WHAT IS DIGITAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS?

**PUBLIC AFFAIRS**
Communications activities (including government relations) conducted by companies, governments, non-profits, or citizens in order to influence public policy

**DIGITAL**
Internet enabled methods, tools or tactics used in communications, including (but not limited to) social media, online content, and data collection and analysis

**DIGITAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS**
The use of internet enabled methods, tools, and tactics to support public affairs activities
Digital Public Affairs: beyond inflated expectations (thankfully)  
1. You must not rush into information delivery  
2. All strategies must be multi-channel (but digital may affect your choice of strategy)  
3. You must not overlook digital’s value on technical dossiers  
4. You must select digital tactics last  
5. You must embrace substance and targeted distribution over white noise and scattergun delivery  
6. You must explore relationship building with stakeholders via social media (but do so with caution)  
7. You must use data and technology to enhance intelligence, targeting, and efficiencies  
8. You must consider digital campaign methods to mobilise support (when feasible)  
9. You must measure well but not obsess (and incorporate internal as well as external evaluation)  
10. You must not neglect internal communications  
Postscript: digital and social media in an age of populism and pseudo-science.
DIGITAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS: BEYOND INFLATED EXPECTATIONS (THANKFULLY)

There was an awkward time, peaking between 2008 and 2010, when I would be invited to meetings, be introduced as a guru or ninja, and be expected to provide an Obama-esque digital strategy that would ensure victory on a lobbying battle by the following Tuesday. I would invariably fail to do so.

Why the over-excitement amongst some at the time?

There was an element of ‘shiny new toy syndrome’ at play, as there was with all industries coming to grips with the impact of digital. Beyond that, the logic was twofold.

First, given that online tactics had bolstered political campaigns by mobilising supporters, the hope was that the same could be done in public affairs.

Second, many assumed that access to new channels would facilitate message penetration. It would not matter that decision-makers were unable to fit another meeting into their diaries, or that journalists were unwilling to report on an issue, as we would now be able to circumvent this minor nuisance by reaching audiences directly online. Magic!

Most now agree that digital public affairs is not the second coming. This is welcome. But we should not stray too far the other way and dismiss the relevance of digital in public affairs. For while the underlying practice remains unchanged – sound strategy, issue understanding and analysis, and knowing how to navigate the political process are paramount – digital has unquestionably altered public affairs in three ways.

Scope. Digitalisation has further blurred the boundaries between reputation and public affairs: it makes the public affairs playing field bigger and faster-moving, and greatly amplifies risk.

Strategic options. The choice of communications strategies available to support public affairs programmes is affected by digital.

Tactics. The toolbox with which to execute public affairs programmes large or small, in tandem with ‘traditional’ methods, is now larger.

I believe (rather optimistically?) that we have now turned a corner, and have moved from hype to improved appreciation of the value that digital can bring (and not bring) to public affairs. Hence the title of this eBook: Digital Public Affairs is Dead, Long Live Digital Public Affairs.

So what represents the new, sensible, and less-hyped practice of digital public affairs?

I shall explore ten of its most relevant components in the rest of this eBook. I will focus on digital public affairs from a corporate/private sector perspective in Brussels, as this is where I have most experience, but the methods are applicable to other types of organisations, and to other locations.
Evolving societal values and ever-growing citizen mistrust have placed corporations in the firing line: they are expected to behave well. When they do not, social media is at hand to let citizens and activists express their discontentment. Moreover, a story can no longer be 'killed' as social media means we have one perpetual news cycle. If a story is big enough, it will keep on running through likes and shares, and be amplified through petitions and campaigns. Social media does not even respect geographic boundaries, with salacious hearsay from a far-away continent likely breaking faster than a less juicy local story.

In public affairs, this all matters because it is now easier for opponents and activists to utilise corporate misdeeds from across the world (real or perceived) for political gains. Many argue that we should take protest in the digital age with an enormous pinch of salt given how easy it is to express indignation on Facebook or sign multiple petitions (the slacktivist phenomenon). But sometimes online protest does balloon, and with decision-makers eager to convey democratic legitimacy by following the tide of public opinion (and, one would hope, wishing to do the right thing), such protest can sway policy.

The most oft-quoted EU examples in the past decade are the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), the much-vaunted trade deal between the EU and the US, and the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), a treaty aimed at cementing international standards for intellectual property rights. I shall not enter into the merits of either package, but merely say that while both had seemed shoe-ins at the offset, they were derailed by large scale protests which would not have escalated so fast and attracted such numbers were it not for online mobilisation and petitions (online petitions against TTIP and ACTA were signed by 3.5 and 3 million people respectively).

What to do about it all?

The easy answer is: be a good corporate citizen. We won’t delve into the substantial (and very fashionable) topic of purpose-driven business, and its value to reputation and the bottom-line, as it is beyond the scope of this eBook. But needless to say, better behaved, trusted companies tend to be favoured by most stakeholders, including decision-makers.

Moreover, being equipped to handle the risks posed by the spread of perilous information online is an obvious starting point. This often involves a melange of operational and cultural remedies of which we shall only scratch the surface here (see the next page).
Public affairs teams should work closely with counterparts globally — EU functions are often quite isolated — and with marketing-communications (not just legal, as is frequently the case).

Working with marketing-communications — the main brand and reputation ‘owners’ — will ensure alignment and joint plans on reputation-building.

