The good the bad and the blogger, the public relations challenge of the Noughties

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Abstract

Technological advances such as the printing press, telephone, radio, television, facsimile machine and now the World Wide Web (the Web) have been the catalyst for changes in business operations throughout history. The Web is a worldwide network of information resources and a powerful communication tool; information on virtually any subject is available on the Web. Considerable ambiguity exists in the literature regarding the online practice of corporate public relations.

The authors assert that public relations is central to the examination of blogs in an organisational context. Organisational blogs have been viewed by many as changing the role of corporate public relations—specifically the manner in which companies are now engaging with their publics. The Web has given those already in power (not just ordinary citizens) even greater potential to distribute filtered information to a mass readership. In many ways the Web presents publics with an overt sense of democracy. However, the filtering capabilities of the medium are not nearly as publicly understood or acknowledged as editorial regulations used in traditional, physical media.

Although the vast library of theoretical public relations models are grounded in physical reality, they should not be ignored, but rather, used as platforms to develop theoretical models for an understanding of organisational weblogs. It is misguided to assign organisational blogs too much communicative power without first considering the theories that should underpin their use, and be used to develop frameworks for their strategic implementation. Blogs’ role in the corporate landscape is still ambiguous and unclear. This paper explores the impact of organisational blogs on public relations practice; academics and practitioners alike are yet to devise methodologies or a consistent approach to handle the future implementation of this new communications tool.

Key words: public relations, blogs, World Wide Web
Introduction

Technological advances such as the printing press, telephone, radio, television, facsimile machine and now the World Wide Web (the Web) have been the catalyst for changes in business operations throughout history. The Web is a worldwide network of information resources and a powerful communication tool; information on virtually any subject is available on the Web. The Web provides an ‘all-purpose communication medium’ (Van der Merwe, Pitt, & Abratt, 2005, p. 40). Consequently, it is vital that organisations are not only aware of their identity in traditional marketing forums but also be aware of their corporate image in cyberspace (Quelch & Klein, 1996). The Web implies the immediacy of the telephone and the persistence of print, and thus has far-reaching implications for organisations. The increased complexity of business operations enhances the turbulence experienced by organisations. Information technologies, such as Web casting, e-mail, and web logs (blogs), only add to the level of complexity by changing the very communication landscape (Barr, 2000; Hearn, Mandeville, & Anthony, 1998; Jo, 2002). A Web log is shared on-line journal where people can post diary entries about their personal experiences and hobbies and postings on a blog are usually in chronological order.

In 2003, more than 153 million Americans used the Web for a variety of tasks, including information gathering, personal communication, shopping, and selecting entertainment options (Faber, Lee, & Xiaoli, 2004). In the first quarter of 2003 in Australia, the number of Web subscribers (including businesses) rose to just over 5 million, and there were more than 8.5 million Web users nationwide (Euromonitor International, 2004). Today, the Web represents a tremendous force for organizations seeking to engage and communicate with their key target markets, their stockholders, stakeholders and employees.

Big business has always strived to take advantage of telecommunications technologies. This is witnessed in what Chepesiuk (2002) termed the ‘dot com bubble’, where many companies—due to an over reliance on and misunderstanding of the Internet and its business capabilities—prospered and failed. The media, the ‘chief providers of…information [to society]’ (Berkman & Shumway, 2003, p. 4) is inextricably linked with business. The focus of this research is the communicative role that organisational blogs—purportedly personal and online ‘means of communication between organizations and their publics’ (Kelleher & Miller, 2006, p. 2)—play in building relationships and communicating across society.

Public relations is central to the examination of blogs in an organisational context. As outlined by PRSA (2006, para.1), ‘public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other’. Further, as Ferguson (1984, as cited in Ledingham 2003, p. 182) believes, ‘relationships…should be the unifying concept of public relations’. Relationships as we have come to understand them in the physical world have now changed. According to
The good the bad and the blogger

Hallett (as cited in Pizzo Jr, 1995, p. 22), ‘public relations practitioners will be challenged to deal with an increasingly interactive public because of the Internet’. Organisational blogs have created an even further challenge in developing and understanding relationships with virtual publics. The authors of organisational blogs ‘are affiliated with the company where they work…even though they are not officially spokespeople for the company’ (Sifry, cited in Kelleher & Miller, 2006, p. 3). As outlined by Edelman and Technorati (2006) the majority of organisational bloggers are in fact, line level employees who have no influence over corporate strategic decision making. What does this seemingly lack of an official voice mean for the future of online corporate public relations, and how does this new organisational voice attempt to connect and build relationships with an unseen public?

