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# The rise of the individual and the agents of change

Multiple converging societal and technological factors are having a significant impact on communications theory and practice. Written for senior healthcare communications decision makers, this white paper examines the pace of change, the increasing personalisation of audiences and messaging and their influence on healthcare communications as a discipline.

## Overview

**We are in the midst of a seismic shift in communications theory and practice, fuelled by the rise in the power of the individual as an agent of change. This relatively new power of the individual aligns with the coming of age of the millennial generation, the widespread adoption of a variety of interactive and online media channels, and a growing distrust of established organisations as information sources and authority. The impact and convergence of these factors has changed how we communicate today, dramatically moving us from a mass communication to a personalised communication mindset.**

Let's look at the advent of the millennial generation as an agent of change. Young adults who were born in the (relatively) prosperous years between 1980 and 2000 are known as the millennials. They, like other generations, have been shaped by the events, leaders, developments and trends of their time.

However, this generation was raised on technology, so much so that their cell phones are extensions of their selves and email, text messaging, instant messaging and Facebooking, for example, are how they interact with others, including other generations. The rise of instant communication technologies may explain this generation's reputation for being peer and community oriented, and for seeking instant gratification.

Millennials are also characterised by a perceived sense of entitlement. They often assertively seek instant communication, more feedback and involvement. Millennials are not content to be 'told' what to do, but want to know 'why' and 'what's in it for me?' One impact of this increased focus on self and increased questioning is a growing distrust of established media and journalism models, and of the role of organisations as traditionally reliable news sources. And their success in getting answers to their questions is influencing other generations to ask questions too.

These changes have fragmented the establishment voice and have increased the volume of information bombarding individuals. It's easy to see therefore how individuals may be confused and question traditional media and

organisations as sources of information. In order to make sense of the variety and volume of information sources,

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many consumers select information channels and sources that address their individual beliefs and tastes, rather than being content to receive information via the established news filters. In addition, because they believe more in the power of the individual and community, they seek out those individuals who they know and trust, and view as influential validation of information they receive.

Barack Obama's Presidential campaign tapped into this confluence of power of the millennial generation, the ubiquity of the Internet and new media channels and a "Them vs. Us / Me" belief set. The campaign demonstrated the changes that are here to stay. Campaign messages empowered individuals to believe that they could make a difference and appealed to communal values of hope and unity. The delivery of information took the power away from "Them" (corporations, the current establishment) and gave it to individuals. The Obama campaign tapped into individuals on a highly personal level and mastered cutting edge social media. It used viral networks, new media and technologies to reach out directly on what felt like a one-

to-one basis via text, email (or whichever communication channel they preferred) to drive the campaign.

The campaign and the current President Obama website have empowered individuals to get involved and become part of what's happening. In fact, the website provided, and still does provide, ways for individuals to control how they receive information, with the ability to customise, personalise and interact. It not only distributes information, but it also provides opportunities for community involvement, how to take action, for feedback and for a chance to be heard, as demonstrated in the current Listening Tour promoted on the website. Yet, even for those who are not part of this younger generation, the campaign website offered ways to receive information and coverage from traditional media and authoritative sources. It included a catalogue of past speeches or interviews, as well as ways to research President Obama's position on particular issues.

**So what does this mean for us as communicators and public relations professionals? The impact of these societal and technological changes signal the need for a shift in mindset. Some examples are listed below.**

## The Impact at the Media Level

### Traditional Journalism

The media landscape is evolving rapidly, driven at least in part by economic necessity on the part of large media owners, but also through the impact of new technologies and societal change. The changes include traditional newspapers closing, distribution of media in digital-only formats and the trend towards engaging inexperienced reporters in lieu of higher priced experts. From a healthcare perspective, many of the well-established reporters with long careers specialising in the field are no longer employed as journalists by the media for which they report, transferred to temporary or short-term contracts which provide employers with greater flexibility (and lower staff costs).

