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I A B D

THE DEATH OF SECOND LIFE
A CASE STUDY OF A (OLD) "NEW TECHNOLOGY"

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ABSTRACT

Public relations professionals are increasingly called upon to understand, embrace, and use technological advancements in their work. Which communication technologies are worth embracing? Which technologies contribute to organization–public relationships? This essay explores public relations' fascination with new technology. In this essay, we conduct a case study of Second Life, asking "do new technologies help practitioners to build relationships with publics?" If yes, what evidence exists? If not, why are practitioners rushing in to embrace unproven tactics?

INTRODUCTION

In the mid to late 80s and early 90s, there was some disagreement over the value, or role, of the computer in modern life. Only a few far-sighted computer scientists and technology professionals on the cutting edge of computers and media studies saw the shape of the future and dared to make predictions. Instead of embracing wholeheartedly the new technologies, however, many academics and professionals were actually the first critics to question computers and related technology (Burnham, 1994; McLuhan, 1964; Negroponte, 1995; Postman, 1993; Stoll, 1995). Stoll (1995), for example, wrote about how computers worked to separate us from the real world and social interaction. Burnham (1984), early in the computer revolution, foresaw the "rise of the computer state" where monitoring and surveillance would be common. Other academics recognized that changes to social system are likely to have serious consequences and that we should always take time to question what we create (Kuhn, 1970; Levinson, 1997; Postman, 1984, 1993; Postman & Paglia, 1991; Stoll, 1999). Citizens and professionals' relationships with technology resemble what McLuhan called a somnambulist state where people do not question what they see or hear.

In this essay we use a case study to analyze a "new technology" called Second Life. Few scholars have carefully examined the latest generation of public relations technologies (called Web 2.0): blogs, social media, and given the diffusion of many technologies, professionals have not had many chances to evaluate them. This essay will help to fill the critical gap in our understanding of technology by examining some of our current new technologies including social networking and blogs through the lens of Second Life. This essay will be divided into three sections. The first section reviews the literature that has lauded the potential of new communication technologies in public relations. The second section provides a case study of Second Life as a strategic communication tool. The third section of the essay explores public relations potential of blogs, twitter, and other social media. The essay concludes with a discussion of future directions in new communication technologies in public relations.

TECHNOLOGY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

In the early '90s, the Clinton presidential campaign was the first political campaign to use the Internet. The ClintonInfoCamp used the Internet in a press agent fashion, distributing news releases, speeches, and a daily calendar of events about the candidates. By the late '90s, the Internet began to fully emerge as a public relations tool. The growth of the Internet also coincided with increased diffusion of the Internet as a personal and professional communication tool. Duke (2002) noted that: "together the Web and e-mail are arguably two of the most important public relations tools to emerge since the telephone and fax machine" (p. 311).

High Hopes For The World Wide Web As a Public Relations Tool

The Web is now almost 20 years old ("released" in 1991). The Web offers many features that can help public relations. It allows for voice and sound, video, and real-time-interaction, that are part of face-to-face communication (the ideal), as well as offering a number of other communication options (print information, information storage and retrieval, time shifting, reach, etc.). Yet, the Web is still used poorly by many (perhaps most) organizations and professionals. Research shows that both small and large organizations continue to use the Internet as a one-way communication tool to post news releases and other print-based documents (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Taylor & Perry, 2005).

Over the last 10 years, there have been hundreds of articles in the public relations academic and professional literature extolling the benefits of the WWW in public relations. A complete review of all of them is impossible in one paper but a quick review of the main points provides insight into the high expectations.

The Web is a dialogic tool. In 1998, Badaracco edited a special issue of *Public Relations Review.* This was one of the first comprehensive treatments of the Web as a public relations tool. Earlier articles in the literature consisted of surveys of practitioners about their uses and needs of the WWW (cf., Johnson, 1997). In this special issue, multiple articles claimed that the WWW could facilitate dialogue between organizations and publics (cf., Coombs, 1998, Heath, 1998, Kent & Taylor, 1998). However, none of the authors explained how you could have a relationship with a Web site.

The Web helps activists. Other high hopes for the WWW included the belief that the Web could "level the playing field" between activists and corporations. Coombs (1998) noted that the Web allowed any sized group or even individuals to publicize their positions and gain media/public support. Almost 10 years later, Reber and Kim (2006) found that activists are really not maximizing their use of the Web to build public awareness and support for their issues.