Considerable ambiguity exists in the literature regarding the online practice of corporate public relations. Albrycht (2004, p. 14) suggests, ‘some write about blogs as a utopian method of saving the world [while others] dismiss them as this decade’s CB radio’. While a commonality exists that the Internet and blogs ‘have emerged as powerful alternatives in mainstream media’ (Guiniven, 2004, p. 6), it could be argued that, from a public relations perspective, there has been limited investigation and understanding into the nature of cyberspace as a communications medium, and its potential effects on academic theory and professional practice. This is supported by Sweeney (2006a, p. 4) who states ‘many argue that the PR profession was too slow to grasp the importance of the Internet, a costly mistake that handed control of company Web sites over to IT departments and advertising agencies’.

The Web is still, comparatively, a new communications tool. It could be argued that the ambiguity in the literature regarding corporate public relations and blogs stems from a misunderstanding of what Taffe (personal communication, March 7, 2006) terms the ‘communication context’ of organisational messages. Taffe (personal communication, March 7, 2006) believes that today’s public relations practitioners can only achieve excellent, two-way communications, similar to Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) framework, through a true understanding of both the medium and publics with which they are aiming to engage. Although timely, McLuhan’s (1967) notion of ‘the medium is the message’ still rings true today. Abrahamson suggests that (1998, as cited in Springston, 2001, p. 614), it is agreed that ‘it is not possible for anyone to predict the scope and/or effect of something as profound as the Internet’. There are a number of factors including the relationship between the communication context of blogs and theoretical models of public relations; the notion of relationship building in blogs and corporate public relations; and the possible undermining of corporate public relations through blogs that should be explored.
Cyberspace—a space for corporate public relations?

Organisational blogs have been viewed by many as changing the role of corporate public relations—specifically the manner in which companies are now engaging with their publics. Scoble and Israel (2006) believe organisational blogs have led to a change in the theoretical models of public relations utilised by practitioners in order to communicate with key constituencies—from a one way ‘command and control’ model into a two-way ‘listen-and-participate’ methodology (p.100). According to Scoble and Israel (2006), blogging has changed public relations ‘from a one-way monologue to a two-way conversation’ (p.100). Further, Richard Edelman (cited in Edelman & Technorati, 2006) CEO of global public relations firm Edelman, asserts that blogs have provided public relations practitioners with a ‘an opportunity for a profound shift in how we do our business…moving away from selling, towards a continuous conversation with the goal of learning from stakeholders’ (p. 8).

If this is the case, then it could be argued that in line with Smudde’s (2005, p. 37) assertion that, ‘the dialogic nature of blogging fits in nicely with Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) model of excellent communication’, Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) two way symmetrical public relations methodology is the best platform to investigate and critique the above claims. Grunig and Hunt (1984) believe that excellent, or two-way symmetrical organisational communications can only be realised through a dedication to open dialogue, honesty and a willingness to participate with publics and incorporate their feedback into strategic initiatives. Many including Marken (2005) and Sturaitis (2004) have identified organisational blogs as highly efficient means of obtaining meaningful insights and opinions on strategic publics. Lane’s (2005) asserts that Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) two-way symmetrical model relies on organisations receiving feedback from their publics and using it in a constructive manner. The proactive potential of organisational blogs as an issues management tool has also been linked to mining consumer insights in order to develop messaging strategies (Nail, 2006). Even if an organisation chooses against developing its own organisational blog, it is recommended that they track the ‘blogosphere’—‘the collective term encompassing all blogs as a community or social network’ (Wikipedia.org, 2006b, para. 1)—to keep an eye on the external environment. As outlined by Branam (as cited in Cafasso, 2006, p. 17), ‘[if companies]…value a window into the thoughts of their consumers—and what company wouldn’t?—they should monitor the [blog] conversation at the very least.’ It could be argued, as is suggested by Day, Dong and Robins (2001, p. 409) that ‘issues management practices that rely on research on publics to alter corporate practice and guide the construction of corporate communication do not qualify as dialogue…[Grunig] would classify this model of public relations practice as two-way asymmetric’.

