

Is social media killing our theories?

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Abstract

“When we change the way we communicate, we change society.”¹

Digital developments have shaken the world of the media. The traditional model of journalism and journalists as gatekeepers to public attention² has been questioned, as technologies enable participation of various new writers and the thresholds of publishing disappear³. Despite this, blogs and social media still rate below the traditional news media in “accuracy, credibility, telling the truth and being ethical”⁴. Some see this development as a threat to society, others as a possibility for democratization and socialization of content⁵. With these changes, it is necessary to discuss what is meant by ‘communication’, ‘public relations’ and ‘journalism’, and how they should be perceived in the future.

Social media refers to writing and broadcasting carried out by “the people formally known as the audience”⁶. Digital development’s biggest changes have occurred as news control and production no longer go together⁷. People get increasingly their news from the Internet⁸, and when anyone can publish their opinions in real time to mass audiences via social media, we can talk of “digital mass self communication networks”⁹. Based on this change in communication, journalism could more precisely be defined as “production of news stories, bringing public attention to issues of public interest”¹⁰.

In this new environment many theories of mass communication and public relations are becoming outdated, yet the need for understanding the environment is acute. This paper first proposes a new categorization of social media into 8 sub-groups ranging from content publishing to aggregation services. Second, the paper takes a closer look at what is happening to several of the well established theories of mass communication and public relations in this new media environment. Theories and ideas such as the formation of public opinion, two-step flow of information, agenda setting, spiral of silence, media richness, relationship management, notion of feedback and stakeholder theory all require re-examination¹¹ in this new environment. The paper introduces and analyzes these theories, and suggests new ideas and

¹ Shirky, C. (2008). *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. New York: Penguin Press, p. 17.

² Dua, A., & Segel, L. H. (2007) ‘What consumers want for online news’, *The Mc Kinsey Quarterly*, August 2007.

³ Miel, P. & Faris, R. (2008), *News and Information as Digital Media come of age. Overview 2008*, The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. Online:
http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Overview_MR.pdf

⁴ Wright, D. K. & Hinson, M. D. (2009) *An Analysis of the Increasing Impact of Social and Other New Media on Public Relations Practice*, *Public Relations Journal*, Vol. 3(2), Available online: <http://www.prsa.org/prjournal/Vol3No2/6D-030202.pdf>

⁵ Solis, B. & Breakenridge, D. (2009) *Putting the Public Back into Public Relations. How social media is reinventing the aging business of PR*. Pearson Education: Upper Saddle River, New Jersey.

⁶ Rosen, J. (2006) *The People Formerly Known as the Audience*, *Pressthink*, June 27, 2006, Available online,
http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html

⁷ Nordfors, D. (2009) *Innovation Journalism, Attention Work and the Innovation Economy. A Review of the Innovation Journalism Initiative 2003-2009*. Online: <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/injo-6-1.pdf>

⁸ Pew Research Center (2008). *Key news audiences now blend online and traditional sources*. Available online at:
<http://peoplepress.org/reports/pdf/444.pdf>.

⁹ Castells, M. (2009) *Communication power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Luoma-aho, V. & Nordfors, D. (2009) “Attention and Reputation in the Innovation Economy”, *Innovation Journalism*, 6(2), online: <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/injo-6-2.pdf>

¹¹ Wright, D. K. & Hinson, M. D. (2009) *An Analysis of the Increasing Impact of Social and Other New Media on Public Relations Practice*, *Public Relations Journal*, Vol. 3(2), Available online: <http://www.prsa.org/prjournal/Vol3No2/6D-030202.pdf>

theories which will become of central importance in the future, such as attention work¹², definition of communities¹³, diffusion of innovation¹⁴ and new media literacies.

Introduction: What is social media?

“We’ve had a lot of discussion about new media, and the point is that traditional media never did, and still doesn’t, mediate. New media does. The traditional media was about sending a message out to be received. It wasn’t about getting a message back”¹⁵.

Social media seems to bring out what communication is in essence: interaction and sharing. Social media is an umbrella term, and it refers to new arenas where users create content: writing and broadcasting carried out by “the people formally known as the audience”¹⁶. Until recently, mass communication has been the task of journalists. Traditionally journalism has been defined by the relation between the journalist and the medium, e.g. the Oxford Dictionary on the Internet definition of journalist¹⁷ as a person who “writes for newspapers or magazines or prepares news or features to be broadcast on radio or television”. Journalism has been a vertically-integrated business, controlling the distribution medium and bundling the distribution with the production of journalistic content.

Categorizing different social media is challenging, as many services offer several functions, such as networking, chat, photo sharing etc. Building on Lietsala & Sirkkunen¹⁸ and Karjaluoto¹⁹ social media is here understood to consist of 8 different genres or categories that all involve the possibility for social interaction:

1. Content publishing & broadcasting: users produce written text or video material to blogs, wikis, microblogs, broadcasting (service providers and examples: Blogger, Twitter, Podcasts)
2. Discussion forums: discussion forums, chats (service providers and examples: Thoughts.com, Suomi24)
3. Content sharing & social bookmarking: social bookmarking, sharing of podcasts, photos or videos (service providers and examples: del.icio.us, YouTube, Flickr)
4. Social networking sites: communities for social networking and community building (service providers and examples: MySpace, IRC-Gallery, Facebook, LinkedIn)
5. Joint production: users create shared content and edit other’s contributions (service providers and examples: Wikipedia, OhmyNews)

¹²Nordfors D. (2008) ‘Attention Work vs Knowledge Work’, The Innovation Journalism Blog, March 15 2008, <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/blog/2008/03/attention-work-vs-knowledge-work.html>

¹³Matikainen, J. (2008). Sosiaalinen media, millaista sosiaalisuutta? (Social media, how social?) Tiedotustutkimus 31(4), pp. 24-41.

