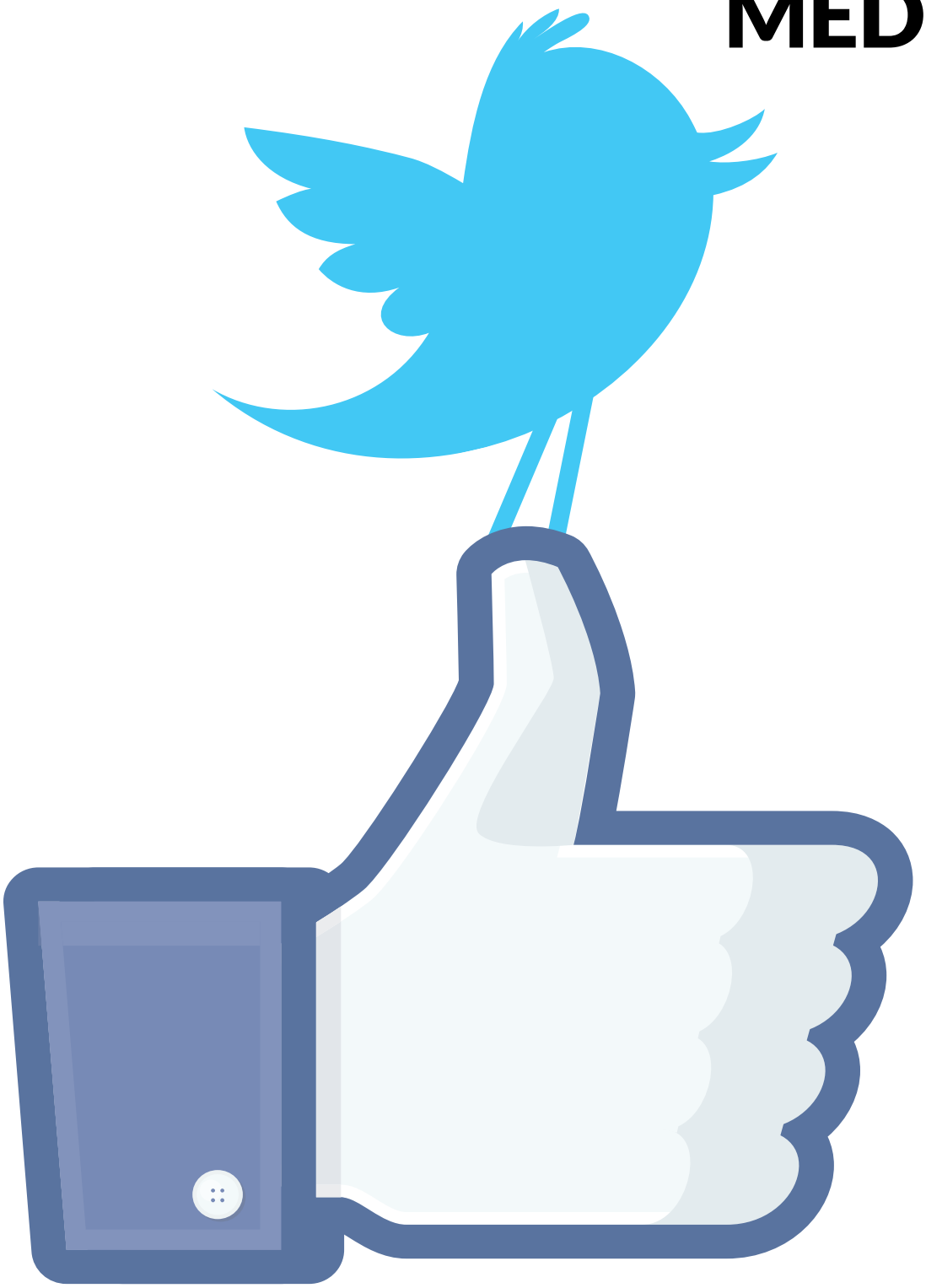
ESSAYS ON 21ST-CENTURY PR ISSUES

# SOCIAL MEDIA



PAUL SEAMAN

# Social Media
*Paul Seaman*

*Part I:*
**Are the "social media" really "social" or "media"?**
My thoughts on whether the ultra-modern "social" media really are all that different to poor old "mass" media.

