

Distributed Influence: *Quantifying the Impact of Social Media*

An Edelman White Paper

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Introduction



At the end of 2006, [Time](#) magazine quoted Thomas Carlyle as saying that "*the history of the world is but the biography of great men.*" They went on to explain that he believed that it is the few, the powerful and the famous who shape our collective destiny as a species. This theory took a serious beating last year.

What matters is who we are talking to... not how many - Jeff Jarvis

For the first time in history, technology has reached a point where everyone has a voice. This voice, articulated through social media, can be extremely powerful and can force individuals, companies and communities to change the way they behave.

In [Edelman's 2007 Trust Barometer](#), results showed that employees or 'someone like me' are trusted far more than any other group of people. Combining this with the advent of social media tools such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter has made an individual's voice louder than ever before.

Consequently, the need to understand which individuals are the most trusted or have the loudest voice has become increasingly important. However, at present there is no agreed reliable process for identifying who these people are or for quantifying the online value of one person over another.

This white paper aims to address this issue. It is not written as a fait accompli but rather as a contribution to the conversation.

Following the publication of the [Edelman's Social Media Index in July 2007](#) with [David Brain](#) (CEO, Edelman Europe), a roundtable was devised to bring together a group of interested stakeholders representing all key constituencies to address the question of influence and how it should be measured. These people were:

Measurement

[Max Kalehoff, Nielsen Buzzmetrics \(now with Clickable\)](#)
[Advertising Research Foundation](#)
[Sarah Petersen, StrategyOne](#)

Advertiser

[Henry Copeland, BlogAds](#)

Publisher

[Jeff Jarvis, Buzzmachine](#)
[Steve Rubel, me2revolution](#)
[Keith O'Brien, PRWeek](#)

Edelman

[Richard Edelman, Edelman](#)
[Jonny Bentwood, Edelman](#)
[Rick Murray, me2revolution](#)

Interactive Agency
David Dunne, Edelman

Industry Observer
[Peter Kim, Forrester](#)
[Charlene Li, Forrester](#)
[Dr. Walter Carl, Northeastern University, ChatThreads](#)

The content in this White Paper is a summary of what was expressed at this roundtable.

Why is it important to measure online influence?

It is not who is influential that counts but who acts as a catalyst for conversation - Keith O'Brien

Calculating an individual's online influence is becoming more important each year as people seek advice from their peers on the Internet regarding what they should think, buy and say.

Many people have recognised this and agree that there is an inherent need to develop a metric, or set of metrics, that allows publishers to more accurately quantify their value as a medium such that they can attract more and higher quality and relevant advertising and sponsorship revenues.

Conversely, advertisers and marketers need to have a reliable metric that provides them with a more scientific (and thus more defensible) way to plan and measure the outcomes of their campaign.

Traditionally the method of calculating influence is by using 'inbound link' tools such as [Technorati](#). However, many people agreed that this system is inherently flawed. Social media by its very nature is more than just blogging.

The Internet, according to [Doc Searls](#) is a place where people connect. To that end, the very term 'social media' is frowned upon by those who many would claim to be its most prominent and influential users. Nevertheless, 'social media' has been adopted as a term that most accurately explains the myriad of 'user generated content' platforms that are being used on the Internet today.

Social Media Index

The initial [catalyst](#) behind the roundtable was the publication of the [Social Media Index](#). A summary of which is shown below.

Traditionally, an individual's web influence was measured by the success of their blog. In its simplest form this was done by counting how many people subscribed and linked to it. However, in today's Web 2.0 world, this is no longer a credible metric as people are currently using a variety of different social media tools to inform and hold conversations with their audience.

FACT: There is a definitive need to assess any social media publisher's influence on the market as a whole.

*The eyeball model does not work in a long tail environment
- Steve Rubel*

What is becoming increasingly clear is that the more engaged an individual is within the different channels available, the broader influence that person has.

The Social Media Index is a model, which recognises and attempts to quantify the impact and influence of multiple social media tools.

FACT: This methodology is not the standard.

The standard is a long way down the road. I have selected one way (of many) to analyse different individuals with the aim to provoke debate so that together the community can create a standard. This could include what social media tools to analyse (e.g. Facebook or MySpace or both?) and what weighting should be given to each category (e.g. is Twitter just as important as blogging?).