Further, Backbone Media (2005) has outlined that it is the nature of organisational blogs—or, their communication context—that has led to this
increased ability of public relations practitioners to obtain qualitative insights and interact with publics on a symmetrical level like never before. JTK Consulting (2006, para. 9) believes that the blogosphere ‘opens up a dialog about issues that the strictures of traditional media simply can’t allow’. However, such arguments present a profoundly linear approach to understanding the Web as a communications medium. It could be said that while the Web is a purportedly democratic medium, it is in reality, not. As Castells (2001, p. 275) notes, ‘the Internet is indeed a technology of freedom, but it can also free the powerful to oppress the uninformed’. The very nature of the Web has made it possible for content controllers to manipulate and update information at lightning quick speeds and decide ‘for reasons of…politics…or corporate preference…what material will be made accessible and what will not’ (Besser, 1995, p. 63). The Web has given those already in power (not just ordinary citizens) even greater potential to distribute filtered information to a mass readership. In many ways the Web presents publics with an overt sense of democracy. However, the filtering capabilities of the medium are not nearly as publicly understood or acknowledged as editorial regulations used in traditional, physical media. Such perceptions are evident in Krecji’s (2006, p. 26) comments that ‘…blogs are eroding mainstream media’s monopoly on information and authority’. The fact that corporate information can be changed and manipulated at anytime also allows for content controllers to have flexibility in decision making, and in a sense, allow them to say whatever they want, whenever they want.

Webcomputer literacy and information access also affect the communication context of organisational blogs. Castells (2001) notes how economic, political and cultural forces result in restrictions to Web access in society and points to exclusion from the Web as being ‘one of the most damaging forms of exclusion’ (p. 3). In order for two way symmetrical communications to become a reality, should not the context in which publics are to communicate not also attempt to be symmetrical? To say that bloggers ‘share their opinions with a global audience’ (Drezner & Farrell, 2004, p. 32) is grossly incorrect. However, in regards to theoretical communications models, it could be argued that the above notions do not make two-way symmetrical communication with key constituencies possible. As outlined by Leitch and Nelson (2001, p. 129), ‘in cases where access to resources is unequal, attempting to practice symmetrical public relations might constitute a self-destructive discourse strategy for the least powerful participant’. The Web and organisational blogs should only be labeled and regarded as ‘global’ mediums, if they are able to accommodate truly global publics, in order for ‘public relations…to positively affect the developing nations of the world through participation in development of communication’ (Taylor 2001, p. 629).

Caution is suggested in labelling organisational blogs as the answer to symmetrical communication, when the medium used to proliferate organisational messages—the Web—is not symmetrical in nature. Such haste
disregards years of study into theoretical concepts, including Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) aforementioned model, which advocates two-way communications. Additional theories include open systems theory (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1985); corporate governance (McCoy 2004) and organisational legitimacy (Metzler 2001). All strongly recommend organisations to adopt open and two-way communications with key publics in order to engage in meaningful and constructive conversations.

Although the vast library of theoretical public relations models are grounded in physical reality, they should not be ignored, but rather, used as platforms to develop theoretical models for an understanding of organisational weblogs. It is misguided to assign organisational blogs too much communicative power without first considering the theories that should underpin their use, and be used to develop frameworks for their strategic implementation. Basturea (as cited in Sweeney, 2006b, p. 13) states, ‘A lot of people are asking, What’s the benefit [of PR blogs]?...We need to come together and build resources for the industry that we can share with others’. An understanding of both the Web as a communications medium, and theoretical frameworks for blogging are vital for practitioners practicing corporate public relations in order to counter what McKie (2001, p. 76) terms the current ‘relative isolation of public relations theory’.

