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BUBBLE WRAP

Social media, public relations, culture and society

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This chapter seeks to identify and understand the various ways public relations is working through the internet, particularly 'social media', exploring a range of associated social and cultural developments. Relevant to this discussion are two divergent views about its character. The first is a utopian ideal that came to prominence in Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* (1995). It promoted a key assumption about the internet's open accessibility and potential to create a digital democracy where new forms of 'community' could flourish. The second view is somewhat bleaker and undermines this. Castells (2001) argued that even in early and emerging internet cultures, it is likely that entrenched relations of power were firmly in place, providing important techno-economic and social advantages to big business and their instruments. Contextualised by this dichotomy, I explore online cultures and theorise how they have provided oxygen to the rather tarnished occupation of public relations. In the late twentieth century, the public relations industry was derided for its ruthless promotion of organisational self-interest, resulting in 'spin' or the degradation of 'truth' in public debates, (L'Etang, 2008; Breit, 2007). Moreover it was lampooned when rafts of clever but unethical practices linked to big business were exposed, examples are greenwashing (the pretence of being environmentally responsible) and astroturfing (phoney front groups) (Nelson, 1989; Stauber & Rampton, 1995; Burton, 2007). Therefore public relations' expansion and hybridisation through social media is of interest, not only to those within the industry concerned with its ethics, but more broadly in society, as these developments could have consequences for the creation of conditions where people can think for themselves. Questions I explore are the effects of this increased activity – and its characteristics – and if they pose new threats for the agency and the political development of citizens, as well as challenges for ethical practice within the occupation of public relations.

Technologically transformative, seductively narcissistic and detraditionalised, the internet in its many forms has colonised social and economic life in the twenty-first century.

It has brought into being a social space in which people can express themselves, search for information, buy goods and services, and importantly have inter-relations. The advantage of flexible and adaptable communication in a networked world is no more evident than in the second wave of internet usage 'Web 2.0' which gained prominence in 2004. According to Brown (2009: 1) this development enabled the easy addition of 'words, pictures, sounds and video' into web sites. These 'DIY' affordances have given rise to the burgeoning use of social media (or networking) sites as a form of direct publishing. Examples are blogs or online journals set up by individuals and accessed by other users who comment on the e-diary entries; and wikis, where users collaboratively 'open edit' material by consensus. They now provide for new forms of social relations, but significantly mark a shift in power from technocrats to ordinary users (Brown, 2009: 2). In tandem with these developments, enterprises, such as Second Life, Twitter and Facebook, have proliferated. Now the term 'social media' is used interchangeably with 'Web 2.0' (Safko & Brake, 2009: ix).

On first appearance the rise of social media – free thinking, inventive and bold – may seem like a pessimistic development for an occupation like public relations. Indeed PR began as a way for an organisation to generate positive publicity that might offset public pressures to regulate big business' (McElreath, 1997: 6). Typically, in the twentieth century, much of its activity was identified with media that could reach mass audiences such as newspapers, radio and television; and consequently, power was neatly concentrated in the hands of media gatekeepers, such as editors, who could be cultivated and influenced (Ryan, 1991). Therefore developments that facilitate 'publics' producing and distributing content to mass audiences, in a cost effective way, might seem highly unfavourable for an occupation focused on controlling and managing their behaviour and attitudes. Hence for PR theorist Rob Brown, the shift in power relations could be regarded as alarming:

They are taking matters into their own hands through their blogs and online networks and user-generated content. They are organizing political campaigns and building coalitions based around common interests. They are spreading news and information to one another on a scale never before thought possible. They are the masters now.

(Brown, 2009: 20)

Today, the internet's decentralised organisational structure and affordances have changed the means and conventions by which people and organisations engage. Reaching a mass audience is no longer the sole domain of a few large organisations. Blogs, for example, give immediate, grassroots feedback on corporations. This information flow can build groups from previously unconnected backgrounds, expand the users' personal networks, encourage engagement and contribute to the coordination of social action. This happened in 2005 when a dissatisfied Dell computer customer posted a blog about his experiences with the giant corporate, causing a snowball effect that vexed the company for years (Brown, 2009: 17). Therefore, for business, social media presents issues such as: lack of message control as 'postings are regarded as

sacrosanct' (Brown, 2009: 14); the rapid spread of damaging information; as well as a quagmire of legal problems in the protection of intellectual property, such as copyright, brand names and logos (Newson et al., 2009: 142–47).