Methodology summary:

Each blog has been given a score out of 10 based upon 6 criteria:

- Blog - analysed Google Rank, inbound links, subscribers, alexa rank, content focus, frequency, number of comments
- Multi-format - analysed Facebook - number of friends
- Mini-updates - analysed Twitter - number of friends, followers and updates
- Business cards - analysed LinkedIn - number of contacts
- Visual - analysed Flickr - number of photos uploaded from you or about you
- Favourites - analysed Digg, del.icio.us

Each score out of 10 was given a defined weighting which created a total score for each category. The sum of each of these numbers created an individual's *Social Media Index*. This index tells you the sum total of a person's influence over multiple social media platforms.

To explain how this works, the first step was to list top blogs purely by the current recognised scheme of inbound links (via Technorati) - the top 30 were analysed. The table below shows the first 5 blogs in this space:

	Name	Blog	Multi-format	Mini-updates	Business cards	Visual	Favourites	Social Media Index
1	TechCrunch	98	0	0	0	0	0	98
2	Search Engine Watch	98	0	0	0	0	0	98
3	Boing Boing	98	0	0	0	0	0	98
4	GigaOM	97	0	0	0	0	0	97
5	Micro Persuasion	96	0	0	0	0	0	96

Technology has now enabled people to communicate in the way they want - David Dunne

The second step was to take the same 30 blogs and score them based upon their use of multiple social media platforms. The first 5 again are listed below:

	Name	Blog	Multi-format	Mini-updates	Business cards	Visual	Favourites	Social Media Index
1	Micro Persuasion	29	17	25	7	2	13	93
2	TechCrunch	29	20	22	0	3	13	87
3	Scobeize	29	20	25	0	3	9	86
4	GigaOM	29	20	13	7	3	13	85
5	Gaping Void	28	20	22	3	2	5	80

This methodology was then used with a larger group of blogs. The overwhelming majority of new entrants to this more 'pure' Social Media Index are individuals which is probably not surprising given that corporates or even collectives don't really use Twitter or Facebook . . . people do. Obviously each platform has different primary functions and some are much more personal (Facebook) than others. But bloggers quite openly use Twitter and Facebook and MySpace to market their blog posts and many blogs these days have widgets cross marketing the individual's Facebook or Twitter profiles. And the personal and the professional was a line blurred for many of us years ago.

There are of course many platforms that we did not include in this, like MySpace, Jaiku and Pownce and of course this list is very English-language centric and includes none of the local social sites which dominate in countries like Korea and Germany.

This presentation of the Social Media Index was never intended to be an end in itself. Rather it was hoped that it would create conversations with the aim that people would move closer to understanding how to measure influence. The resulting roundtable was one of the more tangible outcomes of this.

Defining influence

in·flu·ence

Pronunciation [in-floo-uhns]

Pronunciation Key - Show IPA Pronunciation *noun, verb, -enced, -encing.*

-noun

the capacity or power of persons or things to be a compelling force on or produce effects on the actions, behaviour, opinions, etc., of others: He used family influence to get the contract.

Influence and attention are different. Influence is fiscal and long term whereas attention is monetary and short term - Peter Kim

One of the common words used at the roundtable was 'influence'. However, a straw poll of participants revealed that it could be defined in multiple ways such as:

- It is a noun and a verb; it is an action and an outcome
- It is credibility - having someone pay attention to you
- It is the shaping (and the process of) the opinions, actions and/or behaviours of others
- It is personal and builds from the inside-out and the bottom-up, generally one person, or one personal network at a time.

Ultimately, it's not a purely rational thing. Much of what 'influences' is driven by emotion with uncontrollable external forces like family and the opinions, behaviours and actions of many (the crowd).

[Walter Carl](#), in an academic article written with [Professor Steve Duck](#) at the University of Iowa, contended that the basic function of all communication (and thus influence) is to "seek a sense of control of the environment and of the rightness of one's view of it". By "control of the environment" they were referring to how people order, or interpretively make sense of, their world.