New publics and relationships in the blogosphere

While an understanding of the Web as a communications medium is vital for the strategic implementation of organisational blogs, it could be said that an understanding of the new forms of relationships generated by online interaction is just as important. As exemplified by Wilson’s (2001) matrix approach to public relations research, an adequate understanding of publics is a vital component of any public relations strategy. Identification and segmentation of publics play major roles in identifying key constituencies and developing guided campaigns to engage with relevant publics. With the emergence of the Web, and recently, blogs, new online publics have emerged. However, do public relations practitioners fully understand the relationships with these publics, that are purportedly able to be forged by organisational blogs?

According to Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997, p. 84), ‘public relations literature is replete with references to relationships without defining the concept and without indicating how to measure them’. Considering blogs are touted by many as providing huge potential for developing two-way symmetrical relationships with publics, it is important to investigate the notion of relationship management, an area of study covered by Ledingham (2003). Relationship management has close links to the purported purpose of organisational blogs in that it is consistent with major theoretical concepts such as systems theory and the two-way symmetrical model of J.E. Grunig and Hunt (1984)” (Ledingham, 2003, p. 181). Karpinski (2003) believes organisational blogs provide corporations with the ability to develop a ‘personal connection’ with publics,
through an increased focus on targeted messages. However, just who are these publics, and how do we identify them? According to Wright (2004, p. 242), the ‘difficulty of locating people on-line…presents challenges for maintaining [internet based] relationships’.

Grunig and Repper’s (1992) situational theory attempts to identify publics by segmenting a total market into groups of strategic publics defined by their levels of involvement with an organisation. According to Leitch and Nelson (2001, p. 128), active publics ‘are described as groups that have come into existence and see themselves as having a relationship of some type with an organization’. Latent publics, by contrast, are highly uninvolved publics, have ‘some potential to exist’ (Leitch & Nelson, 2001, p. 128), and as such, do not warrant high levels of organisational attention. However, on the Internet, which according to Parks (1996) and Peebles (1997) is abundant with qualitative insights, how do we distinguish between who is active and who is latent? Organisations can only obtain insights or information from publics that actively blog in cyberspace, or participate in the conversation. If a public does not participate in the conversation, then how can an organisation obtain their insights, and computer related information (such as IP address and email address) used to develop an overview of their targets? As outlined by Morris and Ogan (1996, p. 44), ‘we may discover a fair amount about the producers of messages from the content of their [online] messages, but what about the lurkers? Who are they and how big is this group? In addition, why do they remain lurkers and not also become information providers? Is there something about the nature of the medium that prevents their participation?’

The notion of user anonymity also poses problems for online relationship management. As outlined by Lenhart and Fox (2006) more than half of bloggers—55% of online participants—post under a pseudonym. It remains to be seen how publics can be adequately identified when the makeup of cyberspace allows them to take on a multitude of personas across a multitude of blogs. For example, a teenager in a fashion blog may also post as a disgruntled mother in a childcare blog, while also assuming the identity of a male university student in an IT blog. As a result, it remains to be seen how blogs, while touted for their relationship building ability, can adequately allow for the identification of a diverse spectrum of publics. The independent variables associated with Grunig and Repper’s (1992) situational theory—problem recognition, constraint recognition and level of involvement—subsequently are difficult to implement, and thus do not allow public relations practitioners to adequately ‘identify significant publics…to determine effective communication messages’ (Hamilton, 1992, p. 123).

The evaluation methods used to measure communications online also fail to provide the qualitative information needed to prove that organisational blogs truly do connect with and build positive relationships with a range of strategic publics. Paisner (2006, p. 17) advises public relations practitioners to
‘establish metrics to make sure you are achieving [results from your corporate blog],’ however, fails to actually provide any tangible methodologies to realise this notion. As outlined by Dwyer (2006), online evaluation methodologies are predominantly quantitative in nature, and are inherently similar to measurement tools used in traditional media contexts. Considering blogs are touted for their ability to provide qualitative insights, a continued focus on quantitative methodologies for online evaluation seems questionable. While technologies such as Sacks’ (1997–2000) ‘Conversation Map’ and Donath, Karahalios and Viegas’ (1999) ‘Loom’ have attempted to visualise and interpret online conversations, Dwyer (2006) notes that, ‘[these technologies] cannot really explain who the users are, or why they’re visiting the sites as part of a community…in other words, the person behind the statistic’. It could be argued that an over-reliance on quantitative measurement methodologies could also, in line with McKie (2001, p.81), ‘continue to retard the field [of public relations].’