*Part II:*
**How organisations can survive the Tweet-sphere**
In the past footballers, like most employees, were not allowed to issue press releases, but Twitter and Facebook can easily amount to doing just that. Their bosses are nervous, and rightly so.

*Part III:*
**Wired's Chris Anderson says Web 2.0 is dead!**
Remember when Web 2.0 was all about creating, sharing and collaborating to produce Long Tails that favoured small players at the shallow end of the bitstream? Well Chris Anderson says that's dead.
Goodbye "free", hallo value.

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This article comprises two posts first published on **paulseaman.eu**

# Part I: Are the "social media" really "social" or "media"?

I've just been out rowing on Zurich lake. It's a good place to muse. You can't share my blisters but I hope you'll share my water-bourne (and not water-logged) thoughts on whether the ultra-modern "social" media really are all that different to poor old "mass" media.

The word media was traditionally used to describe communication vehicles that had mass reach in the sense of one-reaching-many. Hence, the telephone as a medium of communication was never considered to be a part of the media [see my comments on *PR Conversations*[1]]. Conversations on telephones traditionally were one-to-one, or at best one-to-few on conference calls. (Oh, yeah right, let's leave the UK gutter press hackers out of this for a moment.)

The word "social" in "social media" was coined to distinguish it from the mass media. It highlighted the ability of digital technology to enable direct – disintermediated – and interactive networked communication.

It was meant to capture all kinds of more or less micro-communications whose essence was that they were peer-to-peer.

Things got complicated because "social" media are not just "narrow-casting". They might be micro, but they had also to be two-way. They were essentially interactive. But they were also essentially about networks: they were clubs.

My sticking point is that I don't think this was all that new. I see why the new media were called "social", but I think the old media were highly sociable.

And I think my most serious objection to social media hype is the old elitist one. I love gossip and I am often thrilled by crowds. But "crap in, crap out" is as true of conversations (whether between two individual or crowds of peers), as it is of computer models: remember how the Club of Rome's computer predictions[2] once panicked the world? Lots of people saying a thing, and lots more agreeing with them, is no guarantee that there is any merit to what's said. I am thrilled that people have "voice" (and even "agency"). The next step is to get them to love wisdom.

1 http://www.prconversations.com/?p=570

2 Time magazine - http://goo.gl/XEx3T

photo: Photo of an American family in the 1920s listening to a crystal radio. http://goo.gl/Iyp6F

## The old media were social

The traditional media – in the mass sense – were always about building relationships with audiences; that's what sustained them. I maintain that old media were always highly sociable. They spoke to a fan base. They reinforced the prejudices of their demographic. They stoked their appeal to their audience. In short they chased their market. I imagine that they tested their market, but in a way they didn't have to. Their market tested them. Oh, and many of them worked hard at earning trust, often by proving themselves brave, truthful and intelligent.

Yes, they were intermediated, but they were interactive.

Take TV. It envisaged itself as the nation's hearth. It knew it had to generate "water-cooler" shows. It saw its role as providing social glue; a role Walter Leland Cronkite[3] played for most of his 92 years as the world's leading TV newscaster. If it didn't generate conversation, TV was dead.

Take radio. For decades it pioneered interactivity because phone-ins were cheap.

Take the press. Many were owned by campaigners and political parties. Plenty more connected with and mobilized millions of people on behalf of a variety of causes.

The mass media got to be massive because it was personal. It was social because at all sorts of levels (from family to nation, via interest groups and societies) it connected its users to their peers.

3 CBS News - http://goo.gl/7RhyZ

photo: "Church notice board" by Jonathan Billinger
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Church_notice_board_-_geograph.org.uk_-_803781.jpg

## Social media aren't always media or social

The web allows all sorts of communications which don't really deserve to be tagged as "media", social or otherwise. They are too like phone calls or rooming-house notice boards for that. They don't aim to reach out beyond the immediate very small number of people they link. I'd say that lots of Facebook communication is of this inward-looking sort.

You may say that Twitter blows this argument out of the water (lake or not). But I think it reinforces it. Yes, Twitter is a super-SMS, and thus a bit like phoning. But its point is that it offers conversations which are designed to be overheard. It takes SMS messages and makes them public. That's super, but it is also too like the "old" business of blogging to be quite as intimately peer-based or as distinctively sociable (its viral nature is not personal at all) as it might perhaps like to appear.