Organisations should make crisis mitigation global and cross-functional. Issue monitoring, scenario planning, and messaging should be shared.

In practice, this should help public affairs professionals keep track of events outside their backyard which could affect policy. And vice-versa: knowledge of policy developments which could affect broader reputation will help corporate communicators and the business at large.

Organisations should strive to institute greater transparency, including a willingness to be open and publicly engaged around policy priorities and advocacy activities (on and offline).
2. ALL STRATEGIES MUST BE MULTI-CHANNEL (BUT DIGITAL MAY AFFECT YOUR CHOICE OF STRATEGY)

What is strategy? Simply how you choose to deliver against an objective. It must be simple, and you should be able to summarise it in one sentence. Familiar strategies in public affairs include: differentiation from the competition or positioning of a key trait (e.g. we are very sustainable or economically impactful, or exceptional corporate citizens); or harnessing an influential group (e.g. customers, experts, employees, or people in a key political constituency).

But what about digital strategy in public affairs? I would argue (a tad pedantically perhaps) that there should be no such thing. Channel specific strategies can undermine a public affairs programme. Rather, one strategy should be formulated, with digital, media, lobbying and so forth then used to execute that strategy. However, digital can affect one’s choice of strategy. Public affairs strategies that comprise significant elements of digital include:

- **A rebuttal strategy** when an organisation is facing regulatory retaliation due to political pressure driven by misinformation spreading online. An industry I once supported was targeted by opponents who claimed its carbon footprint was far bigger than it was in reality. Moreover, the industry in question had made genuine efforts to reduce its footprint, and was exceeding all improvement targets, which was handily ignored. As a result, it ran a large-scale rebuttal campaign to counter every identifiable criticism online. Within a year, their efforts had led to a significant improvement in the public’s perception of the industry’s environmental credentials, and fairer scrutiny by regulators.

- **A strategy to drum up and harness public support** if a programme has a viable public interest angle and the organisation in question is on the ‘right’ side of the public debate. Fish Right represents an illustrious example in Brussels. EU fisheries legislation, which was up for renewal in 2012-13, would have persevered with the practice of throwing perfectly edible dead fish back into the sea for quota reasons, were it not for a very public call to ban the practice. An online driven, highly public, celebrity endorsed campaign ensued - Fish Fight - resulting in a shift in momentum on the issue, and fish discards being banned in a landslide vote.

- **A simplification strategy** that utilises online content to explain a complex topic in simple terms. This approach is sensible when targeting non-expert policy-makers with an important say but little knowledge of a technical issue (e.g. MEPs voting on an issue in which they do not sit in a relevant committee and their group does not have a position). This is now standard fare for competent organisations that engage in advocacy in Brussels.

- **A credible third-party supporter mobilisation strategy** using digital channels to connect and promote allies for political leverage. Industries that have credible and popular supporters - think agrichemical companies and farmers, or pharma companies and patient groups - have utilised this approach with success since far before the dawn of digital; but digital can help build bigger and better-connected alliances.
KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Do not create channel specific strategies.

All channels, including digital, should be part of the same strategy.

But digital can affect your choice of strategy e.g. perilous criticism spreading online, or a large ready-made online community of supporters, could respectively make a rebuttal or mobilisation strategy viable.
3. YOU MUST NOT OVERLOOK DIGITAL’S VALUE ON TECHNICAL DOSSIERS

Much hair has been torn from its roots by digital enthusiasts upon hearing the words: we don’t need digital, this is real public affairs (i.e. technical/legal and government-relations driven).

Certainly, many public affairs programmes that utilise a heavy dose of digital have a public-facing component. When an issue is politicised, and media and publics are aware and active, organisations will need to reach a wider set of stakeholders than just policy-makers – and will often use digital to do so. The online rebuttal example mentioned in the previous chapter – countering public criticism to reduce the likelihood of damaging regulation – is a neat example.

There is also scope for ambitious use of digital when seeking to construct a positive narrative towards policy-makers beyond technical wrangling. An organisation may seek to promote its sustainability credentials, for instance, and digital can play a role in delivering such a narrative through a melange of content, paid and social media (read commandments five and six for more on this).

But much public affairs activity is technical/legal in nature, with a limited public-political dimension. Especially in Brussels. It involves issues which the proverbial man on the street or media has little to no interest in, and public affairs professionals will focus exclusively on ‘traditional’ public affairs activities like tracking policy developments and advising on policy related texts – and will avoid dealing with wider publics.

But while the scope for digital is reduced in such cases, it is not entirely irrelevant, as policy-makers and their staff consume information delivered via digital means and are frequently active on social media. And with an ever-growing range of issues on the table, and more stakeholders, and organisation that can position itself well, or explain its positions clearly, via digital and other means, will have a competitive advantage.

The table to the right indicates how the application of digital could realistically compare on technical/legal vs. political-public issues (although it will clearly vary by issue and dossier).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TECHNICAL/LEGAL</th>
<th>POLITICAL-PUBLIC</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>DOMINANT DISCIPLINE</strong></td>
<td>Government relations</td>
<td>Corporate communications</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>STAKEHOLDERS</strong></td>
<td>Narrow political (e.g. relevant committees)</td>
<td>Broader political Media Publics</td>
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<td><strong>LIKELY STRATEGIES</strong></td>
<td>Political alliance building (mainly Brussels) Harnessing experts</td>
<td>Differentiation Broad alliance building and mobilisation (in and beyond Brussels)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>VIABLE DIGITAL TACTICS</strong></td>
<td>Basic content and search Social media to engage decision-makers Basic intelligence (e.g. decision-maker analysis)</td>
<td>Advanced content and search Social media to engage decision-makers &amp; others (media, supporters, opponents) Intelligence tools (e.g. network analysis) Petitions platforms e.g. Avaaz Campaign platforms e.g. NationBuilder</td>
</tr>
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While the scope for digital is undoubtedly broader on politicised issues or when building a narrative to enhance reputation, digital methods can (and should) be considered to support work on technical-legal dossiers.