The Web helps organizations in crisis. A third argument is that the WWW can help public relations practitioners who are experiencing a crisis.The WWW provides organizations with fast, direct, and controlled communication during times of crisis. The media can visit Web sites for updated information, background, and other crisis related information. The public can visit a site to learn how to protect themselves. However, recent research suggests that organizations are still not maximizing the use of the WWW as a crisis communication tool.

Social media technology builds relationships. The latest manifestation of new technology are the various social media that include blogs, twitter, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, LinkedIn, and a number of other "social" media that connect stakeholders, stakeseekers, and key publics together.

As this brief review suggests, the claims and hopes of the Internet as a public relations tool have been optimistic. Very optimistic—The evidence provided by researchers suggests that there is a disconnection between the potential of the WWW and the actual use of it. Reality and the soft-shoe that agencies and professional associations give to clients does not mesh with lived experience.

The next part of this essay analyzes Second Life as an example of how the field of public relations once embraced and then discarded a communication tool. By understanding Second Life, we can perhaps better prepare ourselves to ask difficult questions about other new communication technologies blogs and twitter.

CASE STUDY: SECOND LIFE AS A POTENTIAL PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOL

Over a 13-month period from December 2007 to January 2008, The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) sent out more than 65 messages (not counting reminders) inviting members to participate in seminars/training, relating to how to use Second Life on behalf of clients. Given that dozens of leaders and experts in our professional associations were saying that Second Life was important, what was the evidence? Before answering that question, we will first explain Second Life.

What is Second Life? Second Life is a fantasy role playing game enacted on a computer. In many ways, Second Life is like a MMORPG (online game) where participants from all across the world interact at the same time. But Second Life is not a "dungeon," rather, Second Life is more like a nightclub, or party, where people meet and interact. You can own property in Second Life and earn money (in "Linden" Dollars), which can be redeemed online for "real" money (U.S. dollars). To participate in Second Life, a member simply downloads the free software that is used to create the virtual world on the member's computer, and then creates an "Avatar" (a graphical representation of a person for use in a chat room www.thefreedictionary.com/avatar). Once a member has created an Avatar, s/he can begin to explore the game-world. For a fee (like a membership fee), players get Linden dollars (local currency), and are able to own property, build domiciles, etc. Second Life also has many basic fantasy features: Avatars can fly, appear however the player wants, avatars can be nonhuman, etc. Second Life players have recreated many real world locations in the game such as famous Parisian cafés, restaurants, nightclubs, etc. Like many of the new Internet technologies that allow for commerce opportunities (stock trading, banking, auction sites, retail, gambling, pornography), Second Life has a small percentage of people who actually earn a living in the real world by spending time in a virtual Fantasy world. Thus, the world of Second Life is aptly named. Many people live virtual online "second lives."

What is the Potential Reach of Second Life for Public Relations?
The claims about "social media saving your organization time and money," being "cheaper and easier," and able to "make your communications department run more efficiently and effectively" (PRSA and Ragan Communications, February 9, 2009) need more support than what is currently available. Ten or fifteen years ago, before technology became so entrenched in our daily lives, making such claims was possible. Now, technology is such a part of every citizen's lives that it is impossible to sort this out. Requiring managers to provide online content

like journalists do, or to continuously monitor social networking feeds like Twitter throughout the workday is unlikely to result in a "more efficient workplaces."

For communication professionals, the natural questions about a new technology should be, "Is this something that my organization needs?" And "What can the technology do for my organization?" To answer this, let us turn to Second Life. As Second Life explains on its FAQ page:

> Second Life is the size of a small city, with thousands of servers (called simulators) and a Resident population of over 15,609,338 (and growing). Residents come to the world from over 100 countries with concentrations in North America and the UK. Demographically, 60% are men, 40% are women and they span in age from 18–85 [sic.]. They are gamers, housewives, artists, musicians, programmers, lawyers, firemen, political activists, college students, business owners, active duty military overseas, architects, and medical doctors, to name just a few. (secondlife.com/whatis/faq.php#01)

The numbers tell another story. According to Second Life, there are about 15 million members world-wide (from 100 countries), with major concentrations in the U.K. and the U.S. If we assumed that 90% of the members came *only* from those two countries, we would be looking at 13.5 million members.