My point is that very often "social" media look very like narrow-casting or broadcasting (just like old-style blogs or websites or newspapers or TV or radio). But it also very often looks a super-phone call or private message board.

In these cases, and in practice, the wonders of interactivity and reflexivity offered by social media don't really add up to all that much. And they are not very social either.

## Truthfulness, wisdom and seriousness

Call me old-fashioned, but I think if something is to be called social, it ought to be good for society as well as just involve relationships between people.

I'm not a Luddite. However that has not stopped social media commentators such as Danny Brown accusing me[4] of, "*discounting one of the most valuable tools in business branding and promotion today.*" But while he gets me wrong, I do love society becoming better educated and more discriminating. I don't think the web is undoing that general trend. But I do think that we should think of "social media" as a technology with power for good or ill and that we need to keep on its case.

As Andrew Keen points out in *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture*,[5] don't underestimate the importance and value of professionalism.

Twitter might seem to contradict Keen's pessimism by demonstrating that quality can thrive on so-called social media platforms.

But hang on. Twitter encourages mass followings and debate, gathered as followers and following around brands (and here brands can be personal as well as corporate), and interestingly so when it aggregates searchable content in the stream. I don't dispute Twitter's power. But at its most powerful it remains very like building old-style fan-bases. It does nothing to validate the merit of the enthusiasms it can generate.

Clay Shirky seemed not to spot this when he asserted *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*[6] on the real-time web. Though he seems to be weakening as the reality of "everybody" dawns on him. Following a deluge of unmanageable content on the real-time web, much of which is irrelevant and nonsense, he's become a fan of Greylisting[7], which – if used to its potential – excludes nearly everybody who does not matter much or at all (most of us).

So he has started advocating in a positive way the need for filtering the stream. Clay and Keen agree about this, but Keen thinks it should be done by humans not machines. Keen promotes the example of how Middle-Eastern news network Al Jazeera, curates tweets, and present an edited and logical flow to their viewers and readers. It seems that the disintermediated world needs mediating after all. And, as I bobbed up and down in my rowing boat on Zurich lake, it made me remember the wise words of Walter Lippmann describing what function the media (as in mass and professional) serves:

> *I argue that representative government, either in what is ordinarily called politics, or in industry, cannot be worked successfully, no matter what the basis of election, unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible*

4 http://dannybrown.me/2009/01/11/conversation-is-good/
5 http://www.amazon.com/Cult-Amateur-Internet-Killing-Culture/dp/0385520808
6 http://www.amazon.com/Here-Comes-Everybody-Organizing-Organizations/dp/1594201536
7 http://www.greylisting.org/

> *to those who make the decisions. I attempt, therefore to argue that the serious acceptance of the principle that personal representation must be supplemented by representation of the unseen facts would alone permit a satisfactory decentralization, and allow us to escape the intolerable and unworkable fiction that each of us must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs. It is argued [by Lippmann] that the problem of the press is confused because the critics and the apologists expect the press to realize this fiction, expect it to make up for all that was not foreseen in the theory of democracy, and that the readers expect this miracle to be performed at not cost or trouble to themselves.*
>
> *[Public Opinion PN Publishing 2007, first edition 1921]*

So, contrary to the likes of Clay Shirky, the power of mediated thought and making sense of the world does not lie in the crowd: also see Jeff Jarvis's *What would Google do?* [8]where he gets over-excited by the always understood "insight" that marketing is based on building relationships and that networks matter.

Jarvis's mistake is to advise companies that they've lost control so go with the flow, partly by ditching their PR, by relating to their customers in an unmediated fashion. It misses the point that companies never really had control [remember New Coke[9]?] over much; it is just that the internet makes that fact more transparent. Hence, I say that mediation is needed more than ever – to keep what control one has over messages, narratives and brands – when everybody can publish their wares and views on line.

