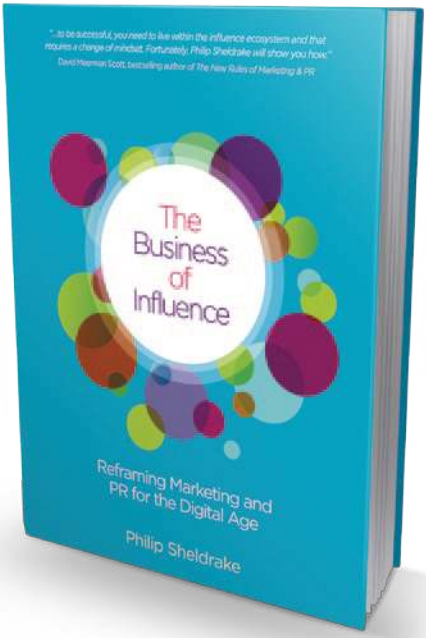
"...to be successful, you need to live within the influence ecosystem and that requires a change of mindset. Fortunately, Philip Sheldrake will show you how."

David Meerman Scott, bestselling author of *The New Rules of Marketing & PR*

The Business of Influence

Reframing Marketing and PR for the Digital Age

Philip Sheldrake



The Business of Influence provides answers to the pressing questions facing everyone in business in this digital age:

- Following the rise of social media, how can we make sense of the noise in our marketplace to help us achieve our objectives and beat our competitors?
- How should the influence processes permeate the organization more systematically and measurably, accruing its practitioners more authority and accountability in the boardroom?
- What big trends must everyone in the business of influence get to grips with?
- Who does this stuff? What traits and skills are demanded of the modern practitioner?

Full of perceptive thought leadership, this book offers a framework to help shape an organization's structural and cultural design. This framework, the Influence Scorecard, builds on the Balanced Scorecard and similar business performance management approaches.

PRAISE FOR THE BUSINESS OF INFLUENCE

"The Business of Influence is a whack on the side of the head for traditional marketers. By focusing on influence, instead of traditional marketing think, it reframes and redefines everything that a modern marketer does. The Business of Influence should be found, dog-eared and jampacked with marks in the margins on every successful CMO's desk."

Katie Delahaye Paine, Founder and CEO, KD Paine & Partners, author Measure What Matters

"Philip Sheldrake shares an important vision of the new communications world order. PR and advertising professionals need to sit up and take note. Influence is the future watchword – and the smart companies are already exploring it and switching models."

Robert Phillips, President & CEO EMEA, Edelman

"The Influence Scorecard shares … principles with the Balanced Scorecard, and applies them to the emergent, cross-disciplinary domain of influence. ...Readers will find helpful the author's syntheses of recent research and writing in the art and science of influence – including insights into social media and web 3.0 developments, chapter summaries, and a glossary. This book will help you understand your contribution to that reality."

From the Foreword by Robert L. Howie, Jr., Managing Director, CMO, Palladium Group, Inc., Director, Kaplan Norton Balanced Scorecard Hall of Fame for Executing Strategy

"Readers should embrace this book and let it challenge their beliefs about the future of marketing and business."

David Alston, CMO, Radian6

"This is a book I hope major corporations will put on the recommended reading list for their senior management."

Barry Leggetter, Executive Director, the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC)

"A highly detailed, authoritative examination on the business of influence, a book of the now… a practical study of material which I am sure will prove to be invaluable insight."

Mark Borkowski, Founder and MD, Borkowski

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FOREWORD

This book will make practitioners in marketing, PR, advertising, communications, and any professional with the word digital in his title uncertain about the future of his discipline. Philip Sheldrake makes the case that the traditional boundaries of these professions must morph into a more holistic expertise, which he calls the influence professional. And while such professionals must retain their creative right-brain talents, they must become far more skilled in left-brained analytical competencies.

The convergence of markets, media, and technology raises the bar further. New business models, the proliferation of social media, the relative power shift from producers to consumers, and the overwhelming amount of structured and unstructured data make managing our businesses more challenging than ever. It seems that we increasingly know more and more about less and less. Change is constant, and accelerating.

What to do? The author proposes a creative, structured approach to the business of influence, which is to say, business itself. He identifies the interactions between stakeholders – businesses, employees, customers, competitors – and maps the primary influence flows among them. He provides a practical framework for seeing, and acting on, the drivers of value creation. He proposes an Influence Scorecard that integrates strategy, objectives, and processes in an actionable influence framework. The scorecard provides structure, focus, and a common language – across organizational boundaries – that drives desired behaviors and outcomes. It puts influence at the center of the strategy.

