

# CONCEPTUAL EVOLUTION OF COMMUNICATION AUDIT: SIGNIFICANCE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

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## ABSTRACT

Communication is the core of every organization. The interaction between the employees, the information sharing, the process of persuasion, the forms and channels of reaching out to publics, the feedback all require the lines of communication for an organization to work smoothly. The organization often goes limitless in terms of communicating and reaching out to their publics. Auditing the ways, outcomes and multiple stakeholder perspectives thus becomes necessary in order to improve or intervene. This process of evaluation and assessment in return may help in establishing or facilitating communication. All this require the need of setting up the idea of communication audit. The following paper explores the concept of communication audit since its inception and reviews the justification and nature of communication audit as a tool, process and a method of analyzing and measuring communication in an organization. The paper further tries to understand, discuss and establish the need of digital media both as a tool in conducting communication audit and as one of the communication areas of conducting audit in an organization.

**KEYWORDS:** Communication, Communication Audit, Digital Media, Corporate Communication, Public Relations.

## INTRODUCTION

Communication forms the core of every organization. For connecting and interacting with their publics, different style and various formats of communication have been used. With the passage of time, these patterns and formats have seen a shift in terms of their level of interactivity and engagement with the publics. But the big question remains as to whether they being reviewed as timely as they are changing? How often are they being revised and on what grounds? How much vigilant a company is in

finding out the suitability of the employed communication strategies? When it comes to the implementation of new communication tool and strategy, on what basis are they being decided?

Not only these, devising a media for communication too has been a new challenge for the corporate communicators. Due to a shift in the process of participation and rise in the level of interaction, the companies need to engage themselves in developing a dialogue may it for

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the customer at large or the employees who look for the first-hand information from company itself then from the people outside. That calls for the use of interactive media that is digital media. So, the communicators are involving themselves rigorously more with the social media, in developing and maintaining company's websites, writing blogs, engaging publics in online dialogues through their comments and related feedbacks.

Digital media have a growing use by publics, already surpassing conventional media in their relationship with business. The government, employees, journalists and business associations routinely use these means to request information or discuss their point of view on the company, according to respondents. It appears that publics use digital media to communicate with the organizations, but in an uneven fashion (Oliveira and Capriotti, 2014). Digital media has been breaking the linear communication by engaging the corporates and publics in a two-way communication making the process of communication easier in terms of getting immediate feedback and response but difficult with respect to analysis. Finding the right method and a tool for finding the effectiveness of the communication programme is a new mandate for the corporate communicators.

However, only "good communication makes a difference--then an understanding of what is good communication and what it correlates should increase our knowledge of organizational behaviour." (Roberts and O'Reilly, 1974). In order to cater to all the public's be it conventional or digital media, communicators now have a tedious task of finding out the right communication tool for better control and evaluation. According to Goldhaber, the important factors for this remains: diagnosis, evaluation and control. Diagnosis is necessary for identifying communication strengths and weaknesses to design relevant training programs. Evaluation for measuring values on selected communication behaviours or attitudes for intervention

effectiveness. And Control is for early identification of communication problems to allow organizations to develop and implement remedial steps before the problems can escalate beyond control. (Goldhaber, 1976)

For a communication process to be diagnosed, evaluated and control, a communication audit thus "examines the communications issues in detail by determining the goal of the institution in regard to the opinions and attitudes for which the institution wants its key public to hold" for "the communication program in meeting those goals" (ibid). A communication audit is a thorough evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of an organization's internal communication system. The purpose of such an audit is to diagnose communication problems and propose strategies for improvements. (Zwijze-Koning and De Jong, 2014). Conducting a communication audit is just like a financial audit which attempts to form an economic portrait of a company by identifying areas of waste and efficiency. The audit does so by determining what goals the institution has in regard to the opinions and attitudes the institution wants its key public to hold, and then determining if the communication program is meeting those goals. (Henderson. 2005). An audit "systematically analyzes and evaluates the readability of common organizational messages" (Campbell and Hollman, 1985). It is a "review to determine what public relations material the target audience is receiving and what it desires to receive" (Wilcox, Ault, Agee, and Cameron, 2000). It is also "research procedures to determine an organization's public statements and publications are consistent with its values-driven mission and goal" (Guth and Marsh, 2003).

