Editorial: the underdog effect and social media

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The autumn has provided us with a number of illustrations from the political sphere of the changes social media has bought about in the relationship between macro and micro social organisation. In October it was reported that twelve candidates in Canada's general election had been dropped by that parties because of social media blunders (Murphy, J. 2015). One of the issues that has played a significant role in Canadian elections over recent decades is what Esman (1982) described and as the *politics of official bilingualism*, and the relationship between language, culture and virtual community is picked-up in Martin White's *Perspectives* column in this issue*.*

Also of interesting was the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the British Labour Party leadership in September. After a career in relative obscurity, Corbyn's brand of anti-austerity populism evidently chimed with a party reeling from recent electoral defeat in the spring. For many commentators Corbyn's victory reflected a powerful combination of grass roots activism and successful use of social media.

There are echoes in this of other populist political movements of recent years, such as the election of Obama to the Democratic nomination, and of Syriza in Greece. But if anything these examples highlight the contrasts between European and American culture. Obama's unfalteringly optimistic slogan was co-opted and transformed in the Corbyn campaign's self-effacing #JezWeCan. The college football pitch stump speeches became the drafty church halls and community centres of Britain. The drabness of this new politics, it's rejection of spectacle and rhetoric, may itself be a reaction to the pin-sharp presentation that characterised British politics of the nineteen-nineties, but in that rejection it appeals to a post-war tradition redolent of Orwell's political commentary.

While *Business Information Review* is not a political journal, it does take an interest in the development of virtual communities and in the role of technology in both facilitating and mediating community formation. Many of the articles that this journal has published over recent years have traced the role of the web, social media, and digital communications in professional practice, corporate communications, and communities of practice. Political events can sometimes underline the ways in which technology has transformed patterns of communication and social participation.

Social media platforms have removed many of the entry barriers for global communications and global brand marketing. It is as easy to create and manage a twitter feed if you are a micro-organisation as it is if you are a global player. In the social media sphere the political outsider can compete on a par with the frontrunners. What is needed are the skills to craft a message that appeals within the social media sphere. But removing barriers to entry does not necessarily level the existing playing field: it sometimes tilts the field against the established players. The irreverence of Corbyn's campaign, and the optimism of Obama's both exploited an ability to address the audience directly without the baggage of past political action and the carefully crafted branding of the political party.

They are good examples of the "underdog effect" in marketing and brand management (Pahari *et al*, 2011). The underdog effect describes the process of exploiting disadvantage and determination as positive brand values. By situating his campaign as itself a kind of *picking-apart* of normal politics, the Corbyn team created a brand image that was difficult

to effectively attack. What should have been negatives in normal political campaigning were transformed into positive messages. The drabness, the shabbiness, and the politics of the fringes added to his appeal precisely because they contrasted with the kind of politics that has dominated mainstream media in recent years and testified to dogged determination. Change is always a powerful message however it is gaged and the message that the Corbyn team crafted positioned his opponents on the wrong side of that change.

There are interesting lessons here for the ways in which we exploit social media within a corporate context. Large organisations often struggle to use social media effectively. This can in part be because their social media strategy sits within a straitjacket of brand values that can conflict with the irreverent, spontaneous, ephemeral and meme-driven characteristics of the microblog or social networking service. The mistake is thinking of social media as a simple brand-vehicle; ceding control over the message is fundamental to the network structures of social media interactions.

For larger organisations the risks of this often outweigh the opportunities, and minimizing risk at the expense of opportunity inevitably results in a more anodyne and less spontaneous kind of social media interaction. Established organisations have more to lose from an ill-judged tweet or by inadvertently inviting a Twitter-storm. As a consequence their social media campaigns can sometimes appear stilted, corporate, and manipulative. Underdogs by contrast have little to lose. By situating themselves as alternatives to the values of corporate culture, smaller organisations can sometimes exploit the informal register of social media communications more successfully. It is not only small organisation that can manage this trick. Apple and Google have both exploited elements of underdog biographies and anti-corporate ethos in their brand positioning, to varying degrees of incongruity as their global dominance has developed.