Strategy is how an organization intends to create value for its stakeholders consistent with its mission. Strategy is a process, and like any process, it must be managed and its efficacy measured. And while strategy is important, it's the execution that counts. In a world where 7 out of 10 organizations fail to execute their strategies, it is not surprising that execution – that is, fulfilling the promise of creating value for stakeholders – is the number one issue that keeps executives up at night. The Kaplan Norton Balanced Scorecard has become the dominant framework successful organizations use to execute their strategies.

The author's Influence Scorecard builds on the Kaplan Norton approach, in which success is based on universal management principles: aligning around the critical few things that matter, identifying cause-and-effect relationships that result in desired outcomes, setting measures and targets to drive behaviors, choosing initiatives that close performance gaps, and managing strategy as a process. The Influence Scorecard shares these principles with the Balanced Scorecard, and applies them to the emergent, cross-disciplinary domain of influence.

Readers will find helpful the author's syntheses of recent research and writing in the art and science of influence – including insights into social media and Web 3.0 developments, chapter summaries, and a glossary. Whether the emerging profession of the Chief Influence Officer leads the nexus of influence as the author suggests, or another C level executive, influence – like strategy itself – is a team sport. Influence is everyone's responsibility. This book will help you understand your contribution to that reality.

Robert L. Howie, Jr.
Managing Director, CMO, Palladium Group, Inc.
Director, Kaplan Norton Balanced Scorecard Hall of Fame
for Executing Strategy
Boston, Massachusetts
February 2011

5

MEASUREMENT, COMPLEXITY AND INFLUENCE-CENTRICITY

I find myself repeating one criticism too frequently: 'measurement because we can, not because we should'. This chapter is about aspiring to measure only what we should.

Measurement

I was never satisfied with common PR measurement approaches, or indeed with many other approaches to marketing measurement. They too often appear vague. Measurement and evaluation come across too frequently as more about post-rationalizing our decisions to pursue particular strategies and campaigns or proving to our clients that they should continue to retain us, than about seeking to secure an objective organizational learning opportunity.

Take the traditional reliance of the PR profession on advertising value equivalence (AVE); a greater waste of time and effort you couldn't hope to find. In all my years in PR I have always refused point blank to 'calculate' AVE or have it worked out by a third party, and once I'd explained my thinking and put other tailor-made metrics in place, it turns out that my refusal never cost me a client.

The Barcelona Principles

The PR measurement and evaluation community came together in Barcelona in June 2010 for the AMEC Second European Summit. AMEC is the

Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication, and it played host to organizations such as the IPR, the PRSA, the ICCO, the CIPR and the PR Global Alliance. I was there, representing the CIPR.

The 7 principles are:

1. Goal setting and measurement are important
2. Media measurement requires quantity and quality
3. AVEs are not the value of public relations
4. Social media can and should be measured
5. Measuring outcomes is preferred to measuring media results (outputs)
6. Organizational results and outcomes should be measured whenever possible
7. Transparency and replicability are paramount to sound measurement.

These principles have been criticized by some as being too simple, too basic, but that, I think, is their value. Absent consensus on the basics, the foundations, and building anything grander becomes a dicey endeavour. With these principles tucked under its belt, AMEC has already moved on to the next stage: its US Agency Research Leaders Group, chaired by Ketchum's David Rockland, is now set on attacking two questions:

- What are the 'validated metrics' to replace AVEs?
- How do you get started in measuring social media, and what are the definitions of relevant metrics?

You will know that I was particularly pleased with principle number 3. Indeed, I see that Paul Holmes of the eponymous Holmes Report was also delighted, making the astute observation that AVEs don't measure the value of advertising either, just its cost.[60] I'd never thought of it like that but it's so true and reminds PRs that advertisers have similar measurement woes. And to repeat the observations made on my blog at the time, even if best practice doesn't turn out to be as simple or even as generic as AVE (and it doesn't), we will at last have something of true value and practical insight to bring to the board table rather than a specious sum based on false assumptions using an unfounded multiplier, only addressing a fraction of the PR domain.