Despite this, public relations is thriving, and in particular, Web 2.0 or social media provide untrammelled territory. According to Brown one reason is that 'we are starting to see a whole host of new routes and opportunities through which we can communicate with our audience' (2009: 21). Similarly, for technology journalist Rupert White (in Newson et al., 2009: xii), 'Any company that can work out how to make money from creating the "room" in which a community can interact and play most likely doesn't need to create very much content for that community. Build it, and they will come.' Hence for business, this vast, playful, new web-using public can become their greatest asset 'and all for no salary' (White in Newson et al., 2009: xii). These views suggest that rather than a real shift in power that empowers publics, for business, it is more the case that the 'rules of engagement' have changed.

Building on this ambiguity, my overall argument is that social media provides public relations as organisational 'self-interest' more opportunity to control and influence its web-users. In unpacking my argument, I apply a broad-based sociological and cultural approach to avoid a pre-occupation with the surface effects and hype surrounding the new technology. A myriad of descriptive works exist that serve this function adequately. Rather I seek to shed light on the underlying social structures and cultural transformations taking place around these new discursive social relations. Hence, I focus on the emerging internet cultures and communicative strategies used by business. In particular, my analysis centres on culture, language and meaning-making and how this positions 'publics' in relation to conflict and the use of persuasive techniques. 'Publics' are defined as a group of people that organisations wish to communicate with, and to persuade, in relation to a politically contentious issue (Heath, 2001: 47), while 'culture' is defined as 'the constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience' and the relationship between this, to the creation of social identity (Fiske, 1989: 1). Key concepts that I draw on to argue this case are Jurgen Habermas' ideas about communicative action; Ulrich Beck's conceptions of individualisation; and Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony.

A web of little traditions and relics

Public relations can be defined as the instrument of specialised commercial interests used in the creation of self-serving public consent (Habermas, 1995). Hence some unease about the PR industry is partly because of its potential to exploit news and media outlets 'to the point of setting agendas and becoming primary definers themselves' (Breit, 2007: 10). In part, it is because these practices have led to controversial issues around social control and resistance. Regarding the phenomenon of public relations as insidious, Habermas (1995: 193–235) maintained that this was because the public is unaware of its presence within the 'public sphere'. In its purest form the public sphere is a social space – such as a newspaper discussion or a public

forum – separate from the state and business, and where citizens, in a free and open way, engage in dialogue and debate focused around issues for the common good (Habermas, 1995: 27). He pointed out that in public relations, it is therefore vital that an advertisement is not recognisable as the presentation of self-interest, but rather it creates the illusion of public interest mimicking the original intention of the public sphere (Habermas, 1995: 194). Therefore for public relations to be successful, consumers must be given a false consciousness and believe that they are actually making a decision based on their own judgement about what is good for themselves. Building on these themes, I speculate that public relations and its problems for society have been hard for publics to analyse precisely because it is an unusual form of ‘system rationality’ or instrumental reason that publicly represents itself as communicative action – the form of rationality that links to the lifeworld and its notions of interpretative consensus and mutual agreement (Habermas, 1989: 333). To engineer consent in a climate of consensus (Habermas, 1995: 194) public relations is thus saturated with symbols and images of communicative action rationality and of the lifeworld. Familiar examples are highly produced brochures where images and text draw on reassuring ideas, such as family, entertaining and good times, and are used to position publics positively in relation to a ‘key message’ that privileges a commercial entity or discourse.