¹⁴Rogers, E.M. (1995), “Diffusion of innovations“, New York: Free Press

¹⁵Mike Baroody, Executive Vice President of Porter Novelli, in *PR Strategist*, Winter 2009, p.11.

¹⁶Rosen, J. (2006) The People Formerly Known as the Audience, Pressthink, June 27, 2006, Available online, http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html

¹⁷http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/journalist?view=uk (May 11 2009)

¹⁸Lietsala, Katri & Esa Sirkkunen (2008) Social Media. Introduction to the tools and processes of participatory economy. Tampere: University of Tampere, Hypermedia Laboratory Net Series 17.

¹⁹Karjaluoto, E. (2008) A Primer in Social Media. White paper, Smashlab, http://www.smashlab.com/files/primer_in_social_media.pdf

6. Virtual worlds: engagement in immersive worlds (service providers and examples: Second Life, Habbo)
7. Attachment services: individual service to aid an existing service (service providers and examples: Google maps, Facebook connect)
8. Aggregation services: combining several elements of social media and more traditional communication (service providers and examples: Friendfeed, Google Wave)

Social media has enabled various forms of group formation without the help of traditional organizations²⁰. What more, it acts as a collective storage and memory and gives an eternal aspect to many stories and events that otherwise would soon be forgotten.

For public relations, social media is understood as a renaissance of relationship building. Public relations practitioners feel social media has enabled a new tool for feedback and a chance for better visibility²¹. New models of impact measurement are needed, as the fate of many organizations is being decided online²². The real value of social networks is not merely based on advertising, but is related to the value of the markets, the purchasing power²³.

Digital development has brought about changes to this business, as control and production no longer go together²⁴. Similarly, production and consumer roles overlap, and some speak of social media as citizen media²⁵ or participatory media²⁶. This has vast implications for the legacy media as people get increasingly their news from the Internet²⁷. When anyone can publish their opinions in real time to mass audiences via social media, we can talk of “digital mass self communication networks”²⁸. Based on this change, journalism could more precisely be defined as “production of news stories, bringing public attention to issues of public interest”²⁹.

Recent findings seem to point toward social media and the traditional legacy media fulfilling different needs³⁰: Matikainen suggest that “traditional and social media are like companions, which operate on separate levels and have different functions in the users’ lives”. The news industry, public relations, marketing and advertising as sectors are facing Digital Darwinism, and to survive they need “relevance, interactivity and accountability”³¹. But is social media big

²⁰ Shirky, C. (2008). *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. New York: Penguin Press.

²¹ The Public Relations Strategist (2009) “There is this Sense of Uncertainty” D.C. Roundtable Examines What’s Ahead for the PR Profession, From an Obama White House to the Recession. *The Public Relations Strategist*, winter, 2009, pp. 9-14.

²² Wilcox, D.L. (2009). Preserving reputation in the Internet Age. In: Rogojinaru, A. & Wolstenholme, S. (Eds.) *Current trends in international public relations*, Tritonic: Bucharest.

²³ Arrington, M. (2009). Modelling the real market value of social networks. *TechCrunch*, June 23rd, Available online: <http://www.techcrunch.com/2008/06/23/modeling-the-real-market-value-of-social-networks/>

²⁴ Nordfors, D. (2009) *Innovation Journalism, Attention Work and the Innovation Economy. A Review of the Innovation Journalism Initiative 2003-2009*. Online: <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/injo-6-1.pdf>

²⁵ Luostarinen, M. (2009) *Uusmedia ja kansalaismedia verkosto- ja klusteritalouden tuotteina innovaatiopolitiikassa*. (In Finnish: New and social media as a production of cluster and network economy in innovation policy), Books on Demand GmbH, Helsinki.

²⁶ Miel, P. & Faris, R. (2008), *News and Information as Digital Media come of age. Overview 2008*, The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. Online: http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Overview_MR.pdf

²⁷ Pew Research Center (2008). *Key news audiences now blend online and traditional sources*. Available online at: <http://peoplepress.org/reports/pdf/444.pdf>.

²⁸ Castells, M. (2009) *Communication power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁹ Luoma-aho, V. & Nordfors, D. (2009) “Attention and Reputation in the Innovation Economy”, *Innovation Journalism*, 6(2), online: <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/injo-6-2.pdf>

³⁰ Matikainen, J. (2009). *Sosiaalisen ja perinteisen median rajalla*. Viestinnän tutkimuskeskus CRC, Helsingin yliopisto. Viestinnän laitoksen tutkimusraportteja 3.

³¹ Vollmer, C. (2009) *Digital Darwinism, Strategy+Business*, Issue 54 (spring 2009), Marketing & Media –feature.

enough to change the way we theorize about communication? And most importantly: Is social media killing our traditional theories of communication?