Specifically, public affairs staples like intelligence gathering, message delivery, and relationship-building can be enhanced using digital tactics. These will be explored further in subsequent commandments.
4. YOU MUST SELECT DIGITAL TACTICS LAST

Communications 101 teaches us that tactics come last, once objectives have been determined and a viable strategy set. It used to be the easy bit. But in the digital age it is often not, given the sheer array of tools and tactics available to us.

What to do about it? A good starting point involves first listing generic communications categories, and then aligning with feasible digital tactics last. I created the digital public affairs wheel (see next page) with this in mind, weary of being asked ‘what channel or tool should we use?’ The wheel lists core activities in the middle, and builds out towards tactics in the outer circle, to encourage wise folk to think category first and digital tactic last.

In this first instalment of the wheel, day-to-day public affairs activities (Image 1, next page) are broken down into:
1. **Delivering a message** to decision makers and other stakeholders
2. **Building relationships** with these same audiences
3. **Gathering and analysing** political intelligence
... and sub-components of each, which are then paired up with a sample of relevant digital tools and tactics (there are many more).

In this second iteration of the wheel (Image 2, next page), public affairs execution is broken down into broader core components:
1. **Day-to-day**: As above
2. **Campaigns**: Mobilising support to influence the environment in which political decisions are made
3. **Internal**: Informing and empowering internal audiences

In subsequent commandments, we will build on the categories introduced in the wheels

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**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Only select tactics once objectives and strategy are set.

If struggling to identify viable digital tactics, list general communications categories (very generic first) and build out (digital last) – see the wheels for inspiration.
YOU MUST SELECT DIGITAL TACTICS LAST
Online content in public affairs is valuable for two reasons:

- While delivering information face-to-face remains king, it is unfeasible to regularly meet everyone relevant to one’s public affairs needs. And pesky journalists will not report on every story one wishes them to. Online content – done well – can deliver a regular stream of material to one’s audiences.

- The variety of online tools and methods enable us to do more than deliver information. Multimedia can tell a better story than text alone; and personal social media channels (e.g. a personal Twitter feed, blog, or LinkedIn articles) can construct a personal brand that can make a public affairs professional more esteemed or likeable (ideally both) – and presumably more effective at their job.

Easier said than done. How do public affairs professionals ensure that they produce content that not just reaches but truly influences their audiences? Initial work to determine audience traits and needs is essential. But tactics like polling and focus groups are often overlooked in public affairs, although they are ubiquitous in other communications disciplines, from marketing to political campaigning.

Content is the indispensable staple of digital public affairs. It represents the means by which the public affairs professional delivers their point of view to their audiences.

Questions such as these must be addressed:

- **Who exactly are we talking to?** This should be narrowed down. ‘Policy-makers’ is not an audience. But Ms. policy-maker from country X facing political pressure Y and with voting history Z might be. And ‘general public’ should never be a target audience. By being everything to everyone, content is watered down and provides no value.

- **What would be useful to them?** What do they need that they are not currently getting? What type of angle will resonate with them? A member state representative, Commission Director, centre-left or centre-right MEP will respond to vastly different triggers, and online content should reflect that.

- **What should we sound like?** What is our voice: formal/informal, academic/easy-going, humble/proud, pessimistic/optimistic?

- **What do we want our audiences to do?** Much digital public affairs content centres on awareness: simply delivering a message in order to inform. Marketers want their targets to do different things, depending on where they are in the customer journey: message and expectations are different at initial awareness vs. loyal customer level. Public affairs professionals should take a leaf out of their book and ask what they want from their audiences. Is it merely awareness? Or action-related: do we want them to e.g. publish an amendment or advocate on our behalf?

- **How do our audiences prefer to receive information?** Off or online? If online: text or multimedia? Long-form or short-form? Most officials or journalists, who need to get a grasp of an issue quickly, will not view a 3-minute video in the hope that they might find a nugget of useful information. They would rather skim a clear one-page summary of an organisation’s position. Content must be delivered in the recipient’s preferred format (and if you do not know what that is, ask them)
At the risk of stating the bleeding obvious, in addition to addressing a specific audience need or preference, every item of content that is published must be excellent. Copy needs to be well written and multimedia content needs to look fabulous. And professionals should be employed, from professional copywriters to designers and editors.

Organisations still churn out long jargon-filled copy, tweets thanking people, mind-numbing blog posts summarising an event that has been summarised by twenty others already, or ‘talking heads’ videos of people droning on for five minutes plus. Such content will not have any impact.

There is some fine content being published for public affairs purposes: tweets that provide entertainment or useful information; well-written, succinct, and informative posts that provide insight on an organisation’s position and world-view; LinkedIn articles by senior individuals that help position their employers favourably; and fabulous data visualisations that explain reams of statistics in one image.