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The following paper explores the concept of communication audit since its inception and reviews the justification and nature of communication audit as a tool, process and a

method of analysing and measuring communication in an organization. The paper further tries to understand, discuss and establish the need of digital media both as a tool in conducting communication audit and as one of the communication areas of conducting audit in an organization.

## **CONCEPTUAL EVOLUTION OF COMMUNICATION AUDIT**

There are various authors who have come up with various definitions of communication audit and have defined the criteria through which communication audit of various organisations can be done. Odiorne (1954) was the first to use the phrase "communication audit". The International Communication Association decided in 1971 to begin the development of its own measurement system, called the ICA Communication Audit and in 1975, Audit became a new tool of Public Relations by J.F. Jones who blended elements of two disciplines: opinion research and public relations". In 1979, Brooks, Callicot, Siegerdt, included five tools: questionnaire, interviews, network analysis, critical incident analysis and communication diary. In 1985, Campbell and Hollman defined audit as systematically analyzing and evaluating the readability of common organizational messages. Cal W. Downs (1988) in his book 'Communication Audit' cited six characteristics as necessary for an effective audit: professionalism, diagnosis, evaluation, a unique design, control and timeliness.

After establishing the need and skills required in conducting a communication audit, Hargie and Tourish, (1993) in paper titled "*Assessing the effectiveness of communication in Organizations using Communication Audit approach*", mentioned the need to increase participation, secure the widespread ownership of corporate goals and implement such programs as Total Quality Management. Clampit and Downs (1993) in their paper, 'Employee perceptions of the relationship between communication and

productivity: a field study', reported several benefits to a quality internal communication, such as improved productivity, reduced absenteeism, a high quality of services and products, and increased levels of innovation. At the same time, the audit should reveal employee attitudes, what forms of communication work best, and what information employees need to be more effective and to feel better about the company. (Wallace 1995).

This was also the time when the situations and methods for conducting audit were also explored and analyzed. Elsasser (1994) in his paper 'Doing a communications audit' had given the reasons for the need of an audit to be conducted. The paper described various situations that frequently generate a call for an audit. A study by Delphi by Gae Synott found that, of an extensive list of issues identified as important to public relations, evaluation ranked as number one. Tom Watson (1997), found the two main methods used during audit were monitoring (not evaluating) press clippings and "intuition and professional judgement". Stating the importance of regular evaluation and audit of communication, Linda Childers Hon (1998) in her article, 'Demonstrating effectiveness in public relations; goals, objectives and evaluation' discusses that the public relations goals are derived from the overall organizational mission, goals, and objectives. Thus, through public relations evaluation, practitioners can demonstrate either directly or indirectly public relations' role in organizational goal achievement" Guth and Marsh, (2003) analyze that today's climate demands attention to evaluation research- procedures for determining the success of a public relations plan- from the very beginning. With practitioners facing greater demands for accountability, every public relations plan must achieve an impact that is measurable'.

Prepared for the 2004 Measurement Summit held in the United States, the Bench point online study (Gaunt and Wright 2004) revealed that 23%

use instinct alone; barriers to measurement were related to cost (77%), time (59%), lack of expertise and questionable value of results (58% each). Elaine Hogard and Roger Ellis (2006), proposed that organizational communication should be considered in all program evaluations and that this should be approached through communication audit through established survey questionnaire instruments. Moore and Kalupa (2005) are of the opinion that, 'Intelligent and responsible public relations, which implies a willingness to state one's case candidly and listen respectfully to the public's and the public relations audit together can provide a valuable management tool and are the most promising signs of maturity in the modern practice of public relations. However, Renowned academics David Michaelson and Donald Stacks differed in their opinion in their work in 2011 stated that "public relations practitioners have consistently failed to achieve consensus on what the basic evaluative measures should be adopted to conduct the underlying research for evaluating and measuring public relations performance".