What is still the same?

Despite the talk about social media several human functions still remain the same despite the emergence of social media. The need for information and creating and maintaining a sense of community are among those needs still remaining³². If anything, they've increased³³. Though we are witnessed increasing use of robotics, it is still most commonly people who communicate, even in the real of social media.

First models of communication spring from Bell's first sketches of the early telephone (figure 3), where communication was seen as a process of transmitting information. The earliest communication theories (eg. Shannon's model of communication³⁴) concentrated on making the transmission with as little noise and other distractions as possible. Though this basic process has much been criticized for being too simple and much amended since, the early models highlighted certain theoretical aspects that are important also in the Social Media Era. Communication still requires a shared channel. Not everyone even in the Social Media Era is using or reading blogs and microblogs, bringing up not only larger societal questions of digital divide but concerns of basic reach and availability. Similarly, when users in today's social networking sites are bombarded with advertising and messages, we are again dealing with issues of "noise".

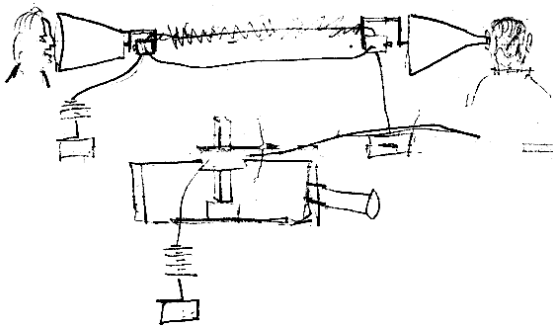


Image 3. Bell's Original drawings of the early telephone, Library of Congress³⁵.

Despite these similarities in the basics of communication over time, many of the most important theories of media and mass communication are being challenged in the context of

³² Hunt, T. (2009). *The Whuffie Factor. Using the Power of Social Networks to Build Your Business*, Crown Business: New York, NY.

³³ Baym, N. K. (2000). *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and the Online Community*. Newbury Park, CA; Sage.

³⁴ Shannon, C. E. A (1948). *Mathematical Theory of Communication*. *Bell System Technical Journal*, vol. 27, pp. 379-423 and 623-656, July and October, 1948.

³⁵ Bell, A. G. (date unknown). *Sketch of the workings of a telephone, from his original sketches*. Bell Family Papers; Library of Congress. Original image retrieved from <http://memory.loc.gov/mss/mcc/004/0001.jpg>

social media. Ideas behind theories of public opinion, two-step flow of information, agenda setting, spiral of silence, relationship management, as well as the notion of feedback and stakeholder thinking all require re-examination³⁶.

Not only journalism, but the role of media corporations has changed with the introduction of social media. The business model is switching from catering to the public interest to finding the online communities and enabling them³⁷. The traditional model of communication from one to the mass audience has given way for the interactive media of tailored content being produced by one yet allowing feedback from many³⁸. Social media takes a step further away from control, toward shared arenas where many produce in collaboration. Despite lack of control, however, the power dimension is still there via the ownership of these new arenas³⁹. The power over the different arenas may in time lead to dominion of society⁴⁰, but more importantly these arenas are grounds for the shaping of public opinion⁴¹.

What is changing?

Among the early communication scholars, Lippman in his book *Public Opinion*⁴² noted in 1922 a lack of individuals' cognitive abilities. Individuals were ill equipped and unable to understand a complex reality. To help with understanding and sense-making, stereotypes were applied. Though individual capacities may not have improved, access to the Internet has provided new resources for individuals to use. We can see a return to this need for stereotypes in the *Reputation Society*⁴³, where we are unable to take note of all available clues and must make choices based on past actions and reputations. New literacies are needed, as the previous modes of reading the media and communication do not translate. Many still interpret the social media with the rules and frames of traditional media⁴⁴, and fail to read that content produced and made available does not necessarily mean it would be of interest to everyone it reaches.

In fact, "Selective exposure is especially likely in the new media environment because of information overload. New forms of communication not only deliver much larger chunks of campaign information, but they also facilitate consumers' ability to attend to the information selectively⁴⁵".

Other things regarding public opinion have drastically changed: No longer is the public opinion dependent on the press and their points of view, but various players can contribute to how an opinion is formed. Moreover, public opinion online can be formed in minutes, whereas in 1922

³⁶ Wright, D. K. & Hinson, M. D. (2009) *An Analysis of the Increasing Impact of Social and Other New Media on Public Relations Practice*, *Public Relations Journal*, Vol. 3(2), Available online: <http://www.prsa.org/prjournal/Vol3No2/6D-030202.pdf>

³⁷ Matikainen, J. (2008). *Sosiaalinen media, millaista sosiaalisuutta? (Social media, how social?)* *Tiedotustutkimus* 31(4), pp. 24-41.

³⁸ Bowman, S. & Willis, C. (2005) *The Future Is Here, But Do News Media Companies See It?* *Nieman Reports* 59, 4, pp. 6-10.

³⁹ Bauwens, M. (2005). *The Political Economy of Peer Production*. *CTheory*. <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=499>.

⁴⁰ Castells, M. (2009) *Communication power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. P.3

⁴¹ Luoma-aho, V. & Vos, M. (2009) 'Monitoring the Complexities: Nuclear power and public opinion. *Public Relations Review*, 35, pp. 120-122.