Given these unusual business characteristics, how does social media (or networking) provide new opportunities for public relations’ expansion? According to Newson et al. (2009: 59): ‘As the terms suggests, social networking sites allow people to network online in a primarily non-business way. The most popular sites deliberately blur the boundaries between different types of social media in the battle for popularity.’ Thus the instrument of public relations – distorting the system/lifeworld and in doing so contradicting ideas about what and how business should look and behave – has been given full expression on the internet. Examples are social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter – appearing friendly, benign and communal spaces to some, but cold-blooded commerce to others. As a result, public relations managing communication through social media is even more difficult for publics to identify as persuasion, and to resist, than mainstream forms. Therefore it is the very opacity of public relations practices which is working within and through the internet, and the bewildering contradictions between what it ‘ought to be’ and ‘what it is’, illustrated by the views of Rheingold (1995) and Castells (2001), as well as the emergence of new methods of practice, which give rise to concerns about what this means for our society and cultures.

In the new millennium, the various iterations of the internet – reinterpreted, relaxed and fused invisibly with the fictions of lifeworld and commercial discourses – have provided fertile ground for public relations. This optimism in public relations ranks is in marked contrast to the last century when politically offensive practices and tactics – such as greenwashing and astroturfing – were uncovered and publicly reviled. Not surprisingly a tremor of excitement is palpable in public relations circles. In pitching its Certificate in Social Media, the Public Relations Institute of Ireland (PRII) writes: ‘Whether you are a fully-fledged convert or remain sceptical of their long-term

influence, the evidence and experience of countless organisations, large and small, across the globe suggests that social media will undoubtedly take their rightful place in the communication arsenal' (circa 2010). However making sense of public relations, its relationship to 'publics' and persuasion in social media – both for industry associations such as the PRII and more broadly in society – needs to be understood in relation to the changes to, and disappearance of, other forms of culture, in particular, the reconstruction of notions such as 'place', 'community' and 'friend'. Central to these transformations is the shifting concept of the individual in large-scale late-modern Western society.

Sociologist Ulrich Beck argues that in early modernity 'individualism' was firmly embedded and institutionalised in class structures, gender and family roles that were culturally policed and thus reproduced (Beck in Beck & Willms, 2004: 64). It took courage and audacity for individuals to flaunt these rigid and conventional ways of living and loving. However in late modernity Beck claims individualisation is 'radicalized'. By this he means it is embedded as a social concept, resulting in cultures that propel people to pursue their self-interest in multidirectional ways (Beck in Beck & Willms, 2004: 66). Hence 'difference' and 'choice' are promoted, not because there is more creativity and free-thinking in our society, but 'because the norm is that one must individualize' (Beck & Willms, 2004: 67). So within this contradictory 'unity of difference' not everyone will actually become politicised and nonconformist, although the multiplicity of choices may well give the illusion that that is the case. Beck argues that this is a common misunderstanding of the concept and warns of a disturbing and somewhat ironic side-effect: 'The opposite might be just as probable. We might end up observing the retreat of the self into blind obedience. The desire for relief from the pressure to individuate can lead to all kinds of fundamentalism' (in Beck & Willms, 2004: 67).

Rapid techno-economic developments, such as the rise of mobile technology and digital networks, work in tandem with this radicalised individualisation and lead to a process of disembedding the known and understood ways of behaving in the social environment. Over time new ways of behaving are re-embedded (Beck in Beck et al., 2000: 13). However this upheaval creates social disintegration where norms of behaviour are constantly questioned and challenged, while another effect is that the individual is released from the dominating and restrictive cultural patterns of the past with 'the compulsion to find and invent new certainties' (in Beck et al., 2000: 14; see also Mackey in this volume). Empowered by these social conditions, the individual's 'compulsion' is also given impetus because the future seems uncertain and dangerous. Beck refers to this as a 'risk society' – one where thinking and action are re-defined, in relation to the hazards and threats produced by industrialisation processes, for example global warming or toxic contaminations that may have deleterious intergenerational effects (Beck, 1992: 19).

