

THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA MEASUREMENT

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How do we know we have been successful online? And what shape does that success take? As public relations practitioners, our purpose is to build and sustain the relationships necessary for organisations, communities and individuals to function, or at the very least develop the relationship to such an extent that the organisation is afforded its licence to operate. Therefore, as relationships develop online, do older approaches to measurement work?

This overview seeks to examine the evolution of online measurement and evaluation and, in particular, provide signposts to some of the systems and approaches now being used to monitor and measure the social media environment. It has been prepared from the viewpoint of the reflective practitioner as an observational and ethnographic documentation of operational experience within the web over a period of 15 years.

Social media is the term used to describe the suite of online digital tools that has emerged in the last decade. The term fell into common use in 2007 and includes blogs, wikis, social networks, social bookmarks, RSS and other web-based applications.

Measurement of online activity has, like most other online disciplines, evolved to a greater degree of sophistication than other measures of success historically used by the public relations profession.

Early online measures were dominated by 'counting hits', followed by search engine results and referrals. Since 2003, the ways in which practitioners can measure online activity have increased exponentially. It should be noted that the development of new data mining tools continues apace, adding to the suite of available tools. In order to set this into context, it is worth indicating some of the key evolutionary moments in online measurement.

FIVE PRINCIPLES

In 1999, Kent and Taylor proposed a strategic framework to facilitate dialogic relationships with publics through the web (McAllister-Spooner 2009, Kent and Taylor 1998, 2002). Kent and Taylor offered five principles as part of their dialogic promise: useful information, ease of interface, conservation of visitors, generation of return visits, and dialogic feedback loops.

As explored by McAllister-Spooner (2009), these principles have extended the research in this area, but she concludes that in spite of all the recommendations to incorporate two-way dialogic channels, the findings suggest that organisations are not fully utilizing the interactive potential of the web to build and maintain organisation-public relationships.

This points more towards a failure to understand the purpose of public relations than an inability to utilise the relationship-building potential of the web, which is again reflected in the historical set of measures used by practitioners (and others) to evaluate the success of their web interactions.

Initial emphasis was given to the statistics produced by internet service providers (ISP), which most commonly included the number of visitors to a site and/or page impressions. This emphasis was partly driven by organisations who were not prepared to acknowledge the perceived intangible benefits of relationships formed via the web but who were prepared to look at 'facts and figures' generated by mathematically driven algorithms. The fact that these algorithms in reality gave no real indication as to the success or otherwise of organisational performance was often ignored.

INTERACTION IGNORED

The Web 1.0 environment was viewed as one in which the provision of 'one-way' information was the primary purpose and the experience and interaction of visitors to the sites largely ignored. Site purpose centred on the provision of information - generally as much as possible and buried so deep that visitors often gave up their search - or driving of sales, using the 'shop window' approach to information. Opportunities for feedback and dialogue were (and in many cases still are) restricted to form submissions, automated emails that often went unacknowledged or automated phone lines.

When set against Kent and Taylor's Internet Principles, this approach could only be measured against 'useful information'. Kent, Taylor & White further explored this phenomenon in their study of web design and organisational responsiveness, centred on environmental activists and 'watchdog' sites. However, the principles suggested by Kent and Taylor were set against the backdrop of the static web, where interaction, although desirable, was uncommon due to restricted mechanisms and the general reluctance by most organisations to view the web as a relationship-building tool.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

By 2000, 'good web measurement' from a practitioner viewpoint was centred around content audit and analysis, ease of interface, the extent to which navigation was facilitated and information could be sourced, the number of visitors - as opposed to the conservation of visitors and the number of return visits. While all these can constitute an overview of the outputs produced by an organisation, it does not give any great indication as to the outcomes, whether those have been identified as business, relationship or communication.

A practical flaw in the internet principles of Kent and Taylor also emerged with the development of search engine page rankings and subsequently search engine optimisation.

