Listening and Empathizing: Advocating for New Management Logics in Marketing and Corporate Communications

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Among the managerial logics employed by corporate employees charged with creating media texts and communicating directly with external audiences, the actual communication experience of those audience members is rarely a primary focus. Instead, the "audience" is often discussed as an abstraction, a statistic, a target, a recipient, or even as a nuisance to be avoided, silenced, or otherwise dealt with as efficiently as possible. Soap opera writer Tom Casiello (2011, p. 275) writes that, despite an obsession with focus group results and ratings, "there wasn't a lot of focus on The Audience" as actual human beings in his industry. Across corporate America, companies represent current or potential customers through spreadsheets, impressions, conversions, and other easily intelligible terms. This inclination to favor audiences as statistics rather than people is even more pervasive outside creative industries, where corporate leaders often rise from financial divisions of the business, rather than what might be considered creative or communications roles, and business performance is primarily discussed in numbers rather than words.

Currently, I work for Peppercom Strategic Communications, a firm that advises companies on corporate communications strategy, including public relations. The company subsidizes a portion of my time being spent continuing to do independent academic research, writing, and speaking—as well as adjunct teaching, and I spend the rest of my time writing and speaking to industry audiences and consulting with the firm's current and potential clients on better understanding, listening to, empathizing with, and prioritizing the wants and needs of the audiences with whom they communicate and for whom they create content.

Through that consulting work, I've encountered companies facing managerial issues related to their communication on a regular basis. These companies typically employ earnest people who express an interest not only in helping their company make money but also in helping serve their customers or other constituencies through their communications work. However, as Mark Deuze (2010, p. x) writes, "The problem of contemporary media work, as felt and experienced by its practitioners, is management." In my consulting, employees regularly voice frustration with coordinating external communications efforts across the organization. While they are not always fully aware of it, employees often find such coordination difficult because of the divergent range of logics by which each department is governed.

This essay explores these internal tensions and challenges as companies seek to create new practices for managing external communications in response to the rise in communication on digital platforms, where more forms of corporate communications are becoming mediated and where customers and other external audiences are more frequently using media channels to communicate about companies. In the process, I draw on key debates happening among those who manage corporate media strategy across marketing, corporate communications, and customer service. Specifically, I will focus on my intervention in this conversation: why I see it as necessary and as part of my academic work. I will summarize strategies I advocate in my consulting and how they have been received (or ignored) by management teams, as an effort to demonstrate the potential such approaches afford for affecting change in corporate media policies, as well as the challenges this embedded approach faces.

In the process, I also hope to provide a more nuanced view of companies which are largely comprised of compassionate and dedicated individuals who truly do wish to serve their audiences but who face a variety of impediments—whether practical, infrastructural, or through restrictions caused by pervasive industry logics. My hope is that this exploration underscores a greater need for media studies scholars to understand the environments, processes, and relationships shaping communication and media strategy within companies outside the media industries and the profound effect internal communications processes have on external communication.

For the purposes of this essay, I'm describing "management" as the processes and logics by which an company's communication to external audiences is conceptualized, organized, and implemented across divisions. I contend that interdepartmental communication processes and competing conceptualizations of "the audience" among the various management teams charged with reaching that audience lead to internal tensions that manifest in external communication across media channels.

These challenges are infrastructural, and such questions of interdepartmental communication have long been the domain of organizational communication scholars and consultants. However, as an increasing degree of communication between companies and external audiences take place online, these interactions are themselves becoming media texts. Thus, the processes for coordinating such communications should be examined through the lens of media management. Existing research on management processes governing "creative work" have typically focused on what are considered the "creative industries" (i.e. Hesmondhalgh 2007, Deuze 2009). As marketing, advertising, public relations, and other forms of corporate communications have been considered by media scholars, studies have often considered employees like myself who work for agencies, which themselves are wholly media companies. Instead, this reflective essay looks at those creating mediated communications texts within companies that are primarily not in the media sector. As such, concerns about how business logics and managerial processes constrain creative labor might be seen as especially restrictive on these professionals in organizations where, often, media and communications are not a priority among top corporate decision-makers.

