

# Social Media: The Business Case and Beyond

ROSS MONAGHAN



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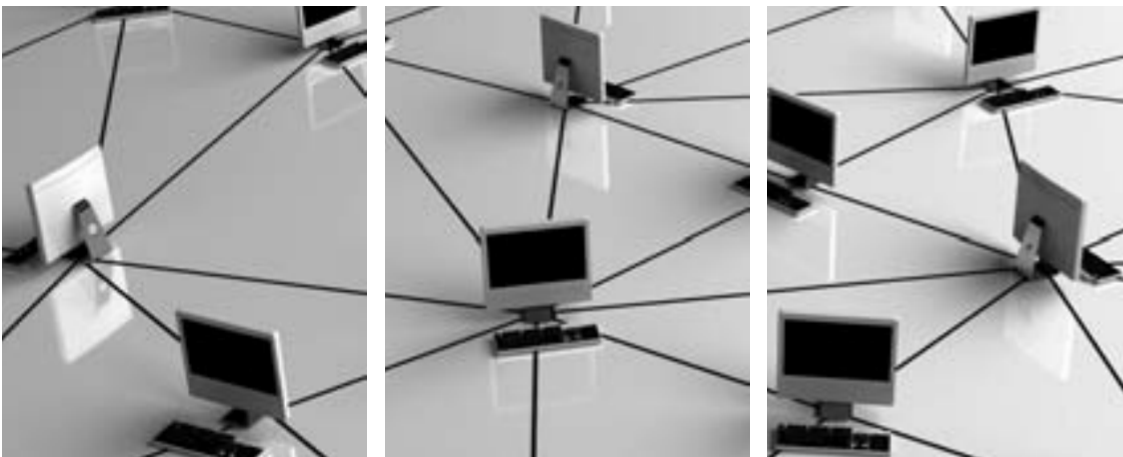
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## Executive summary

THE RAPID introduction of new communications technology now pervades almost every aspect of life, especially in developed countries.

Modern life is moving at an ever-increasing pace. Google catalogues more than one trillion pages of information on the Internet<sup>1</sup>. Today's teenagers have never known a life without 24-hour news delivering updates every minute to televisions, radios, electronic signs, PCs, PDAs and mobile phones. Those that can remember when life moved at a slower pace rarely have time to reflect at how quickly life has changed, and how we've adapted so quickly.

Introduced in 1993, the World Wide Web (the web) became popular quickly because it allowed users to cheaply and conveniently access information and multimedia content from office or home. The use of hypertext, which allows users to quickly and easily access related information, also spurred its growth and popularity, as did applications such as email, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), File Transfer Protocol (FTP) and Usenet. Governments, business and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) quickly began using the web to communicate and distribute information on websites and through email.

The World Wide Web allowed data to be exchanged easily, but almost from the outset some of the most popular applications were those that allowed users to connect and communicate. Email is probably the best example of the web's ability to facilitate

communication and exchange. However, because a user's email address is required to communicate, it doesn't allow for true networking and exchanging ideas with people outside your existing networks. Enter: Web 2.0.

The phrases 'social media', 'Web 2.0' and 'new media' have been used, usually interchangeably, to describe the way in which users of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and the World Wide Web can now upload and create their own content; as opposed to the early days of the World Wide Web when uploading information, while possible, required some technical expertise<sup>2</sup>.

Today's web user doesn't need to be a technical expert because applications are developed with user friendliness in mind<sup>3</sup>. With such a huge variety of social media websites available, a user-friendly interface could mean the difference between success and failure. Apple's iPhone is a good example. Many of the functions it performs can be done on other phones or PDAs, but one of the reasons the iPhone (and many other Apple products) is so stunningly successful is that it is easy to use and good looking.

Early 2008 was a turning point in the history of the web. For the first time since its introduction in 1993, people are now logging on primarily, not to check email, but to interact on social networking sites<sup>4</sup>.

Social media websites, such as Facebook, dominate the list of most popular sites. More than 100 million people around

the globe now have a Facebook profile, yet it is just one of a vast range of social networking sites available. People around the globe are using these sites to communicate, collaborate and engage online.

As the world becomes more digitally integrated, consumers are promoting their favourite brands, sharing experiences about poor products or services and stakeholders, and using video and audio to get national attention, and employees are using blogs to fill organisational communication voids.

Online reputation management is vital for both organisations and individuals, with potential employers 'Googling' potential employees to dig up 'digital dirt'. The risk for communication practitioners is that social media is increasingly allowing almost anyone to communicate and collaborate online, with little cost.

Activists and organised communities are also getting in on the act, making use of the technology to disseminate information. As organisations and the media evolve, so too are activists.

