrance costs for new communicators have been lowered considerably giving rise to new communicators that do not originate from the media industry. Due to the social networking technology and high link density weblogs allow these communicators to participate in the public discussion and to set new agenda topics or to comment them therefore defining them as an emerging new media.

Therefore weblogs might pose a threat to traditional journalistic routines as these fast-paced personal commentaries allow new forms of content production and distribution that are vice versa to these routines. The set up framework will discuss whether an efficient use of blogs as public relations tool is possible and whether public opinion can be affected by the use of blogs (agenda setting).

Luís Miguel Poupinha

Instituto Superior de Novas Profissões, Lisbon, Portugal

Corridors and Time Lapses: Corporate Communication, the building of Reality and CommTech

Abstract

The building of shared reality, or shared beliefs of "what things are" and "what is happening" comes from the successive events defined by several sources and distribution channels which defines actors and issues to the general society and its actors, segments and tribes. Social action is a result of interactions via direct or indirect processes of communication in which individuals and groups are interconnected, generating a network of perceptions, beliefs, interpretations, decisions for actions, reflexes on others and consequences on these. The development of technology has supplied society and individuals among it with resources to be connected with this network of interdependency, allowing people to fulfil their perceived needs with resources placed in a perceived place in this network. The process depends, of course, on the information each one has to identify needs and to identify suppliers and their trustful attributes. This depends on the effort from suppliers to communicate and, of course, the actors with needs to search information for their use. Reality is, by this, composed by the results of communicative efforts from someone to deal with this offer-demand-evaluation process, in a chain of symbolical production, with forms and meanings circulating in the social and psychosociological environment in which individuals are created.

According to this idea, time is perceived via the sequence of events (symbolic buildings) that co-exist or succeed one after, reaching individuals and aggregates of people which share the belief that "that is the things which are happening". There is always something happening and being narrated or perceived via culturally acquired protocols of mental classification, which means that there are no real time-lapses, because, during life, there is no symbolic lapses. However, the notion of time lapse can be useful to understand and to manage communication if we take into account the following notion: people live inside socio-symbolic corridors, time-corridors, knowledge/reality corridors. Being in one means having time lapses in the others. Sometimes, individuals try to get out of all corridors (e. g. holidays). However, there is always someone trying to define reality to embrace people which are trying to get out of one frame of reality.

New proposals on communication technology are, for corporations and individuals, extensions for the "will of someone" to invite others for their corridor, to embrace one's corridor or, at least, to do a cross-corridor proposal. These processes mean an intersection on time processes, on each corridor (if they are linked to different time-symbol corridors). Or they can mean a reinforcement of a time-frame, if both actors are based in equal or similar corridors. As a conclusion, and as a main idea, corporate communication, marketing communications and the ways that now have to relate with publics, do have to take into account the idea that they co-manage time, corridors and the realities on them.

Dr Jan Schmidt
University of Bamberg, Bamberg, Germany

Bloggers as Trendsetters: A survey in Germany, Austria and Switzerland

Abstract

Over the last years, Weblogs have emerged as a new genre of computer-mediated communication. They are part of the growing field of "Social Software", that is of applications which support identity management, information management, and relationship management through online-based interaction. Weblogs allow for a wide range of different practices and publicity levels, ranging from the personal online-journal over tools for internal or external organizational communication to those which complement traditional journalism in discussing matters of societal relevance. Common to all these practices is an emphasis on personalized and authentic authorship, on interactivity and dialogue, and on building hypertextual and social networks through citing and commenting other online sources.

As a result of these practices, the highly interconnected Blogosphere has formed which fosters the rapid diffusion of information and opinion. Somewhat contrary to the widespread perception of Weblogs as non-hierarchical communication, not all Weblogs are equal, though. Limited attention resources as well as different expectations and varying sought gratifications have led to a hierarchy of Weblogs, as measured for example by their size of readership or number of incoming links. Those Weblogs with a higher centrality (sometimes referred to as the "A-List Weblogs") have greater chances of spreading information into and influencing opinions within their respective networks.