According to the CIA World Factbook for the U.S. and the U.K. (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uk.html>; <https://www.cia.gov/…us.html>), and the U.S. census department (www.census.gov), the U.S. and the U.K. have combined "adult" populations of about 245.5 million people (roughly 41 million from the U.K.) between the ages of 15 and 64. The 245.5 million number, is actually lower when we exclude some reasonable percentage of the population who have no ability or desire to participate (the indigent and working poor, people without high-speed access, technophobes, etc.), perhaps up to 40% (about 75% of U.S. adults are now wired. However, activities like Second Life require fast Internet connections and are not easily played at work—the place where many people in the U.S. have high-speed Internet access—and the U.S. has the highest Internet penetration, the 40% number is probably generous. See for instance: www.pewinternet.org/~/media//Files/Reports/2006/PIP_Internet_Impact.pdf.pdf]) leaving about 147.3 (245.5/60%) million potential members. Now, if we divided 147.3 million by 15 million (Second Life's supposed member base), we get a significant number, about 10% of the population of U.S./U.K. adults. However, we know that "number of members" is very different than "active members." Every Internet user in the world has signed into dozens of sites in order to obtain access to information, learn what is happening there, etc. Thus, a better yardstick would be Second Life's 60-day average, which turns out to be about 1.2 million people (averaging several visits throughout the year). When we do the math on the adjusted numbers (147.3/1.2), we get a more realistic number of .0081, or just under one percent of the population. These numbers are consistent with informal surveys that the authors and colleagues have conducted of U.S. and international students.

TABLE I: Calculation of Second Life Users in U.S. and U.K.	
Target Group	Frequency or percentage
U.S. and U.K. Adults	245.5 Million
Percentage with Internet Access	147.3 Million
Second Life's reported member base	15.0 Million
Second Life's 60 day average	1.2 Million
Adjusted Daily percentage of users	.0081%

When we consider that the Second Life demographic (18–25 year olds), is considered the most technologically savvy and wired group in the population, we have to again ask "Are there any coherent demographics that can be reached when a technology has a membership base that spans 100 countries, does not even reach 1% of the population in the two most populous nations that use the site, and the most technologically savvy and wired group in the nation (college students), are hardly aware of its existence?

In terms of raw numbers of *potential* citizens who could be reached, there are approximately a billion people between the U.S., and Europe. The pool of potential Second Lifers among the 100s of countries is certainly in the billions. If a conservative estimate of 2 billion is used, and Second Life's optimistic member base of 15 million, we discover that we are talking about less than .0075% of the population of possible participants. Although 15 million is a lot of "potential" contacts, Second Life is set up like a city and contains people from 100 nations and a huge range of demographics, interests, languages spoken, and technological backgrounds. No cohesive group of those 15 million members exists. No professional organization or individual would probably *want* to reach such a group. And, as is well known about the Internet and chat rooms in general, a large percentage of people lie about their identities when they are online (men pretend to be women, women pretend to be men, young people try to be perceived as older, older people pretend to be younger, etc.). Why would it be worth an organization's effort to devote resources to getting up to speed on Second Life?

Until the online landscape and all of its strength and limitations are understood, most organizations are probably wasting their time on social media like Second Life. For organizations that do have data to support aggressively reaching out to particular wired publics (and research is thin), social networking technologies make sense. For most professional communicators, putting more energy into organizational Web resources makes *more* sense.

Although many argue that Second Life is already dead, major media stories about its success and reach continue to be broadcast and printed. What lessons can we draw to critically analyze the potential of other social networking technologies in public relations?

DO BLOGS, TWITTER, AND OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA HAVE GREATER PUBLIC RELATIONS POTENTIAL?

Will blogs and other social media die the same death as Second Life? A quick look at the PRSA Web site shows eight seminars/Webinars and presentations on the topic of new media and Blogs during the month of February and March 2009, and about the same number in October, 2009. They are the most frequent topics on the site and one of the seminar's promotional statements captures the hype:

> Are you ready to get up-to-speed on blogging, podcasting, RSS, YouTube, MySpace and other social media? Get a comprehensive overview of new media through easy-to-follow, step-by-step instructions. Start at square one and get everything you need to deploy social media initiatives that deliver measurable results.… (www.prsa.org/PDseminars/Display Event.cfm?semID=449)

Lenhart and Fox (2006) surveyed 233 "bloggers," asking questions like: "frequency of Internet use," whether they have ever blogged, and whether they have read other blogs. www.pewinternet.org/~/media/Files/Reports/2006/PIP%20Bloggers%20Report%20July%2019

. That *bloggers* who were surveyed is worth noting. Imagine asking accountants whether they have ever conducted an audit, or asking journalists if they have written a story. Of course, such baseline data can be useful, but what is more interesting is that Lenhart and Fox generally ignore that fact that all blogs are not created equal. There is a big difference between a news blog, a personal weblog, and a corporate blog written by a CEO (Kent, 2008, pp. 33–34). Lenhart and Fox also ask about the type of content on the blogger's page, whether they make any money from blogs, etc. but we learn nothing from their survey about how "Americans" (the *Internet and American Life Project* conducted the survey) think about blogs or how professionals might use blogs. We do learn from Lenhart and Fox that most bloggers do not check their facts, or make corrections when they post inaccurate information, but we do not learn about why bloggers are such poor journalists/scholars, what the consequences are for wider audiences from posting inaccuracies, etc. How frequently non-professionals (everyday citizens) actually read blogs, or whether people actually "read" them at all. In short, the assumption of the blog research, and much of the Internet research, is that people already understand the new technologies, know how to use them, or agree on their utility or value (cf., Kent, 2001).