While not referring specifically to the internet, Beck argues that one of the cultural patterns dissolving and changing is the idea of a local community linked to place. Indeed he argues these notions are being 'reshaped' by altered meanings until they become 'either *relics* or *habits*' (in Beck et al., 2000: 101). For social media it is the

relics of 'community' and the reshaping of meanings around 'place' and 'friends', together with a social concept of individualisation, that has created significant opportunities for public relations as system rationality to create a unique cultural environment conducive to a reacculturation processes and culture-making. However a potential consequence to be considered is whether these discursive forums create conditions which give rise to 'blind obedience and fundamentalism' (Beck in Beck & Willms, 2004: 67). For example, do they provide a new way for powerful organisations, like corporations, to gain and exercise power, perhaps by creating uncertainty in relation to a particular social group or a cultivating mood of consent for a particular policy direction? My analysis seeks to shed light on these 'collaboration' techniques by business and identify what new meanings constitute 'community', in order to understand its relationship with persuasion.

Central to this, is whether virtual communities, so common in commercial social media, construct a vehicle for persuasion and hegemony – a key objective of public relations and a means by which it can attain 'obedience'. Hegemony refers to 'the combination of force and consent' whereby the control appears to be 'based on the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion – newspapers and association – which, therefore, in certain situations, are artificially multiplied' (Gramsci in Storey, 2006: 85). This chapter posits two ways social media, through virtual worlds, can hegemonically 'force' consent – first, by the powerful social current of individualisation which propels them to engage with notions of 'choice' (Beck in Beck & Willms, 2004: 67); and second, by an economic imperative to interact and contribute to the internet's increasing dominance, due to its self-reinforcing characteristics (Castells, 2001: 265–66).

A good example of how 'consent' is achieved in social media is through terms 'community' and 'residents' which describe its users 'reshaped' by these new and 'distant' influences (Beck in Beck et al., 2000: 101). These words connote positive social relations organised around group-living and local politics, and are preferred over the more accurate descriptor: 'consumers', which has negative connotations linked to the absence of 'human agency' (Du Gay, 1996: 81). This is especially evident in the main grid of Second Life – an internet-based business platform that simulates 'reality' in an interactive virtual world. Particular to this social media product is the user's ability to extend their identity through an animated customised human-like representation called an 'avatar'. According to their website avatars or 'residents' can shop, trade, gamble, play games with money from the Linden Dollar Exchange 'and from other third party websites'. In Second Life the hegemonic use of ideologically invested discourse serves to restructure traditional power relations between its producers and consumers. Consumers are transformed into 'residents' of a 'community', while the producers, by the harmonising of language, are an unseen authority. This contributes to a climate of consensus or harmony which lends the producers even greater control over audiences and therefore greater control over the social space. The owner of Second Life, Linden Research Inc., in understanding the effects of these conditions, represents it as a form of bottom-up decentralised digital democracy; its logo stating that it is 'imagined, created and owned by its residents'.

Therefore in presenting itself as grassroots, deinstitutionalised and as a quasi-alternative state that promotes greater individual freedom, Second Life hegemonically controls and diverts the user's attention from the reality of making a profit' to an illusion of empowerment through 'choice' funnelled through harmonising relics. And business clearly recognises that 'community' on Second Life is a relationship-building feature of public relations rather than a collection of people that have 'a shared set of social bonds or a social web ... (and) that carry a set of shared moral and social values' (Etzioni, 1995: 17). According to Field Fisher Waterhouse (in Newson et al., 2009: 74):

Virtual worlds offer a compelling environment for communication and collaboration, as well as an important distribution channel. By establishing a Second Life presence, we're able to interact in new and engaging ways with our clients and the wider community. Businesses are moving increasingly rapidly into Second Life and other 3D internet environments and their advisers should be there with them.

(Field Fisher Waterhouse, in Newson et al., 2009: 74)

Simultaneously an intimate, public and commercial sphere, Facebook is another interesting example of social media that attempts to replicate the relic of community. Its website claims: 'Facebook's mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. Millions of people use Facebook every-day to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet'. According to Newson et al. (2009: 60) it is one of the most popular social media sites and perhaps this is because 'the emphasis is on users' identities being authentic'. However, if viewed in relation to radicalised individualisation, then 'authenticity' becomes nothing more than a clever persuasive strategy in the PR 'arsenal'. This is evident by the raft of new ways that business instruments, such as public relations, can position their organisations on social media. For example on Facebook they can 'Build a Presence' by cultivating 'fans'. Facebook advises: 'Want more fans? Encourage your fans to create a FAN BADGE showing their support for you!' The obvious intent of this strategy is to impose loyalty and brand recognition in customers, but leveraging off authenticity – as a persuasive strategy – adds a layer of complexity that binds individuals even more securely to the illusion of personal choice and freedom of expression on social media.