I'm hoping that this book contributes to the AMEC Group's deliberations, as will, I'm sure, Katie Delahaye Paine's new book *Measure What Matters*.[61] Katie is writing her book at the same time as I am writing this one, and we have shared perspectives to see how the books might relate. On that basis alone, I have no doubt that *Measure What Matters* forms a perfect complement to mine, as I'll expand upon later.

Table 5.1 sums up my stance towards tactical measurement across marketing and PR disciplines, and we'll get to the strategic level later. We will now take a look at the influencer-centric and influence-centric approaches referenced in the table.

Table 5.1: Maturity of influence approach

Maturity	Characteristics		
High	Trace the influence (the action) back to source.	Focused on business outcomes, as we should be.	Influence-centric
Medium	It's quality not quantity. Not how many people you interact with, but how and in what context?	Best practice, intelligent and you could say scientific and professional marketing and PR, and associated activities.	
Low	Number of followers, friends, subscribers, circulation. Empirically supported network science.	Akin to column inches and AVE – measurement because you can, not because you should.	Influencer-centric
Pitiful	Obfuscating compound measures of non-contextual trivial variables (see below). No empirical evidence.		

Influencer-centric

Pitiful is a deliberately pejorative description. The pitiful and low levels of maturity described in Table 5.1 are described as influencer-centric as opposed to the influence-centricity of the higher levels. They obsess with identifying influencers on the basis that some publicly available quantities about them betray the influence they actually have on others; i.e. changing what others

think or what others do. Yet, as mentioned earlier, an individual's popularity is not synonymous with the influence he or she may exert on others.

Someone's influence is not . . .

- the number of friends or followers or subscribers
- a sum of Diggs or Reddits or Stumbles or @'s or Retweets
- their website's Google's PageRank or SEOmoz's mozRank
- the number of blogs and columns they write
- the books and papers they author
- the job they have

. . . when these things are considered in isolation or out of context.

And influence is definitely not some quantity invented by a PR firm, analytics provider, or measurement and evaluation company that rolls up a number of indices and measures into some relatively arbitrary compound formula that makes any appreciation of the underlying approach, variables and mathematics completely opaque to the end-user, thereby radically attenuating any little use it may have been but in such a way that it can be nicely branded and sold as 'unique'. (Phew, I'm glad to get that off my chest.)

Since criticizing services such as Klout for doing just this sort of thing in my presentation to Monitoring Social Media Bootcamp 2010, the Klout team has expanded on its approach and ambition. The summary version is[62]:

> The Klout Score is the measurement of your overall online influence. The scores range from 0 to 100 with higher scores representing a wider and stronger sphere of influence. Klout uses over 25 variables to measure True Reach, Amplification Probability, and Network Score. The size of the sphere is calculated by measuring True Reach (engaged followers and friends vs spam bots, dead accounts, etc.). Amplification Probability is the likelihood that messages will generate retweets or spark a conversation. If the user's engaged followers are highly influential, they'll have a high Network Score.

Klout proceeds to provide a fairly diligent description. Unfortunately, it stops short of the mathematics, probably as much for intellectual property

reasons as for the likelihood that most people using the service don't have the hunger to know. Today, marketing and PR professionals aren't expected to be numerate or meticulous in this sort of way, but when we discuss the emergence of the influence professional later, I associate the title with just this kind of aptitude.

A similar service, Social Mention, isn't so forthcoming as it seems to treat potential customers condescendingly. Incredulously, in answer to the question 'How does it work?' in its FAQs, it simply replies: 'It works just fine, thank you for asking.' Perhaps I'm confusing comedy for arrogance, but regardless, which professional could seriously list this service as a tool of his trade?

No standard for influence

Klout is in the business of network science, where, at the time of writing, network science is defined on Wikipedia[63] as 'a new and emerging scientific discipline that examines the interconnections among diverse physical or engineered networks, information networks, biological networks, cognitive and semantic networks, and social networks', and in a publication from the National Research Council[64] as consisting of 'the study of network representations of physical, biological, and social phenomena leading to predictive models of these phenomena.'

This is interesting and probably important work, and for that Klout should be congratulated. Nevertheless, I still have some problems with Klout, although I've tempered my language since March 2010. Klout encourages users to take its analysis of the past performance by an individual on Twitter and Facebook as an indication of future performance. It discloses that it only takes Twitter and Facebook statistics into account, but then claims in its strapline to be 'the Standard for Influence'. What about blogs and forums and product reviews, and just about any other non-Twitter contribution to the social Web? What about face-to-face, telephone, email, SMS and instant messaging? According to the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising's 2010 TouchPoints survey,[65] emailing remains the number one online activity, accounting for 20% of time online; followed by work-related Internet use at 16% and social networking at 11%, of which Twitter will only represent a fraction.

