A critical review of the Four Models of Public Relations and the Excellence Theory in an era of digital communication

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Executive Summary

This paper started life as a short article following a discussion with public relations consultant and author Andy Green in Newcastle, UK in August 2012, about how messages from organisations are conveyed among communities and markets via digital networks.

It led me to question whether Grunig and Hunt's Four Models of Public Relations (1984) and the Excellence Theory (1992) remain fit for purpose. These theories are taught as normative models and a cornerstone of public relations on courses throughout Europe and the US. They also form the basis of much academic research, especially in the US.

In a draft article I repeated Green's assertion that the Four Models of Public Relations and the Excellence Theory were defined in an era of rigid organisational structures. The Internet has broken down these structures and has given rise to informal communication structures.

I read around the topic and shared my initial conclusions in September 2012 with several public relations thinkers and doers all of whom are referenced in this paper. They were all critical and each had a different viewpoint.

My original article remains unpublished but I knew that it would make a worthwhile topic to explore for my Chartered Practitioner paper. The paper examines the Four Models of Public Relations and Excellence Theory. It examines historical criticism and instances where the theories are being challenged by modern public relations practice as a result of digital communication.

Four Models of Public Relations

In 1984, James Grunig and Todd Hunt published the Four Models of Public Relations as part of their book *Managing Public Relations.*[i] The model describes the different forms of communication between an organisation and its stakeholders.

The first model is publicity or press agent, the second is public relations information model, the third asymmetric persuasion, and the final one — the two-way symmetrical model — has become accepted as a formal definition of best practice for communication in Western markets between an organisation and its audiences.

Model	Type of Communication	Characteristics
1. Press agent or publicity	One-way communication	Uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audiences to behave as the organisation desires.
2. Public information model	One-way communication	Uses press releases and other one-way communication techniques to distribute organisational information. The public relations practitioner is often referred to as the in-house journalist.
3. Two-way asymmetrical model	Two-way communication (imbalanced)	Uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audiences to behave as the organisation desires. Does not use research to find out how stakeholders feel about the organisation.
4. Two-way symmetrical model	Two-way communication	Uses communication to negotiate with the public, resolve conflict and promote mutual understanding and respect between the organisation and its stakeholders

Table 1: James Grunig and Todd Hunt's Four Models of Public Relations (1984).

The Excellence Theory

The so-called Excellence Theory[ii] developed over the next decade as a result of a research programme commissioned by the Research Foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) in 1984. It sought to explore how public relations could evolve from a tactical craft that broadly focused on publicity and media relations to become a management discipline.

James Grunig assembled a team of six public relations academics and practitioners under his leadership. These included his wife Larissa Grunig of the University of Maryland; David Dozier of San Diego State University; William Ehling of Syracuse University; Jon White, a UK consultant, academic and teacher; and Fred Repper, a public relations practitioner.

In the [Third Annual Grunig Lecture Series](link)[iii] at the PRSA International Conference in October 2010, Larissa and James Grunig explained the original objective and motivation of the research team.

> "We started this project with a simple quest from the IABC Research Foundation which was what is the value of public relations, and can you articulate its value to an organisation?"

The first phase of study that led to the Excellence Theory consisted of quantitative, survey-based research of more than 300 organisations in Canada, UK and US, including a cross section of corporations, non-profit organisations and government agencies.

Survey questionnaires were completed by approximately 5,400 senior executives, public relations practitioners and employees. This resulting qualitative data was reduced through a process of factor analysis into a single index of communication management. The index was used to identify organisations for qualitative research to provide insight into how public relations excellence is achieved in different organisations.

The Excellence Theory's general theory proposed that the value of communication can be determined at four levels as follows[iv].

Programme level – effective organisations must empower public relations as a critical management function.
Functional level – Public relations should be an integrated communication function and separate from other management functions including marketing.
Organisation level – effective organisations should base internal and external communication and relationship building on a two-way symmetrical model.
Societal level – Organisations must recognise their impact on other organisations and publics. They cannot be effective unless they are socially responsible.

Table 2: An overview of the four levels of analysis proposed by the Excellence Theory (adapted from Excellence Theory in Public Relations: Past, Present, and Future; Lauri Grunig and James Grunig).