But there should be more of it.

The practice of disseminating online content to target audiences should not be treated as an afterthought. Indeed, it should be level with content production in the hierarchy of tactics. If once published, little to nothing is done to ensure content reaches its intended audiences, it probably will not do so.

We will not delve overly into the tactics, but examples of methods that can help drive targeted traffic to one’s content that are now ubiquitous include:

- **Search engine optimisation** and search engine marketing (e.g. Google AdWords) to drive traffic from search engines, by organic or paid means respectively.
- **Social media advertising** (e.g. Promoted Tweets, Facebook Ads, and LinkedIn Ads) to target narrow demographics interested in a specific issue (e.g. people interested in issue X at the institutions in Brussels). Unless you have an enormous following, publishing on social media demands investment in advertising in order to guarantee significant reach.
- **Native advertising** (aka sponsored content) in relevant publications (e.g. Politico or Parliament Magazine). Useful when ‘earned’ media is unlikely, and while less credible, control of timing and message is guaranteed, as is sizeable visibility.
- **Paid content discovery services** like Taboola and Outbrain which distribute links on a network of member websites (these are the links in the boxes at the bottom of articles on news sites, for instance).

Last but not least, influencer relations, which involves working with like-minded people or organisations who are active and influential online (caveat: online ‘influencers’ are few and far between in Brussels, meaning this approach may be most viable at member state level). It seems a shame to relegate influencer relations to a virtual footnote, as it can be a highly effective method to reach people in an age of low trust, but two points are worth making:

- In public affairs, where we work with influencers to attain credibility rather than massive reach, follower numbers matter less than the relevance and resonance of the influencer i.e. are they a respected source whose insights are appreciated by the people you wish to influence? Working with influencers with just a few thousand followers (if that) can be highly effective.
- Influencer relations offers a wider set of opportunities to engage than disciplines like media relations, in which the exchange is pre-determined (useful information for coverage). With influencers, one may just be looking for coverage, but there are options for deeper collaboration that are worth exploring, like involving influencers in joint content creation. Think pharma companies that co-create with patients, for instance.
Do not begin producing content before your content strategy is in place. In particular, determine audience needs and wants.

Do not be dull: in an age of information overload, content must be interesting and/or entertaining, and needs to be professionally produced to be so.

Utilise paid media and other tactics to disseminate content to a narrow set of targets. Without a dissemination process in place, content publication is a wasted effort.
If policy stakeholders are active on social media, there may be benefits in connecting with them. When social media first came about, this prospect got public affairs professionals very excited, as it offered a chance to build relationships with key targets, and to demonstrate transparency while doing so.

Sadly, it is not quite as easy as it seems. While social media purists insist that all public affairs professionals and their stakeholders should merrily be engaging on social media at all hours of the day, this is unrealistic. In the real world, personalities and sectors will dictate how viable social media is. Perfectionists and introverts are often uncomfortable with social media: the former need to get everything picture-perfect and may spend hours on a mere tweet; the latter dislike engaging in a public forum. And there are many perfectionists and introverts in public affairs. Moreover, the nature of a sector will dictate levels of participation: tech issues are more likely to be discussed publicly than financial services.

Moreover, it is easy to get it wrong. Being dull or irrelevant, or adopting the wrong tone, will damage rather than build reputation and influence. On an important energy dossier in Brussels a few years ago, a key legislator was a Twitter aficionado. One organisation thought it would stand out by producing cartoons carrying their message and targeting them directly at the legislator. Unfortunately for them, he found their approach inappropriate, and said so in no uncertain terms.

By no stretch does this diminish the fact that, done well and in the right circumstances, social media can enhance reach and help build relationships.

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But it should be well thought-through beforehand:

- What exactly are you hoping to achieve by being active on social media?
- Are your audiences present and open to engaging with you? These might include key legislators, but also journalists, or supporters.
- How exactly will you add value to them (what will you provide that others cannot?)
- Have you benchmarked similar actors? What can you learn from them?
- What will you do if things turn sour (e.g. if you get criticised?)
- Does your organisation have social media guidelines? Will they actually permit you to say anything of note?

A note on channels. Given that Twitter is dominant in Brussels, it is frequently assumed that it must be the channel of choice. It often is, but channel selection must be based on objectives and strategy. Are you seeking to build a narrative around a subject area, or position yourself or your organisation as experts? Then you need a content strategy delivered mainly via an owned channel (usually your website or blog). Twitter (and other social media channels like LinkedIn) will add most value by driving attention and traffic. Are you trying to build an online coalition of support? Groups (public or private) on your preferred social network might be a better option than Twitter. Are your issues public, and are you on the right side of the public debate? Then a Facebook page might be for you.

Having said that all that, Twitter and LinkedIn will likely be your channels of choice for Brussels-based public affairs. LinkedIn is no longer the dull CV repository it used to be. Public affairs professionals willing to be visible should consider LinkedIn articles and video posted from their personal profiles. For organisations, posts, video and the excellent ad platform can provide very good, and very targeted, visibility.
Social media can provide value, but approach with caution: are you comfortable using it professionally; are your stakeholders present? If the answer is no to either, social media may not be for you.

Be strategic around your use of social media, and answer questions like: what are you seeking to achieve; what are your audience’s needs; how can you add value – and what do you do if things turn sour?