Walter explained that "the fact that people also seek to confirm their rightness of how they order/make sense of their world brings communication into contact with community (we define community as our network of personal and social relationships). In this context, to interact within a community of relationships is to engage in interpersonal influence. We are continually seeking to confirm the validity of how we order the environment and, one powerful to confirm our own view of the world is to put our view in communication with others' views, and to have an effect on both others' views and our own.

With social media, people's discourse leaves a digital trail, making it available as a way to infer how people order their environment. In confirming our own views through a process of communication we often make subtle adaptations to our views. Thus, conversations are everyday negotiations of this sense-making process and to the extent people shift the discourse, or engage in efforts to reaffirm a certain discourse, we can say influence has occurred. Maintaining or ending a conversations is also a way to engage in influence."

Following the roundtable [Max Kalehoff](#) attempted to answer the question of defining influence. He surmised:

"With all the attention around influence, and many unanswered questions, what we need most is more practical testing, tied to specific marketing objectives and applications.

The marketer's Holy Grail of influence is the ability to recognize patterns and optimize outcomes – whether for advertising,

Is influence what we should measure?

Starters and spreaders of memes are the most influential people - Jeff Jarvis

media-planning, public relations, word-of-mouth marketing, etc. Without question, influence often rides on nothing more than spontaneity. Spontaneity is an overwhelming force. Unpredictability is perhaps the greatest law of mother nature when it comes to influence. However, deeper understanding will lead to bets and actions with more favorable odds."

In defining influence, Max also believed that it is important to emphasise the value of 'the Network'. He stated that any single person is nothing without a network. The network defines influence perhaps more than any one person. In its most basic form, someone may have an incredible idea but unless people hear about it, then its value is diminished.

Using this theory, the roundtable concluded that in the context of social media, an influential person is not necessarily the individual who has the 'bright idea'. Influence can largely be determined by the meme.

In [Jeremiah Owyang's Dow Jones White Paper](#) on 'Tracking the Influence of Conversation', a meme was defined as: "*an idea or discussion that grows and spreads from individual to individual into a lengthy commentary*".

Jeff Jarvis strongly believed that for someone to be influential they will likely be either a meme starter or a meme spreader:

- 1) **The meme starter (Who? When? Where? Why? How)**
This person typically is creative, forms opinions and articulates them well. They have the ability to state a view at the right time. Their readership is not necessarily large but views the individual as trustworthy.
- 2) **The meme spreader (Who? How fast? How long? Where? Why? How?)**
This person thrives by sharing opinions and wants to do it first. They are trusted and have a large readership.

However, following the roundtable, I believe that there are a further three types of influencer that should be taken into consideration. They may not be as strong an influencer but they still have a high impact in the community. These people are:

- 3) **The meme adapter**
This person reads what is going on outside their traditional sphere of knowledge. They take the opinions of others and reform them so that it is tailored to their bespoke niche group. This information is then published and spread to a smaller but highly targeted audience.
- 4) **The meme commentator**
This person does not create content but reads the views and opinions of others and takes part in conversation via adding

comments. They are far more likely to share the knowledge of this topic with their peers through offline discussion rather than published content.

5) The meme reader

This person does not create any online content. However, they tend to be a vociferous consumer of information to which they read, learn and share with their peers in the offline world. Although not having the same reach as the meme spreader, their views are trusted and are able to promote these ideas in an alternative method.

The common themes behind the memes are:

- Topics and context
- Believability and credibility of message (both real and perceived)
- Relationships. Number and quality of people in any one conversation and number of talkers and listeners.
- Time. What happens now?

Should marketers target influencers or the easily influenced?

Focusing on the two categories with the greatest impact. The super-influencers fall into two buckets (meme starters and meme spreaders) and are by their nature the minority.

- *Meme starters* - e.g. [Dave Winer](#), film critics
- *Meme spreaders* - [Glenn Reynolds](#), or people with a platform

Nevertheless, it was agreed that there are very, very few super influencers. Arguably the most real 'influence' is effected by people not even on the 'influencer' radar screen.

Marketers face the continuing dilemma of how to gain the maximum impact for their investment. Understanding that there are very few meme starters or spreaders, we asked the question on whether the most effective target would be the easily influenced as oppose to the few influencers.