However for business, the setting of a culturally dominating objective and achieving it are two different things. Are not 'publics' that use Second Life and Facebook more savvy, educated and resistant to persuasive and hegemonic techniques than previous generations? Arguably, the acculturation process in social media is subtle and gradual. That said, there are worrying signs that strategies such as developing a fan-base successfully obscure contradictions which should be apparent to critical publics. An example is the tobacco industry, which according to *The Age* (24 April 2010) is using Facebook to 'subvert bans and international conventions against cigarette advertising'. One page for Lucky Strike cigarettes has 'tens of thousands of

members, (and) had images of old and new tobacco ads and various Lucky Strike tobacco products and merchandise'. An effect of this activity is that the tobacco industry positions publics towards a politically benign relationship with its product. Therefore when 'fans' of Lucky Strike engage with a seemingly trivial discussion responding to questions such as 'Well, the weekend is almost here, and we HAVE to know ... any bowling plans?', they may be unaware that at the same time they are harmonising a major social contradiction: the promotion of tobacco products, with their widely reviled and unhealthy effects.

Furthermore a recent study into Facebook shows how it is centrally organised around an identity of narcissism and self promotion. Buffardi & Campbell argue (2008: 1304); 'Narcissism refers to a personality trait reflecting a grandiose and inflated self-concept. Specifically, narcissism is associated with positive and inflated self-views of agentic traits like intelligence, power and physical attractiveness ... as well as a pervasive sense of uniqueness ... and entitlement.' They argue online communities such as Facebook which has millions of users worldwide 'may be an especially fertile ground for narcissists' and for behaviour that promotes shallow and superficial relationships and control over self-presentation (2008: 1304). Significantly their study's findings show how these shallow characteristics are melded into users' every day existence. 'The results demonstrate that narcissists act, portray themselves, and are perceived on social networking sites in a manner similar to how they behave in real, offline life' (2008: 1312).

Buffardi & Campbell do not make any correlations between narcissistic publics and resilience in detecting and understanding persuasive techniques. However their study found that 'participating in social networking online ... allows for controlled self-presentation, satiates the craving for attention, and promotes shallow relationships' (2008: 1311). Therefore this chapter argues that it is within these changed conditions where practices such as 'manipulating Web site usage and assessing short- and long-term personality change' are normalised to a greater extent so that lower thresholds to persuasion are created (Buffardi & Campbell 2008: 1311). Thus in a similar way to Second Life, Facebook is an example of a 'thin' internet community wrapped up in veneer of community, where blinkered cultures of self-gratification are normalised and identity is shaped.

Moreover, publics using these social media sites are also positioned towards system rationality by the dominant but underlying numeric cultures. One example in Facebook is the superficial renderings of the idea of 'friendship' where pride is taken in having 'hundreds or even thousands of "friends"' (Buffardi & Campbell 2008: 1304). Indeed, for US journalist Anard Giridharadas, this idea of quantifying values on social media for example how many visitations, by whom and when, through metrics or numeric cultures, demonstrates 'assumptions and leaps of faith built into numbers' (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 11 March 2010). Thus for publics 'faith in numbers' demonstrates, not only the embedded system rationality, but another part of a subtle acculturation process that hegemonically links to a belief in economic rationalism and once again positions publics uncritically towards persuasion.

Similarly, the re-constructed idea of ‘friendship’ is more about preparing the ground to hegemonically exploit a sense of loyalty associated with the concept. As discussed, implicitly numeric cultures intersect with business strategies to the extent some claim that social media sites such as Facebook represent a ‘new way of thinking’ ‘in which you view your customers as co-producers of your products and services’ (Safko & Brake, 2009: xi). In this light, instead of ‘digital democracy’, social media sites like Second Life and Facebook can be viewed more cynically as a privatised forum of political and social control that works through hegemony. Thus the disintegration of social norms develops opportunities to construct and hybridise new identities, new conceptions of place, community and friendship performed through the spectacle of social media; creating warm tropical conditions for public relations practitioners – and others – observing the private worlds of others.