Overall, experience is becoming expensive, and as organisations seek to cut costs, specialist reporting is increasingly being outsourced or, in some cases, dispensed with altogether. In its place come inexperienced reporters who frequently oversimplify complicated health stories, may leave out context, lack substantial sources and sacrifice accuracy for headlines. They may also shortcut established research techniques. In a cannibalistic fashion they consume other media in order to inform their own, carrying out primary journalistic research via the internet rather than firsthand fact-finding.

However, while journalists across generations and assignments are adopting social media, the greatest usage is by the millennial generation journalists, who believe that new media enhances journalism versus weakens it. They not only use new media to assist in research or to expand their reporting reach, but turn to it to connect with their readership and shape opinions. Some are even being rewarded by editors and media owners for hits to their copy on digital versions of print media, rather than for their interviewing skills or investigative strengths.

## Citizen Journalism

The emergence of the (usually) internet-based 'citizen' journalist is another factor changing the communications environment. Traditionally, excellence in news gathering is associated with impartial, non-emotional reporting of the facts, leaving the reader or viewer to make up their own minds. With new technology, the citizen journalist has found

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life as an average person who can capture and disseminate news. In citizen journalism, personal beliefs and opinions are paramount, and the interpretation that the individual places on the actions of others, be they people or organisations, is a key element of each story.

Many citizen journalists lack the training, experience or access that trained reporters have. They may often be activists, so may lack the objectivity of traditional journalism. Can they even be classified as journalists?

The sheer volume of internet material available (and added to daily) means that the voice of the citizen journalist is beginning to overwhelm more rational voices from traditional media. This is not to say that all online reporting, blogging and commentary is inaccurate or biased, that's far from the truth, merely that for the casual browser, there is no way to distinguish between stories that are accurate, inaccurate or somewhere in between.

## Objectivity and Full Context

One of the biggest challenges we face from a communications perspective is how to lead our audiences to the information source that's right for them, alongside the ever-decreasing attention span of media consumers. The sound-bite generation requires short, snappy info bites,

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rather than well thought through, well argued discussions. The influence of Twitter should not be underestimated, given the popularity of a channel where people get their messages across in less than 140 characters. This means that, as communicators, we need to find a way to condense information about often complex conditions and treatments, while at the same time putting the information into full context with multiple points of view.

## Impact on Public Relations

The rise of the individual and the impact on media and journalism also provides the opportunity for communicators to raise the standard and to connect with audiences. In some ways, these changes bring us back to the core of public relations (PR): understanding the needs of individuals and responding. Below are some examples:

### **Listen vs. Promote**

A standard definition of PR tells us that it is “the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics”. At its heart is the concept that to be effective, PR must listen to what its publics (audiences) have to say and then respond to them, delivering the “right message, at the right time, to the right audience, using the right medium”.

In modern business parlance however, PR has become shorthand for ‘promotion’ – much more about saying what we want to say than about listening, learning and redefining. The changes today and the rise of the individual make delivering information to audiences in a “packaged goods” method no longer acceptable. Instead of distributing content, communicators must also create a playing field in which they can both deliver information and also provide opportunities for consumers of that information to share their opinions.

### **Individuals vs. Mass Audiences**

In the past, message development, which forms an integral part of shaping our communications, has been based on our perception of what general audiences think, rather than what they actually think. The advent of social media, and the explosion of individual voices clamouring to be heard, means that we have the opportunity to really get under the skin of our audiences, as groups of individuals, and understand their perspectives. It brings significant challenge, because it illustrates, more clearly than we could have imagined, the variety of different perspectives and information needs of our audiences.

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From an agency standpoint, the people formerly known as the audience or market segments, are now groups of individuals. It means that we must incorporate within programmes tools to reach out and identify opinions – so that we can continually refine our messages and respond to our audiences’ changing needs. Instead of a monologue, public relations truly comes alive as a dialogue, engaging with audiences to debate and drive change.

