

Bite Age of Communication Talk

(December 2009)

The rapid growth in social media, mobile communication and the beginnings of virtual presence point to a significant change in how we are beginning to build and sustain relationships with one another, contents of entertainment and information and indeed to external things more generally. I believe this change marks a fundamental break with the past and in terms of modern media, say the last 50 years, represents a change in the power structures underpinning the broadcasting of messages, by which I mean, whilst mass broadcast, that is broadcast controlled from a central source or sources, lives on, indeed continues to play an important role, it is now fully joined and in many areas already supplanted by the mass of personal broadcast, in which we each have the power of almost unfettered access combined with the ability to broadcast to many.

In our Digital Lives Research Programme I have characterised these changes as the move towards 'Assemblage'. By which I mean that today we live in an on-demand world, where we increasingly expect what we want, when we want, where we want, presented to us in our preferred format. In short we expect to be able to assemble experiences to suit ourselves. The world is increasingly available to us on demand, as indeed, are we available to it on demand, for most of us not to be constantly connected, available, is almost to cease to matter or to be. By way of explanation here are one or two quick examples of what I mean by assemblage. If you were to examine several users iPhones you would find them to be very different, as each individual iPhone rapidly becomes an assemblage of applications, each structured to match individual usage and preference, this by the way is real personalisation. I may add as an aside it positions the overall creating organisation in this case Apple, as both a facilitator and co-creator acting in partnership with both structured third parties and user individuals, this I believe brings content closer to the user and points the way to a compelling, more

co-operative and co-creative business model that will continue to emerge over the coming years. A further simple example is Video on Demand or even the PVR, here users restructuring time, or broadcast schedules to create their own scheduling. Final as a more advanced example is the way in which given or professionally created contents are mixed with other user created content and shared and re-modified to be then broadcast from individual to individual or more generally shared.

Assemblage therefore means the individual increasingly shapes and re-forms experiences, indeed actively seeks out opportunities to do this, to a large extent the user can be said to structure and create things round themselves. This is important as I think it gives us a very strong clue as to what forms of content may be more powerful in the future and how we are likely to use them.

Returning to the contrast of mass broadcast and personal broadcast. First I should explain that on this occasion I am not going to enter into a simple discussion of broadcast television versus social media although I will by analogy draw from these areas, rather by mass broadcast, I am taking a broader definition, I mean all types of broadcast messaging, where by a content is designed once and broadcast to many, this is what I call a 'tell based' model. A specific example of this is the traditional model for most corporate marketing, it is based on central control of the message accompanied by mass dissemination and at its best consistent re-enforcement i.e. brand or values building. Whilst I believe that these notions of mass broadcast do and will continue to have a role today and into the future I also believe that in the context of corporate marketing they no longer represent the prime way in which brand equity will be built and sustained. Quite simply mass broadcast does not give the 21st century user sufficient to assemble their personal take on a product or service, although it may act as pointer or guide to somewhere that can or does. I should add that despite the explosion

in the number of so called Digital Agencies and seemingly constant flow of brands adding 'social media' to their marketing campaigns, few organisations really appear to understand that what is happening is a fundamental deconstruction and I believe ultimate breakdown of the 'tell based', central control model. This model will over the coming years be replaced by brands acting as facilitators or co-creators of discovery and engagement, where any control the brand has is based on what I call providing 'opportunity with personality', in that the individual is provide with opportunities to explore, build, personally appropriate and share elements of the brand or service experience and that the 'opportunity' contains within it the essential nature of the brand or service personality. By way of explaining this I will turn to two behavioural examples, the need for users to seek 'similar' others and the changing way we establish an understanding of something and 'verify' this; both of these behaviours were explored in this years Digital Lives Programme and research I have undertaken in the past few months examining the on-line behaviour of young people between the ages of 16-24, some of which was published in the recent Youthnet 'Life Support' Report.

Not all but many of the commercial social media campaigns have failed to meet their targets, often they have create 'crowds' for merely transitory moments, perhaps whilst the campaign is at its most active, and probably expensive, but these in many instances quickly die away, the crowd simply moves away with little enduring impact. Why is this, is it just something in the nature of social media or is it a failure in execution? I believe that what lies at the heart of this problem is a miss-understanding of 'social media' which is based on the correct observation that individuals will cluster round certain contents or activities, combined with a poor understanding of why people use 'social media'. In short the overwhelming nature of 'social media' usage is related to issues of identity establishment and sustainability. As we found in our research many people visited a location because, yes at one level they were interested, but more fundamentally they were hoping to meet people similar to themselves there. In fact

rarely did they feel it sufficient for just the particular content or location to be the only uniting or common factor. Their search required them to quickly establish sufficient information about some of the 'clustered' others to enable them to find individuals who they thought were much more broadly similar to themselves. It can be argued that at the extreme they were almost seeking a reflection of themselves, a reflection that by being present verified or supported their own presence.

This leads us quickly to my second issue that of verification. How do we know today that something is trustworthy or believable? We might say go to a trusted source, but today cynicism abounds, who do we trust? We may not have been particular enamoured with the Banks, but we didn't expect them to go bust, even the BBC appears able to be economical with truth when it comes to phone-lines and competitions, academia fairs little better as the recent fuss about emails and climate change reminds us. Much is made of trust and brand, I believe all brands are held in a balance of cynicism, that is not to say that brand is not a good signpost, rather more that is inappropriate to talk of brands being trusted in any real world sense. Indeed when we explored how young people, the so called Digital Natives, establish the veracity or believability of something we see a different trust forming mechanism in action. They often decide what to believe, what to trust by visiting many sources, these sources may not give consistent answers, they actually prefer to see opposing or varying views! They like to see the debate in action, often participating in it directly. However once again they are looking for the presence of similar others, other people sufficiently similar to themselves to provide credible commentaries and as previously to reflect back to them. This approach is one where the believability of something, its trustworthiness, is assembled in a dynamic set of negotiations by the individual. The monolithic highly crafted and centrally controlled 'certainties' of the 'tell based' model have become openly contested and subject to the scrutiny of an audience that is no longer merely passively on the receiving end of the broadcast message but is itself now

a broadcaster. We now see the emergence of mass personal broadcasters able to transmit viewpoints and engagement, in real or near real time, back to one another and, given the complex relationship between personal and traditional media, to provide a potentially significant content for traditional mass broadcast.

As Steve and Peter have clearly illustrated a change in communication and connected behaviour on an unprecedented scale and depth is just beginning, the implications of which are far reaching. I believe that now, more than a decade after the mobile phone and internet became generally available, we are seeing the first stages of a generational change. A change that, in combination with other social pressures, will lead to a complete reformation of the power relationship of 'authority', in which I would include commercial brands, to the individual. I would argue that this is already beginning to deconstruct forms that have been sustained by broad consensus over the past 50 years. I am not saying this in any romantic fashion or as a doomsayer, or indeed predicting some form of death of capitalism, nothing could be further from my position. Rather I believe it to be a fact, a challenge and a most exciting opportunity, but one that will call for some very different and imaginative thinking during what, I think is potentially going to be a decade of transition.