Understanding Internal Managerial Tensions

Staying true to the focus I advocate in my consulting, the best place to begin examining internal managerial issues is from the customer's perspective, where interacting with a company is often a fractured communication experience. For example, consider the typical experience a person has with their cable provider. As a new customer, I set up service by talking to the local office staff. The technician who comes to my house to establish that service is a subcontractor who does not communicate directly with that local office. After my service is established, my primary interaction with the company is through paying my bill on the website once a month. If I have a service issue, the company's Twitter account is immediately responsive if I complain about that issue publicly online. Yet, a call to the company's 1-800 number results in an automated menu, a 15-minute hold time, and an agent talking off a script who tries to quickly address my issue. Meanwhile, the company mails, emails, and advertises to me on a weekly basis, and someone from the cable operator even calls every few weeks to tell me about a great deal on its "triple play service."

This range of communication experiences—across multiple media formats—illustrates why asking customers to describe their relationships with a company is a complicated query. Even if every employee involved in the scenario described above were fully motivated to serve the customer, that customer's experience would still be disjointed at best.

Businesses have identified a range of legal and tax benefits from having the corporation described as an individual in the U.S., yet—if the cable company depicted above is to be understood as a single "person"—its identity is one suffering from the type of dissociative identity disorder one might expect from a soap opera character. The company is immediately responsive on one channel and difficult to connect with on another, garrulous in one format and terse in another. And customers are treated differently across channels or may even get different answers to the same question, depending on where the question is posed.

This picture of fractured corporate communication from the customer's perspective is due to splintered corporate managerial practices governing external communications. In the cable company example, customer "on-boarding" is managed locally; service set-up is outsourced; the website is designed by the ".com" team; online complaints are handled by public relations; the call center is managed by customer care; promotional materials come from marketing; and calls are driven by sales. The employees of these various divisions often work in separate locations and report in to different company leaders. In many organizations, these teams' managers do not coordinate frequently. And these various communication functions are not viewed equally, most often with those more directly responsible for creating revenue receiving higher priority from company leadership.

An even more fundamental challenge is that each division maintains its own understanding of the customer, operates by a different managerial logic, and measures success on its own terms. In the cable company scenario, the sales team is measured by "conversion," charging its employees to, as they say in the 1992 real estate film *Glengarry Glen Ross*, "always be closing." The marketing team is tasked to "engage" current and potential customers and are often evaluated through measures of stickiness: how many current or potential customers view an ad or click a link, and how much time do those people spend with the company's content? And call center operators are charged with getting from one call to the next as efficiently as possible, as customer service is often considered a "cost center" within the company—meaning any resources spent on it are considered only as a subtraction from the company's profits (Yellin 2009, p. 13).

Corporate infrastructure—and its related exponentially complex organizational charts—are built for a reason: to provide order and ensure a company weathers changes in the economy, the sector, workforce turnover, and other external forces. But that structure can make it harder for organizations to be flexible in incorporating new processes or philosophies—particularly for those managing creative work such as the creation of media texts and the handling of communications and services. Deuze (2009, p. 144) writes of the "gradual bureaucratization of workspaces in media organizations"—a trend that is likely to be even more pronounced within the divisions who handle creative work within companies outside the media industries.

Staying true to Cartesian philosophy, employees in organizations begin to accept internal "truths" over time without ever returning to question them—meaning that tradition eventually begins to dictate how people organize, even if the world outside has changed. Amanda D. Lotz (2008) argues that the only way these outmoded "truths" are eventually uncovered is through pressure from disruptive external force. For corporate communications in all its forms, the many new ways customers and other external audiences have found to communicate about companies and to access and directly compare media texts from and about the company provides that disruption (Ford 2010a). And, in response, companies are rapidly prioritizing finding new structures for internal communication to better coordinate the production of external media content.

