

Communication for the 21st Century Or, How to have your blog and read it too!

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ABSTRACT

This presentation deals with the challenges faced by communications professionals by the rise of Web 2.0 sites such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *MySpace* and *Wikipedia*. It is argued that we are moving from the 20th century one-to-many, top-down mass communications model towards a 21st century communications model that is more open, interactive, multidimensional and participatory, but presents new challenges for business, government and organisations more generally.

I wanted to begin today's presentation by thanking the Society of Business Communicators (Queensland) for inviting me to present to your prestigious breakfast symposiums. I dare say that I would not be surprised if my colleague and good friend Patsy McCarthy had a say in the decision to invite me, and for that I thank her. In my time working with Patsy at QUT, I learnt many things, two of which stand out. The first was being aware of the difference between 'communication' and 'communications', and the different contexts in which they are relevant. The second is an understanding of the many and diverse ways in which both communication and communications matter, particularly for those seeking a competitive advantage in a complex world, be they individuals or organisations.

I am going to introduce today's presentation by considering the 2007 Australian Federal Election. One thing that we know about elections from all over the world is that when they are on, interest in all things Internet-related spikes. This would be as true of elections in China and Iran as it is more obviously in the U.S. and Britain, and it is certainly true in Australia. Site statistics that I am aware of for the big five news and information portals in Australia bear this out for the 2007 elections (The 'Big Five' are News, ABC, Fairfax, ninemsn and Yahoo7).

But the 2007 elections saw a lot happening on the edges of the mainstream media, on blogs, on Facebook and MySpace, and on YouTube. I'll demonstrate this with two examples. Both of these are taken from YouTube, and both were produced by 24 year old Law student from Sydney named Hugh Atkin.

Slide showing Hugh Atkin videos on YouTube

The first of these, which run for about three minutes, presents the then Prime Ministerial aspirant Kevin Rudd as Kevin 007, with his mysterious charm being presented as akin to that of the better known 007, Sean Connery as James Bond.

Show Kevin 007 – The Man with the Golden Jaw

The second video I will show, and the one that caught the eye of a lot of people, represents Kevin Rudd as a revolutionary leader in the tradition of Chinese propaganda videos. It riffed off the scare campaign of the Liberals that Labor were a crypto-communist front organisation, Kevin Rudd's fluency in Mandarin (his life story is now translated into Mandarin, and he is known in China as Lu Kewen), and the growing fascination with all things China-related in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, including the fascinating iconography of the Cultural Revolution.

Show Kevin Rudd – Chinese Propaganda Video

In terms of my presentation today, it is fitting that Labor won the 2007 Federal election, as they certainly won the Internet campaign. The Labor campaign made ready use of sites such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube well before the election campaign proper began, communicating an image of being new, fresh, forward thinking, and attuned to the needs and aspirations of the 'Net Generation'.

Show Kevin07 slide

This contrasted to a reactive, clumsy and largely ineffectual use of the Internet by the Liberals, perhaps best illustrated by John Howard's ill-fated foray into the world of YouTube to announce his new climate change policies.

Show Bill Leak cartoon

Indeed, one of the features of the Web 2.0 environment is that if you don't stake out your own territory, others may do it for you. Again, this was seen in the 2007 election, with a proliferation of fake John Howard Facebook pages. Tell-tale signs that these sites, which actually appeared on Facebook until some one complained, included statements such as:

Activities: Politics, observing polls, running fear campaign, cunningly releasing new policies to win elections.

Interests: Winning. At all costs.

Show fake John Howard Facebook page

So we see a familiar pattern in the history of the Internet, where the use of the new medium for strategic communication, dialogue, conversation and community building co-exist with its uses for subversion, parody, invective and misinformation. The most successful parodic TV programs, such as *The Chaser's War on Everything* in Australia and *The Jon Stewart Daily Show* in the U.S., as well as the anarchic humour on *South Park*, have a second life via the Web through the circulation of their

materials through YouTube and other sites. Similarly, some of the most successful blogs are among the most opinionated and partisan, with Andrew Bolt's blog on the *Herald-Sun* site being an interesting case in point (<http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/>).