⁴² Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. New York: Macmillan.

⁴³ Luoma-aho, V. (2005), *Faith-holders as Social Capital of Finnish Public Organizations*, *Studies in Humanities* 42, University of Jyväskylä Press, Jyväskylä, available at: <http://dissertations.jyu.fi/studhum/9513922626.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Shirky, C. (2008). *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. New York: Penguin Press, p. 17.

⁴⁵ Iyengar, S. & Hahn, K. (2009) 'Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media use. *Journal of Communication*, 59(2009), pp. 19-39.

it was a longer process. New forums also enable even minute groups to gain support and members, and hence they have been seen to democratize the formation of public opinion. The spiral of silence⁴⁶ is another aging theory, as in the new environment people have become less shy on sharing opposing beliefs with larger audiences and through the cover of anonymity. On the other hand, having an online existence does not yet guarantee wide public support or a shared opinion.

Similarly, the two-step flow theory⁴⁷ and the role of opinion leaders must be reconsidered in the new environment. Flow of information has grown exponentially. Opinion leaders are no longer mostly politicians or people in authority, but many bloggers and microbloggers who are in practice producers of mass media, are also opinion leaders passing on their own interpretations. Moreover, opinions take new turns when people post their views in their social networking sites, and unintended consequences may occur when translation services translate messages and posts across cultures and languages.

The new environment has also changed the notion of what communication as a process⁴⁸ is about: when there are more than one possible communication channel, more than one electronic formats to be applied and several ways to ensure understanding, noise found in the early communication process plays a smaller role. On the other hand, the amount of information available today could be understood to hinder our perceptions and attention we give to individual events⁴⁹. With the introduction on real-time interaction through blogs, chats and forums, feedback⁵⁰ is today very different than in the original context of early communication theory. The new environment has opened communication up to be what before was only dreamt of, a real dialogue.

With social media, society on some level has become the great community the Chicago school⁵¹ once imagined it to be, joined together through communication. As people are joined across cultural and spatial borders around their interests, some speak of global neighborhoods, or the Twiterville⁵², other talk of us entering the Facebook Era⁵³ of online friendships. These changes have major consequences for public relations theories as well. For example, the basic ideas behind relationship management⁵⁴ have to be considered, as managing relationships in the uncontrollable online environment is proving to be difficult. Stakeholder theory⁵⁵ must also be revisited, as organizations are no longer in the center of communication networks, but instead must find the different issue arenas⁵⁶ where stakeholders and potential stakeholders⁵⁷ are already discussing issues relevant to them.

⁴⁶ Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. (1984) *The spiral of silence: public opinion - our social skin*. The university of Chicago press, Chicago.

⁴⁷ Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. (1955), *Personal Influence*, New York: The Free Press.

⁴⁸ Shannon, C. E. A (1948). *Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Bell System Technical Journal, vol. 27, pp. 379-423 and 623-656, July and October, 1948.

⁴⁹ Davenport, T. H. & J. C. Beck (2001), *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business*, Harvard Business School Press,

⁵⁰ Weiner, N. (1948). *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. Wiley.

⁵¹ Dewey, J. (1916/1963). *Democracy and education*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

⁵² Israel, S. (2009) *Twiterville, How Businesses can thrive in the new global neighborhoods*. Portfolio.

⁵³ Shih, C. (2009) *The Facebook Era, Tapping Social Networks to Build Better Products, Reach New Audiences, and sell more stuff*. Prentice Hall Professional, Pearson Education.

⁵⁴ In Ledingham, J. A. & Bruning, S. D. (eds.). *Public relations as relationship management. A Relational Approach to the Study and practise of Public Relations*. Lawrence Erlbaum: Mahwah, NJ.

⁵⁵ Freeman, R. E. 1984. *Strategic management: a stakeholder approach*. Boston: Pitman.

⁵⁶ Luoma-aho, V. & Vos, M. (2009) 'Monitoring the Complexities: Nuclear power and public opinion. *Public Relations Review*, 35, pp. 120-122.

⁵⁷ Luoma-aho, V. & Paloviita, A. (2010) "Actor-networking stakeholder theory for corporate communications", *Corporate*

What's new in media?

For the media, the church and state separation of the editorial and the business processes is being challenged in this new environment. Bloggers, for example, are forming their own businesses combining these two, and resulting sometimes in ethical dilemmas: how can you write objectively of sources that support your existence? At the same time, the existence of blogs and other online communities offer unique ways to enable symmetrical two-way communication⁵⁸. On the other hand the question rises in the context of public relations, how is it possible to be symmetrical in communication when there are suddenly thousands of new stakeholders?

Moreover, the theory of agenda setting⁵⁹ is changing in several ways. Though some individuals aim at becoming citizen journalists and writers, others become accidental citizen journalists by being on the scene while something big happens in their arena⁶⁰. When many people are equipped with cameras and Internet access wherever they are, they can shape and mold the agenda faster than legacy media. Moreover, in many areas in the Western world, the legacy media institutions are going out of business so there is a vacuum for agenda formation⁶¹. With the introduction of new media, the leading role of large media institutions is diminishing selective exposure⁶² becomes the norm: People are gathering their personal, targeted news and information from several sources, both professional and unprofessional.