While organisational blogs certainly do have the ability to develop a form of relationship with certain publics, it is a mistake to claim they can reach a truly diverse range of publics strategically. Online it is impossible for both message senders and receivers to truly identify who is actually authoring online comments, and which publics simply read blogs, choosing not to engage through posting. It could be said that blogs solely favour those who post and make comments, and as such, only allow for the identification of active publics, at the expense of latent ones. This is in line with Hallahan’s (2000, p. 499) assertion that the practice and study of public relations has in recent times, ‘focused mostly on publics that are interested in and concerned about the activities of organizations [while]…largely overlooked is the importance of groups that have only minimal [ability to participate in the conversation].’

Further, the nature of blogging technology allows for ‘[organisations] to decide who gets to see all or parts of [their] blog’ (Anon., 2005, p. 4). This imbalance of power in message development increases the chance that certain organisational publics are prioritised over others, namely those who are active publics with access to an Internet connection. Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) consider the exclusion of certain publics from organisational dialogue as unethical, and therefore, does not translate into excellent, two-way symmetrical relationships.

According to Weber (1998, p. 12) ‘the Internet’s roots are in academics and business’, and as such, it could be regarded as not a truly symmetrical medium. The same could be said for blogging. American studies by Lenhart and Fox (2006, p. 2) have shown that ‘bloggers are overwhelmingly young adults who hail from urban and suburban areas.’ Further, these authors point to the majority of bloggers as being heavy Internet users with high-speed broadband connections. While these findings do not directly relate to organisational blogs, they do nonetheless provide an overview of those who are likely to populate the blogosphere, and who are also likely to be considered as ‘publics’ in an online corporate context. It could be said that these publics are highly computer
literature and contribute to Stefik’s (1999, p. 250) assertion that ‘differing levels of [Internet] service may always distinguish the wealthy from the poor’. Further, as outlined by Delfore (as cited in Guiniven 2006, p. 6), blogs are ‘narrow silos of interest’—bringing the notion of substantial numbers of individuals to comprise a public into question. As a result, the notion of public is limited and confined to a distinct number of online participants when considering the role of organisational weblogs in relationship management.

Blogs and public relations—a further blurring of an already blurred discipline?

It is suggested that consideration be given to hastily providing organisational blogs with too much promise. Considering the lack of exactness has prompted a steady erosion of…public relations’ reputation as a profession and scholarly discipline care must be taken when implementing a communications tool (blogs) which, itself is still ambiguous in nature. Further, public relations has struggled to differentiate itself from related disciplines such as marketing (Hutton, 2001). A key part in the endeavour to differentiate public relations from these disciplines has revolved around the academic categorisation of message control—that unlike advertising and marketing, public relations relies on unpaid dissemination of messages. As outlined by Wilcox et al (2005, p. 14), ‘editors, known as gatekeepers, determine whether [public relations] material will be used or simply thrown away’. Now that online, the gatekeeper has, from a public perception, been eroded, practitioners need to take care when exclusively conceptualising blogs as belonging to public relations. Considering that the gate-keeping function of traditional media has helped to establish public relations as an impartial disseminator of messages, it could be argued that the publicly perceived erosion of gatekeepers online could affect the public relations industry’s attempts to position the discipline as an intermediary device to be used mutually between organisations, the media, and society.