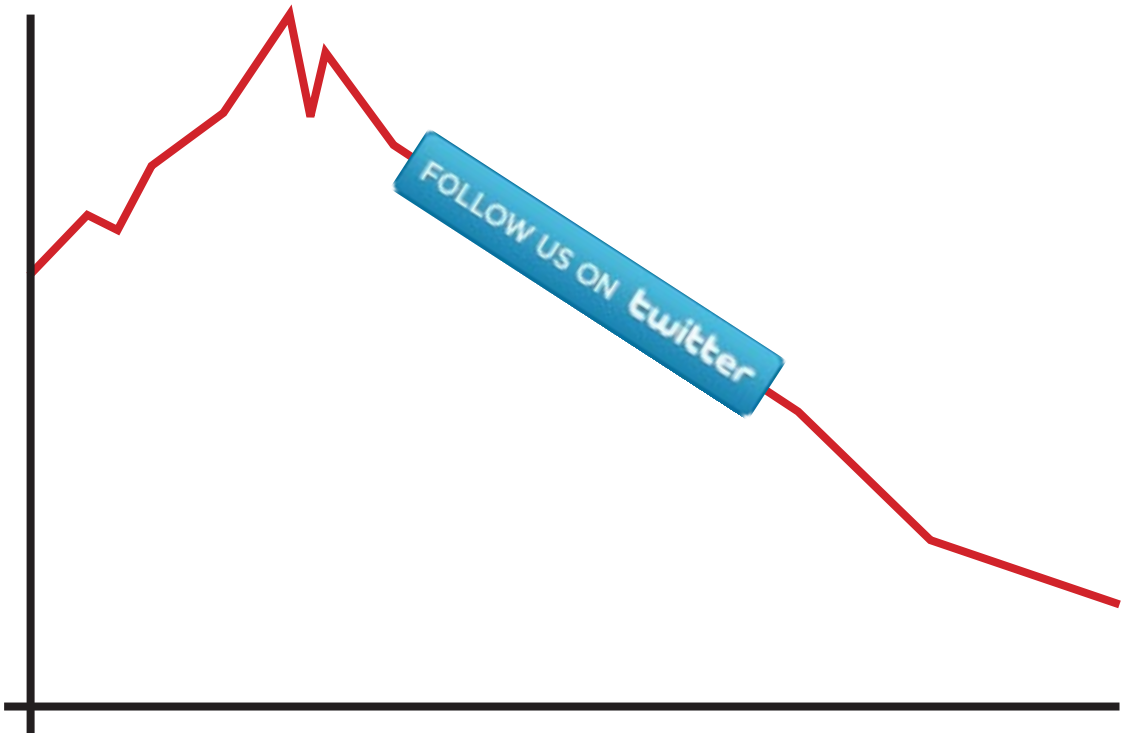
Organizational structures are not dead but more vital than ever. And so is PR.

When it comes to the future of the media, I increasingly favour Charlie Beckett's analysis in *Supermedia: Saving Journalism So It Can Save the World*[10] that media institutions are being transformed towards creating social networks of news. In his view, the mass in media lives and like all living organisms it adapts. It is my view that is why social media as a meaningful term is doomed.

I think what is happening is this: social media will go its merry way, not really deserving the term. The intermediated media will continue to live with it and even deploy it to its own ends. The sensible public will continue to seek quality-assured material and know that mass-acclaim doesn't guarantee it. The mass media will stay as it is: a series of niches.

So, I was dismayed to hear reports quoting Richard Edelman saying[11] recently that the mass is dead and the future is public engagement. If that is so public relations is dead as Jarvis says[12], because the word public relates to the people as a whole. Hang on a moment, says I, let's have a reality check all round.

8 http://www.buzzmachine.com/2008/12/22/what-would-google-do/
9 http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7209828/
10 http://www.amazon.co.uk/Supermedia-Saving-Journalism-Save-World/dp/1405179236/ref=sr_1_1/277-3160142-9024624?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1248433704&sr=1-1
11 http://www.hyperorg.com/blogger/2009/06/10/newmedia-richard-edelman/
12 http://www.edelman.com/speak_up/blog/archives/2009/02/we_will_prove_y.html




# Part II: How organisations can survive the Tweet-sphere

Manchester United and Manchester City have advised their players against using social media accounts. It would seem the players have accepted the advice[13]. The WSJ has taken a similar stance on SM[14]. There are serious issues here to explore.

In the past footballers, like most employees, were not allowed to issue press releases, but Twitter and Facebook can easily amount to doing just that. Their bosses are nervous, and rightly so. Footballers are, after all, mostly only of interest because of their association with the game and a particular club. So every public utterance they make and the way they behave becomes of concern to the football companies.

The same goes for the likes of Kate Moss, Tiger Woods as representatives of their sponsors - just as it does for Jonathan Ross and John Humphrys as voices of their employer, the BBC. (With Ross the thing is complicated by his being not merely a freelance, but also a corporate sub-contractor.)