For theories focusing on media use, such as the media richness theory⁶³, digital developments have enriched, or made more effective some of the media that traditionally were considered cold, such as the computer mediated interaction. When video and voice are carried over long distances, the mediated interaction takes a shape different from the traditional face-to-face but still much like it: communication is very recipient-centered and feedback is readily available. As for the uses of media, the question is turning more toward what should the roles of joining online communities where news and information is discussed and shared⁶⁴.

New theories on the block

As many of the important theories of media and mass communication are being challenged, the question arises which theories, then are current and still applicable? Though many theories require reconsideration, it should be noted, however, that they will not “die” as such. Agenda setting –theory may well become central again when the online environment is involved in the picture. The process-nature of communication, it can be argued, is still very much there, only

Communications: An International Journal, forthcoming

⁵⁸ Grunig, J. Dozier, D., Ehling, W. Grunig, L., Repper, F & White, J. (Eds.) (1992). Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: Hillsdale NJ.

⁵⁹ McCombs, M. & Shaw, D. (1972) The Agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), pp. 176-187

⁶⁰ Israel, S. (2009) *Twitterville*, How Businesses can thrive in the new global neighborhoods. Portfolio.

⁶¹ Miel, P. & Faris, R. (2008), News and Information as Digital Media come of age. Overview 2008, The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. Online: http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Overview_MR.pdf

⁶² Iyengar, S. & Hahn, K. (2009) ‘Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media use. *Journal of Communication*, 59(2009), pp. 19-39.

⁶³ Daft, R.L. & Lengel, R.H. (1984). Information richness: a new approach to managerial behavior and organizational design. In: Cummings, L.L. & Staw, B.M. (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* 6, (191-233). Homewood, IL: JAI Press.

⁶⁴ Matikainen, J. (2008). Sosiaalinen media, millaista sosiaalisuutta? (Social media, how social?) *Tiedotustutkimus* 31(4), pp. 24-41.

now the processes are quicker and multiple⁶⁵. This is evident in the trend of foreverism⁶⁶: as the need for real-time information exceeds the need for truth or verified information, news and information published online are not even expected to be finished products.

Similarly, opinion leaders play still an important role for opinion formation, though not so much in mediating information as merely guiding opinions among the specific publics. Opinion leaders today could be called attention leaders, as their main assets is no longer opinion but the targeting of attention. This is well evident for example in the world of micro-blogging services such as Twitter, where those with the most followers are best able to direct others' attention to specific websites and documents through linking them in their tweets.

In the attention economy, the diffusion of information and innovation is acute again⁶⁷. With more information available to more people than ever before, focus is no longer on acquiring information but on putting it together in a useful way. In the attention economy, how ideas spread or "go viral" are of interest not only to organizations but also to journalists. The new agenda is overridden by popular clips ranging from political content, disasters, celebrity news to funniest home videos. The urban dictionary defines going viral as a phenomena used in reference to Internet content that spreads rapidly through a population by being frequently shared with a number of individuals... In other words, a link goes viral because most of the people who get it forward it to their Friends list or post it in their online status." Similarly of new interest are the theoretical foundations of how and why certain things "stick"⁶⁸ while others are forgotten easier.

Managing attention is about managing curiosity: "To stimulate curiosity, it is necessary to make students aware of manageable gaps in their knowledge"⁶⁹. This requires finding a balance, as to interest individuals enough for action, yet not making it too difficult. Curiosity gaps motivate individuals to learn and find out information, and information seeking and news gathering is natural as humans seek to lower their levels of uncertainty⁷⁰. When change is constant, need for information is greater. Crises communication theories⁷¹ represent an area where the concept of speed has always played a central role, and hence these theories are of newfound value. In fact, these theories are especially useful for different practitioners working in the attention economy: "It used to be that crisis communication was a niche market... now (with social media), crisis communication is what we do every day"⁷².

Theorizing on reputation becomes important when all dealings are recorded online. In fact, reputation has been established as a central area for crises management⁷³. Reputation research has traditionally focused on the individuals and organizations, but as the new issue arenas arise,

⁶⁵ Miel, P. & Faris, R. (2008), News and Information as Digital Media come of age. Overview 2008, The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. Online: http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Overview_MR.pdf

⁶⁶ <http://trendwatching.com/trends/foreverism/>

⁶⁷ Rogers, E.M. (1995), "Diffusion of innovations", New York: Free Press.

⁶⁸ Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2007). Made to stick: Why some ideas survive and others die. New York: Random House.

⁶⁹ Loewenstein, G. (1994), The Psychology of Curiosity: A Review and Reinterpretation, *Psychological Bulletin*, 116 (1), 75-98, p.94.

⁷⁰ Hebb, D. O. (1949), *The Organization of Behavior*, New York: John Wiley.

⁷¹ Coombs, T. (2007) Crises management and communications. Institute for Public Relations, available online: http://www.instituteforpr.org/files/uploads/Coombs_Crisis2.pdf

⁷² Ex -journalist, current PR-practitioner working in a PR Agency specializing on tech communication. Citation taken from interview data, (V. Luoma-aho) on attention workers in the Silicon Valley, Fall 2008.