The original Four Models of Public Relations and vision of two-way symmetrical communications as a model of excellence was reinforced by the subsequent analysis that emerged from the Excellence Theory. As we'll see, some academics believe this shows Grunig's foresight while others claim that the research team was unduly influenced by the Four Models of Public Relations.

Academic criticism
Critical appraisal of the Excellence Theory isn't hard to find. A critical review together with responses from members of the original research team would be sufficient material for a paper in its own right. A chronological summary of some of the different aspects of academic criticism is outlined below.

1996	In a paper for the *Journal of Public Relations Research*[v] Michael Karlberg makes the case that the Excellence Theory is overly concerned with consumers as a primary audience. He believes that the research team missed an opportunity to explore the broader implications of the relationship between an organisation and its markets.
1996	In *Paradigms, System Theory and Public Relations*[vi], Magda Pieczka says that the two-way symmetrical component of the Excellence Theory is over-idealised. In doing so she attacks the research agenda from which it was developed and the premise of systems theory on which the model is based.
2001	Shirley Leitch and David Neilson challenge the rigid nature of the Excellence Theory in a chapter written for the *Handbook of Public Relations*[vii]. Their belief is that publics are not fixed categories waiting to be identified but are formed dynamically through the conversation in which they participate.
2011	In *Public Relations, Society and Culture*[viii], Lee Edwards and Caroline Hodges argue that Grunig's rigid focus on organisation theory over simplifies human behaviour. They suggest that this singular focus on public relations within organisations overlooks the social world in which those organisations operate.

Table 3: Academic criticism of the Excellence Theory.

Other challenges include ethics, power, propaganda and Western bias. My primary issue with the Four Models of Public Relations and the Excellence Theory is the use of a simple construct that seemingly places an organisation or brand at the centre of every diagram, appearing to control communication and relationships. This is not the case in the era of the social web and I would argue never has been.

Applying the Excellence Theory to organisational communication in an era of digital network communication

It is very easy to get excited about the fragmentation of traditional media and celebrate the upheaval in organisation communication created by social media. Digital networks and new forms of digital media are making it easier than ever for organisations to engage with their audiences by creating their own text, images and video and sharing via social networks such as Google+, Facebook, Pinterest and Twitter. But we only get excited about the potential for new forms of digital media to disrupt organisations because so many organisations are wedded to publicity and one-way propaganda as a means of communication.

During the October 2010 speech at the PRSA International Conference, Larissa Grunig said.

> "The new media that we have today makes it more possible than ever to achieve our goals in terms of relationships with stakeholders. So given today's social and business landscape and the advance of digital and social media, what is still important about the Excellence Theory?"

> "I would begin by saying that the theory is not static. Some of the things that we conceptualised years ago are going to change over time because [...] we continue to do research on the theory. People working in the field of public relations continue to investigate and with more data and more analysis, we are able to refine the theory."

> "With things like globalisation and the crises that we've experienced so visibly in the last few years, and of course digital media, all these factors will undoubtedly influence whatever theory is useful to our field."

The implication of Larissa Grunig's comment is that modern digital media provides the opportunity for excellent public relations practice as defined by the Excellence Theory.

In this next section I have scrutinised some of the areas where the Excellence Model is being challenged by digital networks, fragmented media and modern public relations practice.

Communication in digital networks

The jointly sponsored CIPR PRCA Internet Commission in 2000 foresaw the impact that the Internet would have on the media and organisational communication. It recognised how the Internet was set to disintermediate all forms of media and that this would necessitate fundamental changes in organisational communication.

The moment that a message is recorded in an electronic form it can be transmitted within a network with ease. The interconnected nature of networks means that if a message resonates with an audience it will be shared and passed from network-to-network. The original creator of the message has no control over how a message passes through a network or how it is modified en route.

In *The Social Media Manifesto[ix]*, Jed Hallam summarises how messages travel in networks and how thanks to the Internet and social networks this effect is multiplied and messages spread widely and at speed. His book explores what this means for organisational communication and how this effect can be used to build the reputation of an organisation.