I have mentioned Web 2.0 in this presentation, and I will now take the opportunity to say a few things about what it is. The term is sometimes credited to Tim O'Reilly and his O'Reilly Media group, O'Reilly describes its key underlying principle as being '*Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them ... [or] harnessing collective intelligence.*'¹ The term has its critics, who see it as hype, or what the Internet theorist Steve Woolgar termed 'cyberbole', or as marketing bait to promote over-capitalisation in a new Internet capital-raising bubble.²

The concept of Web 2.0 has caught on for two particular reasons. First, it has embedded within it a range of the features that have long been seen as central to the Web as a communications infrastructure, such as the scope for participation, interactivity, collaborative learning and social networking (*social networking media* is a commonly used alternative to Web 2.0), as well as positive networking effects from harnessing collective intelligence. In other words, the quality of participation increases as the numbers participating increase, and this in turn attracts more new users to the sites. Second, some of the fastest growing Web sites of the 2000s have been based upon Web 2.0 principles. These include sites such as the photography site *Flickr*, the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, the online video library *YouTube*,

¹ Tim O'Reilly, 2006, 'Web 2.0 Compact Definition: Tying Again', *O'Reilly Radar*, http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/12/web_20_compact.html, posted 12 October.

² Steve Woolgar, 2002, 'Five Rules of Virtuality', in S. Woolgar (ed.), *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

aggregated Web log (blog) sites such as *Blogger*, *Livejournal* and *Technorati*, and the various personalised Web space sites such as *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Friendster* and *Bebo*.

The core principles of software programs and Internet sites that conform to Web 2.0 principles are that they are:

- Many-to-many in their connectivity;
- Decentralised in terms of control;
- User-focused and easy for new users to use;
- Open in terms of their technology standards and their Applications Programming Interface (API);
- Relatively simple and 'lightweight' in their design, their administrative requirements and their start-up and ongoing development costs;
- Expected to evolve and change over time, as users make new modifications to the sites.

A recent set of essays on *First Monday* summarise the critical state of play about Web 2.0. In his introduction to this collection, Matthew Zimmer observes:

Web 2.0 represents a blurring of the boundaries between Web users and producers, consumption and participation, authority and amateurism, play and work, data and the network, reality and virtuality. The rhetoric surrounding Web 2.0 infrastructures presents certain cultural claims about media, identity, and technology. It suggests that everyone can and should use new Internet

technologies to organize and share information, to interact within communities, and to express oneself. It promises to empower creativity, to democratize media production, and to celebrate the individual while also relishing the power of collaboration and social networks.

But Web 2.0 also embodies a set of unintended consequences, including the increased flow of personal information across networks, the diffusion of one's identity across fractured spaces, the emergence of powerful tools for peer surveillance, the exploitation of free labor for commercial gain, and the fear of increased corporatization of online social and collaborative spaces and outputs.³

So what might this mean for you, or for your organisation? The tricky issue here is that the couplet you/your organisation takes on a particular meaning in this context, as these social networking sites very much blur the lines between public and private selves. They are a product, not simply of APIs and user-focused design, but of a generation that is familiar with reality TV, self-promotion, do-it-yourself media production and celebrity culture, as well as being 'always on'. We are at a threshold moment in 'always on' culture, as the Apple iPhone and its many competitors are now seeing computing become truly portable, as it is now on your phone and hence in your pocket or purse at all times, rather than portable in the sense we have meant with the laptop computer. A figure worth pondering in this respect is that China now has at least 210 million Internet users, but also has about 600 million owner of mobile phones.

³ Matthew Zimmer, 2008, 'Critical Perspectives on Web 2.0', *First Monday* <<http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2137/1943>>, posted 3 March.

People who use sites such as Facebook and MySpace would have little trouble understanding why Corey Worthington put his 16th birthday party invitation in suburban Narre Warren up on MySpace, with over 500 people subsequently crashing the party. Corey's party was roundly condemned when it was held in the middle of January – dead news time in Australia – with the Victorian Premier, the Minister for Police, the Police Commissioner and Leila MacKinnon from *A Current Affair* all offering levels of condemnation that would have been unlikely had he committed an actual crime, but Corey has many fans.

Generation Corey?

Here is an entry from the site Best Ever TV about Corey Worthington and his appearance on *A Current Affair*, to give a sense of what is going on;

I once had [this theory](#) that the apocalyptic house party - as seen in pretty much every teen movie in the 1980's - was only a myth, and could never truly exist outside the realm of **John Hughes**-penned Hollywood fiction. Then I saw the following video of **Corey Worthington**, Master of Parties, who for some 4 minutes stood proud and firm and open-shirted and cool-shaded as some square Australian news reporter grilled him about what sounds like the most epic party ever. As the lame-o newscaster repeatedly requests Cory remove his cool ironic sunglasses, and tries to wrench a little remorse out of the clearly baked-out-of-his-mind party animal (who's currently in hiding from both his parents and the fuzz), like the **Rosa Parks** of wasted suburban kids, he

courageously refuses to be swayed by her buzz-killing ways. This young man is a hero, a legend, and worthy of our reverent honor.