However, there's distinction between Tweeting as an individual and Tweeting as someone who is clearly identified with an entity. The question is maybe this: should entities allow their members to Tweet about the entity but not about the wider world. Or is it, weirdly, vice versa?

13 http://www.prweek.com/uk/News/MostRead/979216/Manchester-United-Manchester-City-deny-social-media-ban-players/
14 http://mashable.com/2009/05/14/wsj-social-media-policy/

Well, one wonders whether the wannabe editor of The Independent Rod Liddle now regrets[15] writing on Millwall Online[16] fan site that it was:

> *"Fcking outrageous that you can't smoke in Auschwitz. I had to sneak round the back of the gas chambers for a crafty snout. Also, I wasn't convinced by the newish Auschwitz Burger Bar and Grill."*

I'm sure that Amanda Knox wishes she'd never been described as Foxy Knoxy on a social media site, and then gone on to build on that reputation, if only for fun.

Perhaps that explains why one of the fastest-growing social media services is suicidemachine.org[17], which allows you to watch as your online history and friendships are shredded.

The reality is dawning, I believe, that the web is not a place to abandon inhibition. It is a place that should be engaged with confidence, but with the knowledge that everything is public, transparent and potentially damaging. Indeed, the new media have not overthrown (actually they have reinforced) old wisdom about reserve and caution.

Firms need to be able to say that they have a right to expect loyalty, up to a point. Individuals have a right to assert that they have a right to "voice", up to a point. How can we get too cross when we find even footballers want to be articulate?

Well, one moderating influence might be for organisations to caution their staff that they'll have to live with what they say: Tweets are horribly permanent. Best to be sensible, then.

Frankly, I suspect that organisations and their PRs will approach these issues very variously.

The best hope may be not to control what your people say so much as to get them to make it clear when they are speaking as individuals and when as representatives of the corporation. Indeed, an organisation should at least insist that their employees make it clear when they are not being "official".

That's one reason why, in contrast to the likes of Neville Hobson[18], I argue that corporate utterance is collegiate, not personal. If anyone wants the corporate view, they'll need to log-in and get the official line or stick in the SM world but listen to people licensed and badged as corporate. The individual can say "I", but only the PR or the manager can say "we".

15 http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/greenslade/2010/jan/18/rod-liddle-theindependent
16 http://www.millwall.vitalfootball.co.uk/forum/forums/forum-view.asp?fid=5
17 http://www.suicidemachine.org/
18 http://paulseaman.eu/2009/07/corporate-blogging-now-its-personal/

It's easy – perhaps too easy – for some organisations to claim security is a problem. For instance, the US Marine Corps has banned all social media usage on its networks for security reasons[19], while allowing soldiers to continue to use them at home. I can't judge the merit of the decision of the brass, but I recognise that firms are often paranoid about criticism and may attempt to silence their employees under a cloak of commercial confidentiality. The tension here is natural and sometimes healthy, as it was with Pfizer's whistle-blowing saga[20].

An assessment of risk should determine the degree to which individuals are left free to exercise their judgment when it comes to using social media, or whether they will be restrained by bans on this or that topic or using this or that channel.

The case for corporate censorship is particularly strong in instances in which the distinction between "we" and "I" is difficult to separate in the public mind, and when the "I" helps calibrate the brand's value. But censorship, whether corporate or self, will often make sense.

19 http://www.cio.de/news/cio_worldnews/894098/
20 http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2009/sep/02/pfizer-drugs-us-criminal-fine

photo: "U.S. Marine on patrol in the Helmand province of Afghanistan on July 1, 2008"
http://www.defense.gov/photos/newsphoto.aspx?newsphotoid=10427

There are some big general points to make.

1. Companies never really could control what people said about them, and certainly can't now. But for as long as they're being talked about (bigged-up, dissed, or whatever) at least they are the subject of interest, and what they say is of interest. They've just got to be better and better at their end.

2. But to do so they need to be more strategic and approach messages from an evidence-based, grown-up, real-world position to win or retain credibility. They need to tie communication to business goals online and offline, and that requires a strong strategy backed by clear tactics in the face of chaos.

3. So with social media just like old media, if you are not proactive you let someone else define your brand, which was always the case, but only more so with SM etc.

