

Communication without Frontiers: Public Relations and the Cyberspace from a European and Transatlantic Perspective.

Oscar Bartoli

Introduction

We are living through very upsetting times. Globalization has created a “globalization of emotions” and panic is spreading like an oil spill.

Twenty years ago the average person in America, when waking up, would not have been worried about the early opening of the Asian stock markets and how they might impact the American and European ones.

Nowadays the ripple effect of financial events results in real time changes in behaviors and decisions with consequences on the daily activities of billions of people.

Economic globalization is the outcome of the globalization of information.

Person to person communication frontiers are constantly being pushed forward. Distinct technological fields no longer exist. Just yesterday the world of computers was separate from that of telephone communication.

Today people talk to the world through their computers and in so doing save on their phone bills.

For their part, cell phones have basically put land lines out of business. Satellite phones, despite their early lack of success, now make it possible to reach inaccessible places.

And smart cell phones have become computers. They are able to receive direct television broadcasts, locate destinations thanks to GPS, and transmit and communicate worldwide.

In this type of world, traditional media are being hit hard and are struggling.

America’s most important newspapers are facing dangerous advertising and circulation losses mainly because young people have not grown up with an ingrained DNA for the printed word and feel more comfortable in front of a monitor, however small it may be.

Children today have PlayStations instead of the fairy tale books of fifty years ago. Their mental and visual abilities are linked to computers, not the printed page.

The newspaper CEOs who first grasped this rapid change in communication physiology, beginning with the Australian publishing Tsar Rupert Murdoch, have been strongly concentrating on creating websites. And with some of these websites have, in terms of daily contact, there has been an almost complete take over of the functions attributed to newspapers. And advertising has also made the move.

Traditional media, such as television, are running out of steam due to the competition with the Internet.

In just a few years the mass media spectrum has tilted towards colossuses such as Google, Yahoo, MySpace, YouTube that have captured the attention of billions of people around the world. We have reached the point that even politicians are forced to maintain a constant and insistent presence on the main search engines.

The blog phenomenon is another characteristic of media-information revolution we are living. Google's new search engine Chrome, which allows for the selection of themes and details from the myriad of blogs existing worldwide, is a clear sign of how the mass media scene is changing.

There are changes in public relations, in human relations and how politics work: the television debates of the two presidential candidates in America have not resulted in a shift of millions of votes.

Television analysts acknowledge that what works in political campaigns still is a commercial aired many times every day on local stations based on the Latin principle of "Gutta Cavat Lapidem" (constant dropping wears away the stone; persistence will accomplish anything).

The potential impact of video clips is amplified when they are placed on the Internet through YouTube and MySpace and drill into the brains of the people with short, primarily negative messages about rivals.

Given this constantly evolving mass media scenario we must ask ourselves if there is a future for traditional media because important economic and financial consequences are in play.

Newspapers will be relegated to being niches for thorough examination. This has been confirmed by the investigations and analysis found in the major papers such as The New York Times and The Washington Post.

News is being covered in real time by the television networks equipped to do so despite the fact that the costs for global news reporting are reaching unsustainable levels.

What being a journalist entails has changed. The use of satellite phones allows for video links of a quality unthinkable just a few years ago. But journalists have become one man shows: they broadcast, monitor feeds, do audio checks, etc.

Dear old radio has acquired a new important dimension thanks to digitalization, satellite reception, and the use of cell phones that make it possible to have continuous osmosis with listeners throughout the world.

This revolution in communication will have an impact on our existence in an integrated society in which cultural demands and conflicts are increasingly emphasized.

One need only think of the important role of religious propaganda which readily relies on traditional tools of information, beginning with radio and television, and hands its large audience over for the insemination of international fanaticism.

Every technological revolution results in immediate economic consequences.

And from this derives the importance of social networking, which feeds on the Internet, thanks to the willingness of millions of volunteers, particularly in the United States, to combat the types of crimes against which local and national authorities often say they are powerless.

One of the most significant is the fight against the sexual abuse of children and adolescents.

It is a scourge that afflicts hundreds of millions of young people worldwide and avails itself of electronic technology.

I wish to speak of a mass media phenomenon that in the United States has made a significant contribution to the attempt to implement a bottom-up approach to problems that at first glance would seem to be difficult to solve.