Comparatively little is known about the characteristics of Weblog authors and readers. This research gap is problematic because not only the network position of a Weblog, but also the characteristics of its author (e.g. openness for innovation, topics of interest, or level of blogging activity) will contribute to its ability to act as a attention hub or focal point. This paper will report on findings from an online-based survey „Wie ich blogge?!" which was the first general large-scale survey on sociodemographics, motivations and usage patterns of Weblog users from german-speaking countries (N=5.246). Included in the questionnaire was a validated nine-item scale on "Trendsetting" which about 4.300 participants answered. Based on these results, it will identify different subgroups of bloggers and their blogging habits. It will also identify areas of further research, namely the connection between individual- and network-based measures of trendsetting and network centrality. Thus, it will help advancing our knowledge of the Blogosphere as a communicative environment where ideas and information are shared and diffused through networks of different scope.

**Susana de Carvalho, Prof Dr José Quintela & Luís Miguel Poupinha
Instituto Superior de Novas Profissões, Lisbon, Portugal**

Public Relations Identity, Internet and Weblogs in Portugal

Abstract

Public Relations has been, in the past, linked with media (the now called traditional media). Today, those media have their own net-existence, in terms of the relationship processes between sources, media and publics.

This paper tries to answer the question "to which extent and by which attributes do cyber world belong to PR identity" in Portugal. For that, the researchers have pursued the following methodology:

- in-depth focused interviews with PR professionals;
- on-line semi-directive interviews with PR and Com professionals;
- closed questionnaires with PR professionals;
- websites ethnographic analysis.

The axial questions were related to the following aspects:

- Which kind of activities do PR perform via net?
- Which is and what can be the interference of PR in the net-performance of corporations and institutions?
- Which is the credibility of net information sources?
- Which are the possibilities of understanding and relating with public's opinion via net sources and means, in a logic of strategic issues management?
- Which can be the future of PR in relation with the net?

Sarah Zielmann
University of Münster, Münster, Germany

An archetype for European CEO-Blogs? Insights from Italy, Great Britain and Germany

Abstract

For a few years, not only private, but also corporate blogs provide a web based opportunity to publish informations and sentiments on personally determined issues. Corporate blogs accomplish an informational function and the functions of agenda setting and image building, among others. These blogs can be used internally and externally as a tool of knowledge management or to introduce products, services or corporate strategies. Furthermore, there is a constantly increasing amount of CEO-blogs in the United States, whereas a look at the practical experience in Europe is different: usually only a few tens are listed somewhere or are rather presumed.

At the beginning of the contribution, the current state of research shall be summarized regarding the chances and hassles of corporate blogs in general and of CEO-blogs in particular. Against this background, it can be stated to what extent these blogs can render a contribution to the respective business objectives. Surprisingly, it seems that little research has examined CEO-blogs cross-nationally, up to now. Hence, the presented exploratory study concentrates on a description and analysis of external European CEO-blogs being on the lookout for a cross-national prototype for these blogs. After having searched for CEO-blogs in several online profiles and having gathered information from experts, four CEO-blogs have been chosen via random selection in Germany, Great Britain, Italy (and France) and have been analysed over a period of three weeks. Doing this, the question was addressed to the consistence of the amount and the kind of CEO-blogs across these national boundaries. In addition, the results are based on phone interviews not only with experts from the German-speaking countries, Great Britain and Italy, but also with the bloggers themselves.

Finally, it can be stated, that a CEO-blog stresses the progressive image especially of technical orientated and a few other specialized small organizations being at the cutting-edge. Nevertheless, the top management of other organizations should be encouraged to create their own blog, too, as blogs are most likely to become more important in the future. Right now, an organization with a well performed CEO-blog would still get a bonus.

Based on these findings, a quantitative survey could be realized in a comparative perspective, including additional countries and not only studying CEO-blogs in general, but differentiating between types of organizations. Enterprises could then be distinguished according to the branch of trade for the purpose of presenting detailed similarities and varieties within a country and between countries. Thus, a model for successful corporate blogs and CEO-blogs could be shown.