The refractions, perceptions, versions and channels through which the world perceives you are as various as there are people looking and talking about you, and are growing all the time. Whilst you – the entity – can't be static and rock-like, you should at least aim to be considered, serious, adult and stable. That's surely the best way to earn respect and see off – or even gradually respond to – the gales of opinion and gossip swirling around.

The trick for PRs is to anchor our communication in a solid reality and to get the message out to wherever audiences are. (But that shouldn't stop us being adult just because we're speaking with young people on our employer's behalf.)

Everything else will come out in the wash.

Hence, the less we as PRs can control the perceptions of employees or customers on SM, or anywhere else, the more we'd better be good at managing and communicating the underlying realities to a wider audience. As ever, our messages need to be heard by as many of the disinterested or the uninterested as possible. All the people who aren't talking (or even thinking) about our employers or clients matter as much as the tiny number who are making their life bloody.

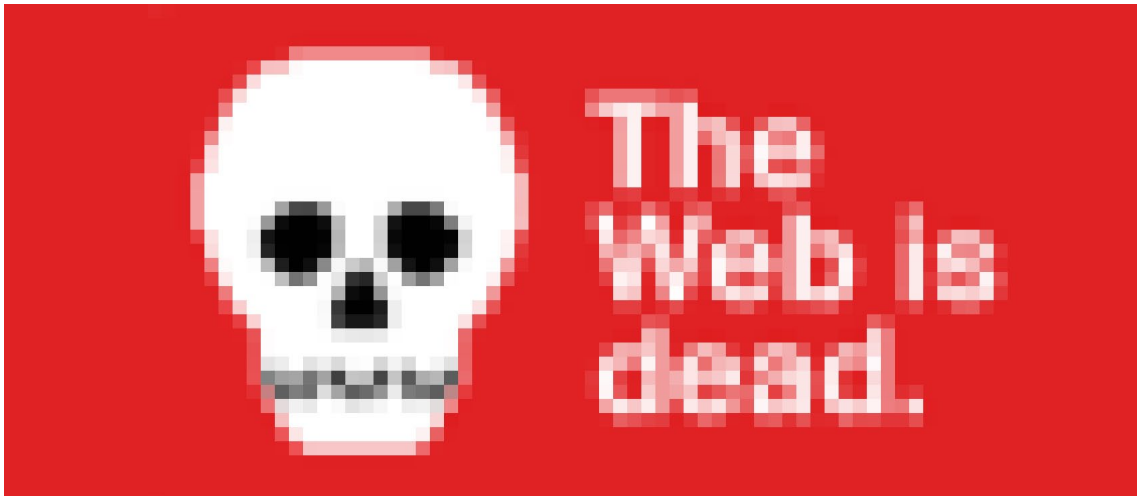



image: adapted, with a hope of non-offence, from http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/08/ff_webrip_debate/

## Part III: Wired's Chris Anderson says Web 2.0 is dead!

Remember when Web 2.0 was all about creating, sharing and collaborating to produce Long Tails that favoured small players at the shallow end of the bitstream? Well, now Chris Anderson says[21] the World Wide Web is dead. Goodbye "Free", hallo value.

Browsing and Web searching are yesterday's stuff, the next big thing is "getting" things from major suppliers on the internet via apps for a fee. In the words of Anderson and Michael Wolff in the latest Wired:

> *"Now it's the Web's turn to face the pressure for profits and the walled gardens that bring them. Openness is a wonderful thing in the nonmonetary economy of peer production. But eventually our tolerance for the delirious chaos of infinite competition finds its limits. Much as we love freedom and choice, we also love things that just work, reliably and seamlessly. And if we have to pay for what we love, well, that increasingly seems OK. Have you looked at your cell phone or cable bill lately?"*

21 http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/08/ff_webrip/all/1

As Anderson and Wolff say, consumers will pay for convenience. How else can we explain the success of iTunes selling otherwise free music for 99 Cents a pop? And therein lies the secret of the internet.