However, the competing internal logics described earlier are not the only barriers companies face in a quest for integration. Battles for budgets and higher positions in the corporate hierarchy also greatly shape the tone of internal collaboration. Within companies, there can be much talk about who "has a seat at the table" with the CEO and other members of the so-called "C-Suite." Again, this concern is particularly pronounced among those doing largely creative labor outside the media industries, where some or all forms of media development and communications are seen as necessary evils that take away from profit margins rather than as vital business functions.

Just within marketing and communications, such tensions are frequent. Conflicts rise as new processes surrounding digital communication have blurred the lines between what the "digital team," the public relations/corporate communications division, and marketing and advertising functions within a company are supposed to do (as well as the budgets they afford to agencies such as the one for which I work). Traditionally, the company sets a budget for how much will be spent on advertising, public relations, direct marketing, and other forms of marketing, and then each team develops a plan based on that budget. Thus, who "owns" digital communications becomes a sensitive question. For instance, Ken Payne (2008, p. 76) finds through a survey of members of the Public Relations Society of America that "concern is growing within the industry that failure to assume a leadership role in the adoption and use of Web 2.0 technologies by public relations professionals will ultimately result in [. . .] encroachment from other disciplines such as marketing and advertising." As we write in *Spreadable Media*

(Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013), "Such questions are more than just semantics. [. . .] Who "owns" the customer relationship within a company is ultimately a question of who remains relevant and who keeps their job."

Addressing a corporate workshop we facilitated together, Ed Moed (2010) writes:

> [C]orporate politics and turf battles are almost always a reality of day-to-day business. [. . .] One run-of-the-mill infrastructure issue we often see involves functional departments competing over budget sizes and resource allocations. And, within departments, managers often jockey for control over specific projects/campaigns or groups of employees.

In my consulting work, I have had clients agree with an idea but never share it across the organization for fear it would be a perceived encroachment of a relationship with some other external partner ("Great idea, but that's our ad firm's territory."), or for fear that the idea, if implemented, would end up owned by a different department and take budget away from their team. Such an environment is predicated on a mentality where corporate divisions are viewed simultaneously as collaborators and competitors, a dynamic that—as Moed suggests—is an everyday part of the corporate workplace and an omnipresent element in managerial strategies developed among those who fall under the broad marketing/communication umbrella.

Moving outside marketing and into a company's broader organization, these dynamics and struggles for power and budget become even more complex. I regularly lead workshops on social media/digital communication for organizations. At these events, I encourage all those charged in some way with managing external communications to join. Often, these employees from human resources, recruiting, information technology, customer service, legal counsel, governmental relations, investor relations, sales, research, and other corporate divisions Aare as much strangers to one another as they are to me. As a result, we spend the first part of the day helping people understand who everyone is and what it is they do.

The ability to get various functions within the company to have a conversation based on common language is daunting. Not only are these various divisions measured and understood differently within the company, but each employee's perspective is also guided by the professional culture of their field (Mierzejewska 2010, p. 18). Frequently, the training, focus, and philosophy of one field conflicts, implicitly or explicitly, with the concerns and interests of fellow employees in other departments.

Because of these cultural differences, employees at these workshops sometimes only know one another through prior internal conflicts. For instance, at several gatherings, marketing expressed that legal counsel only serves as a barrier to their ideas and that executives bow to the concerns of lawyers rather than listen to the marketing team's insights about why more open and responsive communication is now essential. Other times, legal counsel expressed frustration that, rather than be consulted at the point of ideation, they were called in as a project neared completion. The result, they said, were projects they had to oppose because certain elements of its execution raised legal red flags that could have been easily avoided. Overt animosity arose at one meeting between the marketing team who conceives of new ideas and the digital team who implements them. The marketing team complained that digital designers were slow to respond, hard to reach, and unresponsive to deadlines. The digital team complained that marketing conceived of ideas without consulting them and then built detailed plans that were overly complicated to act on because they did no reflect the particulars of the company's digital platforms.