In the case of sexual predators the stage is that of the Internet with its varied incarnations (blogs, video sharing, and wikis) and of traditional television, which has assumed, via reality TV, new functions and horizons as well as the ability to reach audiences that had drifted to other media.

I have been living in the United States for many years and I am a great consumer of media. But I often return to my native land, Italy.

And I must admit that unfortunately Italian private and public networks are brimming with programming that appeal to the lowest common denominator and imitate the worst of American television.

I should point out, however, that in the United States massive protests can provoke reaction from the Federal Communication Commission if a singer bares a nipple for a fraction of a second during the broadcast of a football playoff game. In America, when people want to view naughty stuff they have to subscribe to cable. Is this an excess of Puritanism? Perhaps.

In Italy, in prime time when my compatriots are at the dinner table surrounded by their children, television programming consists primarily of panoramas of the ample bosoms and plump buttocks of young maidens or broadcasts of movies full of foul and disgusting language.

Despite numerous past and present controversies, America continues to be a benchmark for many Europeans, for better or for worse.

I believe that reflecting on what has happened with NBC and Fox in recent years may be a serious way to face the societal themes that are evolving via traditional media and new technology and that have a significant moral and economic impact on the life of the citizenry over and beyond any political frontier or linguistic barrier.

Please allow me to be more explicit: you are free to believe that this issue is not in tune with the basis premise of this conference.

Beyond moral considerations, I would like to call your attention to the fact that the corruption taking place on the Internet results in more than financial crimes, in the strictest sense, and has important short and long term economic implications.

It is a matter of determining whether or not these broadcasts are merely what some define as “trash” and tabloid journalism (although recently tabloid magazines have scored some really big scoops).

And whether – as many claim – they can provide a decisive contribution to an increase in public opinion sensitivity and thus offer a service to the entire collectivity and allow law enforcement to intervene.

I am not referring only to sexual predators but also to all those manifestations of individual or organized criminality that could be brought to the attention of very vast audiences by revealing their links to the powerful and to those who offer them cover, thanks to the fact that too often there is a tendency to sweep these issues under the carpet of collective who gives a damnism.

++++++

They are called predators and they are two-legged beasts that prey on children and adolescents. For years in the US there have been television shows that show how to identify these criminals and make sure they are apprehended and tried. NBC three years ago started a series called "To Catch a Predator." A house is rented in a residential neighborhood. Hidden cameras are set up inside. A nearby trailer is used as the director's command post. A young actress, pretending to be a minor, welcomes into the house a man she has made contact with over the Internet. The girl has told the man that the coast is clear because her parents aren't at home. She brings him into the kitchen and then leaves saying she is going to change her clothes. The show's host then enters the kitchen and begins to question the astonished predator manqué. He is confronted with the pornographic emails he has sent to the fake underage girl. The man is then allowed to leave the house, which he does in a state of visible relief. As soon as the man steps outside he is arrested by the police and his personal Calvary begins. All kinds of men are caught and they range from construction workers to truck drivers, electronic engineers, physicians, lawyers, men of the cloth and are of ages ranging from 18 to 65. And this too is America.

The Internet has become the predator's preferred playground. It's anonymous and provides these sexual deviants with more protection and more children than they could ever target in a park or schoolyard. The key is they need to find a willing, or an accommodating, naïve, child/target. Unfortunately, their internet playground is full of children poised to be targets!

Pre-teens and teens frequently post information and/or photos of themselves online with either no knowledge of what a dangerous and potentially fatal activity in which they are engaging is, or they are adventurous and trust that they will meet someone who will fulfill their needs. Again, not realizing their lives could either end as a result, or, be ruined forever.

It is important to note that there are approximately one-and-a-half million American children illegally trafficked each year, according to director, Carol Smolenski, of ECPAT (End Child Prostitution and Trafficking). While the Internet is not responsible for all of these, it certainly is a factor.

Child pornography and exploitation is a billion dollar business, and there is no end in sight.

The first thing to know is that sexual predators continually troll the internet looking for child targets. They browse personal profiles that children, typically 12-15 year olds, post of themselves on social networking sites, such as MySpace.com, or instant message services.

They also anonymously lurk in the background of chat rooms. Sometimes they'll collect information on a particular child before trying to contact them. Other times, if the child's remarks seem inviting, provocative, or, if the child seems lonely and looking for friends, they'll make an immediate contact.