Publics, persuasion and politics

The achievement of hegemonic control depends on the support of a majority view achieved through an ‘organ of public opinion’ which in turn works within the public sphere. Gramsci (in Storey, 2006: 85) identified this with newspapers but today powerful internet search engines, user-generated blogging, micro-blogging, vodcasting, podcasting, together with an array of social media sites, have transformed news content, news gathering and news publishing. For example RSS is an alert that contains a headline and short summary of the information and automatically generated when movement is detected on a site. In effect this process allows the user to configure a personal news gathering service and access it twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The extent of this transformation is evident in the State of the News Media 2010 report which claims:

The year past proved important for social media establishing themselves as a part of the media ecosystem. The power here had less to do with reporting than serving as a place for people to quickly come together around an issue that they feel passionately about to share concerns, pass along information, offer financial contributions and in several cases bring about change.

(State of the News Media 2010 report)

However, relevant to any discussion of ‘news’ is its relationship to ‘truth’ as a key assumption of democracy is organised around the idea of merit and a group of individuals testing out uncertain or unformed judgements in a public sphere (Habermas, 1995). However influencing public opinion formation and ‘agenda setting’ is also a central objective of public relations. A highly produced message to ameliorate negative opinion, inserted invisibly within the news, is a way many offending organisations that have breached laws or regulations attempt to influence the way their actions are interpreted and reinterpreted by ‘publics’. So public relations, truth, and news have inherent tensions within democratic frameworks (Breit, 2007, see also Mackey in this volume); but these relationships and their interaction with the public sphere become even more complex with the advent of cyber technologies. Ariella Azoulay

(2001: 101) points out that cameras, photographs and the internet have caused structural changes to the public sphere and argues that 'a virtual public space now operates in parallel to the public sphere' (2001: 138). Therefore not only can we conceive of sites such as Second Life and Facebook as grooming passive publics, but also as reworked public spheres, where news is distributed and consumed, and where the notion of public space – and its allied ideas of 'publics' and 'community' – are now invisibly fused together. And it is these changes that also play an important role in the hybridisation of public relations and the way it practises. This is also evident in the non-commercial sphere where bloggers, in the same way as journalists, are now regarded by public relations as important opinion leaders and relationships with them are cultivated.

So what sort of public sphere exists in Second Life and Facebook? Is it open, inclusive, tolerant and critical or exclusive and controlled? Who are the authorities that validate public opinion? What critical dimensions do these new conditions encourage? What views and ideas are being promoted? These questions, which pertain to the characteristics of the reworked public sphere, are significant because Beck argues that the information technology may be the means that 'could be used to short-circuit the power of public opinion' and through which a new authoritarianism will emerge (Beck in Beck & Willms, 2004: 60). So, for example, what relationship do the plethora of unfettered narcissistic subjectivities being filtered through commercial social media have to individuals' political development? For Beck (in Beck & Willms, 2004: 137) important questions are: 'Who decides what counts as a cause and what doesn't, in the face of the complexity and contingency of knowledge, and the difficulty of fully establishing a causality? What norms underlie this process? And what types of cause interpretation does governing opinion accept as valid?'

One norm established in modern culture is a 'tell all' culture, voyeurism, and the idea of a private conversation in public. Indeed, Calvert asks: 'Why are so many people so willing to overshare, as it were, so much about their lives with so many people?' (2000: 83). A corollary of this is the willingness to provide vast amounts of personal information to social media sites. Yet another is the growing acceptance of numeric cultures, spurred on by the technical affordances of the web, which make it relatively easy to track what is being said and who has said it. Data mining is a commercial activity that is growing in tandem with the vast amounts of information being stored on the web and can be defined as 'finding hidden information in a database'. Alternatively, it has been called exploratory data analysis, data-driven discovery, and deductive learning (Dunham, 2003: 3). Thus social media, seemingly relaxed and friendly, provides a unique opportunity for PR to undertake surveillance and develop extensive demographic and psychographic profiles of publics. Once patterns are established from the mined data it can be classified and on-sold (Dunham 2003: 3–5). However, organisations' ability to extract complex personal data, coupled with the new compulsion to disclose information, has consequences for openness in society. An individual's or group's online behaviour and communication – whether their purchase history or political activity – can be accessed, commodified and privately investigated. Arguably, it means there is a plethora of new ways for public relations to watch and detect personal activity in unseen and therefore less accountable ways.