I've seen companies launch multiple almost identical Twitter accounts or Facebook pages because each function within the company want to own their own version, with no one coordinating or even communicating internally about their efforts. I've heard of sales forces that actively ridicule and sell against their company's marketing when talking to potential customers but who never express their objections to the marketing team. I've encountered digital communications teams who attempt to help customers complaining online without access to the detailed files their customer service departments keep on those customers' issues. I've seen tensions arise during meetings when the marketing department heard what call center employees were saying and became angry that it did not align with messaging on the website and in advertising. And I've heard of frustration from customer service professionals who know firsthand what customers want and need but who never have a chance to share that knowledge with those who design the company's mass media messages.

Production studies and media industries management research have given us a more nuanced understanding of how work is organized in the creative industries. Conversely, these observations point toward the many managerial fissures which shape media and message development within companies outside the media sector, where communication is typically less understood and less of a priority and where those tasked with creative labor may be especially constrained by managerial processes. Understanding how these pressures shape the work of professional communicators throughout a company's organizational chart is vital for understanding how those organizations relate to and communicate with external audiences.

The Need for Intervention

In *Technologies of Freedom*, Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983) presciently argues that the development of the Internet would challenge public media policy because the new communication medium is simultaneously printing press, broadcast platform, and common carrier—three distinct modes of communication that have their own regulatory histories. Similar to how the challenges he posed continues to vex Internet regulation today, corporate policy for managing communications in distinct media formats has broken down because online communication blurs those formats. Is a blog a place for broadcasting material, publishing opinion, or facilitating dialogue? The answer, of course, is all three.

From a corporate perspective, whereas communications used to be aimed at one particular audience (current customers, potential customers, current employees, potential employees, former employees, investors, local communities, government regulators, etc.), that content is likely to be seen by multiple groups when distributed through online channels. And, from the perspective of a customer or other external audience, online media provide the means to access content directly from a company when we want it, rather than relying on an advertisement or news story finding us. Further, we can now directly compare online content to additional communication from the company and content from other primary sources.

However, as Poole argued from a regulatory perspective, it is not new technologies themselves that determine industry practice but rather the corporate policies and managerial processes developed to govern corporate communication in a "digital age." Here, I take the perspective that—just as public intellectuals have focused decades of work on advocating for regulatory paths forward which lead to a more open communication environment—it is important for some media scholars to take up an interventionist mantle to influence the policies being formed in corporate campuses and not just on Capitol Hill. After all, in a capitalist society which often relies on self-governing market forces, many aspects of the balance of power and information between companies and their external audiences are determined through the everyday implicit and explicit policies within these organizations (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013).

My primary academic affiliation is with a program called Comparative Media Studies (CMS) at MIT. William Uricchio and Henry Jenkins, co-directors of that program when I was a Master's candidate, developed this program in the humanities at an institution that prioritizes applied research with a range of public and private partners. In that spirit, CMS sought to create an “applied humanities” approach. The program’s research projects partner with foundations, governments, and other institutions on subjects from “new media literacies” and “civic media” to the educational potentials of gaming and new digital humanities archival processes.

During my time at MIT, I helped conceptualize, launch, research for, and later manage a project called the Convergence Culture Consortium (C3). Created around the launch of Henry Jenkins’ 2006 book *Convergence Culture*, C3 was funded by companies interested in how audiences were relating to and communicating around media content in a digital age. The project focused on finding ways for humanities academics and graduate students researching these issues to put that thinking into conversation with the companies shaping media practice, primarily through white papers, newsletters, retreats, conferences, and a research blog.