Initially, difficulties around the credibility of website statistics arose following revelations that unethical behaviour by some sites meant people were paid to 'hit' sites in order to drive up numbers of visits. This resulted in sites being 'pushed' up the search engine results. The problem was exacerbated with the advent of Google's page ranking systems in 1998/9. In the period that followed, Google developed other algorithms and the company development over the next four years gave birth to the use of search engine optimisation as a method of 'measuring' and monitoring success (or failure) of a site. In the same way that practitioners had been historically cornered into 'gaining coverage' for organisations in mainstream media without heed to organisational, reputational or relationship outcomes, so organisations became focussed on their SEO results, rather than concentrating on the relationships their sites would facilitate with key communities and publics. In the drive for favourable SEO results, a number of 'black hat' methods surfaced, again creating ethical issues for practitioners to address. Google then introduced 'sponsored' results, the precursor to the Google Ads that have developed since. As new methods evolved, it became apparent that what others were saying about you online also effected search results confirming the significance of online reputation.

EXPANSION OF ANALYTICS

The introduction of RSS (an application language within XML - Extensible Markup Language) provided a new and different measure that did not simply rely on numbers of visitors. RSS allows the creator to monitor the number of subscribers and, more importantly, determine where action has been taken as a result of the subscription, moving more towards the out-take benchmark, providing an indication of message delivery and comprehension than simply measuring outputs (Macnamara,1999).

In parallel with this development, the analytics algorithms developed to an even greater extent as data could be mined to produced statistics on length of visit, referrer, key words, key word search and phrases. Initially, ISPs still charged for this more detailed information, which meant there was still a reliance on hit counts and search engine page results. However, search engine results also began to provide snapshots and insights into a particular issue and informed practitioners began to develop their own analytics to create more effective environmental scans and assist in the issues management process.

ONLINE RELATIONSHIP

Between 2004 - 2007 greater emphasis was given to the nature of the online relationship, initiating several research studies into this particular dynamic. One example is the Seltzer & Mitrook 2007 study which looked at the dialogic potential of blogs in relationship building, taking the Kent, Taylor & White research stream and applying it to blogs in the same environmentalist/ activist sphere.

In looking beyond the basic measures that evolved through the development of the web, it is evident that there are many opportunities for practitioners to measure and evaluate the level of engagement and to an increasing extent, the level of their relationships conducted via the web. Whether or not practitioners are actively utilising such opportunities is certainly an area worthy of further research. It is certainly an area of considerable frustration as articulated by K.D Paine on her blog following this year's AMEC Summit in Berlin (Paine, 2009).

Those who are still concentrating on 'numbers' have a wealth of data-mining and analytics tools available to them, some of which are indicated below, although again, the majority focus seems to remain with 'hits' (referred to by Paine as 'How Idiots Track Success').

BEAN-COUNTING

While these tools are certainly useful for monitoring and insight, only by creating a dashboard of approaches can insight into outcomes and relationships be achieved and for public relations practitioners the measurement and evaluation emphasis must be on the relationship outcomes if the function is to be fulfilled - otherwise we are simply bean-counting. Since the first robot was sent out to 'search' on Valentine's Day 1995, we have been looking for accurate and useful measures of the web. Technologies have advanced considerably since then but still the search continues - perhaps because practitioners have yet to decide exactly what it is they are measuring.

While all the technologies provide extremely useful data, this data should not be viewed as a 'stand-alone' measure of the success or failure of web activity. Nor should it be used as a single-point evaluation tool to determine if outcomes have been reached.

In the end, only by establishing clear outcomes, designing a measurement and evaluation system that may incorporate some or none of the readymade tools and then implementing the system as part of the ongoing programme will we be able to accurately ascertain if our activities have been successful in moving us towards our goals.

TOOLS TO EXPLORE

RSS:	Feed URL is entered and platform returns statistics about its posts, including most popular based on sharing within social networking sites.
Google Analytics and Feedburner:	Free tools to help analyse site or blog traffic, subscriber count, keyword optimization and additional trends.
Xinu:	: URL submission results in range of statistics including search engine optimization (SEO) to social bookmarking, CSS errors and sharing.
Compete:	URL submission provides base statistics but also trends, limited psychographic profiling and competing site comparisons
Radian6:	Commercial service monitoring and counting conversations, social media mentions etc..
Technorati:	Blog ranking and tracking service based on algorithms
Buzzmetrics:	Commercial service offering data and analysis of online activity in both blogs and conversations
Quantcast:	Commercial service delivering detailed stats, profiles and comparisons

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