⁷³ Coombs, W. T. & Holladay, S. J. (2006). Halo or reputational capital: Reputation and crisis management. *Journal of Communication Management*, 10(2), 123-137.

being associated with a certain arena could also be a factor of reputation. Hunt suggests that Whuffie⁷⁴, a reputation online is based on three types of action: who you are networked with (network), how you behave (niceness) and how noteworthy you are (notability).

One emerging new theory in the context of online environments is the idea of Issue Arenas⁷⁵. Issue Arenas is rooted in public relations, but can be applied to studies of the mass media and journalism as well. It is an evolved version of stakeholder theory taking the dynamic nature of the stakeholder field of forces into account. The theory suggests that stakeholder interaction today takes place on versatile issue arenas, outside organizations' and editors' control. Hence contributing to a conversation or having a point of view represented does not require the previously famed tool of control, but instead skills such as monitoring, listening and participating are vital. Measuring the importance of different arenas becomes relevant, at the same times as social media is becoming more measurable. New theories on the effectiveness of new and social media are needed, as thus far most existing measures are still consultancy-built. Ideas are needed on how to measure the impact and engagement apparent on the different issue arenas.

In this new environment, allies and supporters become central. Those groups and audiences that help organizations or individuals survive by trusting them and speaking well of them (contributing to a good reputation) can be titled Trust Agents⁷⁶ or Faith-holders⁷⁷. The idea behind faith-holders is that those who trust an organization and who have actual experiences of working with the organization, can provide to organizational social capital. They can become social capitalists for the organization, Bearers of new ideas and openers of new doors to other networks. All these are central concerns of those dealing with attention, and next focus is turned toward the professionals of the attention economy.

New workers on the block

If the currency of our environment is attention, then those who broker it can be called attention workers⁷⁸. Attention workers are a product of the Digital Darwinism⁷⁹ as they have evolved from the previous job-market of communications. The roots of attention workers lie in public relations where attention results from a process of relationship building⁸⁰. Attention can be defined as "focused mental engagement on a particular item of information"⁸¹, consisting of psychological processes. Attention and awareness are closely related, which narrows down to attention and a decision to act or not. In fact, awareness turns into attention when a certain

⁷⁴ Hunt, T. (2009). *The Whuffie Factor. Using the Power of Social Networks to Build Your Business*, Crown Business: New York, NY.

⁷⁵ Luoma-aho, V. & Vos, M. (2009) 'Monitoring the Complexities: Nuclear power and public opinion. *Public Relations Review*, 35, pp. 120-122.

⁷⁶ Brogan, C. & Smith, J. (2009) *Trust Agents. Using the web to build influence, Improve reputation and earn trust*. Smith Wiley & Sons: New Jersey.

⁷⁷ Luoma-aho, V. (2005), *Faith-holders as Social Capital of Finnish Public sector organisations*. Doctoral dissertation. Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 42, Jyväskylä University Press, <http://julkaisut.jyu.fi/?id=951-39-2262-6>

⁷⁸ Nordfors, D 2006. "PR and the Innovation Communication System", *Innovation Journalism Vol.3 No.5*. (2006), <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-3-5.pdf>, also published by Strategic Innovators

⁷⁹ Vollmer, C. (2009) *Digital Darwinism, Strategy+Business*, Issue 54 (spring 2009), *Marketing & Media* –feature.

⁸⁰ Ledingham, J. A. & Bruning, S. D. (eds.). *Public relations as relationship management. A Relational Approach to the Study and practise of Public Relations*. Lawrence Erlbaum: Mahwah, NJ.

⁸¹ Davenport, T. H. & J. C. Beck (2001), *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business*, Harvard Business School Press

threshold is reached in the brain and the potential for action is spurred⁸². Attention, awareness, perception and cognition all shape each other.

When attention is identified as a scarce commodity, the influence of ‘attention workers,’ professional generators and brokers of attention⁸³ rises. An attention economy is the “natural economy of the internet”⁸⁴ and increasingly of all society with its own social structures, culture and values. Attention workers create and maintain these structures and rules, though their role has thus far received little scholarly attention.

In attention economy, a system built around “paying, receiving, and seeking what is most intrinsically limited and not replaceable by anything else, namely the attention of other human beings”⁸⁵. Some have suggested that attention transactions⁸⁶ might take over and even replace financial transactions in the future. To a certain degree this has already happened, for example when holiday rental companies offer free hotel nights in exchange for attending a sales pitch or a website (e.g. hulu.com) provides the choice of viewing one long ad or several short ones in exchange for showing an episode cost-free online. Other note attention or noteworthiness to be one of the aspects of the new online reputation capital, whuffie⁸⁷.

Attention is needed to conduct business in several ways. On one hand, entrepreneurs, investors and public-policy makers want attention from journalists to help sell their ideas or products. On the other hand, journalists need audience attention to maintain their status. A delicate system of symbiotic relationships develops between the various attention workers in the innovation ecosystems, both professional and social. Unfortunately, as information and attention are for sale, the problems of bias, conflict of interest and corruption may increase in the attention economy. Table 4 presents the five different basic types of attention workers.