This “applied humanities” approach, especially when it comes to intervention within the industry, has been met with its share of cynicism. cryptoxin (2008), an active writer on fannish culture, suggests C3 is “a disturbing sign of the increasingly corporatized academy” and writes of his wariness about the project’s corporate funding and “alienating” use of “corporate-speak” in an attempt to converse with corporations. Researcher Juan Gonzales calls C3 “the exact opposite” of what academics should hope to achieve (Gonzales 2006). And an “MIT professor familiar with the consortium, who asked not to be named,” said of C3 in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* profile on Jenkins, “One of the dangers of this is that the money can drive the program” (Young 2007).

Despite such criticism, however, the successes of our work have convinced me that collaborative industry/academic approaches aimed to intervene within industry discourse rather than to criticize from a removed distance is a key approach to media reform. Through C3's direct interaction with corporate partners and the conferences the project organized which industry audiences attended, we have seen concepts which advocate for companies to create more equitable relations with their audiences take root in corporate discourse.

Jenkins (2006, pp. 247-248) argues that media reform must be a multi-subject and multi-pronged battle. Taking up that charge, my own career has been fueled by a conviction that distanced critical approaches constitute a crucial element of intervening in media but not the whole of media studies approaches to such reform. Since leaving my full-time position at MIT, I have worked directly within the corporate communications space. While I suspect many academics might not go so far as to be embedded in an industry position to make such interventions (and that some scholars would discount my even using the mantle of "academic" to describe my work), it's crucial to see the value of not only critically examining media management logics as a system but in also finding ways to intervene within that system, with the goal of affecting industry policy. I see this essay as a chance to reflect on that work and how these attempts at intervention have (and have not) been taken up within the managerial practices of companies with which I've worked.

Advocating Managing Communications from the Audience's Perspective

I have posed the question in industry publications as to whether internal corporate discussions about social media might become a “Trojan horse” for bringing about more fundamental change in internal communications and for better connecting disparate parts of the company that have not traditionally spoken the same language (Ford 2010c). But what goals guide such integration?

As a consultant, my interest is in pushing companies to create more participatory, transparent, and equitable approaches to communicating to customers and other audiences. I see my role as advocating on behalf of external audiences and, ultimately, to convince all employees managing external communication to view their role in a similar fashion. However, I know that a company’s primary motivation remains efficiency and efficacy: to find more efficient ways to communicate with audiences for the purpose of selling a company’s products and services. In a market economy, that goal is a given, and it is the marker by which employees will always in some way be measured.

Thus, my point of intervention has been to advocate that companies who manage their external communication strategies through more interpersonal (as opposed to distanced and corporate) logics will not just better address their audiences’ wants and needs but find greater long-term business success as well. Occasionally, and especially in the short-term, such audience-centered approaches may run directly counter to a company’s business interests. But those organizations which consistently care about external audiences (including critics who are not part of their potential customer base) beyond profit margins build better reputations, stave off communication crises, and stay more attuned to the wants and needs of the customers and communities who keep them in business. My goal is to, in whatever incremental ways I can, shift corporate economic logics slightly toward social logics, at least as it affects how companies communicate with their audiences (the area in which I can reasonably hope to have some small degree of influence.)

These interpersonal or "human" approaches to managing corporate communication focus on putting the audience at the center of a company's way of thinking (Ford 2012a). Here, let me briefly profile two approaches that have been at the center of my efforts: prioritizing corporate "listening" and pushing all those in charge of managing communications and media content to empathize with their external audiences.

Listening

Word-of-mouth is the oldest and most influential form of marketing, and most businesses seem aware that customer testimonials—or rants—have substantial impact on a company's reputation. Today, however, online platforms now maintain a textual trail of the conversations we all have online. That, in turn, transforms conversations into publications. In response, companies have developed a variety of monitoring tools to make sense of what people are saying online about them and their brands. Often, these tools seek to produce quantifiable results of customer conversations, measuring "share of voice" (how much a company is being discussed online vis-à-vis its competitors), "sentiment" (whether discussions are positive, negative, or neutral), and shifts in the volume of discussion over time. Such quantified "surveillance" techniques echoes the criticisms of Andrejevic (2007), who redefines online spaces of presumed open communication online as digital enclosures where people are closely monitored and analyzed.