The easiest targets are those kids who can be conned into keeping secrets. Secrecy is key. You should always educate your children that if anyone whom they have met online asks them to keep a secret, they should report it to you.

Ensure them that they will never get in trouble with you. This is not a time for punishment, but rather a time for being an understanding parent. They have fallen prey to a manipulative pedophile.

Sexual predators search for kids who post personal online profiles and are particularly drawn to those kids who post photographs of themselves, give their physical description and include their name, age, sex, and location.

They look for kids who have regular and private access to a computer and are consistently online for long periods of time each day. They like kids who have few activities or a strong network of friends. They seek out kids who are vulnerable and willing to keep talking to them. Vulnerability comes in many forms: a kid who is sheltered, insecure, unhappy, lonely, or adventurous.

Predators particularly like kids who come from single parent families, are having trouble in school, with friends, or with the law and/or are experimenting with drugs, alcohol, or sex.

They also like kids who have their own instant message accounts, which today is not uncommon. Although some predators use email, they prefer to use instant messages because once the instant message window is closed the message seems to disappear; whereas with email, the message has to be manually deleted thus, posing a risk to the predator of getting caught.

Law enforcement estimates that the typical online sexual predator has victimized anywhere from 30 to 150 kids prior to getting caught.

Predators often pose as children or teenagers. They are experts in what pre-teens and teens have as interests, and they know exactly how they talk. Their goal is to create a “trust bridge” relationship that becomes more important to the child than the relationship that child has with family and/or friends.

The predator uses the relationship to initiate sexual discussion and activity. One of the main activities is using a webcam or digital camera to take and email provocative or lewd photos of themselves. Sometimes these photos are copied and sold to child pornographers or end up on pedophile websites.

Predators need children who will be open to sexual discussions and not terminate the relationship at the first suggestion of sexual activity. They will expose the child/target to sexual images in an effort to break down their barriers and portray the viewing of sexual photos and deviant sexual activities as “normal”.

If the predator has groomed the child/target well, he/she will put up with this uncomfortable conversation and the viewing of sexual images so as not to lose their new friend.

There is the flip side however, on occasion there will be the child who gets scared or wants to end the relationship. The predator may threaten the child/victim with exposing them to parents or friends, or depending upon the situation may threaten to harm them or their family, if they fail to “go along”. Typically however, the predator doesn’t want to alienate the child/target but rather ensure their loyalty and confidence. After all, the final goal is to lure the child into a secret, face-to-face meeting – sometimes including a plan to run away from home or, from the predator’s objective, a plan to kidnap or abduct, or engage in sexual slavery.

(suzanne@kidsafe.com)

Shows like "America's Most Wanted" and "To Catch a Predator" are taking to the airwaves in an attempt to nab sexual predators in a very public way. These shows often involve trying to nab predators — or would-be

predators — who communicate online with people they believe to be underage kids.

While some argue such programs are nothing more than tabloid pulp and that the media should leave police work to the police, others say this kind of programming performs a community service. They say it gets the message out that there are sex offenders among us who pose a threat to our kids.

"Media has done a tremendous service to our nation by bringing awareness to the issue. Proactive online investigations are effective in identifying and ultimately catching child sexual predators, when conducted by proper law enforcement authorities," said John Shehan, the Cyber Tipline program manager at the National Center of Missing and Exploited Children.

"Awareness and the identification of these individuals is the first step in the process. ...[But] trained law enforcement ... should be conducting these types of investigations to ensure the highest possible conviction rate."

FOX's pioneering "America's Most Wanted" has profiled missing persons and fugitives wanted for violent crimes, often those on the FBI's 10 Most Wanted Fugitives list, since 1991. The crimes featured on the show include rape, white-collar crime, murder, armed robbery, gang violence, terrorism, drug trafficking, and child molestation.

After the program's pilot aired, a lengthy search was conducted, and John Walsh was selected as the host of the show. Walsh gained publicity after his six-year-old son, Adam Walsh, was kidnapped and murdered in 1981, and he parlayed that into the creation of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

The show began profiling missing persons, especially children, in 1991. The show was canceled for a month and a half in the fall of 1996 when Fox decided to air a Saturday night sitcom block.

However, protests from the public, law enforcement, and government officials, including the governors of 37 states, as well as low ratings for the shows replacing *AMW* encouraged Fox to bring the show back. Since this time, the *AMW/COPS* combination has made Saturday evening Fox's most stable night, along with the longest unchanged primetime schedule on American television currently.