Table 4. Attention workers and their foci⁸⁸

Player in the attention economy	Mandate/paid	Generate & broker
Journalism	public	Attention
Public relations	source	Reputation
Marketing	source	Reputation
Advertising	source	Attention
Lobbying	source	Support

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Nordfors, D 2006. “PR and the Innovation Communication System”, Innovation Journalism Vol.3 No.5. (2006), <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-3-5.pdf>, also published by Strategic Innovators (July - Sept 2007, Volume I | Issue 3). The concept of Attention Work is modified and further developed in Nordfors D. “Attention Work vs Knowledge Work”, The Innovation Journalism Blog, March 15 2008, <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/blog/2008/03/attention-work-vs-knowledge-work.html>

⁸⁴ Goldhaber, M.G. (2006), The value of openness in an Attention Economy, First Monday, 11(6), available online: <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1334/1254>

⁸⁵ Goldhaber, M.G. (2006), The value of openness in an Attention Economy, First Monday, 11(6), available online: <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1334/1254>

⁸⁶ Goldhaber, M. H. (1997), "The Attention Economy and the Net", First Monday, 2(4), Available online: <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/519/440>

⁸⁷ Hunt, T. (2009). The Whuffie Factor. Using the Power of Social Networks to Build Your Business, Crown Business: New York, NY.

⁸⁸ Luoma-aho, V. & Nordfors, D. (2009) "Attention and Reputation in the Innovation Economy", Innovation Journalism, 6(2), online: <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/injo-6-2.pdf>

The first column of the table lists some attention workers in the attention economy: journalists, PR, marketing, advertising and lobbying. The second column lists from where the mandate of the attention worker derives. It is clear from table 3 that journalism is distinctive from the other types of attention work. Journalism is done - as defined by its principles - via public mandate. Each story will contain information from sources, but the journalism is committed not to represent the sources. It should be an independent actor, serving the interests of the audience. The other actors - PR, marketing, advertising and lobbying - act on a mandate from the sources. Their job is to catch public attention, to improve the standing of the actors they are serving.

The main generator of revenues for the various attention workers is similar to where the mandate results from. Journalism's traditional attention business model is to generate readership attention and broker it to advertisers. With the proliferation of the Internet and the arrival of the social media era, journalism is struggling to find alternatives. For the remaining actors, we have listed that the money comes from the 'source,' borrowing language from the jargon of journalism. In a news story, the source is the provider of narrative elements in the journalistic story. The source may have an incentive to influence the narrative that catches public attention, and that may influence the narrative adopted by the public. In table 2, we use the word 'source' to represent an actor who plays for public attention to influence the public narrative, to achieve goals.

The third column shows the value proposition of the attention worker to the customer, the one who provides the money. Journalism sells attention to advertisers. Advertisers sell attention (that they in their turn buy from journalism or other actors gathering public attention) to the source. PR sells improved reputation to the source, as does marketing. Lobbyists generate support for the source.

Whuffie: net worth of attention workers

As the online environment allows for a permanent record of past deeds, online reputation is becoming the centre of interest. Reputation consists of impressions formed in the minds of individual stakeholders, yet it is understood as a collective attribute that creates a positive or negative operating environment^{89, 90}. Reputation is the outcome of the history and the sum of stories told about the individual⁹¹, so a strong reputation results from "consistent information signals over time, which constituents believe, share and trust"⁹². It refers to both substantive and evaluative estimates, "the distribution of cognitive representations that members of a collectivity hold⁹³" about a target⁹⁴. Most reputation scholars agree that reputation is a source

⁸⁹ Hosmer, L. T. (1995) 'Trust: The connecting link between organizational theory and philosophical ethics', *Academy of Management Review*, 20(2), 379-403.

⁹⁰ Fombrun, C. & van Riel, C. (2003) *Fame and Fortune: how successful companies build winning reputations*. Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River.

⁹¹ Hon, L. & Grunig, J. (1999) Guidelines for measuring relationships in public relations. *The Institute for Public Relations*. [online] [cited 29.11.2006] <http://ipr.wieck.com/files/uploads/1999_MeasuringRelations.pdf>

⁹² Dentchev, N. A. & Heene, A. (2004) 'Managing the reputation of restructuring corporations: send the right signal to the right stakeholder', *Journal of Public Affairs*, 4(1), 56-72.

⁹³ Grunig, J. & Hung, C.F. (2002), The effect of relationships on reputation and reputation on relationships: A cognitive, behavioral study. Paper presented at the PRSA Educator's Academy 5th Annual International, Interdisciplinary Public Relations Research Conference, Miami, Florida.

of competitive advantage, related to social standing⁹⁵. Attention workers must create and maintain a solid reputation for themselves to be able to play in the attention economy.

Attention workers need a reputation that will give them the credibility to operate within the attention economy. The formation of whuffie can be taken as an example of how reputation of individuals in this new era is formed. As noted earlier, whuffie⁹⁶ consists of how nice, noteworthy and networked an individual is. The record of the attention workers' past deeds becomes central, when strong institutions such as the legacy media are no longer able to provide institutional reputation for the individual attention workers. Having a good reputation among different stakeholders can be understood as reputational capital, and this accumulating this personal reputational capital is the prerequisite of an attention worker. Reputational capital has been claimed to contribute to reduced transaction costs through trust⁹⁷, added loyalty⁹⁸ and legitimacy⁹⁹.