While Twitter remains prevalent in Brussels, LinkedIn is catching up. But in any case, your choice of channel should depend on objectives and strategy.
7. YOU MUST USE DATA AND TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE INTELLIGENCE, TARGETING, AND EFFICIENCIES

While the use of data has driven enormous advances in intelligence gathering, audience targeting, and efficiencies in most communications disciplines, it remains quite rudimentary in public affairs.

There are various reasons for this. Many claim that public affairs practitioners are luddites who have not moved with the times. While many might be, others are patently not. Further factors are at play.

Budgets, for instance. To the surprise of many, public affairs functions are often poorly funded. As a result, vendors tend not to make tools for public affairs practitioners, sensibly preferring to target marketers with bigger budgets.

Moreover, especially in the corporate context in Brussels, certain elements of data and analytics are not all that useful. While NGOs may use data to build and mobilise communities of support, corporate players are often on the wrong side of the public debate on the same issues, and simply have few people to mobilise.

Having said all that, there are ways in which data can add significant value to public affairs activities. Beyond staples like social media monitoring to track issues and key people, which is already ubiquitous, numerous other applications exist.

Data is useful when seeking to test a strategy or message. A few years back, I teamed up with a data partner on some work for an energy client. Our goal was to test the likely success of a set of messages in several EU markets, based on public sentiment. While the client had been using a generic green message in all markets, our findings encouraged them to shift to an energy-security narrative in one key market, and their campaign was more successful as a result.

Online data – especially local social media trends – can be used to identify proof points to back up a message when targeting a specific decision-maker e.g. what are their constituents saying about the issue that might support our case?

Using network analysis to assess the influence of online stakeholders and how they connect can help answer questions like: who is actually in our network; who is influential; how might we harness their connections; are opponents engaged publicly on our issue; does it matter i.e. are they influential in the network? An agrichemicals company I once worked with was using online content, social media, and search to rebut activist claims on the dangers of its products. Network analysis demonstrated that the online conversation on their issue was so polarised that their material was largely being seen by supporters who endorsed their position already. As a result, they shifted their strategy from critique rebuttal to supporter mobilisation.

Data can be used to help build an understanding of the views and habits of a target audience member e.g. if targeting MEP X, what do they state publicly on social media about a relevant issue, what is their world-view, and what are their interests? If a target audience is large, data mining tools can be used to analyse metadata across huge numbers of social media feeds. But in public affairs, our targets can often be counted on one hand, so a more ‘manual’ approach may well provide enough insight. In some recent work for a client, we discovered through a simple review of social media that a key member state ambassador was fanatical about a minority sport played in his country. We subsequently created some items of content showing the relevance of our issue to said sport, which he received and said gave him a clearer view of the issue.

Micro-targeting is arguably the most celebrated application of online data in campaigning. Lists of people (merging e.g. email databases, electoral data, social media profiles) combined with intelligence about them (e.g. from social media posts, surveys, face to face meetings) provides such depth of data that it can be used to micro-target potential supporters down to the individual level. Rather than targeting large groups of people based on some focus group findings, campaigners are now able to target individuals with personalised messages. This is now a staple of top-tier political campaigning.
YOU MUST USE DATA AND TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE INTELLIGENCE, TARGETING, AND EFFICIENCIES

Marketers have used similar methods for yonks, as have NGOs and activists, but I still remain wary of their utility in EU public affairs. As many dossiers remain uninteresting to the layman, the number of people to target will usually be so low that a manual review of an email database and the social media feeds of the people in it is probably faster than creating complex database concoctions. But watch this space. On bigger, politicised issues in the future, it will be part of the toolkit.

Online platforms for managing public affairs programmes

Sales and marketing professionals have been using Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools for years. These enable everyone within a single organisation to manage and share data, from intelligence to meetings to contacts, in one online space, vastly improving efficiencies. Used well, CRMs ensure better information sharing, the ability to leverage internal knowledge and relationships, superior collaboration and less duplication.

Various companies, mostly US-based, have in the last few years produced bespoke tools for public affairs that work much in the same way. Some of them use the neat term Government Relationship Management (GRM) to define their products, reflecting similarities to the more established ‘CRM’.

In one place, these tools can provide: issue and media monitoring, a comprehensive contact database, network analysis, records of upcoming activities, records of all meetings, email, social media and grassroots management tools, and more.

Some market leaders who started out in Washington DC, like Quorum and Fiscal Note, are looking to break Brussels and have updated their products to include EU-specific items, such as EU issue monitoring, EU contacts (MEPs, officials etc.), and listing activities at EU institutions.

All PA functions can benefit from using these tools, especially those managing multiple dossiers. Not only will consolidated monitoring, reporting, and communication save time and reduce pointless duplication, but having intimate knowledge of what everyone else is up to within an organisation will invariably help raise levels towards the highest common denominator.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

While data has revolutionised most business and communications functions, its use in public affairs remains rudimentary. But it can already be useful in EU public affairs when used right. With a strong emphasis on ‘when used right’.

On most public affairs dossiers, uses are fairly simple, for instance strategy and message testing, proof point identification, and target audience analysis.

On big political dossiers in which large numbers of people are to be identified and mobilised, more advanced techniques enabling micro-targeting may be possible, but there are few corporate issues at EU level today on which it is viable.
Much excitement around digital public affairs has centred on online campaigning to build and mobilise supporters in order to drive a political outcome. This stems from the success of non-profit and political campaigns that have effectively mobilised followers online.