But, even within the profit-driven logics of corporate America, these efforts to simplify and quantify audiences are limiting. Hesmondhalgh (2007, pp. 196-197) writes that, in the media industries, market research's reliance on quantitative data and focus groups have led to management processes which primarily seek to mitigate risk. The restrictive impact of these processes extends beyond media companies, however, repressing both the creative energies of employees and qualitative processes which seek to understand and connect with external audiences. In industry discourse, I have argued that online quantitative research tools act as "hearing aids," amplifying and recording that a noise has been made but giving a company little knowledge beyond recording the sound (Ford 2010b).

Conversely, my advocacy for "listening" strategies refers to processes that move beyond these acts of "hearing" in three fundamental ways:

First, these processes focus on the context of communication rather than just the mention of a company or its products. While quantitative monitoring can provide an overall snapshot at a high level, it does little to provide insight into what customers actually want, need, or think. Instead, listening requires focusing in detail on what audiences are actually saying, or at least a large sample of what audiences say. For instance, since the mid-1990s, Robert V. Kozinets (2009) has advocated for a research methodology he labels "netnography": "a form of ethnographic research adapted to include the Internet's influence on contemporary social worlds" (2009, p. 1). In short, Kozinets and others have worked to develop systems to help academic and marketing industry researchers investigate online communication within its original context. Kozinets' work advocates for more widespread adoption of the type of qualitative online community research techniques one might expect from fan studies (an area that Kozinets has explored on many occasions, from media fandom [i.e. Kozinets 1997] to "brand fandom" [i.e. Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003]).

Second, listening processes focus on companies paying attention to what external audiences are talking about beyond just their brands/products. Many companies that do invest in paying attention to what their audiences are saying unfortunately only focus on "reactive" monitoring, ignoring what their audiences are saying unless it is specifically bout the company. (That's why corporations, were they actually people, would too often make for horrible cocktail party companions.) Instead, listening processes focus on following what external audiences are discussing in relation to the larger issues, needs, and wants which the company's products and services are created to address—focusing on the audience's agenda and concerns rather than just on the company's. Further, Grant McCracken (2009) has strongly advocated that companies have to pay attention what's happening outside their industry—to listen to what's happening in the culture surrounding them and to pay attention to new trends and patterns that are developing in how people live and communicate.

Finally, listening processes demand "an active response: not just gathering data but doing something about it" (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). Externally, companies are known for focusing deeply on measurement but only lightly on engagement. Internally, hearing processes too often lead to myriad tables, charts, graphs, and statistics to forward up the chain of command but little knowledge about audience concerns that could disseminate throughout the company. Customer service professionals might hear what's wrong with products, and sales teams might find out why customers are offended by a marketing campaign; however, that knowledge never gets shared across departments. And those in corporate communications handling online monitoring programs rarely spread the knowledge gathered around the company—or, if they do, only do so as part of a measurement report months after the intelligence could have been useful.

In my attempts to advocate on external audiences' behalf in the face of implicit and explicit corporate communications managerial policies, I've argued that companies that are closely attuned to audiences' wants and needs should use that knowledge to better serve their customers. This difference between "listening" and "hearing" distinguishes companies that are attempting to be connected, responsive, and committed to those with whom they communicate from those which still view the people they communicate at in aggregate.