These people can be defined as follows:

- *Individual influencers*: people who lead the crowd (influenced by societal observations, memes)
- *Influence-ables*: the people in their personal networks who follow their lead

Either way, we're likely also talking about the effect of influence on the aggregate - or watching the crowd and its impact on how people act. In some rational decisions, and in essentially all emotionally-based / impulse decisions, the action, opinions and behaviours of the crowd shape the actions, opinions and behaviours of those still on the outside.

The crowd drives behaviour - Henry Copeland

The concept of the 'crowd as the influential' was an area that Henry Copeland strongly believed in. He cited [Duncan Watts](#) who explained that "*people almost never make decisions independently*" and that "*what people like depends on what they think other people like*".

No conclusions were drawn regarding who marketers should target. Where there was consensus though was through continuation of Henry's point regarding the crowd. Because the crowd is online, the best way to interact with them is in that environment where they can readily see how others are reacting, both positively and negatively.

What can we be selling that is better to buy than impressions?

If inbound links and other 'popularity measures' are redundant, the roundtable queried whether it was possible to sell:

- 1) Influence
- 2) A meme
- 3) Search results

As an alternative, Jeff Jarvis highlighted Flickr's innovative way of approaching this. Although the methodology of this contains a large amount of secret source, the concept, was explained as follows:

- What amount of effort goes into a photo - i.e. number of links, number of comments, use of tags etc.
- A social analysis - the relationship that emerges based on the photo and not the photographer.
- A mapping of the first two points.

The redeeming social value is an aggregated metric of these points.

The reason why this methodology resonated with the group was that it tried to calculate influence in an alternative manner. This approach did not look at the creator but rather the effort that went into the publication and the amount of discussion that it created amongst a wider community.

In this instance, popularity was not the primary metric as effort and dialogue were now included. The roundtable agreed that any meaningful social media metric had to ensure that popularity measures were not promoted at the expense of these other factors.

To get to one standard of measurement, we would need access to and the ability to aggregate all data, and that demands a whole new level of openness and sharing that is not available.

Regardless, there was general consensus that we may never be able to get to one standard. This is because this 'old world

Popularity is a meaningless measure - Jeff Jarvis

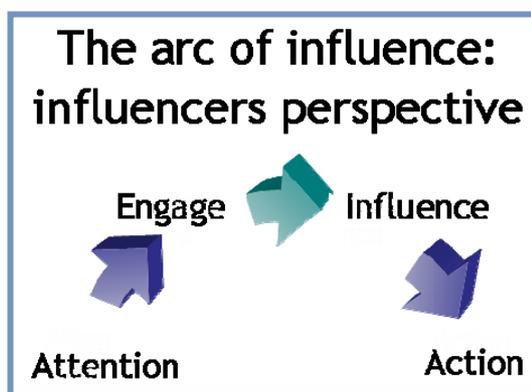
What are the origins of influence?

Influence is only influence when you reach a critical mass that inspires you to act - Steve Rubel

thinking' implies that the people with the money are in control. We believe the inverse is true, and thus it's the people with the content who will dictate - or at a minimum have an equal say in dictating - the metric standards by which their content is monetized.

Understanding that it is both the people who create and spread content combined with the fact that it is impossible to predict which opinions will turn into memes, the roundtable believed that a different approach was called for, namely to understand the origins of influence.

Using meme regression as a way to identify how topics spread and influence causes action, we created a model that tried to explain how the process works which we called the 'Arc of Influence'.



1) Grab attention

How do influencers grab a user's attention? What methods and social media tools do they use?

2) Engage

How does the influencer engage with the audience? Is it done in an informative, entertaining or challenging way?