New communications technology, particularly the Internet, has made it easier for individuals to express opinions and call for action in a way that can be accessed by almost limitless numbers of people. Activists have become cyber activists. An important distinction between traditional activists and cyber activists, for public relations practitioners, is the cyber activist's ability to raise issues and get ideas across to hundreds of thousands of people without the gate-keeping role of the media. The Internet can be seen as 'levelling the playing field', by allowing activists almost equal power to well-funded corporate public relations managers.

With such momentum, public relations practitioners have little choice but to 'surf' the wave of change that has affected both business and private life. Some also say

that after a period of being relegated to 'press relations', public relations is now returning to its roots because social media allows engagement with target publics, not just communication<sup>5</sup>.

So whilst it's a risk, the power of social media to connect and engage key stakeholders is also a huge benefit.

Clever and innovative organisations are using social media to engage internal and external stakeholders through:

- Social networking sites – by promoting employee benefits to potential employees, and letting consumers become 'fans' of their favourite brands;
- Video content – which allows organisation to use 'colour and movement' to promote products and services, and to quickly tell their side of a story when they're in the headlines; and
- Audio content – by podcasting to employees, the community or other stakeholders so that they can listen to information anywhere, from their desk to the gym.

Monitoring the blogosphere is also crucial. Whilst there are a range of commercial monitoring options, tools such as Google's blog search and alert service make it cheap and assessable to almost anyone.

Social media tools also facilitate innovation. Through use of blogs and wikis, the Victorian Government is allowing cross-departmental sharing of information to ensure continual improvement throughout the public service.

Online tools also allow organisations to brainstorm, collaborate and create mind maps. Social media is also allowing organisations and their suppliers to work together to quickly respond to new opportunities.

There are a range of legal, regulatory, IT and disability access issues that need to be considered by communication practitioners before organisations take their first steps into the world of social media. With technology changing so quickly, the sooner they take those steps, the better off their organisations, and they, will be.

The fundamentals of organisational communication haven't changed. You don't need to be a 'digital native' to succeed online, but you do need an understanding about the way key stakeholders, including your own employees, can (and almost certainly) use digital media to become individual media outlets.

This report looks at the broad social and organisational issues associated with the development of new communications technology.

Chapter one looks at life in a digital wireless world and examines the best and worst of life online. In chapter two, you'll discover why you are the media and how this can fundamentally change the relationship between organisations and stakeholders.

Lunchtime is the new primetime. Chapter 3 looks at how media consumption habits are changing, how media outlets are responding and how communication professionals need to reposition themselves to remain relevant and responsive.

Part two of this report examines the fundamentals of blogging, virtual worlds, mobile content, podcasting and social networking sites. This section looks at how they are being used by your stakeholders and how you can use them to not only communicate, but monitor, collaborate and engage with internal and external publics.

Part three of this report examines the business case, including barriers often encountered by corporate and government

organisations.

Throughout the report, there are interviews and case studies with leading practitioners offering practical advice and highlighting best practice tools and tactics that work.

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## About the author

ROSS MONAGHAN is an experienced professional communicator, educator, blogger and podcaster. He is currently an academic at Deakin University in Victoria and co-founder of 'themediapod.net', a blogging and podcasting website with a focus on public relations and media-related issues.

A former chief executive officer of the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association, and chairman of the Mobile Carriers Forum, Ross has represented some of Australia's largest organisations such as BHP, Telstra and Optus. He has a unique combination of communications theory and practical experience, and is well-known for his current work and research in the area of new social media.

Ross began his career as a journalist working for a regional daily newspaper and spent several years involved in general news reporting before completing a Bachelor of Arts.

In 1988 Ross was recruited by BHP and spent eight years with the company at sites around Australia and North America. He was involved in a range of internal and external communication management issues, such as editing employee journals, developing community relations strategies and managing the public affairs and media response to issues such as industrial accidents and disputes with environmental groups such as Greenpeace.

In 1996 Ross was appointed community relations manager for Optus. He helped establish, and was the first chair of, the Mobile Carriers Forum. Ross also chaired

other groups, such as the Australasian Crime Commissioners Taskforce on mobile phone theft, and dealt with issues at all three tiers of Government.

During his time in the telecommunications industry Ross gained general management experience as the CEO of the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association. A key responsibility of that role was to represent the industry in all levels of the media, from daily newspapers to television news and current affairs programmes.

In 2006 Ross received a fellowship from Deakin University and co-founded 'themediapod.net' with academic colleague, and former BBC producer, Colleen Murrell.

Ross continues to maintain strong links with industry by providing *pro bono* services to several national organisations, and provides counsel on public relations and social media to a range of corporate organisations and government departments. He is a regular commentator on social media in the Australian media.

He is a member of the Melbourne Press Club and has chaired FroComm's Annual Public Relations and Corporate Communications Summits in Sydney since 2005. He has also chaired the Government Relations Summit in Canberra since 2006, and the New Media Summit in Sydney since 2007.

Ross has a BA (management communication) from Deakin University, and an MA (mass media and communication) from Monash University.