Public affairs professionals yearn for a bit of the same magic. Sadly, it is harder to mobilise the masses if you represent cement or the food packaging industry than if you are Barack Obama.

Nonetheless, there is scope for campaigning in public affairs. Especially when mobilising specific, influential constituencies, rather than enormous swaths of the population. Campaign methods have been used in public affairs for years but called things like 3rd parties or KOL mobilisation, involving for instance: healthcare players activating patients or healthcare professionals; agrichemicals companies doing so with farmers; or anyone rallying residents in a place where they provide jobs, or their own employees.

But digital (if used well) allows us to build and mobilise broader communities of support with relative ease, involving tactics like:

- **Network analysis** to help identify and map supporters.
- **Content provision** via online channels (websites, email, social and paid) to inform and mobilise supporters.
- **Open (but usually closed) communities** of support, enabling networking and information sharing, and facilitating advocacy.
- **Advanced organisations with big groups to mobilise might even invest in campaign management platforms** like NationBuilder. Used by many politicians and political parties, it combines online campaign tools on one platform, including a content management system and website, supporter database, and email list and social media matching service.

However, many corporates tend not to engage in online campaigning for public affairs purposes. They may simply have no major constituencies to mobilise or be so unpopular that they stay out of the public realm entirely (e.g. many banks). Moreover, European publics are present in member states. To truly ‘campaign’ across multiple EU markets, localisation per market is essential (language, message, and tone), but EU public affairs professionals tend to have a Brussels only remit.

Having said all that, some industries and companies are popular. Others might not be, but can align with popular issues. In both cases, online campaigning to mobilise supporters in order to help drive a political outcome can work.

I would urge readers who might not have an obvious campaign narrative to explore Keep Me Posted, a campaign that began in the UK and is now pan-European.
YOU MUST CONSIDER DIGITAL CAMPAIGN METHODS TO MOBILISE SUPPORT (WHEN FEASIBLE)

It is run by a coalition comprising postal services, the paper industry, and civil society groups representing pensioners, rural communities, people on the low end of the socio-economic ladder, arthritis sufferers, and many others. They share one common goal: to make it mandatory to provide paper statements and bills.

As with all good campaigns, it is not purely run online (that would be a tad ironic, given its patently offline objective). However, various online tactics are utilised to disseminate content and involve supporters, including a busy website, newsletters, social media, email capture, and calls to action to share stories, generate content, and urge MPs to sign a motion (now ended).

While the companies at the helm (including postal services and paper manufacturers) are not overly popular, the cause they have chosen is one in which their interests align perfectly with several constituencies that are on the ‘right’ side of the public debate. Clever, and an inspiration to organisations and industries who may not believe they have an obvious campaign angle with which to drive popular support.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Online campaigning methods to drive political outcomes are not utilised much in EU public affairs. But where there are constituencies to leverage, be it specific groups, citizens, employees, or experts, they are worth exploring.

However, proceed with caution. Mobilising small groups is easier and more effective than seeking to influence ‘everyone’ so narrow down as far as possible, both in terms of target groups and countries: where do you get most ‘bang for the buck’?

Never put all eggs in the digital basket: campaigns must be multi-channel.

One-size fits all campaigns are impossible in the EU: sub-campaigns per market are needed. Language needs to be adapted, of course, but also message and tone (but not too much, as a campaign will appear insincere to anyone visiting multiple country platforms).
Public affairs lags in measurement versus other communications disciplines. There are a few reasons for this. One is cultural. Public affairs professionals often stem from politics, the civil service, or journalism, where measurement is not as sacrosanct as it is in marketing or even PR.

Moreover, given that policy outcomes are dependent on so many factors that are hard to control, or are not transactional (e.g. think building a relationship vs. selling a product), there has been less pressure on the public affairs function to deliver against set metrics.

However, change is afoot, as public affairs professionals are increasingly expected to prove success by delivering hard metrics. The craving for measurement sometimes goes too far. Reams of pointless metrics are demanded, including online vanity metrics like site traffic or followers on Twitter (even though a high percentage of the latter are invariably bots, salespeople, and oddballs).

What constitutes a more sensible approach to measurement?
- Focus on a few key metrics, not everything that can possibly be measured.
- Prioritise outcome related metrics i.e. influence, change or action, over vanity metrics like traffic or followers.
- Also track qualitative non-numeric anecdotal proof of success e.g. a key person quoting your material in a meeting.
- Insight and recommendations should be provided for each measurement e.g. what does the metric imply, what has changed, why has it changed, and what to do about it?

Moving on from the basic principles, what should one then actually measure in digital public affairs?

First, it is essential to have a framework for one’s metrics to categories for different types of metrics. Lots of frameworks exist (every communications agency has their own) but I like the following:

- **Awareness**: People are exposed to your material.
- **Interest**: Beyond being aware, they have expressed an interest in you.
- **Influence**: Beyond being interested, they have been influenced by you (ideally positively).
- **Genuine action**: As well being influenced, they are taking some sort of action (off or online) which will help you achieve your public affairs objectives.

In the table on page 24, labelled “Metrics Framework”, I list some sample metrics that could populate each category. While this selection provides a useful snapshot, for further detail, I urge readers to explore the website of the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC), which is a treasure trove of material on all aspects of measurement in communications.

Beyond measuring communications aimed at external audiences, I would also advise anyone practicing digital public affairs to conduct internal evaluation and benchmarking.