3) Influence

Does the influencer create high quality content? Is it personal and relevant. i.e. Does it demonstrate need + context + timeliness

4) Action

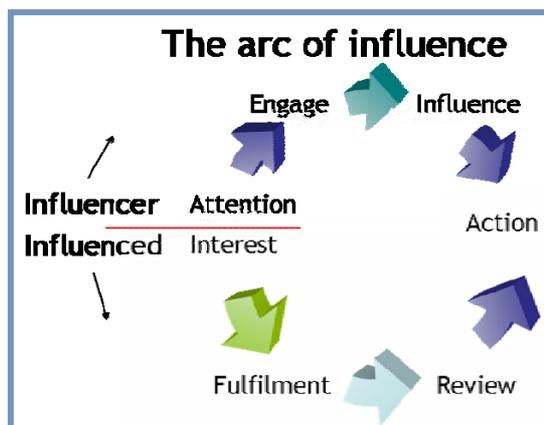
Does the influencer inspire the individual to act

Following this discussion, we proposed inverting the arc by putting the consumer in control and trying to work out how they get influenced so that they accordingly act.

You don't go for the most influential but the most easily influenced - Max Kalehoff



- 1) **Interest**
The consumer identifies a need or interest in information
- 2) **Fulfilment**
The consumer seeks fulfilment from what they hope are credible sources (information, entertainment)
- 3) **Review**
The consumer evaluates the content provided
- 4) **Action**
The consumer forms or modifies their opinion and acts accordingly.



It was hoped that this model could be used as a more effective way to engage than the historic way of merely counting page impressions to identify influence.

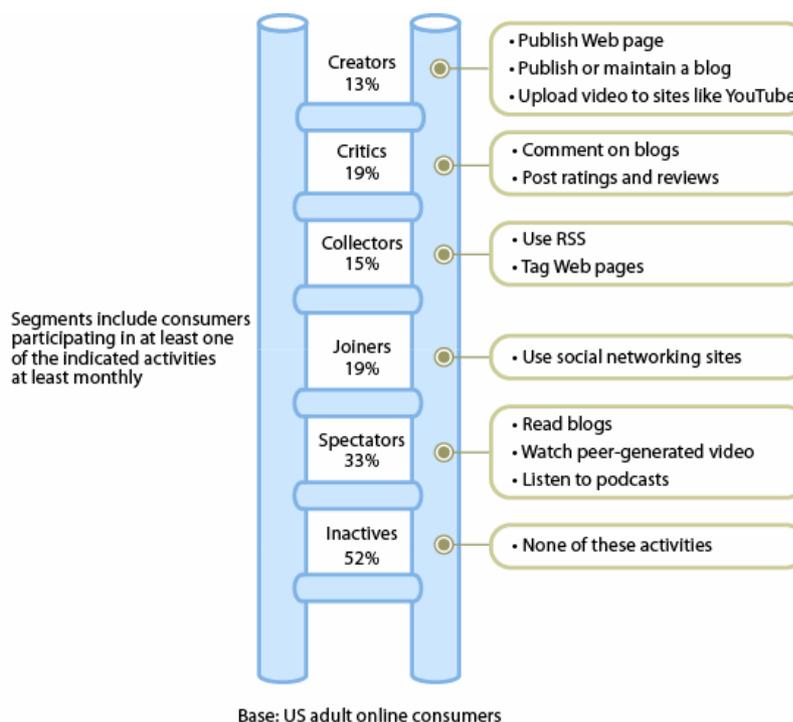
The move to
micro comm-
unications

The ideal scenario was to use this concept to determine the precise time and place when both the influencers and the influenced would like to be engaged. What the roundtable concluded was that a system equivalent to [Myers Briggs](#) was needed for micro-communications. This would enable people to be able to map target media, meme creation, consumption and sharing habits.

Peter Kim explained that a starting point in this exercise would be to identify the characteristics of the different target

Whatever the circumstances of your life, the understanding of type can make your perceptions clearer, your judgements sounder, and your life closer to your heart's desire - Isabel Briggs Myers

audiences which could be explained via Forrester's Social Technographics ladder.



[Source: Forrester report on Social Technographics](#)

Be cautious

With great power comes great responsibility - Spiderman

Nevertheless, there are certain things to beware of that everyone agreed should be top of mind:

- As we move closer to structuring our communications efforts on a micro / individual level, we have to take care to respect the privacy of those we seek to connect, converse and ultimately do business with.
- From [Google Health](#) to [Digitas](#) creating 4,000 versions of the same advert or a new mobile company that's mining cell phone conversations. The more we know about an individual, the more it is possible to manipulate.
- Transparency must reign.