The problem lies in the fact that many perceive corporate blogs such as General Motors’ organisational blog as ‘steering past its own PR department and the mainstream press’ (Business Week 2005, p. 3). Corporate blogging policies guided by public relations and legal intervention—such as those outlined by Flynn (2006)—have increased in importance and profile as ‘giving employees free rein over corporate communications…[can put] the organization at tremendous risk’ (p.15). Further, although referring to news blogs, Wall’s (2005, p. 165) assertion that ‘the use of personal opinion gives a certain intimacy to blogs and suggests that the blogger is someone…who is not manipulated by a corporate boss or a filter of professionalism’, still could equally apply to purportedly open corporate blogs. These common misperceptions do not account for the covert role public relations plays in organisational blogs, through activities such as blog pitching (Shift Communications, 2006; Trufelman and Goldberg, 2002). According to Edelman and Technorati (2006, p. 14), ‘as many as nearly half of all bloggers
Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal, Vol. 8

(48%) reported never having contact with companies or their public relations representatives. Perhaps the fact that public relations practitioners have not yet fully come to terms with the blogosphere, or taken the time to reflect on its relationship with public relations—like it has with traditional media—is the main reason why blogs are, predominantly, publicly perceived as a democratic form of communication. Blog pitching is essentially the online parallel of traditional media pitching—however, rather than pitching traditional media outlets, it is in fact authors of popular blogs, or who Shift Communications (2006) labels ‘blog authorities’ and ‘A-list bloggers’ being pitched, who are likely to be opinion leaders in the blogosphere.

If the field of public relations is to avoid the ‘increasing ambiguity of the central role of public relations’ (Cropp & Pincus, 2001, p. 190), practitioners and academics need to be careful in not viewing blogs as mediums to force overly artificial and controlled information, under the guise of a ‘democratic medium’—especially at a time when the relationship between publics and media credibility is in decline (Geary, 2005). Considering that public relations influences up to 60% of traditional Australian news coverage (Johnson and Zawawi, 2003), with similar findings also applying in Britain and the United States (Cadzow 2001, cited in Howell, Miller & Bridges, 2005), this could be a major reason why the relationship between media consumers and traditional media producers is declining in credibility. The future approach public relations adopts to organisational blogs both theoretically and practically is vital, as ‘business credibility is very low, but public expectations of organisations are high’ (Judd, 1995, p. 37). As organisational weblogs are developed by the company, for the company, it could be said that from the outset, credibility is even more difficult to establish with online publics. As Searls and Weinberger (2001, cited in Kelleher & Miller, 2006, p. 4) state, corporate messaging is become ‘less interesting and less relevant to online publics because…corporate voices sound more like profit-driven machinery than real people engaged in two-way conversations’. If bloggers are not left alone to truly communicate openly with publics, could the Web follow in the footsteps of traditional media, and lose its perceived democratic qualities?

As outlined by Turner (as cited in Crawford, 2005), a number of organisations are now providing purportedly open communications about the internal happenings of the company. However, ‘everything they post has come through the public relations department…it is designed to build the cult of personality’ (p. 1). Crawford (2005, p. 1) points to organisational weblogs also becoming increasingly ‘gagged by marketing, public relations and corporate communications staff’. Albricht (2004, p. 14) recommends that practitioners, alongside marketing personnel, should ‘post anonymously’ in organisational weblogs, focusing on developing corporately appropriate messages. Thenotion of anonymous authors reaching potentially anonymous publics raises not only ethical concerns for the practice of public relations, but also arguably compromises
the purportedly two-way symmetric potential of organisational blogs. According to Metzler (2001, p. 325), ‘without a specific connection between the speaker and the public, all communication strategies will fail’. The unseen influence of public relations in an online environment perceived as allowing ‘articulators of social movements…to speak for themselves’ (Ford & Gil, 2001, p. 205) could, if widely discovered, erode an organisation’s legitimacy in the eyes of those publics visiting corporate blogs. Today’s publics are ‘less tolerant to ambiguity and contrived truth…they expect honest and substantive truth and honesty’ (Marken, 2004, p. 27). Marken’s (2004) assertion applies even further in a medium touted for its openness and honesty, particularly when ‘the Internet’s inherent potential for the generation of unprecedented cultural creativity depends on openness of access and freedom of movement and action in cyberspace’ (Lessig, 2002, cited in Nightingale, 2004, p. 23). Further, this also has ramifications for the future conceptualisation of public relations from a societal perspective. As outlined by Pritchitt (1992), public relations’ ‘poor reputation and low image is probably holding back the growth of the discipline’.