Most critically, services like Klout can only be very lightweight when it comes to monitoring the effects of influence. You've been influenced when you think in a way you wouldn't otherwise have thought, or do something you wouldn't have otherwise done, and yet the only actions Klout can detect are retweets, decisions to follow someone or add them to a list, tweet rate, and so on. This is ideal if one of your organizational objectives is to maximize retweets, etc., but I cannot imagine that 'maximize retweets, etc.' features as a stated objective in your annual report.

Where might Klout-like services stand if individuals' active and daily use of Twitter and Facebook becomes as ubiquitous as organizations' active and daily use of websites? After all, Google's PageRank algorithm is based on network science, focused on hyperlinks on webpages to other webpages, and is renowned for translating these 'votes' for webpages into search results that are relevant more often than not. The problem with this comparison is that the content is the end of the journey for Web search (at least it is today). Does the content answer the question? Does the website have the information or resources or service you were looking for? If Google thought it did yesterday, it's because others thought it did yesterday, and it probably still does today.

But in the world of personal influence – in the domain of influencer-centric measurement and analysis – we can only ever rely on proxies for personal influence that may or may not be a reliable indicator of influence and, equally importantly, we never know in which cases they might be more or less reliable. Unlike influence-centric measurement and evaluation, as we'll discuss shortly, we can never close the loop.

Interestingly, *Business Week* reported in August 2008[66] that Google has 'patent pending technology for ranking the most influential people on social networking sites', but other than a further article at Search Engine People[67] I can find nothing more recent. It might be quite similar to the approach adopted by a company called PostRank,[68] (a name noticeably similar to Google's PageRank) that's attempting to build a measure of online influence that extends beyond Twitter. From its website:

> PostRank provides the best measurement of influence for people who produce content online. PostRank tracks the engagement that each

> article generates – tweets, diggs, and comments for example – in real-time, and delivers comprehensive metrics about the content and the conversations around it. PR professionals and brands can dynamically measure the real impact that targeted influencers are having with the audience.

PostRank is doing some really interesting stuff, but of course it is only assessing a lesser facet of influence, one that's manifest in actions/outputs such as sharing, liking something, giving it the thumbs up or down, stars out of five, and commenting. It cannot pick up influence that's manifest in outcomes or in behavioural change corresponding to an organization's objectives – such as being persuaded to change political party allegiance or changing from buying brand X to brand Y.

And what if the whole premise is wrong, or even just partially wrong? What if John 'the Mow' Doe appears to be the expert on lawnmowers? What if those interested in lawnmowing retweet him and comment on his blog? But what if his views don't actually affect people's choice of Flymo over Lawn-Boy, or Bosch over Honda? What if he's an expert but not influential? We've already highlighted the pitfall of confusing popularity for influence; might we also confuse *expertise* for influence?

The complexity of influence

Stephen Waddington, Managing Director of Speed Communications, gave his thoughts on integrated marketing communications earlier. But I'm now going to quote his daughters, Ellie (11) and Freya (10), who helped their Dad to post to his blog when they and other children of the Speed staff came into the office for the day.[69]

Ellie says: 'What influences me the most on what to buy are usually my friends. My friends recommend things to me but I also look at what they're wearing and what they talk about.' And Freya says: 'I think the thing that makes me buy things is mostly my friends, they buy it then tell me about things, so I want to go and buy them.'

I'm obviously making no assertion that this sample is statistically significant – it just happens to be a nice, pertinent opener for this section.

What if we were hoping that this whole influence thing would be simple, but actually turned out to be pretty complicated? As the answer to this question lies at the heart of the matter here, let's proceed now to review the landscape through the eyes of the practitioner – the marketing agency, market researchers, the user-experience researcher and academe, including a doctor of mechanics.

The practitioner

It appears that Ellie and Freya are not atypical in regarding their friends as the leading influences in their lives. In his presentation at TEDx PennQuarter 2010, David Armano, SVP Edelman Digital, discussed various aspects of social media, including a short observation about influence from his study of a particular social media campaign.[70] Armano credited the role played by some individuals with large influence circles, assessed by variables such as number of social media friends, followers and retweets, but also recognized that 'a lot of people with smaller circles of influence also made a big difference'. He finishes his report to the audience by saying that there were different levels of influence that all needed to work together.