We also recognise that individual behaviour isn't 100% predictable. Indeed we can't rationalise everything, because emotion and impulse still drive and will always drive a majority of economic and psychological buying decisions.

A formula to

The final discussion topic at the roundtable was to see if there was a formula that could be created to measure an individual's

understand
influence

online presence. The following system was proposed:

$$\frac{\text{Volume and Quality of Attention} \times \text{Time}}{\text{Size and Quality of Audience}}$$

This formula still needed a fair amount of work which we are following through at the moment. It is interesting to see that since the roundtable met, several popular web sites have all tried to create a new formula that also focussed on time and attention to portray someone's influence.

Whereas the initial social media index moved the argument forward by dismissing inbound links as the sole way to score an individual, by adding these variables it is hoped that a more realistic score can be achieved.

However, I recognise that this data is largely unavailable (although some sites like compete.com may be able to help with some of it). Unless this data can be readily and publicly accessible, it is hard to conceive how reliable any published results may be and therefore difficult for marketers to act on accordingly.

What next -
making this
actionable

Moving forward there are several questions and concepts that need to be answered and understood to help people maximise the impact of their online marketing activities, namely:

1. How does one use this information - such as the index, the identification of meme spreaders, adapters, commentators - to shape a communication strategy?
2. What role does traditional media play, particularly as they join the conversation with their own blogs, Twitter streams, Facebook apps, etc.?
3. Much of what has been discussed in this White Paper focused on people who create and shape ideas that become influential. However, these are just passing moments in time. The higher order bit is the influence these events have on the longer term through search.

This can be illustrated by showing how influential blogs, Twitter posts are indexed very highly in Google. For example, a [Google search on Dell technical support](#) will bring a negative blog post by [Jeremy Zawodny](#) as the third choice.

4. Continuing the earlier point of measurement, Walter Carl believes that more needs to be done to understand how to track influence where there is a digital trail and where there isn't one, such as face-to-face conversations or in

*Search is a
measure of
intent - Jeff
Jarvis*

Effective communications should evolve, from controlled messaging towards conversational collaboration... By aspiring to big ideas and helping to change the reality not simply the perception, we move along the continuum from Talk to Action - Richard Edelman

private online venues like email or chat. He believes there is a lot of opportunity to integrate social media analysis with other types of methods to understand how conversations spread in offline and publicly-accessible digital environments.

5. Much of the discussion focused on the top of the pyramid. However, in the long tail, every vertical has a set of influencers. Further, as does every local market. How does this model hold in niches? How can it be applied?
6. [Richard Edelman](#) explains in his blog that "*corporations can't buy reputation or brand loyalty any more. These are earned through performance over the long-term*".

He continues to explain that PR's aim "*is to educate when possible, build bridges when necessary, and respect the new market-based conversations always. We should start at the end point - to dream about where we would like our client to be - and then create a dialogue-based communications program to get them there*".

This philosophy should be the guiding principle for marketing professionals to engage with the online community. By following the theories and concepts mentioned in this White Paper, it is hoped that a greater understanding of influence and impact can be gained. However, unless the application of this knowledge is done in a transparent, honest and ethical way within social media then the end result will be damaging.

Conclusion

If there's one constant in digital media, it's change. Every 12 to 18 months the landscape expands. New channels seem to join existing, more mature formats that only started to dot the horizon a few months earlier.

For example, consider that in 2005 blogs were the single most important emerging centre of influence. A year later this broadened as millions began to upload videos to YouTube, a site that didn't even exist until late 2005. Finally, by 2007 the traditional media had fully embraced these channels. The New York Times as of this writing has more than 50 blogs, all of which support comments. Meanwhile, the Internet continued to grow as powerful new centres of authority, like Facebook and Twitter, witnessed dramatic growth.

As we begin 2008, the lines have truly blurred between the mainstream sources that we have years of knowledge in how to engage and quantify and a digital landscape that is more dynamic. As the pace of change continues and the generation that grew up with the web enters adulthood, it ensures that measuring influence will continue to become even more complex

and challenging.

Still, there is some basic truths have emerged that are grounded in human nature and can guide the PR professional accordingly.