Corporations that do use social media effectively often do so by creating a one-to-one conversation with the consumer or customer and attempting to personalise that relationship through individualised brand narratives. The flattening of organisational hierarchies that is implied by trusting individual employees with greater autonomy over social media communications recalls aspects of knowledge management practice, and the integration of effective use of social media's informal register into corporate communications implies the kinds of cultural changes that are a precondition to effective knowledge management.

One of the lessons here for information and knowledge management is one of how we communicate on a personal level – through social media and in other context - and how we think about professional practice in relation to the contexts within which that practice takes place. Social media has intensified the need for organisations to understand and master basic information and communications management techniques to both foster communities but also reach out beyond those communities. It is interesting how naturally the information profession has taken to social media over the past decade, and how many individuals with a background in information and knowledge management have developed careers in social media management roles. Nevertheless thinking about the context of that communication in terms of the overlapping brand values it embodies that it embodies may be a little more unfamiliar.

Victoria Sculfor from TFPL makes this point eloquently in this issue, highlighting the importance of thinking both about your professional practice as a brand with specific values that are independent of, but congruent with the organisational contexts of that practice. The values of professional practice, and of commercial practice, can be applied at every scale and the techniques we use professionally can also be applied in our careers, professional groupings, and continuing professional development. Increasingly information and knowledge professionals are required to move through different scales of social and corporate organisation to apply their expertise at the personal, local, national and international level.

The other lesson is that social media is not itself enough - perhaps counter-intuitively that social media is not by itself a transforming agent. The change offered by social media is not one of kind but of scale. Interpersonal communications always involved networks of social interactions, and has have always had a significant role in forming public opinion, in both the political and commercial spheres. What has changed over twenty years is the density and viscosity of the network; we are each connected to more people and information flows more easily. Yet that network is complex, its output not simply an amplification of input. The evidence of this complexity is the existence of the network effects that characterise digital culture and social media: memes; sudden internet celebrity; twitter storms and social media lynch mobs. These network effects, which ratchet-up the consequences of tiny differences, can transform the most mundane things into global phenomena and back again virtually overnight. The complex network is fickle.

In the information world we should be wary of the kind of biases that can creep into our evaluation of information, perhaps making us overestimate the significance of these network effects themselves. The most obvious kind of mistake is perhaps availability error: the tendency to overestimate the significance of data on that basis of its easy availability. Social media is a readily available resource, and it is tempting to use social media to gage public opinion, or the effectiveness or particular strategies and campaigns. It is tempting to rely on social media for feedback about the effectiveness of our service. But a report published by Demos in September (2015) warns against simplistic social media research techniques, such as assuming the frequency of posts or number of followers directly correlates with the underlying social feeling. The echo-chamber effects of social media are of course widely articulated; social media users are not representative of society as a whole, and this is true at every scale.

There is perhaps a danger of an echo-chamber effect emerging in professional discourse. A danger, perhaps, of information and knowledge professionals re-enforcing each other's' professional prejudices, assumptions and beliefs without ever testing them, leading to a disconnect between professional practice and wider social and commercial needs. It is an irony frequently observed that the information and knowledge profession has sometimes failed to successfully communicate its value in what has become defined as the "information age" and "knowledge economy", but that is a challenge that our community still needs to fully address. We don't pretend that resolving that challenge is easy or obvious. But as the disintermediating influences of technology intensify the information and knowledge profession needs to find a way to define its core values in a way that doesn't leave it on the wrong side of social and cultural change. Simple victories within an established and sympathetic community are perhaps less important than reaching beyond that community to a more sceptical public.

December's Business Information Review

Many of the articles in this issue of Business Information Review echo the differences between macro and micro social organisation in information management. Reflecting the eclectic mix of professional and research based papers that characterise this journal, and the eclectic mix of topics, they cover a lot of ground from knowledge management, to information asset management, professional development to information systems transition. What follows is a brief overview of those contributions.