The marketing agency

Armano wasn't presenting any kind of quantitative conclusion, but what if small circles make more of a difference than bigger ones? This possibility seems to be supported in findings by marketing agency Razorfish in its report *Fluent: The Razorfish Social Influence Marketing Report*, 2009.[71]

The Razorfish team studied three categories of influencer:

- *Key influencers* – have an outsized influence in specific fields on brand affinity and purchasing decisions on social platforms; typically have their own blogs, huge Twitter followings and rarely know their audiences personally.
- *Social influencers* – everyday people, typically in your consumer's social network, influencing brand affinity and purchasing decisions through consumer reviews, by updating their own status and Twitter feeds and

commenting on blogs and forums; the consumer may know the social influencers personally.

- *Known peer influencers* – typically family members or part of the consumer's inner circle; closest to both the consumer and the purchasing decision; they influence the purchasing decision most directly and have to live with the results.

In ascertaining the role each of these influencer categories plays as consumers move through the so-called marketing funnel, the report finds:

> Known peer influence tops the list, but social media – including corporate and independent blogs produced by key influencers – and user-generated content (UGC) from social influencers, play an influential role that meets or beats traditional marketing efforts.
>
> When asked how certain sources influence respondents in the awareness, consideration and action phases of making a purchase, respondents consistently attribute strong to heavy influence to word-of-mouth from known peers, both online and off. This bears out across all phases, with influence nearly doubling during the awareness and action phases, as compared to the consideration phase.

Table 5.2 shows the diagram from the report portraying the exact figures.

Market researchers

Invoke Solutions, Harris Interactive and Forrester Research have all studied this issue.

Invoke Solutions

The market research firm Invoke Solutions reached the following conclusions following a 300-person study of active social media users[72]:

> Generally, participants trusted information most when it was generated by friends, or people they know regardless of content form.

Table 5.2: The role of influencers in the marketing funnel, Razorfish, Fluent report, 2009, reproduced with permission

	Awareness Phase	
No influence % (1&2)	Neutral (3)	Heavy influence % (4&5)
5	**Close family and friends**	78
17	Independent bloggers	59
22	Contribute to YouTube, etc.	49
20	Corporate bloggers	46
22	Anonymous peer reviews	34
	Consideration Phase	
No influence % (1&2)	Neutral (3)	Heavy influence % (4&5)
23	Contribute to YouTube, etc.	49
19	Anonymous peer reviews	43
6	**Close family and friends**	42
35	Independent bloggers	23
47	Corporate bloggers	20
	Action Phase	
No influence % (1&2)	Neutral (3)	Heavy influence % (4&5)
5	**Close family and friends**	79
22	Anonymous peer reviews	43
38	Independent bloggers	21
51	Contribute to YouTube, etc.	18
50	Corporate bloggers	17

Known Peer Influencers = Close family and friends
Social Influencers = Contributors to YouTube, Flickr, etc., and anonymous peer reviews
Key Influencers = Independent bloggers and corporate bloggers
Percentages do not add up to 100 because neutral respondents are not reported here

> However Facebook posts by companies were either 'trusted completely' or 'trusted somewhat' by 41% of respondents and company blog posts fared nearly as well at 36%.
>
> The most important factors in trusting a social media content source were the open nature of dialog, and the quality of comments and content.

> Somewhat surprisingly, few participants rated length of participation (15%) and number of fellow fans, followers and participants (12%) as extremely important.

Harris Interactive

The pollster Harris Interactive undertook some research in 2010, *Speak Now or Forever Hold Your Tweets*.[73] On asking those surveyed what influenced their decision 'a great deal' to use or not use a particular company, brand or product:

- 71% said reviews from family members or friends;
- 46% said reviews in newspapers or magazine articles;
- 45% said reviews from friends or people they follow on social networking websites;
- 33% said reviews on blogs and message boards;
- 10% said reviews by celebrities.

Forrester Research

In Forrester Research's April 2010 report *Peer Influence Analysis* by Augie Ray and Josh Bernoff, the executive summary (reproduced with permission) begins:

> For marketers seeking the sort of reach offered by advertising, social media has posed a challenge. Based on our surveys, we now know that people in the US generate more than 500 billion online impressions on each other regarding products and services – more than one-fourth the number of impressions advertisers make. Furthermore, 16% of the online consumers generate 80% of these impressions.