First, even as they use their digital presences to coalesce audiences into communities, the basic ethos of the traditional press remains grounded in information. People visit media sites to stay informed, even as the way reporter's work is becoming far more open and collaborative. This means that, for now, that the traditional methods of measuring the influence of the media remain largely the same.

In the social sphere meanwhile, whether it is a dispersed community (e.g. blogs) or a more centralized one (MySpace), a different spirit has evolved. This one is grounded in open collaboration toward a shared outcome. The agenda here could include everything from information to entertainment to connections, social change and virtually thousands of others.

Communicators who desire to build and measure influence need to think about the ethos of each venue, devise the right kinds of appropriate programmes and set up methodologies for measuring the impact of their efforts. Edelman has devised a basic approach to help guide companies.

Arguably, marketing communications spans two different continua. Programmes are at one end or the other or somewhere in between. This is depicted in the schematic below.

Programmes can either be closed or open (Y axis) or they can be designed for communication or collaboration (the X axis).

The result is four distinct quadrants:

1) Controlled Communication:

One-way tactics such as TV advertising, online advertising and media relations that are great for branding and visibility, but are seldom collaborative

2) Open Communication

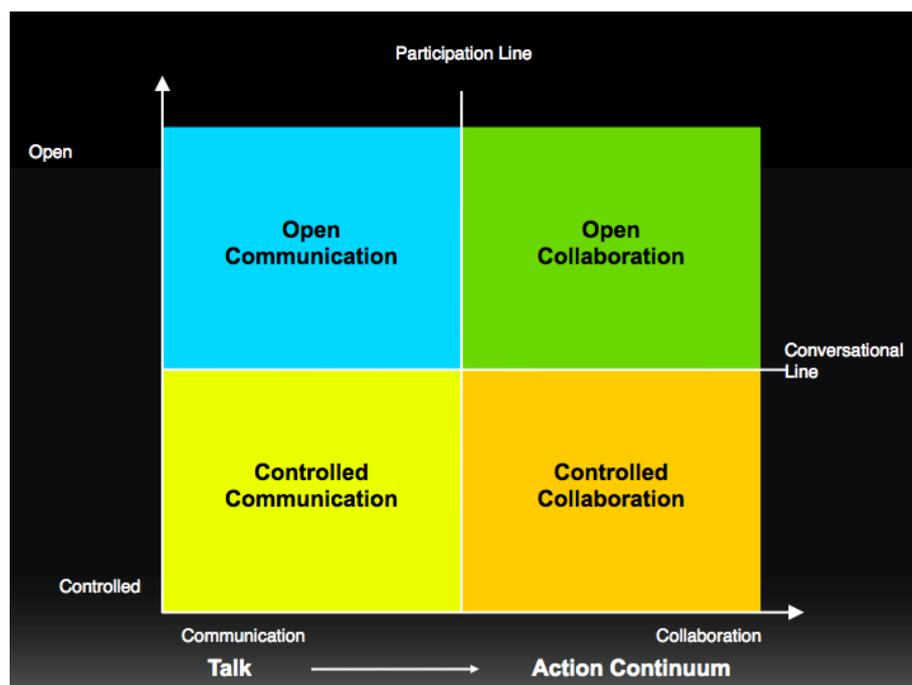
Online initiatives, such as viral videos, that are designed to generate discussion, but not necessarily produce a shared outcome

3) Controlled Collaboration

Programmes that facilitate participation but are more controlled, for example numerous efforts to solicit consumer generated ads

4) Conversational Collaboration

Win-win initiatives that open a dialogue toward reaching a broader goal



Currently, most marketing communication programmes sit in on the left hand side of this matrix. However, as companies and organisations become more aware of the tenor of each venue and what works, we believe they will begin to mix in strategies and tactics from the right side.

As a result, the outcome is that programmes on the left will measure online influence through metrics like impressions, conversations, in-bound links, friends and more.

Meanwhile, the right hand side - particularly Conversational Collaborative programmes - will adopt entirely new methodologies that measure based on outcomes. For example, this could include ideas generated, donations or other means of measuring advocacy and so forth. This is fertile ground and one that has not been the dominion of marketers, but it will be going forward.

The future of communications is in the mixing of these quadrants and understanding how they work together to influence the public.