Conclusion

The blogosphere has been viewed as ‘the largest focus group and living laboratory in the world’ (Himler, 2005, p. 26). Many common consumers and citizens would not know that their comments are being scanned by public relations practitioners. If they did, would they care? Organisations, through their blogs, also can now enact focus groups through blog comments, and secretly conduct research without the knowledge of participants. While this arguably does provide more natural responses than a forced focus group setting, is it unethical to not inform participants directly that their comments could be used for research purposes (and perhaps their intellectual property used for commercial profits)? Johnson (1997, p. 216) believes that research conducted under the name of two-way symmetrical communication should ‘develop relationships between an organization and its publics, not merely to further an organization’s goals’. Considering knowledge of an organisation’s positive actions amongst key publics can deliver loyalty towards a company (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), the knowledge of corporate manipulation or reliance on asymmetric tactics must also potentially result in negative corporate perceptions. This is why those driving the field of public relations must fully understand, and reflect on the discipline’s role in the blogosphere before embarking on uninformed initiatives. Perhaps the haste put forward by the public relations profession in relation to researching corporate blogs is in line with King’s (cited in Thomas, 1996, p. 114) notion that ‘ethical problems in research may not always be immediately evident when a topic or field is new’.

In their relatively short existence, blogs have quickly become a mainstay in everyday life, entering the popular lexicon and taking the corporate world by storm. As blogs become more established their impact on corporate
communications will continue to increasingly feed through all areas of life. There will continue to be those who extol blogs, and those who criticise them. Even those who are adverse to blogs will still undoubtedly come across them in their everyday practices, illustrating the already existing impact of the Web’s ‘embed(edness) in mundane routines and practices’ (Jones, 1999, p. 182). The field of public relations continues to evolve as practitioners face the advent of new technology. As clearly illustrated in the past twenty years in particular, the practice of public relations has changed due to technology, but it can also be seen that those driving the discipline also have the ability to positively adapt and understand new communications tools.

Blogs’ role in the corporate landscape is still ambiguous and unclear. Public relations academics and practitioners have not yet devised methodologies or a consistent approach to handle the future implementation of this new communications tool. The dangers of using a technological medium without fully understanding, or being realistic, about its capabilities, can lead to what Shafer (2005, p. 18) terms ‘fetishizing a new technology…in the rush to define the new thing and celebrate its wonders, the human tendency to oversell kicks in’. To avoid such consequences, a greater understanding of organisational blogs can be more realistically achieved through educating those who will continue to push blogs into the future as an organisational communications tool. As blogs are a relatively new technology, it is important that the next generation of practitioners be taught not solely on how to use them for corporate purposes, but also taught of the deeper implications in their use. Until the Web is made available in third world countries and becomes a true democratic and global force (not just seen as ‘global’), then blogging’s true potential for change in organisational communications will not be realised.

Blogs have emerged as an important media platform for organisations to consider, and to be used in line with existing traditional public relations strategies. It is agreed that in line with Rossiter (as cited in Fraser 2005, p. 1), ‘PR people need to understand the nuances of using blogs effectively in corporate communications. It’s not simply about which blog to pitch and how to do that…It’s also important to remember that while blogs are a unique channel which do require specific skills, they are ultimately just another medium through which individuals and organisations can communicate.’ The future of both blogging in a corporate context, and, more widely, the perception of public relations in a societal context are inextricably linked. The manner in which public relations approaches organisational blogs—through both academic conceptualisations and practitioners’ implementations—could have tremendous effects on the future credibility for both disciplines. Considering the blogosphere is a new environment, there is still plenty of time for academics and practitioners to take a step back, reflect, and reconsider the path public relations is to take in this communications context. After all, as outlined by Steve Rubel (as cited in Sweeney 2006a, p. 9), widely considered as an authoritative figure in the public
The good the bad and the blogger

relations blogging movement, ‘We [public relations practitioners, are] sitting on the cusp of the Grand Canyon of opportunity here...and it's our game to lose.’

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