In the new millennium, America's Most Wanted has seen continued success. Currently in its 22nd season, AMW has reported over 1000 captures.

The show usually ends with John Walsh saying, "...and remember, you can make a difference", or, on occasion, "...and remember, you do make a difference."

(Wikipedia)

Talk show host Oprah Winfrey recently launched "Oprah's Child Predator Watch List," a roundup of the FBI's most wanted sex offenders, in a campaign to catch pedophiles.

The NBC Web site says the show has helped catch 129 male predators in a total of 14 days between 2004 and 2006; at least 71 have been convicted so far.

The show works with Perverted Justice, a group of volunteers who pose as children ages 10 to 15 in online chat rooms.

Tabloid Fodder or Real Journalism?

Judy Cornett is president of Safety Advocacy Zone, Inc., an advocacy group she founded after her 11-year-old son was raped in 1992 by a neighbor. The group follows sexual predators, warns neighbors of sex offenders living nearby and provides support to victims and their families. Cornett supports media coverage, law enforcement, and public involvement, and says none can effectively work independently of the other.

"[Pedophilia] is an epidemic. We can't just go door-to-door to raise awareness, or even just print it on a newspaper. It's not enough," Cornett said. "We need to get the media in these guys' faces. If we're not looking, they're going to be looking out for their next victim."

But some critics say these shows contribute more to a sense of hysteria than anything else, since most abuse cases involve children being molested in the home.

Jill Levenson, a professor at Lynn University in Florida who studies social policies dealing with sex offenders: says "[the shows] are not representative of 'typical' child sexual abuse cases," in which children are victimized by someone they know and trust.

She also said the vast media attention has made it appear that the rate of sex crimes is rising. "In actuality," she said, "sex crime rates, like other

serious, non-sexual crimes, have declined substantially over the past decade, based on both official crime reports and victim reports."

According to Justice Department statistics, most sexual perpetrators are well known to their victims. Strangers committed only seven percent of sexual assaults against children in 2002. In 2000, child sex-abuse victims identified their abusers as family members in 34 percent of cases, and as acquaintances in 59 percent of cases.

The more that people get to know about what actual crime, the more they can prevent it from happening.

NBC managers say: "Reporting on stories like 'Dateline's To Catch a Predator' requires a careful balance between maintaining social responsibility and upholding journalistic standards. At every turn, we have been transparent and disclosed our relationship with Perverted Justice, as well as with local law enforcement, to our audience."

Like "America's Most Wanted," "'Dateline' has received an overwhelming positive reaction" from viewers, parenting groups, government and school officials, Tartikoff said. "We are proud of our innovative and enterprising reporting, and will continue to follow this issue."

Other analysts say: "They're doing it for the thrill, fun, and notoriety they seem to be getting out of it."

(By Daniella Gallego)

Thanks to shows such as "Dateline: To Catch a Predator," both adults and kids are well aware of online predators lurking in cyberspace. When it comes to kids and technology, parents are more likely to be blinded by the hype than to absorb the reality.

As more kids head back to school with increasingly sophisticated technology in their backpacks, the mischief they get up to may not have much in common with the hyperbolic tales of evening news shows that reveal humanity at low tide.

"Even parents that don't know that much about technology can ask the salesperson these questions: "Can this piece of technology allow access to questionable content, and if so, can it be filtered? Can it be protected from malware that might cause the device to blow up? Can it download movies or music illegally that can lead to getting sued? Can it allow contact with others, and if so, can that communication be monitored?"

MySpace has reached an agreement with more than 45 states to change to help prevent sexual predators and others from misusing it.

Several states' attorneys general said in a statement that the huge social networking Web site has agreed to add several protections and participate in a working group to develop new technologies, including a way to verify the ages of users.

Other social networking sites will be invited to participate. Among other measures, MySpace agreed to:

- **allow parents to submit children's e-mail addresses to MySpace to prevent anyone from misusing the addresses to set up profiles.**
- **Make the default setting "private" for 16- and 17-year-old users.**
- **Respond within 72 hours to complaints about inappropriate content and devote more staff and resources to classify photographs and discussion groups.**
- **Strengthen software to find underage users.**
- **Create a high school section for users under 18 years old.**

National Sex Offender Public Registry