Rather than professional content becoming valueless, it has risen – or is in the process of being resurrected – once more to become the most valued commodity of all in the media, distribution and consumer world:

> *"We are returning to a world that already exists — one in which we chase the transformative effects of music and film instead of our brief (relatively speaking) flirtation with the transformative effects of the Web.*
>
> *"After a long trip, we may be coming home."*

Explaining how this works out in business terms, they say:

> *"...technologists have steered clear of actual media businesses, seeing themselves as renters of systems and third-party facilitators, often deeply wary of any involvement with content. (See, for instance, Google CEO*

> *Eric Schmidt's insistence[22] that his company is not in the content business.) Jobs, on the other hand, built two of the most successful media businesses of the past generation: iTunes, a content distributor, and Pixar, a movie studio. Then, in 2006, with the sale of Pixar to Disney, Jobs becomes the biggest individual shareholder in one of the world's biggest traditional media conglomerates — indeed much of Jobs' personal wealth lies in his traditional media holdings."*

What does this mean for PRs? Well, for starters the old top down model of influence still applies on the internet. PRs are going to have do some rethinking about how they advocate conversations, crowd sourcing and word of mouth PR. Some old-world notions of brands, reputation, quality and service are going to come back in to play (they never really went away). But at the same time, as Anderson and Wolf point out:

> *"…the so-called generative Web where everyone is free to create what they want, continues to thrive, driven by the nonmonetary incentives of expression, attention, reputation, and the like. But the notion of the Web as the ultimate marketplace for digital delivery is now in doubt."*

And, as Anderson and Wolff also note:

> *"According to Compete[23], a Web analytics company, the top 10 Web sites accounted for 31 percent of US pageviews in 2001, 40 percent in 2006, and about 75 percent in 2010. 'Big sucks the traffic out of small,' Milner [Yuri Milner[24]] says. 'In theory you can have a few very successful individuals controlling hundreds of millions of people. You can become big fast, and that favors the domination of strong people.'*
>
> *"Milner sounds more like a traditional media mogul than a Web entrepreneur. But that's exactly the point. If we're moving away from the open Web, it's at least in part because of the rising dominance of businesspeople more inclined to think in the all-or-nothing terms of traditional media than in the come-one-come-all collectivist utopianism of the Web. This is not just natural maturation but in many ways the result of a competing idea — one that rejects the Web's ethic, technology, and business models. The control the Web took from the vertically integrated, top-down media world can, with a little rethinking of the nature and the use of the Internet, be taken back."*

So it's not yet a done deal when it comes to who controls what and how. However the trend is certainly clear. The utopian dream of paradigm shifts is over. Welcome back to familiar reality – even if it is virtual and digital.

22 http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/newswar/interviews/schmidt.html
23 http://www.compete.com/
24 http://dst-global.com/Team

# *Paul Seaman*

Biography

In countries as diverse as Switzerland and Nigeria, I have worked in environments ranging from multinational boardrooms to environmental disaster zones.

I've managed corporate, crisis and product PR. I have dealt with every kind of media. I've counselled at the highest levels and have sorted things out at street level. I live and work near Zurich, Switzerland.

## A little more detail of a campaign life

In the 1970s I campaigned for a socialist Britain (and for various health and transport causes later). In the 1980s I did PR for a union in the finance sector. I suppose that's when I switched sides and started working on PR for the finance industry – just as it went into its late 80s meltdown. But Britain is a robust as well as an argumentative place, and it was surprisingly easy to make my case that mortgages had always been advertised as coming with risk.

Perhaps with a nose for the unpopular, I then went into PR for the nuclear industry – then a pariah. This culminated in 1996 with the life-changing experience of fronting the 10th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster. I worked from the site itself, exploding media myths and lapping up close encounters with nuclear heroes.

For the next ten years I did PR for the IT sector, both product and corporate. So I was getting the media to flog our kit for us. And then getting them to buy into my bosses' M&A strategy. There was much less blood on the carpet but I had fun and learned a lot.

Enthused by my IT experience, I started a trading firm a few years ago. I cashed-in quite profitably. And again, I'd learned a lot.

More recently, I have taken this varied experience to work for a Ukrainian "oligarch" who was flirting (quite well) with CSR and then for a burgeoning indigenous PR house in Nigeria as it helped a huge range of firms produce world-class messages. These were vivid experiences, to say the least, and not to be missed.

What does this tell you? I love the challenge of advocacy, whatever the case, product or place. I love a scrap. I am proud of my portfolio CV. It doesn't begin to tell you how much I love team-work. It may be an age thing, but I've also loved mentoring youngsters.

Here's a conclusion. I have learned to respect people who run things, invent things, make things happen – especially when the chips are down.

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