Empathy

Building on that emphasis on listening, my recent work focuses on empathy as a central approach for creating communications management processes that are more effective for businesses but also more equitable for their external audiences. This approach draws, in part, on the writing of consultant Carol Sanford (2011), who argues—through her work with Seventh Generation and a variety of other organizations—that companies who put a responsibility to their customers at the center of their everyday business practices and align all employees' way of working around this customer-centered approach become not just more responsible but more profitable over time. Applying Sanford's approaches to a company's media and communications strategy provides a means for all employees who manage some aspect of external communication for a company to find as their common ground a central desire to put themselves in their customer's shoes and to look at the company and its communications from that perspective.

Such a mindset draws heavily on the elements of "design thinking" (Ford 2012b). This concept has been driven by thinkers like Rolf Faste and David Kelley at Stanford University, where the d.school (The Hasso Plattner Institute of Design) has popularized a way of approaching design and business with its stated goal to create an interdisciplinary environment to "make the lives of the people they're designing for better" (Stanford University 2010).

As Dev Patnaik (with Peter Mortensen, 2009) argues, a sense of empathy must pervade an organization in order for such an approach to be effective. Design thinking requires being able to solve problems by constantly putting one's self in the audience's shoes, an ability that can only be possible if employees feel connected to the lives of those audience members. David McQuillen's work at bank Credit Suisse provides an example of this approach (Yellin 2009, pp. 248-249). McQuillen, in an effort to help the bank's senior executives better understand their customers' experiences, put them on the phone as customers with the bank's call center and took them to stand in line for a teller. Credit Suisse made this way of thinking pervasive in the company, creating a team whose focus was helping people throughout the organization think about solving their everyday problems by putting themselves in their audience's shoes.

Emphases on ethnographic research and putting employees' in their audiences shoes have informed new processes for product design, website design, retail space planning, and (increasingly) customer service to approach everyday business objectives from the perspective of the end "user." Yet, such an approach has not often been applied to communications, where managerial processes are often guided by seeking to align audiences with what the company wants to say rather than moving the company's communication toward addressing what its audiences want and need (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013).

Currently, Peppercom is consulting and conducting workshops aimed at helping clients put themselves in their audiences' shoes to experience communication with and about the company and the categories and issues surrounding that company's area of business. This way of thinking has become central to the way our company describes itself (Ford and Cody 2011). As journalist and customer experience expert Emily Yellin—our partner on the initiative—has said of this Audience Experience work, our goal is to help marketers and corporate communicators adjust to a world where marketing is increasingly "more about service than selling" (quoted in Peppercom 2012). Projects have included helping an appliances manufacturer understand the communication experience their customers have when buying a new appliance, helping a financial services firm think about how students research potential employers and how the company's recruiting communications look from a graduating college senior's point of view, and using these processes to transform our own business. While the approach has occasionally led directly to improved business processes, the primary focus is on better communicating with customers in ways that only indirectly impact "the bottom line." Nevertheless, we strongly advocate that this mentality is vital to a business' longevity and reputation in the long term.

Success and Challenges of Intervening within an Industry Setting

Frequently, my work within marketing and communications has energized me about the potential such an embedded position has to transform media managerial practice. I've played a role in transforming the way my company thinks and how it counsels clients, and I've counseled and held workshops with a variety of media industries companies along the way. However, as this essay has detailed, I have also had many opportunities to moderate and guide discussions among corporate leaders working for companies outside the media industries; to present perspectives inside companies and at industry events that challenge prevailing corporate logics; and even to directly help shape corporate policies in relation to how their communications is understood, from social media guidelines for employees to processes for interdepartmental collaboration surrounding external communications. In the process, I've been fortunate to receive visibility within marketing and communications circles for that work.

However, for every success, I've met many more roadblocks. The disjointed and competitive environment within companies has frequently obscured or dampened the impact this advocacy can have. In some cases, business leaders in one division find such arguments to resonate but have no power to disseminate those ideas beyond their division. In others, the problems with internal communication are so vast that it has discouraged employees to act on new ways of thinking, even if the ideas resonate.