The report authors describe an analysis technique they call Peer Influence Analysis designed to determine how many impressions social applications create, who has the greatest influence (online) and how influence differs between product or service categories. Based on surveying 10,000 consumers about their online social participation, 'influence impressions' are calculated by the number of tweets and updates people make and the number of friends

or followers who may read them. There's commonality here with traditional measures of advertising reach, a comparison drawn in the executive summary, and the influence impressions analysis stops short of looking for engagement as emphasized by such as Katie Delahaye Paine, Econsultancy and PostRank.

The analysis also looks at 'influence posts', defined as ratings, reviews, forum posts, blog posts and comments, and the report points out that it's impossible to measure accurately the number of people who potentially read each influence post.

The report identifies two types of what it calls Mass Influencers. In homage to Malcolm Gladwell's book of 2000, *The Tipping Point*,[74] there are Mass Connectors (11 million people responsible for 80% of impressions) and Mass Mavens (24 million people responsible for 80% of the influence posts). Some people belong to both groups, making a total of 29 million Mass Influencers (all numbers relate to the USA).

The report states:

> You do not and cannot know the identity of the vast majority of your Mass Influencers. . . . You can't engage them individually the way you would a small handful of Social Broadcasters – the influential bloggers or Twitterers you can reach with social PR. Instead, you must reach out to them efficiently, with mass social media marketing techniques.

It appears that Ray and Bernoff are in two minds about *The Tipping Point*. On one hand they pay respect to its lead characters, and on the other hand they conclude that things are nowhere near as polarized or as simple as *The Tipping Point* asserts.

(One last point on this report: Why would any social media marketer be 'seeking the sort of reach offered by advertising', as written in the first sentence of the executive summary? I'd much rather *not* pay to reach those I cannot influence, or those I don't wish to influence me. The last I knew, I wasn't in the market for eyeliner, double-glazing or a skiing holiday, yet someone has paid to 'reach' me on each of these in the last 24 hours. For clarity, this is different to our earlier recognition of the new stakeholder role of 'netizen'. Their role demands that we relate to their use of information technologies once they have declared themselves to be netizens in our domain.)

User experience researcher

Paul Adams is a senior user experience researcher at Google. I'm looking forward to reading his book, *Social Circles*,[75] which at the time of writing is scheduled to hit book shelves July 2011. Paul shares some of his findings ahead of the book's release in a presentation *Bridging the gap between our online and offline social network*,[76] and some quotes from that presentation about his research findings are pertinent to our topic:

> The role of 'influentials' is overestimated.
>
> Understanding how people influence each other is not simple. It's certainly not as simple as many people believe – that there are a small number of very influential people in society, and if you reach and influence them, they will influence hundreds, thousands and even millions of others. This is the basis for 'The Law of the Few' as described in *The Tipping Point*, and many business people subscribe to this theory. After *The Tipping Point* became a bestseller, many researchers studied whether or not it is real. Some studies concluded that there are in fact people in society who have great influence over others. But most research studies concluded that other factors play a much bigger part in how people are influenced.
>
> Whether someone can be influenced is as important as the strength of the influencer.
>
> We're most influenced by the people around us.

Academe

In *Determining Influential Users in Internet Social Networks* in the *Journal of Marketing Research*,[77] August 2010, Drs Trusov, Bodapati and Bucklin find that not all 'friends' are created equal:

> Firms operating SN [social networking] sites observe an 'overt' network of friends, defined according to who added whom as a friend. Most of the links in this network are 'weak' in the sense that the relationships

> do not significantly affect behaviour in the network. It is of interest to identify the 'strong' links (i.e., the links corresponding to friends who affect the user's behaviour).

They also find that:

> relatively few so-called friends are actually significant influencers of a given user's behaviour (22% is the sample mean), while substantial heterogeneity across users also exists. The authors also find that descriptors from user profiles . . . lack the power to determine who, per se, is influential.
>
> . . . friend counts and profile views also fall short of being able to identify influential site members, especially for the most important 5–10% of users.

Dr Duncan Watts isn't beloved of marketers. He's applied his physics degree and doctorate in theoretical and applied mechanics to the study of information contagion. In perhaps the best summary of his work to date – a Fast Company article from February 2008, *Is the Tipping Point Toast?*[78] – he is quoted as saying: 'Influentials don't govern person-to-person communication. We all do.' He isn't beloved apparently because this is interpreted to be bad news for marketers.