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## Impact on Healthcare Communications

These change agents create an interesting paradox for healthcare communications. On one hand pharmaceutical and healthcare companies want to have more control of their messaging in regards to what they say and to whom they say it. On the other hand, based on the rise of the individual and other agents of change we have discussed, healthcare communicators will need to find the middle ground.

### More Corporate and Regulatory Control

Because the pharmaceutical industry today is subject to public scrutiny on an increasingly frequent basis, one result is that healthcare organisations have become more cautious in the way in which they communicate, and with whom. Regulators such as the FDA hedge pharmaceutical company communications with greater and greater restrictions, firmly controlling what can be said, on pain of legal action and worse. The objective of many pharmaceutical company insiders is to minimise their exposure to litigation and criticism. It's a 'command and control' approach, designed to prevent misinformation and promote factual accuracy.

However, the packaged goods story is the way of the past, and companies must find a way to balance sharing the information the public demands with corporate and

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regulatory demands. This requires a robust understanding of the risks involved for healthcare companies, so that we can help legal and regulatory teams navigate today's growing demand for greater openness. We need to help individuals and teams to identify solutions that both fit within existing 'control' focused frameworks and journey towards increased transparency.

### More Consumer Demand for Information

Ironically, for the millennial generation desperately seeking dialogue, this controlling approach is interpreted as being somehow deceitful. Today, consumers demand more transparency in healthcare information. Closing down routes of communication and prohibiting companies from engaging in direct dialogue about the medicines that they make only reinforces the often not so positive view of the pharmaceutical industry. Communicators will need to find a way not only to share important health and pharmaceutical information, but also to lead its consumers to the right sources of information, allow for comment, and put often complex information into context.

### Make Information Relevant to Individuals

For pharma, new product development is increasingly about delivering incremental improvements versus older products – second, third, or even fourth generations of therapeutic approaches that were ground-breaking in their infancy. To help patients and clinicians fully appreciate the

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benefits of these improvements and what they mean to them, it is important to communicate effectively in a way that's meaningful for each individual. It is also critical to find a way to balance participating in a complex discussion with individuals, while delivering information in sound-bites, with personality and within the constraints of current regulation. Short of changing the regulatory landscape overnight, pharma will struggle in the short term to adapt and meet this new communications environment.

## Best Practice Principles for Change

The challenges communications professionals face today are not insurmountable. They are, however, rapidly evolving and require us to have the flexibility to change, and the ability to actively listen and engage. The key word here is journey, since change is the one constant in this evolving environment – so we must therefore continually evaluate and adapt our methods of engagement. In summary, communicators today must embrace these agents of change and recognise the power of the individual.

### Here are some pointers

**1** Recognise the shift from broadcasting a packaged, controlled message to delivering information in a highly individualised, interactive and customised way that increases the receptivity of individuals vs. mass audiences.

**2** Continue to recognise the importance of traditional media and communication models, but embrace the power of new media channels and interactive media, even if it's just gaining an increased understanding of its strategic marketing value-add for your product or company.

**3** Map and prioritise the multiple sources of information about your company and products. This includes taking a broader view of who the influencers are and considering the power of not only key opinion leaders, advocacy groups and traditional reporters, but also individual bloggers, community members, family and friends and other individuals who have an opinion.

**4** Engage with opinion leaders differently than in the past. See them as not just audiences but information channels that reach groups of individuals. Investigate and understand the opportunities provided through direct peer-to-peer and peer-to-patient communication.

**5** Redefine corporate/product voice and personality so that they resonate more clearly with different groups of individuals. Become more engaged in two way communication and active listening. Give individuals ways to develop a true relationship with the brand.

**6** Demonstrate value through direct contact with individuals rather than through mass audiences, and by creating a playing field on which interaction and discussions can occur vs. sending messages of corporate responsibility and transparency via a one-way communication.

### The author

Anna Korving  
Joint Managing Director  
anna.korving@publicislifibrands.co.uk  
+44 (0)20 7357 8187 or  
+44 (0)20 7173 4124