Moreover, 'listening' on social media is so easy. Twitter is a text-based news-gathering service that represents its identity as the personal, the simple and the everyday – within a global and networked community. Despite the dissimilarity to conventional press, Twitter is 'increasingly becoming highly effective as a way of disseminating news. It works like a personal newswire' (Brown, 2009: 140). Twitter, like Second Life and Facebook, requires the user to become a member in order to fully participate in the forum. "The service asks its users only one question: "What are you doing?" Its users have just 140 characters in which to express themselves' (Newson et al., 2009: 67). These updates are measured in popularity by the amount of 'followers' they attract. However this website advice shows how easy it is for comments to become public property and for business to 'win, win, and win':

Monitor who is talking about you on Twitter (for example, SocialMention.com). When someone mentions you then find out if they have a blog. If they do get them to write a blog about some aspect of your company, they are probably looking for ideas for articles (just like the 'real' press). So your network expands so does traffic to your site, so your reputation and awareness improves. At the same time so does Google's pagerank view of the importance of your website, so you appear higher in Google results. Win, win, win.

(Kothea The Fabric Blog)

These developments in social media have not escaped politicians. US President Barack Obama made these comments in relation to Facebook while addressing school children: 'First of all, I want everybody here to be careful about what you post on Facebook, because in the YouTube age whatever you do, it will be pulled up again later somewhere in your life.' Thus media monitoring on sites like Second Life, Facebook and Twitter has refocused surveillance as core function of public relations and provided it with new ways that it can operate out of view. Indeed being 'out of view' is where PR wants to be. Concealing its presence ensures that it is the illusion of public opinion interacting through sites like Twitter that provides the ideal conditions that hegemonically resolve inherent tensions with broader ideals of democracy.

This is also apparent in social media such as Second Life that attempt to replicate the public sphere as it works in the offline world. For example Linden Research Inc. promotes the representation of Second Life as an alternative society, complete with all the complexity of political dimensions and the processes by which public opinion is formed. For example, activities are reported in 'in-world' media outlets such as the 'The Second Life Herald', 'Second Life Times' and 'New World Notes'. Linden Research Inc. uses these fake news sources to blur further the boundaries between the real world and the fabricated. Moreover, to entrench the fabrication of a public sphere they seek the involvement of real-life media outlets such as NewsCorp, NBC, Sky News and Reuters. Drawing on the ideas of Habermas (1995), news content on Second Life serves merely to detour public opinion back to the unseen authority's

self-interest rather than to an authentic public sphere where a dialectic can clarify and define contentious issues.

Twitter, Facebook and Second Life therefore make a claim as authentic forms of the public sphere and this is tacitly endorsed whenever an offline institution links to them. Indeed in Australia, Twitter has successfully colonised publicly owned (non-commercial) news broadcasting service the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and it is regularly advertised as a communication channel for audiences, on both radio and television. Linking into these social media sites brings other benefits for organisations. Being members of Facebook and Twitter allows them to post an online press release, test out public responses by undertaking a 'kite-flying' exercise around controversial ideas and monitor the response. However the populist approach to deciding on the significance of 'news' raises concerns about its true value. Bivins (2009: 262) asks 'whether any of this activity constitutes "news" ... Because the information generated is generally done by "citizens", it is often done without the interference, or aid of editors'. Moreover the potential for misleading authorship or online-astroturfing is expanding.