According to C.V. Narsimha Reddi (2014) is of the view that similar to financial audit, there should be a public relations audit at the end of every year to know how public relations budget has been spent and what the results are. One of the pitfalls confronting the public relations profession in India is the lack of public relations research and evaluation. As per a report by Amit Jain (2014), it is no more a matter of debate whether the PR industry needs better models of measurement. Everyone recognizes that need. What is needed is a common minimum standard that everyone can agree upon.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF DIGITAL MEDIA**

According to Free Press Journal, analyzing the growth of digital media, the Indian internet traffic will be nearly 291 times more than what it was in 2005. As per the Compound Annual Growth Rate, growth in India and globally include Internet

advertising (India CAGR 20.4%, global 10.7%); Internet access (India 15.0%, global 9.0%); video games (India 16.7%, global 6.2%); and newspapers (India 7.5%, global 0.1%). Narrower differentials between Indian and global growth rates were visible in segments such as music (India CAGR 4.8%, global 1.2%) and business-to-business (India 6.9%, global 3.4%). At the same time, large companies are using social media for corporate communications. There has been a rise in linking their corporate websites to social media from 35% three years ago to 72% today. Also, certain correlations between levels of activity states that companies engaging with social media are gaining more views and social interaction. On Facebook alone, companies who respond to wall posts are seeing more 'Likes' than those who do not acknowledge. Companies tweeting 30 times or more each month, averaged 20,800 followers as compared to 2,456 from those who were tweeting less. (Investis research report, 2015).

The term Web 2.0 defined as "the effects of extensive collaboration and user participation on the marketplace and corporate world" (Visser, 2010) was coined in 1999 by IT consultant Darcy Di Nucci and later popularized in 2004 by O'Reilly. It is a powerful tool that can help companies to improve their collaborative knowledge to impact customer relations and corporate culture (Hearn *et al*, 2008). With its emergence, the communication ways have changed and social media has become a central tool for organizations (Kim *et al*, 2010). Social media can include internet applications such as YouTube, Flickr, Wikipedia, social bookmarking, blogs or micro blogs (Twitter), and social networking sites as for example, MySpace and Facebook (Hearn *et al*, 2008). For greater reach and access to develop a dialogue. (Newsom *et al*. 2004) the companies need to establish and maintain fluid communication and dialogue with these (partners, business consumers, suppliers, social, cultural and educational entities and environmental groups) groups as a matter of survival, and digital

instruments favour this process. The corporates are now turning to digital platforms which could be due to “reducing costs of mandatory communication in an industry that is highly regulated (government); favouring the productivity of the company with a collaborative, fast, dynamic and low cost model in order to maximize benefits (employees); adapting to changing paradigms in mass media, increasingly oriented towards digital structures (journalists) or facilitating communication among several companies cheaply and quickly even when one is not in the same geographic location (business associations). Still, results show that these publics have an active and participative role in communicating to companies with these tools. (Capriotti and Kuklinski 2012). Therefore there is a need to foster a more participatory, active and dynamic communication with businesses.

The act that these audiences use these platforms less frequently for specific purpose could be linked to the fact that they are not yet fully adapted to the new technologies, but gradually they are incorporating them into their communicative process with organizations. (Capriotti 2009). The level of use of digital media by the other publics to interact with companies is higher than conventional means. Therefore, digital media act as a supplement and expansion of traditional instruments that encourage a dynamic and continuous communication between publics and businesses.

Communicating corporate messages and issues through social media is important and necessary in order to improve and promote conversations between companies and stakeholders (Briones *et al*, 2011). Through social media, stakeholders, companies, society, or anybody can have a “voice” and be part of this new digital society. This is because these platforms have changed the way organizations and people communicate. (Vasquez and Velez, 2011). Corporates are now adapting social media for customer service, marketing, internal communications, public

relations or corporate social responsibility, etc. as it provides opportunities for collaboration, participation, interactivity, and engagement. Therefore, social media is conceived today in the corporate world as a strategic communication partner, driving new and unique possibilities for organizations to engage stakeholders in conversations. (ibid). But these useful technological tools are employed widely and precisely by corporates in order to facilitate and improve communications? According to a study performed by Burson-Marsteller Communications Group (2010), social media permits new levels in the conversations that of news, general and promotional messages, events, trivia/contests, annual reports, of Corporate Social Responsibility and philanthropy initiatives within the posts and tweets. This study analyzed the presence of social media in the Global Fortune 100 companies finding that 79% of the global companies and 86% of the US companies<sup>6</sup> have at least one social platform (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or corporate blogs) claiming more transparency, open communication, and engagement through social media platforms. At the same time, none of the studies mentioned about the audit of digital media neither of the use of digital media tools for auditing purpose.