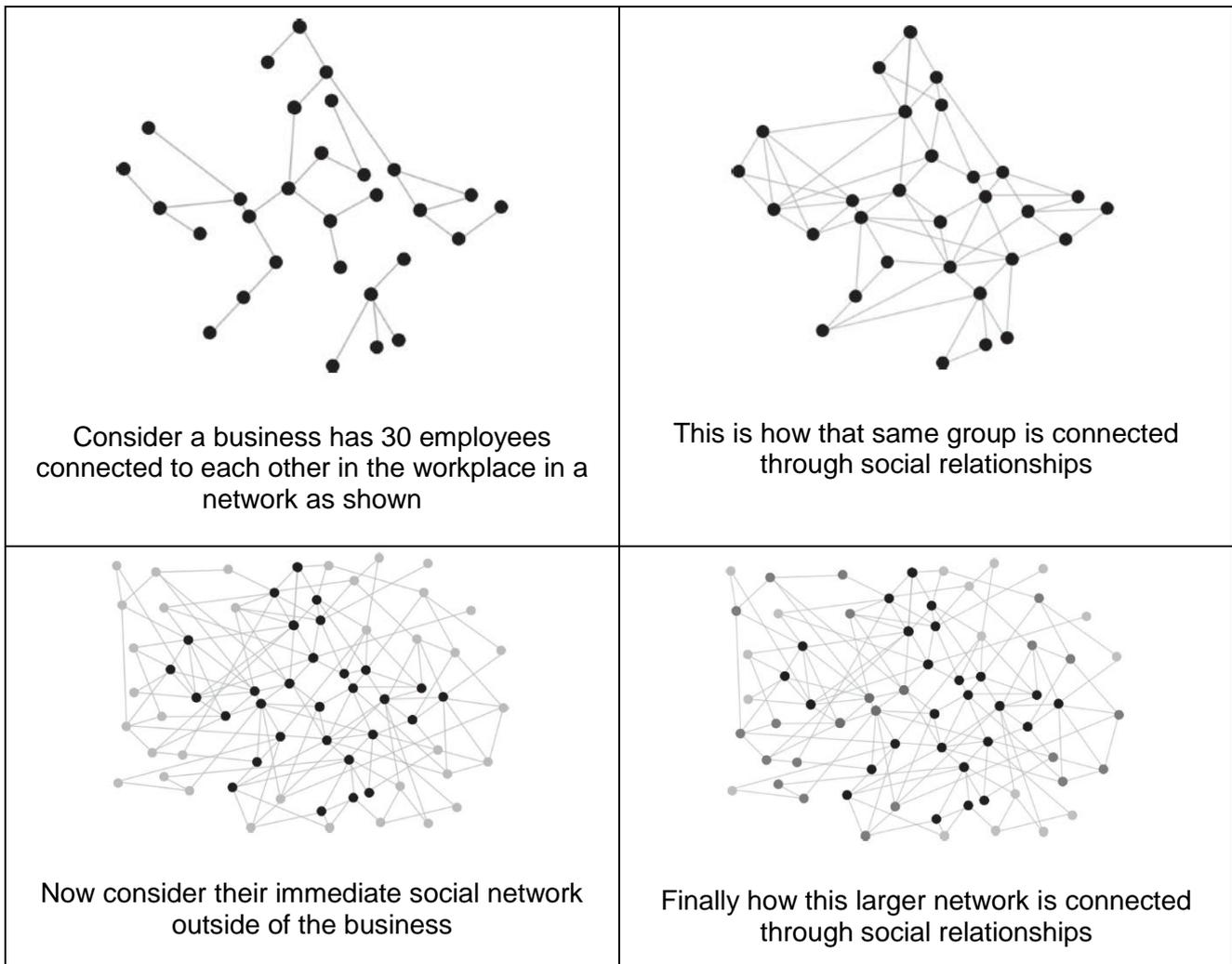|	
Consider a business has 30 employees connected to each other in the workplace in a network as shown	This is how that same group is connected through social relationships
Now consider their immediate social network outside of the business	Finally how this larger network is connected through social relationships

Figure 1: How messages travel in networks regardless of traditional boundaries. Messages travel between social connections rather than via traditional hierarchical structures.

How publics assimilate online

David Philips was an original member of the CIPR PRCA Internet Commission. He has campaigned tirelessly for the last decade for the public relations industry to wake-up to the impact of the Internet on organisation communication.