Different attention workers interact and often work together. The decision to collaborate is based on individual reputation, attention value and reputation. "On some level, journalism and PR can trade: a journalist can access a source with high reputation, which can boost generation of attention around the story. PR will give the journalist access to the source if they think this is the best alternative for improving the reputation of the source. Not only journalism borrows reputation from the source. PR may also borrow the reputation of journalism. The journalist has a reputation with the audience (from whom journalism has its mandate) that the journalist nurtures to maintain the attention that is sold to advertisers. Therefore the trade between journalism and PR can be seen as an intermixing of reputation"¹⁰⁰.

Reputation consists not only of what the individual does, but also of other cues such as trends and the sector¹⁰¹. Reputation formation can be seen as "a communication process in which industry context and the actions of rivals influence how the signals of a focal firm affect its reputation"¹⁰². Hence, the reputation of the previous fields such as journalism and public relations, greatly reflects on the reputation of attention workers. Moreover, in most parts of the world the concept of the attention workers has not yet been established. An interesting case, however, is the recent developments in Russia, where the attention workers have created new innovative ways of working together through journalism-public relations information contracts¹⁰³.

⁹⁴ Wry, T., Deephouse, D. & McNamara, G. (2006) Substantive and Evaluative Media Reputations Among and Within Cognitive Strategic Groups, *Corporate Reputation Review*, 9(4), pp. 225-242.

⁹⁵ Fombrun, C. & Shanley, M. (1990) What's in a name? Reputation building and corporate strategy, *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(2), 233-258.

⁹⁶ Hunt, T. (2009). *The Whuffie Factor. Using the Power of Social Networks to Build Your Business*, Crown Business: New York, NY.

⁹⁷ Hosmer, L. T. (1995), "Trust: The connecting link between organisational theory and philosophical ethics", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp. 379-403.

⁹⁸ Fombrun, C. and van Riel, C. (2003), *Fame and Fortune: how successful companies build winning reputations*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River.

⁹⁹ Deephouse, D. and Carter, S. (2005), "An Examination of Differences Between Organisational Legitimacy and Organisational Reputation", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 2, pp. 329-360.

¹⁰⁰ Luoma-aho, V. & Nordfors, D. (2009) "Attention and Reputation in the Innovation Economy", *Innovation Journalism*, 6(2), online: <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/injo-6-2.pdf>

¹⁰¹ Luoma-aho, V. (2008), "Sector reputations of public sector organisations", *The International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 21(5), 446-467.

¹⁰² Basdeo, D.K., Smith, K.G., Grimm, C.M., Rindova, V.P. & Derfus, P.J. (2006), "The impact of market actions on firm reputation", *Strategic Management Journal*, 27, pp. 1205-1219.

¹⁰³ Tsetsura, K. & Luoma-aho, V. (2009) How much do you trust me? The role of trust and innovation in Russian journalism, A paper presented at the 6th Conference on Innovation Journalism, available online: <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/ij6ac/papers/TsetsuraRussianInnovationdraft.pdf>

Conclusion

“When we change the way we communicate, we change society.”¹⁰⁴

Much of the change we see brought about by social media is related to means of communication, whereas the basic human needs of sharing remain the same. In this new environment many theories of mass communication and public relations are becoming outdated, yet the need for understanding the environment is acute. This paper was a first attempt to map new categorization of social media into 8 sub-groups ranging from content publishing to aggregation services. The paper provided a closer look at what is happening to several of the well established theories of mass communication and public relations in this new media environment. Theories and ideas such as the formation of public opinion, two-step flow of information, agenda setting, spiral of silence, media richness, relationship management, notion of feedback and stakeholder theory all require re-examination¹⁰⁵ in this new environment.

The paper can be seen as an introduction to the changes needed for theories of communication in the web 2.0 Era. New ideas and theories were suggested that could become of central importance in the future, such as attention work¹⁰⁶, definition of communities¹⁰⁷, diffusion of innovation¹⁰⁸ and new media literacies. Much empirical evidence does not yet exist, as the phenomena is rather novel in nature. The role of attention workers, those who professionally generate and broker attention was argued to be central for the new environment. Several theories of communication were noted to be in need of revision in this Social Media Era, though many basic concepts of communication have remained the same throughout the Century. New media has changed not necessarily the essence of communication, but its speed, its channels, its interactivity and its impact.

Future communication research should focus on developing the renewed versions of our central theories of communication and map in theory what these trends will mean for both individuals and organizations. Moreover, the online environment has opened up great potential for communication research, as it stores most of the interaction taking place, such as blog-posts, responses and even times of response for later study and analysis.

¹⁰⁴ Shirky, C. (2008). *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. New York: Penguin Press, p. 17.

¹⁰⁵ Wright, D. K. & Hinson, M. D. (2009) An Analysis of the Increasing Impact of Social and Other New Media on Public Relations Practice, *Public Relations Journal*, Vol. 3(2), Available online: <http://www.prsa.org/prjournal/Vol3No2/6D-030202.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ Nordfors D. (2008) 'Attention Work vs Knowledge Work', *The Innovation Journalism Blog*, March 15 2008, <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/blog/2008/03/attention-work-vs-knowledge-work.html>

¹⁰⁷ Matikainen, J. (2008). Sosiaalinen media, millaista sosiaalisuutta? (Social media, how social?) *Tiedotustutkimus* 31(4), pp. 24-41.

¹⁰⁸ Rogers, E.M. (1995), "Diffusion of innovations", New York: Free Press