[http://www.bestweekever.tv/2008/01/15/icymi-the-legend-of-corey -
worthington/](http://www.bestweekever.tv/2008/01/15/icymi-the-legend-of-corey-worthington/)

It is perhaps worth noting that Corey Worthington now has a Wikipedia entry, after the first one was rejected by Wikipedia users, and that copycat Corey parties have been held in Bayview Heights, Sydney, Seacliff Park, Adelaide, and the Townsville suburb of Mysteron (from www.coreyworthington.org).

Being open about yourself is a key to participation in social networking sites. Kevin Anderson, Head of Blogging and Interactivity at *The Guardian* in the U.K., has observed that the three ways for an online mainstream media site to be successful are:

1. To open up to your audience;
2. To involve your audience in meaningful ways;
3. To tap into the wisdom that exists within crowds.⁴

None of this is easy. Opening up online potentially means opening yourself up to criticism, ridicule, ratings, rankings, parody, pranks, spamming, identity theft, offers of MBAs from Russian prostitutes, and, cruellest of all, being ignored completely. It also raises the interesting question, if you are prominent within a public organisation,

⁴ Kevin Anderson, Head of Blogging and Interactivity, *The Guardian*, presentation to Fairfax Digital Media 08 conference, Sydney, 7 March, 2008.

of the relationship between what you say in a personal capacity and what that represents for the organisation that you are a part of.

Similarly, involving those who access your online site as participants and content co-creators in ways that go beyond the trivial or gestural is difficult to adapt to if you have been trained in communication practices that are top-down, sender-message-receiver based mass media or mass communication models. A tipping point has arguably been reached in journalism, where the rise of blogging, citizen journalists, collaborative Web sites and social media are now bumping up constantly against the claims of accredited mainstream journalists to elite professional authority over what constitutes the news and how it is reported.

News organisations throughout the world are trying to work out how to respond to this. At one end, the *OhMyNews* site in South Korea has embraced citizen journalism, with its online news content provided globally by a mix of 65 staff reporters and about 60,000 citizen journalists. At the other end, what has become known as the 'July 12 incident' at *The Australian* last year indicates the degree of resistance that exists towards authority claims on the part of bloggers. In its Editorial on July 12, and in response to a week of sustained online criticism of the reporting of opinion poll data by *The Australian's* chief political reporter Dennis Shanahan, the blogging community were variously described as 'woolly headed critics', 'sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job in a real newspaper', 'out of touch with ordinary views', and engaging in 'smug, self assured, delusional swagger' that was not real news or informed opinion. In a statement that is more revealing than it

perhaps first appeared, the editorial proclaimed that ‘we understand Newspoll because we own it’. The two problems here are:

1. The Editor of *The Australian* does not own Newspoll, Rupert Murdoch does, and he is a lot more interested in the ‘wisdom of crowds’ in the online world than many journalists would be comfortable with;
2. The fact that such claims need to be made at all indicates the extent of creeping paranoia that exists about the status of mainstream media outlets and journalism feature writers in this changing informational landscape.

There is also a leap of faith element in accepting the wisdom of crowds. For critics such as Andrew Keen, this is the rise of the ‘Cult of the Amateur’, or what others have termed ‘digital Maoism’, a flattening of once-stable hierarchies of authority as everyone gets onboard to offer an opinion, advice or information on the Internet, without gatekeepers to filter out ‘good’ and ‘bad’ content. Their concerns are shared by bodies such as Education Queensland, which prevent school students from citing *Wikipedia* in their assignments, meaning that throughout the state, there is a complex exercise in pretending that information sourced from *Wikipedia* was in fact found somewhere else. A similar set of gatekeeping assumptions about ‘trustworthy’ and ‘unreliable’ information sources can be found among the academic community and in universities.

I believe that these issues will swim around in the Australian mediascape and infosphere for some years to come, with varying degrees of accommodation and resistance from established institutions and communication professionals. The theme

of my talk has been that communication practices are changing, and that we are moving from the 20th century one-to-many, top-down mass communications model towards something that is more open, interactive, multidimensional and participatory. How organisations in business, government and the community sector respond to it is something that is already being formed. For communications professional, now is very much the time to look at not just the new technologies, but at the different forms of communication practice that are arising through them. But I might leave the last word on this to our *YouTube* impresario Hugh Atkin, and his mashing up of *Insiders'* Barrie Cassidy and our slightly faded out teenage rebel poster boy of 2008, Corey Worthington.

Corey's other party video