> "The Grunig device of having the equivalent of four models of communication between an organisation and its publics has significant limitations. It was conceived in an era of set structures and I think it is showing its age."

In a paper presented at Bledcom in 2009[x], Bruno Amaral and David Phillips reported on a research project at the University of Lisbon that investigated how relationships are formed online. The research examined a huge corpus of blog posts and discovered that relationships are formed at a nexus in values. Individuals and organisations that share similar values with other individuals and organisations will naturally converge online.

Amaral and Phillips stopped short of identifying how this convergence took place. Some of it was via hyperlinks but by no means all. There were lots of connections that were unexplained by network theory. Phillips has continued the programme of study and developed a work in progress called the Lisbon Theory[xi].

New models of organisational communication

In *Online Public Relations*[xii] David Phillips and Philip Young state that Internet technologies have disintermediated not only of organisational communication but the entire value chain of commerce.

> "The context in which an organisation can thrive is rapidly moving from its ability to create traditional relationships with publics to its ability to do this in an online world, and mostly via third parties that are beyond its control."

> "The presence of information and messages about organisations is spread by and through many devices and platforms that transmit and receive information. Distribution is effected by web crawlers and search engines."

Case study: PG Tips

You can test Phillip's and Young's hypothesis for yourself very simply in the time that it takes to make a cup of tea or coffee. In fact head to Google, or any other search engine, and type the name of your favourite brand of tea or coffee.

I'm a PG Tips drinker myself. Google returns 29 million pages. The PG Tips Facebook page has around 1,000 likes and 100 comments and Twitter returns a tweet every 30 seconds from someone enjoying a cup of tea.

PG Tips has created less than one per cent of this content. The simple fact that has been laid bare by the Internet and social forms of media is that an organisation does not own the conversation around its products or services.

People have always talked about organisations and brands. It was almost certainly the case in a pre-digital world but conversations were transient and didn't leave an audit trail as they do now.

The tea manufacturer can only hope to influence what is written about it by how it communicates and the relationships that it has with its audiences. This is the story of social media and it is causing upheaval for organisational communication.

The point well made by Philips and Young is that the vast majority of content on the web about an organisation is not under its control and the opportunity for engagement is limited. In fact it's not possible for an organisation to monitor all the mentions of it online let alone interact in a meaningful way.

The social web is made up of conversations on blogs, forums and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, accessible in moments in response to a search query. They put publics firmly in control of the reputation of an organisation, placing the audience at the heart of the conversation, seemingly turning The Four Models of Public Relations and The Excellence Model theory on its head.

Memes: dynamic communication

Andy Green challenges the Excellence Theory's assumption of a neat transactional relationship between an audience and its publics.

> "I would challenge Grunig's symmetrical model [the fourth model] as it fails to take into account the dynamic nature of memes - it makes assumptions that content is passive, undynamic and inert."

Memes is a concept conceived by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* that has come to define the means by which cultural behaviours and ideas are shared. It describes an idea or concept, typically in the form of a piece of content that is replicated and modified through personal communication, increasingly the social web.

Marketing and public relations practitioners strive to generate memes as a means of promoting a brand, product or issue. But devising an idea that is meme-friendly that inspires an audience to develop and share so that it goes viral is as tough as it gets. The Internet is littered with failed attempts.

Organisations also need to contend with the issue of the loss of control. Memes as a metaphor of cultural DNA evolve as they reproduce. This is where Green takes issue with the Excellence Theory. In his view it fails to describe how an idea that is originated by an organisation is shared, mimicked and developed by the audience. Everett Rogers explores this issue in *The Diffusion of Innovations*[xiii]. The relationship between an organisation and an audience isn't asymmetrical as Grunig describes. Instead messages are distorted and adapted as it is shared by the audience, as Green contends.

> "Communicators need to understand that memes are the DNA of communications. You need to understand and respect the power of memes to harness, direct where possible, although not positively control."

Social media doesn't change anything

Liz Bridgen who leads the MA courses in Public Relations and International Public Relations at De Montfort University responded to a tweet I posted in my search for examples of truly two-way symmetrical communication.

Bridgen encourages students to take a critical view of Grunig and challenged me to consider whether social media changes anything in the relationship between an organisation and its publics.