The article continues:

> Watts believes this is because a trend's success depends not on the person who starts it, but on how susceptible the society is overall to the trend – not how persuasive the early adopter is, but whether everyone else is easily persuaded.
>
> . . . 'If society is ready to embrace a trend, almost anyone can start one – and if it isn't, then almost no one can', Watts concludes. To succeed with a new product, it's less a matter of finding the perfect hipster to infect and more a matter of gauging the public's mood. Sure, there'll always be a first mover in a trend. But since she generally stumbles into that role by chance, she is, in Watts's terminology, an 'accidental Influential'.

The article capitalizes Influential in deference to Jon Berry's and Ed Keller's 2003 book *The Influentials,*[79] a book with theories *Publishers Weekly* described as 'compelling and exceedingly well researched, and should be a boon to anyone looking to promote the next big thing'. Dr Watts counters the ideas presented by Berry and Keller – and Gladwell:

> No researcher, he points out – including Keller – ever analyses interactions between specific Influentials and the friends they're supposedly influencing; no one observes influence in action. In essence, Keller appeals to common sense – our intuitive sense of how the world works. Watts thinks common sense is misleading.

Innovation-driven complexity

Innovations are empowering each and every individual stakeholder, and each and every employee of organizational stakeholders, to set their news / information / content schedule. It's what they want, when they want it, and how they want it.

Web users have had the ability for several years to customize a homepage, subscribe to RSS feeds, and record media they want to watch later, but for me the advent in 2010 of personalized social news streams[80] marked the beginning of everyone having their own sophisticated customized channel. Such channels are tailored uniquely and automatically from our own subscriptions, our friends' subscriptions and recommendations, and automated 'if you like that, you'll like this' discovery. In my presentation at Internet World 2005, London, I labelled precisely this eventuality myChannel.

Two billion Internet users. Two billion channels.

The ramifications of myChannel for influence professionals include:

- Considerably more fragmentation of the target audience of communications campaigns.
- Less precise timing of delivery.
- Less certainty of how each recipient is receiving the information.
- Increased opportunity to provide niche information.

- Greater opportunity for innovation in inviting and securing interaction.
- The need for new mechanisms for gauging communication success.

Why do we think it's not complex?

Let's take a look at how this reality manifests itself in the day of a PR consultant: one that's living the dream in 1991, and one that's teetering on the edge in 2011. Complexity doesn't feature in 1991; everything is quite manageable, thank you. By 2011, however, things have become quite complicated indeed. A similar comparison could be drawn for an advertising executive, of course.

We're in 1991 and your campaign execution demands a vanilla media relations outreach. You need to contact 20 journalists across your target publications and broadcast media – your tier 1. You might also want to 'spray' the rest with a wire distribution. Effectively then, you have 21 points of focus. A few of the target journalists are freelance and write for two or three key publications, and as you expect a bit of syndication, you have approximately three-dozen media to track.

The campaign results in potential coverage across this media, requiring assessment of sentiment (positive / neutral / negative) and readership. A clippings service sweeps up the tertiary coverage for you, which you will treat as tier 2 and weight accordingly. A share of voice analysis reviews all coverage in your 30-odd tier 1 media, and teases out the mentions of your brand, your product, and those of your nearest competitors.

This is simple stuff. There are no mathematical products here, just some simple high school arithmetic based on averages and spreads.

Now let's go back to the future, to 2011. As we've seen, communication and media technologies proliferate and company-to-customer communication now competes for attention with customer-to-customer communication. Active and passive customer-to-customer and customer-to-company communication is multi-channelled and in the public domain. The format of communication has expanded massively beyond the press release to include blog posts, podcasts, video, Twitter, games, live Web chats, etc.

This means that you now have many different ways and channels to engage with customers and prospects, and they have many ways to engage

with you and each other. You employ continuous, active listening, and you're effectively involved in thousands – possibly millions – of relationships.

Where should I listen and how should I make sense of it, and what demands a response and what should I say and when should I say it, and to whom should I say it and where should I say it, and in which format should I say it? When you multiply these possibilities together it becomes immediately clear that you're trying to deal with massive complexity, at least relative to your colleague from 1991. We have many more permutations and complexity than any human can juggle independently in a meaningful way.

Following our roundup of some of the research into the sources of influence, and this quick 'a day in the life of' comparison, we have to ask why many marketers and PR professionals appear to be so fixated on identifying 'the few' – the individuals who supposedly have the rest of the world in their hands. In trying to explain the differences between the evidence and practice, I find myself thinking about two contributory factors.