Doing so can help to set the bar for excellence, and to determine how to reach that bar by answering questions like: What constitutes best practice (and poor practice?) Where are we now / how are we performing? What do we need to do to reach excellence?

A handy format for this sort of evaluation is the basic-good-great grid. The sample grid on the next page lists five core components of digital public affairs (strategy, integration, content, social media, and measurement) along with a short description for each.

NB: this is clearly just a sample grid. Organisations should develop bespoke grids that align with their goals and their definitions of basic-good-great.
### Communications Strategy in Place but Digital Addressed Tactically

- **Communications strategy in place but digital addressed tactically** e.g. ‘use digital to deliver information’
- **Strategy does not specifically address how digital can deliver influence or genuine action**

### Most Tactics are Offline

- **Most tactics are offline** (lobbying, media, events etc.)
- **Online channels for ad hoc distribution of content only**

### Content Based on Key Messages but Audience Knowledge Limited

- **Content based on key messages but audience knowledge limited**
- **Objective is primarily reach & awareness raising**

### Use to Distribute Content and/or Monitor Stakeholders

- **Use to distribute content and/or monitor stakeholders**
- **No priority objective or target audience(s) specifically addressed**

### Vanity Output Metrics Tracked

- **Vanity output metrics tracked e.g. traffic & followers**
- **Ad hoc reporting of KPIs but no action recommended**

### Communications Strategy Developed with Digital Added Value

- **Communications strategy developed with digital added value in mind**
- **All elements of communications strategy align with suitable digital methods**

### Online Channels Utilised

- **Online channels utilised to augment all priority offline activity** e.g. amplify media coverage & speaking ops

### Some Audience Research and/or Online Data Used

- **Some audience research and/or online data used in order to develop more bespoke content** e.g. through social media monitoring

### Social Media Channel(s) Used to Address Specific Objective

- **Social media channel(s) used to address specific objective**
- **Narrowly defined target audience(s) e.g. not ‘policy-makers’ but specific set thereof**

### Outcome Related Metrics Added

- **Outcome related metrics added e.g. change in opinion or desired action taken**
- **Regular reporting & ad hoc use of insights to improve output**

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### Multiple Data Items Used to Inform Content Choices

- **Multiple data items used to inform content choices**
- **Each content item has specific purpose & target**
- **Objectives beyond awareness e.g. drive specific action**

### Social Media Also Used as Source of Intelligence

- **Social media also used as source of intelligence on issues & stakeholders which is fed into communications strategy**

### All Metrics Regularly Analyzed

- **All metrics regularly analysed to inform communications activity**
- **All communications output is informed by recent metrics**

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### Basic-Good-Great Grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Great</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
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<td>Communications strategy developed with digital added value in mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>On &amp; Offline Integration</strong></td>
<td>Most tactics are offline (lobbying, media, events etc.)</td>
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<td>Social media channel(s) used to address specific objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Measurement</strong></td>
<td>Vanity output metrics tracked e.g. traffic &amp; followers</td>
<td>Outcome related metrics added e.g. change in opinion or desired action taken</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Objective is primarily reach & awareness raising
Do not measure everything: select a few key metrics relevant to your programme. But prioritise outcome related metrics that denote influence or action, over vanity metrics like traffic or followers.

Make measurement actionable: each reported metric should include an insight and recommendation for further improvement.

Do not neglect internal evaluation and benchmarking: by defining what constitutes excellence, and measuring yourself against it, you are more likely to attain it.
10. YOU MUST NOT NEGLECT INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Many believe that public affairs professionals have access to endless funds. Sadly for them, this is not the case. Indeed, given the value public affairs can bring to an organisation by mitigating costly regulation or creating alternative revenue streams, one might argue that the function is frequently underfunded.

Why is this the case? We are wading off-topic, but briefly: public affairs professionals often cannot quantify the € cost of the regulatory risk they have thwarted or € benefit they have brought through other means (e.g. guaranteeing market access or developing partnerships). The public affairs function therefore often comes to be seen as a cost (not always: some organisations worship at the altar of public affairs, especially in heavily regulated industries).

Meanwhile, other communications functions, like marketing, can set a fairly precise € figure on their impact, making the business case for further investment a relatively easy one.

Public affairs professionals often blame the complexity of their discipline for this state of affairs. ‘Selling to a consumer is easier than dealing with policy-makers or activists’ or ‘how can we set a € figure for our work when so many factors are at play?!’ they howl. They may be right, but the fact remains: the public affairs function is less fluent in the pure €-oriented language of business, and as a result, is frequently side-lined and underfunded.

Another explanation may be found in corporate structure. An oft-heard lament in public affairs is that the function is not well understood by the business simply because of geography and silos. Public affairs teams may sit in Brussels and DC and only run into colleagues from other functions at an annual get-together (if at all).

Digital cannot magically solve these challenges. But assuming that the public affairs function has a sound story to tell and proof points that quantify the value of its work (and political gobbledygook has been replaced by the language of business), digital tactics may help overcome geographic or function-based silos through:

- Education delivered via high quality content on internal digital channels, which raises awareness of the activities of the public affairs function, the impact it has delivered, and the people behind it.
- The efficient use of enterprise social networks (i.e. online, internal communications systems like Slack, Yammer or Zoho) to encourage fast information exchanges and dialogue amongst colleagues in different functions.