> "If an organisation has a blog or a Facebook page and invites comments from its publics, a symmetrical form of communication, does it conform to Grunig's Excellence Theory?"

> "The answer is clearly no. It is only symmetrical communication if the organisation engages but it is unlikely to be a symmetrical relationship. Oil companies are a good example of companies where the power they hold means that no exchange can ever be equal."

Case study: Starbucks

Starbucks is often upheld as an example of an organisation that engages with its publics in a two-way relationship.

At Schiphol airport in Amsterdam recently I was served a cup of coffee personalised with my name. It's an attempt to engage consumers in a two-way symmetrical relationship, dressed-up as a cute gimmick.

Starbucks takes on board comment from customers via its stores and acts on customer preferences via its website. In September 2010 its then UK head Darcy Willson-Rymer was criticised by Financial Times management writer Louise Kelloway for obsessing about customer feedback via Twitter[xiv]. Kelloway questioned whether it was a valuable use of his time.

More recently Starbucks has been criticised by the UK media and customers via Facebook and Twitter for minimising its UK tax affairs. Its response has been a formal rebuttal. Two-way symmetrical communications for Starbucks stops when it comes to the bottom line.

The Business of Influence

In *Brand Anarchy[xv]*, the book that I co-wrote with Steve Earl, Philip Sheldrake brings a refreshing perspective to organisational communication.

> "Information and communication technology has laid bare the fact in a way that you can't call anything less than brutal these days. You can't fake it so, to me, reality is the new perception. So you'd better make sure that you build that reality in order to live up to the perception that you'd like others to have of you. Ultimately that's the business of influence."

In a related article in the *Harvard Balanced Scorecard Report[xvi]*, Sheldrake says:

> "No organisation is an island. Everything it does occurs within the context of a changing world, in a dynamic interplay with every entity around it. The revolution in information and communication technologies has made this dynamic interplay increasingly transparent, immediate, and global. If 'perception is reality' characterised twentieth-century marketing and public relations, 'reality is perception' is the twenty-first century axiom. […] Organisations must cultivate a sensitivity to the new dynamic (one that's superior to competitors') and sharpen their ability to interpret and respond to the myriad communication flows issuing from all sides."

Sheldrake sets out a new model organisational communication as a result of the Internet and online networks based on six primary influence flows in his book *The Business of Influence*[xvii].
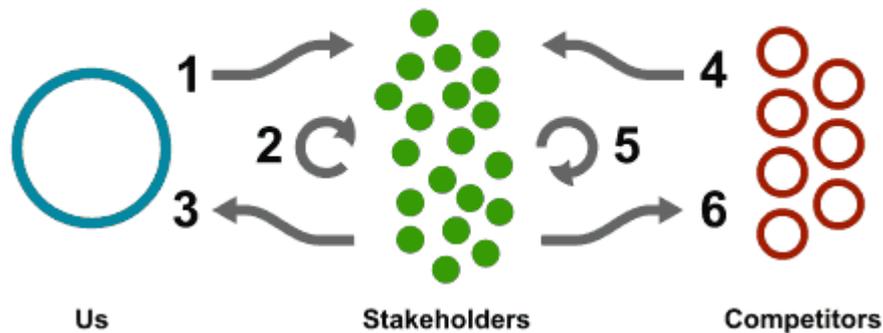

Figure 2: The Influence flows between an organisation, stakeholders and competitors.

1. An organisation's influence on its stakeholders
2. The influence of stakeholders on each other with respect of an organisation
3. The influence of stakeholders on the organisation
4. An organisation's competitors influence its stakeholders
5. The influence of stakeholders on each other with respect to an organisations' competitors
6. The influence of stakeholders on the organisation's competitors

Sheldrake's contention is that the first flow, an organisation's influence on its stakeholders, and the corresponding third flow, the influence of stakeholders on an organisation, are well understood. This is symmetrical communication between an organisation and its publics and it overlays neatly onto the fourth of the Four Models of Public Relations. But the Internet has made the second flow critical to the management of the reputation of an organisation and a market.

Furthermore, stakeholders are using the Internet to find each other and thanks to search technology are able to communicate about an organisation online. These conversations are likely to be a rich source of insight for an organisation if it chooses to listen and are an opportunity for engagement. Technology also makes it easy for an organisation to track its competitors and their influence on its stakeholders and vice versa - influence flows 4, 5 and 6.