The first factor is one that Paul Adams also refers to: an apparent widespread faith in some of the assertions made by Malcolm Gladwell in *The Tipping Point*. It appears to have almost single-handedly influenced marketers' regard for the power of 'the few'; how ironic that one man can exert such influence! Other works, such as *The Influentials*, compounded the consensus.

I believe the other contributory factor is a self-narrowing of focus. While I have nothing but anecdotal evidence for this personally, I get the feeling that some marketing and PR practitioners are quite simply in denial; they don't believe that things could have become quite so complicated. They want to believe in *The Tipping Point* and *The Influentials*. They appear, on the whole, to be far more comfortable approaching a communications campaign in a world nearer to one extreme – in which, for example, a TV superstar espouses her choice of product and everyone else obligingly falls in line (think of Oprah's book club), than to the other extreme, in which an individual is more influenced by the 150 associates nearest to them than by the other six or so billion combined. Think about the movies you've seen, or music you've bought after recommendations from friends. And I chose 150 because that figure is usually referred to as the Dunbar number – the number of relationships each of us can typically maintain, which itself features in *The Tipping Point* of course.

I hope this is accepted as a plain observation, rather than any kind of haughty criticism. The Fast Company article, however, reports a perspective that's a little more charged:

> Joe Pilotta, research VP for a firm called Big Research (and one of Watts's bigger fans), suspects marketers cling to their belief in Influentials partly because they're lazy. 'They love the idea of needing to reach only a small group of people to 'tip' a product,' he says with a laugh. Plus, it strokes their egos.
>
> 'Think about it. You're saying, 'I am in control – I am the biggest influencer, because I am going to influence the influencers!' It's an arrogance that only the corporate world could enjoy'.

Given that the idea of 'the few' has such traction, and obviously examples plainly exist, you will notice I have invested most of my time here providing the counter balance. For my part, it's obvious that there's an Oprah (and Watts would argue that if you could re-run history there would likely be someone like Oprah, just not Oprah). Also, things often appear to come 'out of nowhere'. It's complex. And to clarify that observation, complex systems can sometimes demonstrate behaviours that appear simple and deterministic, and sometimes they appear non-linear, random, chaotic.[81] It's definitely an area worthy of more analysis and potential commercialization, so do get in touch if you'd like to support this work; I even registered the domain name brandcomplexity.com a few years back in anticipation.

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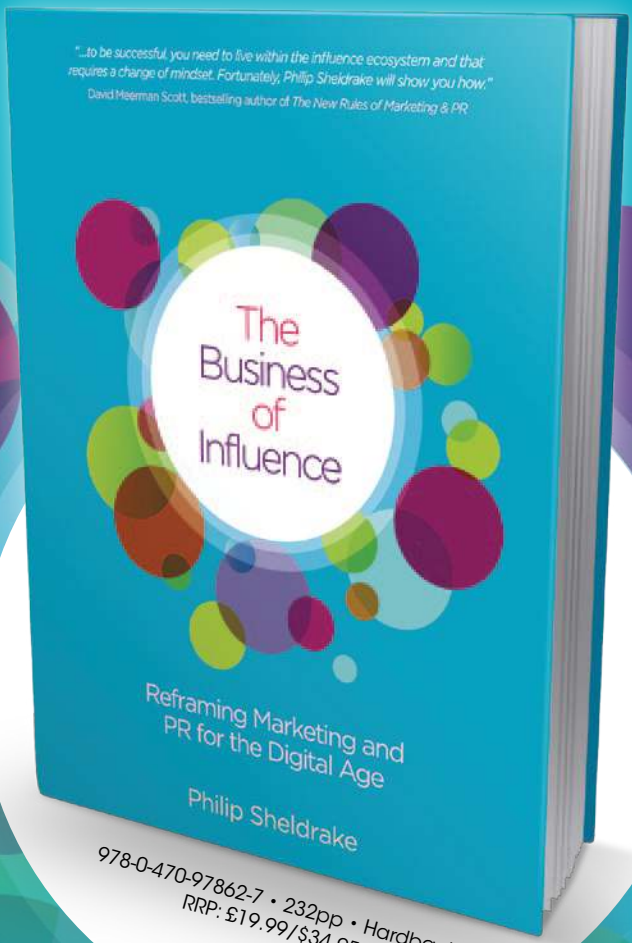

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