Dr Ansgar Zerfass
MFG Baden-Württemberg, Stuttgart, Germany

Social Software, Business Excellence and Communication Strategies

Abstract

The upswing of weblogs, podcasts, wikis, RSS and other technologies known as social software has already stimulated a lot of discussion within academia and practice. However, most research focusses on partial aspects such as the motivation of bloggers and members of online communities, the use of weblogs as a communication tool, the dynamic rise of issues within the blogosphere, or successful business models. A "big picture" is missing - though this will help practitioners to set priorities and researchers to define areas for future debates.

This lecture presents a framework for theorizing about social software. It starts with the most relevant and basic question: Will communication ever be the same? The short movie "Epic 2015" argues that Google and Amazon will join forces in the near future, outperform traditional media like the New York Times, and change the way opinions are built dramatically. Three disciplines may be used to discuss the implications:

- From a sociological point of view, it can be argued that social software expands our communication culture. The Gutenberg, McLuhan and Internet Galaxy depicted by Manuel Castells are endorsed by the Google World, where digital reputation, passion, authenticity and hubness gain in importance.
- From an economic point of view, one has to notice that social software can be a driver for business excellence in different ways: There are market opportunities for public relation agencies and software providers, online services and media intelligence companies, and industry or other organisations who use communication management to achieve their institutional goals.
- From a management point of view, it is possible to explore the link between social software and communication strategy. Communication strategies define how (goals, channels) to communicate with whom (recipients, stakeholders) in which framework (public sphere). It may be appropriate to use weblogs and podcasts as channels, to build relationships with bloggers as gatekeepers, or to utilize the blogosphere for crisis prevention and viral campaigns.

In order to stimulate discussion, the presentation introduces a classification of corporate blogs and a strategy-exposure-matrix which may help public relations practitioners to define priorities and master the challenge of social software.

Prof Dr Helmut Krcmar, Technical University of Munich, Germany
Trine-Maria Kristensen, Social Square, Copenhagen, Denmark
Prof Dr Betteke van Ruler, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

What's next?
The impact of weblogs and social software
for public relations theory and practice

Roundtable Discussion

Curriculum vitae

- Prof Dr Helmut Krcmar is Professor for Information Systems at the Technical University of Munich, Germany, and Academic Director of the ;communicate! qualification program, which offers the first Executive MBA in Communication and Leadership in Germany. He graduated and received a doctorate in business administration from the University of Saarbrücken, Germany, where he worked as researcher and management consultant with Prof A.-W. Scheer. Helmut Krcmar continued his career as a Post Doctoral Fellow at the IBM Los Angeles Scientific Center, and as professor at New York University, City University of New York, and University of Hohenheim, Stuttgart, Germany. His research interests include information and knowledge management, value webs, computer supported cooperative work and information systems in health care and eGovernment.
- Trine-Marie Kristensen is managing director, founder and owner of Social Square, a communication consultancy based in Copenhagen, Denmark. She graduated in Public Relations at Roskilde University and is currently conducting research projects in close cooperation with the University of Copenhagen. As a consultant on the use of weblogs in organizations, Kristensen helps organisations to understand the conversational potential that social software provides, based on the believe that public relations will benefit from focusing some attention on conversations and dialogue.
- Prof Betteke van Ruler, PhD, is Professor of Communication Science within the Amsterdam School of Communication Research at the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. She is doing research on the practice of communication management and the relationship between organisations and the press. Betteke van Ruler is currently President of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (Euprera) and Chair of the PR Division of the International Communication Association (ICA). She holds the Bob Heath Award for the best top paper of the ICA PR Division (2004). Recent books are "Public Relations and Communication Management in Europe" (co-editor Dejan Verčič) and "Communication Management in Communication Scientific Perspective" (in Dutch).

The panel will be moderated by Swaran Sandhu, who is one of the authors of the EuroBlog2006 survey and works at the Chair for Communication Science and Journalism at the University of Hohenheim, Germany.

EuroBlog International Research Symposium 2006, www.euroblog2006.org/symposium