An added benefit of better links between public affairs and other functions is that the practice of public affairs itself can be improved, as colleagues from other functions may provide real-world business intelligence and personal or professional networks at local level that the public affairs team may harness.

The proverbial win-win.
Always consider colleagues as an essential stakeholder.

Assuming a sound internal communications strategy is in place, consider digital methods (content delivery and engagement via enterprise social networks) to help bypass geographic and function-based silos.
I am frequently asked about social media in the context of some of the more unsavoury phenomena of our age. Such as the rise of assorted populist movements. Or the pseudo-science peddled by some activists, from climate change deniers to the anti-GMO brigade.

Countless items of disinformation disseminated by such people, and their zealous supporters, are seen (and believed) by millions. Some are rebutted, others not; but frankly, once a story is in the open, rebuttals are often drowned out, however fervently the aggrieved parties seek to stand their ground. Some people still insist that Hillary Clinton runs a child trafficking ring out of a pizza parlour in Washington DC.

Many quite reasonably ask what on earth we can do about it all. With the (mostly) reputable gatekeepers of old (i.e. traditional media) sidelined, how can we stem the flow of nonsense?

Mechanical fixes are touted. Like insisting that Google and Facebook filter their platforms better. Or that they block the financial incentives that encourage people to set up and feed fake news sites (e.g. impeding the famed Macedonian teenagers that set up fake news sites to generate ad revenue during the US presidential campaign). Facebook in particular has faced scrutiny over unsavoury ads and is being called on to make it harder for crazies to advertise, especially since the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal in early 2018, in which it was revealed that a UK research company had collected and sold the data of millions of people on Facebook without their consent.

But whatever fixes are put in place, nonsense will still likely proliferate, as long as audiences are eager to consume it in the first place.

There is enough fodder for another eBook on this topic, but I will summarise two takes on this that I think are essential:

- By scapegoating the internet and looking for quick technical fixes, we ignore the root causes of populism and the triggers that encourage people to disseminate nonsense.
- A more sober understanding of what the internet can and cannot achieve might actually be quite helpful.

I am by no stretch diminishing the perils of disinformation disseminated over the internet. It is a very bad thing indeed. When believed, it can convince people on the fence to move to the dark side. And even when not, it contributes to the general sense of rift and disillusionment we face in our public/political arena.

But scapegoating the internet, along with populist politicians (however reprehensible) and the supposedly dumb people who vote for them, is far too easy. Many of the so-called elites – politicians of the non-populist sort, media, and corporates – are the cause of their own predicament. They have behaved in a manner that has drained public trust and fuelled the populist machine.

Expressed differently: they have done more damage to themselves than have populists, fake news et al. Indeed, they have allowed disinformation to be plausible in the first place.

The ‘establishment’s’ response following the 2007-08 crash was for the most part insensitive, making it easy to make the case that elites in ivory towers were the enemy of the common man or woman whose wages had stagnated, and had lost their jobs and homes (and presumably a dose of self-respect). In parallel, modern day corporate scandals like Dieselgate, journalists behaving unethically, or the murky dealings of sinister media empires have hardly helped.

Similarly, corporations that are targeted by activists peddling pseudo-science fail to see that in many cases they are targeted because they are easy prey. Organisations that are honest, transparent, and generally good corporate citizens are targeted far less forcefully. The starting point of the victims of pseudo-science, and other illegitimate activist claims, should be ‘how can we first behave, and then secondly, communicate better’; and not ‘pseudo-science and the internet are the sole triggers of all that is wrong in the world.’

By scapegoating the internet and looking for quick technical fixes, we ignore the root causes of populism and the triggers that encourage people to disseminate nonsense.
Which brings us to the second point: that of a potential silver lining, brought about by a more sober understanding of what the internet can and cannot do. For years, far too many of us believed that the internet was the second coming and would bring about prosperity and world peace for all.

Quite literally. Think back to 2011, when many claimed that social media alone was responsible for the Arab Spring and the ensuing loveliness and chorus of group hugs it would produce. Seems so long ago now.

Given events of the last few years, belief in what Evgeny Morozov calls cyber-utopianism - the failure to see the internet’s undesirable side, and believing it to be purely a force for good - has faded. And this is a good thing. It means most of us (hopefully) have a more sober and realistic view of what the internet can achieve.

In public affairs and communications terms, this might involve assessing and mitigating risk before we engage in online communications (see the first commandment). Or adopting a level-headed integrated strategy that sees digital and social media as a set of useful channels amongst many, rather than insisting on digital first.

Moreover, might the threat of fake news - in part - encourage the derided elite to clean up its act? Is the best defence against fake news not to be the sort of person or organisation that disinformation peddlers largely leave alone because they are holier than though? Muck is less likely to stick when thrown at saints, so genuinely behaving well is a far more precious asset than slick spokespeople and pretty communications material.

I live in hope.
STEFFEN MOLLER

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Steffen has since 2006 advised organisations and individuals in Brussels and beyond on how best to use the internet in public affairs, corporate communications, and campaigning.

He appreciates that the internet is a game-changer, but remembers the analogue age, is allergic to shiny new toy syndrome, and thoroughly dislikes being termed a guru (or ninja). He advocates a sensible use of the internet to understand, reach and ideally influence audiences, built on solid (non-digital) foundations, like audience understanding and genuine communications strategy.

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If you’re not yet bored of Steffen’s reflections, more may be found at www.steffenmoller.com

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