Switching the axis of organisational communication
Back to Philip Young. I sought out his views on the Four Models of Public Relations and the Excellence Theory after reading *Online Public Relations* and reviewing a post on his thought provoking blog Mediations[xviii] about his personal view of the theories. Young shares Sheldrake's view that the key to understanding organisational communication lies in an audience-centric viewpoint. He believes that the theories are based on an old-fashioned view of organisational communication.

> "The organisation talks to the audience, listens a bit, talks again, and a lot of public relations theory, especially when written from a media relations perspective, still concentrates on this vector."

Young's view is that we argue that the most significant conversations are those surrounding the organisation and that social media has increased the ability for the audience to communicate with each other.

"These conversations are now visible. They are aggregated and are searchable. Grunig sees the main path as up and down, from organisation to audience and back, but the most significant discourse is left to right amongst the audience."

Grunig continues to make the case for the Four Models of Public Relations and the Excellence Model. He responded to the claim that the Internet disrupts his model in a paper *Paradigms of Global Public Relations in the Age of Digitalisation[xix]*.

"For most practitioners, digital media do change everything about the way they practice public relations. Other practitioners, however, doggedly use the new media in the same way that they used traditional media. From a theoretical perspective, in addition, I do not believe digital media change the public relations theory needed to guide practice, especially our generic principles of public relations. Rather, the new media facilitate the application of the principles and, in the future, will make it difficult for practitioners around the world not to use the principles."

Conclusion

The Four Models of Public Relations and the Excellence Theory aren't wrong but they are idealistic and as Sheldrake shows are showing their age in an era of Internet-driven network communication, and are insufficient to explain the modern business of public relations.

Few organisations truly engage with their audiences as Grunig et al describe in the Four Models of Public Relations and the Excellence Theory but are locked into one-way forms of communication or imbalanced two-way asymmetrical communication.

Grunig's intention in developing the Four Models of Public Relations and Excellence Theory was to set out how public relations should be practised. It has been idealised by academics and practitioners. That's not a flaw or fault in the theory. I'd argue that this is recognition of the breadth and rigor of Grunig's work.

The increasing adoption of social media and the shift to integrate social technologies into organisations puts audiences at their heart and calls for a reappraisal for the Four Models of Public Relations and the four levels of analysis proposed by the Excellence Theory.

The Four Models of Public Relations and the Excellence Theory were milestone texts in the project to professionalise public relations and shift away from propaganda and persuasion. But the Four Models of Public Relations and the Excellence Theory have signification limitations but then they were both conceived in a pre-social web era of well-defined organisational structures and modes of communication.

It is important to recognise that these are models. As such, no organisation can expect to conform to them precisely. However they are important as a means of helping students and practitioners understand the flow of communication between an organisation and its publics.

I've stopped short of proposing how the Four Models of Public Relations and the Excellence Theory might be developed. I'll leave that to far more learned and wiser minds than my own. That said my view is that the models must take an audience, consumer-centric or influencer viewpoint and consider their impact on an organisation rather than vice versa.

This is after all the business of public relations.

Acknowledgements

In producing this paper for my Chartered Practitioner qualification I have tackled an academic public relations issue from the standpoint of a practitioner. I would argue that this has merit in its own right as I've long believed that academics and practitioners should have a better working relationship.

I acknowledge that I have trodden a well-worn path but I am a relatively new student of the Four Models of Public Relations and the Excellence Theory and emerging forms of media have led to renewed interest and criticism.

In researching and developing this paper I have relied heavily on friends and colleagues in the public relations industry to fill in gaps in my knowledge and critique my work.

My thanks to the following people for helping bring this project to fruition: Richard Bailey, Liz Bridgen, Andy Green, Jed Hallam, Laurel Hetheringon, David Phillips, Philip Sheldrake, and Philip Young. Finally thanks to my editor Margaret Clow for her help with proofing and numerous rewrites.

Biography

Stephen Waddington is a public relations consultant and author. He is European digital and social media director at Ketchum, author of *Brand Anarchy*, and the editor and contributor of *Share This*. You can connect with him via his blog about public relations *Two-Way Street* or via @wadds on Twitter.

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