## **ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this paper is to find out the significance of digital media as a tool for corporate communication as well as understanding it as communication audit tool, Qualitative interviews were conducted with 50 corporate communicators working in the Public Sector Units (PSUs), Multi-National Companies (MNCs), audit companies, entertainment and e-commerce industries where communication audit is regularly conducted to find out:

- Digital media as an important tool of corporate communication
- Digital media has been used as a communication audit tool

## **UNDERSTANDING DIGITAL MEDIA AS CORPORATE COMMUNICATION TOOL**

1. Are the digital strategies used are aligned with the mission in a measurable way?
  - Out of 52 respondents, 24% people found it somewhat aligned, 71% found it aligned perfectly and only 5% found it not aligned as it should be. They found it more at a superficial level.
  - In terms of measuring aspect, 50% communicators found it unplanned and so often difficult to measure.
  - Around 28% people found it difficult to align their activities with their mission in a measurable way.
2. Are digital media targeted at publics: almost 70% agreed upon the usage of digital media tool marked at the target publics only.
3. Are Digital media being studied on the basis of impact analysis in terms of different publics besides studying the website visitors, event attendee numbers, or media mentions of their organization and attempting to measure their influence on a positive change in the real world? Out of all just 25% have been actively tracking the impact metrics.

## **RECOGNISING DIGITAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR CONDUCTING COMMUNICATION AUDIT**

1. 25% respondents, dividing them into 5-7%, the corporate communicators are engaged in output metrics, reach metrics and engagement metrics. More than 80% of respondents said they tracked "reach metrics" (e.g., number of press mentions of your organization, follower growth on social media accounts, search engine ranking for keywords) and "output metrics" (e.g., number of events hosted, number of tweets posted, number of policy briefs published). About 70% are tracking engagement metrics (e.g., number of event attendees, number of

- petition signatures, number of blog comments). In order to collect this data, respondents are using a long list of tools.
2. What digital tools have they been using for collecting communications data? Many respondents agreed using a combination of web analytics, social media, email marketing, spreadsheets to collect data along with press clipping service, Search Engine optimisation software, online audience surveys, feedback analysis and even Google Analytics used as a primary tool used for communication data collection and reporting.
  3. How significantly have they been using the digital media in data collection and analysis? Significant majority of respondents said they produced these reports manually using a combination of tools. About 16% solely used web analytics dashboards. Only 3% respondents said they imported data from a variety of sources into an analytical software tool.
  4. Does the organization have digitally trained personnel for conducting audit?
  5. 60% Communicators found the lack of capacity. Smaller organizations found the absence of mentoring for measuring and doing. Lack of training was another factor pointed out by around 30% of the respondents. Also, for audit purpose, the communicators demanded the need for special design and software for controlled data analysis.
  6. Many corporate communicators were quite on this topic but except 5% of the people 95% of the people feel that analysing communication is under-funded as their organizations are always reactive then being proactive and so conducting audit on regular basis has never been on cards.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

As per the interviews conducted with corporate communicators, the researcher came across

following findings:

1. Digital media is an important tool for communication in terms of engaging stakeholders. It helps in creating dialogue between organization and its various publics.
2. With the growing popularity, almost all the organizations are using digital media strategies in serving and involving their publics still half of the percentage feel that they are either not aligned with the organization's mission and at the same time is difficult to measure.
3. To know the relevance of digital media as corporate communication tool, it is found that the digital media is well targeted at the publics but they are focused more on the basis of reach not on the basis of impact.
4. In using digital media tools for data collecting, quite a few organizations are using web-based and online tools for data collection, rest are still working manually or through conventional ways of communication data collection.
5. The organizations are not engaging digital media for auditing due to lack of professionals for the same and people are still unaware of using these tools for analysing communication process besides collecting information.
6. On being asked about the management's take in using digital media tools and setting up for the same in terms of investing in people and infrastructure, many corporate communicators found that the organizations only take action when there is demand for action especially during crisis whereas audit is such tool which prepares the organization in advance before any uncontrolled situation arise.

## **CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

Communication being the most essential aspect is "under-rated" and often left unanalyzed. Planning both in terms of developing digital

media as a tool for communication and also using digital tools for communication audit, purpose, require serious thinking. Survey respondents and interviewees are eager to improve the ways in which they measure and report the impact of their communications activities. According to them, they would like to understand the way to connect communications to strategic impact. Also, with the implementation of communication efforts, the tracking too needs to be meaningful and consistent and so there is strong need to connect communications to strategic impact. For a successful communication programme, corporate communicators realize the need to identify the impact metrics which they feel are often found costly and challenging due to lack of trained and skilled manpower.

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