The PEW Internet Project data is only a few years old. As recently as 2006, reputable researchers like PEW did not really know what to ask or how to ask their questions. Clearly, the assumption that professionals or everyday citizens already understand blogs is premature. Most Americans still do not blog. In light of the general lack of critical examination of most new communication technologies, the next section of this essay will take up the social networking phenomenon. The newest social networking sweeping the profession is surely Twitter, a social networking technology that works like an instant messaging tool. We selected Second Life for our case study because of the continued attention that it receives in the mainstream broadcast media, and the fact that so many professionals claim that Second Life is now dead, after being the greatest thing to come along only a few years ago. Twitter is the latest darling of the media and communication professionals.

In a recent study of social networking by PEW's Internet and American Life project, only 10–30% of adults 35–55 have any social media presence (Lenhart, 2009, pp. 1–2, <www.pew internet.org/~/media/Files/Reports/2009/PIP_Adult_social_networking_data_memo_FINAL.pdf. pdf>). According to Lenhart, "Overall, *personal use* of social networks seems to be more prevalent than *professional use* of networks, both in the orientation of the networks that adults choose to use as well as the reasons they give for using the applications" (p. 2, emphasis added). Only about 35% of all adults in the U.S. even use social media, and about half of that number are young-adults, 18–25 (p. 5). Perhaps more importantly, young (teens) social media users use the technology solely for entertainment purposes, while only one in four adult users, about 3–8% or the adult population use social media for networking or professional purposes (p. 6). By far, *both adults and teens* use social media "to stay in touch with friends," "to make plans with friends," "and to make new friends." Finally, no more than 1–3% of the population has ever used social media for active political purposes like requesting information or joining a political group (p. 11; cf., also, Lenhart & Fox, 2006). The media might be given a pass on this job since the media have not spent much time critically examining *any* technology in the last ten or fifteen years (cf., Kent, 2001; Postman, 1984, 1993). However, we would expect more caution and understanding from professional associations. On the most basic level, professional associations like PRSA, IABC, and AEJMC should be examining how to use communication technologies effectively, rather than assuming new technologies are already working.

Besides the general lack of understanding of Web 2.0 technologies, there is an abundance of other "old-tech" technologies that professionals take for granted like Listservs, mailing lists, print based information and speeches offered on Web sites, and communication skills (dialogue, interpersonal communication, B&P, etc.). Many professional Listservs like CRTNET, are decades old and used by thousands of communication professionals. Genuine organization–public dialogue (rather than Twitters, or blog postings) are substantially more likely to result in useful decisions and solid relationships.

CONCLUSION

Integrating new communication technologies as part of an overall public relations campaign and knowing how to use technology effectively are really two different things. Any media or technology that has the potential to allow a public relations professional to do his/her job more effectively is valuable. The problem here is that so much of the discussion about new technologies has been overly laudatory, suggesting that all new technologies are inherently valuable simply because they are new (*argumentum ad novitam*).

Instead, what we need is research and critique into how, when, and why to use our technologies. There has been enough cheerleading about how great they are. We need a body of research focusing on the implications and the hurdles to using new technologies: the importance of having trained communication professionals use them, the implications of moderated verses open dialogue, obtaining buy-in from top management regarding transparency and honesty, the risks involved in deception, etc. Rather than just blanket admonitions to use new technologies "because of the phenomenal growth" (which seems impressive until unpacked), "because our publics are increasingly online" (another exaggeration), "because we need it to compete" (only true with certain publics), the profession needs senior practitioners and leaders who are willing to say "*this might work if . . .*," rather than "you *should* use this because . . ." There is no turning back from technology. Saint Isidore, the patron saint of computers and technology, is here to stay, especially given the latest generation of students, who have grown up with technology as a part of their everyday lives and have a different relationship to technology than someone who is 35, 45, or 55. What we need is fewer cheerleaders for new technology. We need more researchers examining how technology can improve communication and professional life.

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