A key weakness in these developments from a Habermasian perspective is that while the involvement of real-world media and other organisations in Facebook, Second Life and Twitter appear to some to have expanded the public sphere, arguably this is not the case. Rather, the public sphere has merely lost its political characteristics and is therefore more disposed in character as a forum for the persuasion and control of publics (Habermas, 1995: 163). A possible political consequence of this social and media confluence is 'democratic authoritarianism' which gives governments 'increased possibilities for domestic surveillance and control' (Beck in Beck & Willms, 2004: 92–93).

Apprehension that surveillance practices may be increasingly used as a form of social control in online cultures justifies further the need to understand what precisely is happening on these sites. One group concerned with these questions is TOR. This non-profit group challenges the notion that 'transparency is good' and asks more pertinently 'who is it good for and is there really transparency'. According to TOR's Andrew Lewman, for ordinary web users, 'it's time to get past the idea that being secretive on the web is necessarily a negative or bad thing'. They ask users to try to find out who is running the website they are interested in and predict that they may find it difficult. Privacy concerns and groups like TOR therefore challenge embedded technocratic belief in technology by asking if individuals are merely caught up in a vast organisation – in which discussion about limiting it has become sacrilegious (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *The Deep Web*).

Conclusion

Relaxed, playful and self-selecting, social relations are reorganised on the internet but with the transformation of 'tradition' comes the desire to find new certainties. Social media – with its multiplicity of technical affordances funnelled through the relic of community – appeals to highly individualised subjects by promoting an artificial sense

of empowerment around notions of 'choice'. However, while social media and its associated cultural effects appear novel and contemporary, this is not necessarily the case. Forty years ago Gordon Rattray Taylor (1970) flagged the prospect of a future where individuals were politically disempowered and rendered 'helpless' through 'a propaganda of loyalty evoking symbols and abstractions' within the complex cultural effects of cyber technology (1970: 299). Together with Beck's (in Beck & Willms, 2004) views about radicalised individualisation and its false sense of empowerment; this suggests that these social currents are well established and conclusions for society are mixed.

'Culture making' always has political consequences for society and culture (Fiske 1989: 1) and the sheer scale of these new developments online deserve more attention. Today the internet presents a range of new and novel discursive practices through which groups and people can mobilise and interact. On the one hand, for publics, parts of the internet afford cultural resources that work to create an authentic public sphere with political characteristics that promote agency, and depth of discussion and debate. However, on the other, the internet, especially social media, is a colossal economic and cultural force which has penetrated society in a number of concerning ways. Central to these concerns is its potential to be a powerful discursive forum for social and political control that has invisibly positioned itself in relation to publics and indeed many large public organisations. This together with the constant demands of a 24-hour news cycle, flourishing cultures of populism and narcissism and the proliferation of subjective commentary means governments may find it harder to engage publics with complexity and achieve the long term reform that is so urgent in the light of current environmental challenges.

These paradoxical consequences were foreshadowed by Bauman who, prior to the advent of Web 2.0, cautioned about effects of 'the new soft world of communities' claiming that the elevation of micro-style democracy could obscure the groups and individuals that offer vision and viable solutions to society's problems in the clutter of competing voices and views (Bauman 1997: 81). If Bauman's analysis can be projected on developments in social media, then it seems highly likely that the culture of tolerating differences may ironically create a splintered form of individualisation characterised by aggressive self-interest, which undercuts reform agendas, depth of discussion and debate, and the unity of communities.

To find comfort in a rapidly changing world, the ideas of 'community', 'place' and 'friendship' has been reconstituted for internet cultures. A relevant question for society and for public relations is how does this translate offline? What sort of community, friends and places are being created and what is their relation to political persuasion? One effect may be a greater tolerance of 'spin' and gullibility. Exaggeration – once a source of derision for public relations – is now legitimised by social media where self promotion and narcissism are normatively embedded both culturally and technologically. Another effect may be an aversion to complexity and depth in relation to public debates. The lack of critical perspectives in social media in turn could potentially lead to more power and influence for public relations practitioners, in which case limits to activities such as surveillance need to be considered by

professional associations alongside its relationship to privacy and ethics. This will shed further light on how public relations practices used on the internet will affect cultural values, constructions of knowledge and the distribution of power – both within the internet and its communities and ‘offline’ in broader contexts of culture and society.

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