In several instances, the profit-generating logic of companies has gotten in the way. My attempts at intervention have been shrugged off with "nice-to-have but not essential" responses or else met with questions of how success can be measured for "feel good" priorities that don't generate hard numbers through which performance can be assessed. Most frustrating of all is when the conversation turns immediately to ROI—what "return on investment" does funding these audience-centered approaches give me? In such cases, I know immediately that a meaningful intervention couldn't possibly be made.

These difficulties are driven by the fact that managerial processes and logics are often especially restrictive on creative work outside creative industries. Those who manage communications are expected to conform to profit-driven forms of measurement—largely quantitative in nature—and often develop policies against their own creative and human instincts in an effort to maintain or gain respect within the prevailing business logic of their organization. Additionally, while many of the professionals I meet feel these are barriers are constraints, I have met several individuals who manage communications and media creation who lack concern about connecting with or serving audiences and who seem to have embraced a direct profit motivation at the expense of social considerations.

Perhaps worse than encountering those for which my advocacy falls on deaf ears is to see ideas only embraced at a cursory level. Companies say they want to start listening but then do little more than assessing how their messages are "resonating" with their "key audiences"—in other words, to label as "listening" efforts to "hear," and to create reportable "results" that managers up the corporate hierarchy will immediately comprehend and value. Organizations express interest in developing relationships and prioritizing the wants and needs of their customers or other constituencies but then prove that they only really care about "the influencers" who might gain them some immediate clout for public relations purposes. Perhaps most frustrating is when people pick up some words and phrases of what I have said or new concepts that have been introduced into corporate communications and begin applying them to only a slightly altered version of what the company has long been doing.

The most frequent way in which companies take this surface-level approach is to prioritize responding to customers' wants and needs on a one-off rather than a systemic basis. Public relations and marketing teams often address customer service issues to silence customers' complaints rather than to transform their business. In the process, listening and empathizing is limited to mitigating the potential "damage" a customer might cause to a brand, on the negative end, or trying to turn people into "advocates," on the positive end. In short, communication is seen solely as advancing what the company wants to say rather than addressing audiences' concerns.

However, the most significant barrier to the potential impact my advocacy from within the communications industry could have is self-censorship. I vehemently reject the notion that my role compromises an ability to speak critically in general terms of the industry in which I now work; on the contrary, I have found all attempts to do so at a macro level embraced. Yet, on a micro level, my perspective is restrained both by my own sense of "picking my battles" and by the needs of my employer.

I provide frank counsel when it's sought and interject objections when I perceive violations of audiences' rights or needs. But the ideas shared will undoubtedly be shaped, whether consciously or unconsciously, by the degree to which a company seems willing to consider new ways of thinking and the need to maintain an ongoing relationship with a client (barring, of course, blatant and fragrant offenses to transparency or business ethics). And my ability to find opportunities for intervention at a company level is also shaped by the business needs of the company for which I am employed. For instance, as opposed to industry-wide events or publications where Peppercom supports my participation because of its visibility, I am less likely to find myself traveling to get in front of a company unless it is believed there is some chance for ongoing business with them as a potential client.

These various barriers point toward why it's critical to have scholars who maintain a critical distance to industry and who advocate for media policy changes that seek to revolutionize how corporations communicate with their external audiences and how access to media platforms is managed. But, while calls for revolution help us explore new possibilities for corporate and governmental media policy, intervention at the level of evolution within industry can also achieve significant gains toward shifting formal and informal corporate policies in ways that are more equitable and empathetic to us all. Despite the limitations, barriers, and frustrations I encounter on a daily basis, I'm heartened by every minute change I see made. The work of policy intervention on the corporate level is worthwhile if we see attempts to better balance power between companies and their external audiences as ongoing; if we define those in corporate America not solely in oppositional terms of struggle but also—when appropriate—in terms of potential collaboration; and if we aim to try and change the world as it exists rather than only to overturn the world for a utopian perspective of an alternative.

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