Knowledge management performance measures

Cheng Sheng Lee and Kuan Yew Wong from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia provide the first article in this issue, focussing on Knowledge Management performance measures in micro-sized, small, and medium sized enterprises. Knowledge Management as a suite of techniques and professional knowledge is often associated with large companies and organisations, who perhaps not only have the resources to develop effective KM strategies but also stand to benefit most from capitalising on tacit knowledge. Using a survey-based research approach targeting a range of commercial organisations in Malaysia, Lee & Wong advocate for the benefits of KM techniques in every size or organisation.

Why is information the elephant asset?

Reynold Leming returns with a provocative reflection on the vital importance of treating information as an asset, and applying asset management techniques to information and knowledge resource. He highlights how asset management has often excluded information from its consideration, and sets out a clear and extremely useful approach for developing an Information Asset Register.

Towards a Rosetta Stone

One of the ongoing problems that face many organisation is how to manage legacy systems, and deal with the migration of information and data. In this issue we have a significant piece of research exploring the viability of a "Rosetta Stone" approach to translating data between systems – a software device for automating aspects of the problem of data migration. Written by Josh Morton, John Beckford and Louise Cooke from Loughborough University the research is focussed around interviews to develop a framework for data interpretation and a prior step to translation.

Developing your career in information

One of the important parts of *Business Information Review* is its occasional discussion of professional practice and professional development issues with a particular focus on commercial information and knowledge management contexts. In this issue, Victoria Sculfor, Senior Consultant at Sue Hill Recruitment, provides helpful advice for career development in information services, and in the changes to the employment marketplace in recent years. Particularly useful perhaps for early career information professionals, this nevertheless is important reading for everyone.

Developing and implementing policy

Our final paper this week comes from Danny Budzak and addresses a continuing concern of many organisations: developing and implementing information policy. Danny's paper clearly contextualises the process of policy formation and the kind of considerations that

underpin effective policy initiatives, drawing on his own professional experience. He advocates ceding responsibility for aspects of information security and compliance to individuals by exploiting clearly formulated and well communicated policy.

Perspective and Initiatives

Martin White returns with his regular *Perspectives* column this issue, focussing particularly on the role of language in creating linguistic communities. Perspective aims to highlight significant research, interesting articles, or other curiosities from Sage's publishing catalogue that are relevant to information practice, but which may be missed by appearing in journals associated with other disciplines. Information and knowledge management is necessarily an interdisciplinary practice that draws on its own body of research, but also research published in business studies, social sciences, technology studies, and a diverse range of other disciplines. In this issue looks as publications that address corporate social change, knowledge sharing in multilingual organisations, the cultural dimensions of implementing focus group studies, virtual teams, and using Skype for research interviewing among other topics.

Allan Foster also returns with his regular *Initiatives* column. Initiatives is a round-up of developments that are of significance for professional practice, including new publications, new products, and new research. It has proven to be an invaluable source of information over recent years, and this issue's column is no exception, with coverage of IT trends and technology development, open data initiatives, big data and analytics, new products from Companies House and Reuters amongst others, and business books, amongst many other interesting and vital topics.

References

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Esman, M. J. (1982), The Politics of Official Bilingualism in Canada, *Political Science Quarterly,* 97 (2): 233 – 253.

Murphy, J (2015), Canadian politicians' social media blunders cost them in election campaign, *The Guardian,* 05th October 2015, available at: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/05/social-media-gaffes-canada-election [accessed: 21st October 2015]

Paharia, N., Keinan, A., Avery J, & Schor, J. B. (2011), The Underdog Effect: the marketing of disadvantage and determination through brand biography, *Journal of Consumer Research,* 37 (5): 775-790.

Corrections:

Two mistakes crept in to the *Perspectives* column of September's *Business Information Review.* Firstly, on the third page a sentence was prematurely clipped; the full version should have read:

> "Curators come in three shapes. There are Curation Experts — people whose background and depth of understanding makes their curatorial choices valid. If you're looking for medical advice, you want your video viewing curated by a

doctor, not a patient. There are Editorial Curators, who manage the voice and the collections of the publications and sites they organize. And there are Passion-Driven Curators, they love their particular area of focus and attention and bring that single-minded focus to every piece of content they touch"

Secondly, the references to the Videolink.com article on curation was reproduced incorrectly. The online version of the article has been edited to include both corrections.