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Interactivity and public relations on the web: a theoretical analysis

ABSTRACT

Interactivity is one of the most prominent features of the Internet, distinguishing it from traditional mass media such as newspapers or television. However, when discussing the concept of interactivity, most people tend to think only about the bells and whistles on particular web sites without considering interactivity as a theoretical concept. As this aspect has such important implications for communication theory, in general, and for the use of the Internet as a communication medium, it is essential for communication scholars and all communication practitioners (including public relations practitioners) to understand the theoretical roots of interactivity. This would enable academics to apply interactivity as a theoretical concept to new media research and practitioners to make better use of the Internet as a communication medium. This article explores the concept of interactivity and makes a connection between interactivity and the application of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations to public relations on the web.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The interactive nature of new communication technologies is seen as the key advantage of new media. It makes two-way communication between source and receiver possible, and multidirectional communication can take place between any number of sources and receivers on different levels of communication. Internet users can therefore become more active participants in the world of mediated communications (Pavlik, 1996:135).

An interactive medium such as the Internet gives the receiver more power to control the content and form of the interaction. Interactivity makes it possible for everyone on the information superhighway to act both as a receiver and as source, just as anyone with a telephone can make or receive a call. In contrast with traditional mass communication, where the audience or the receiver of the message could not “talk back” or control the content of the interaction, interactivity refers to quite a different view of (mass) communication. With regard to two-way symmetrical communication, Elliot (1997:119) found that online communication was the most symmetrical form of mass communication when compared to radio, newspapers and television.

The application of interactivity to new media such as the Internet therefore has important theoretical implications for communication theory. It also opens exciting possibilities in various professional fields such as public relations (cf. Kent, Taylor & White, 2003:63; Ryan, 2003:335). This article therefore intends to unpack the theoretical dimensions and implications of interactivity, specifically applied to the field of public relations.

2. INTERACTIVE AND NON-INTERACTIVE CONTENT – A COMPARISON

Before we arrive at a generally accepted definition of interactivity, it is important to compare the differences between interactive and non-interactive messages (Anderson, 1995:153). This comparison is illustrated in Table 1 and discussed thereafter.

Attribute	Interactive	Non-interactive
1. Information flow	Multiple information flows	One-way flow
2. Message availability	Usually available on demand	Fixed availability
3. Feedback immediacy	Real-time feedback possible	Severely delayed feedback
4. Type of perception	Intelligent & responsive interaction	Exposure
5. Customisation of content	Users customise	Customised by senders

(Source: Anderson, 1995:153)

Table 1: A comparison between interactive and non-interactive content

- Information flow is defined by the transfer of information from one point to another. Interactive messages consist of multiple information flows between participants, while non-interactive messages consist of one-way flow of information between a sender and a receiver. Interactive and non-interactive communication differs in terms of its different views on what the purpose of communication is. According to the linear or one-way model, communication is seen as the transmission (or sending) of information (a transmission view of communication), and it is therefore a non-interactive act. On the other hand, the two-way model views communication as a ritual for sharing, participation or association between people, and communication is directed towards the representation of shared beliefs and not only towards the act of imparting information (Carey, 1989:15-20).

In the past, communication technology such as the telegraph and the computer had been associated with the transmission view of communication, which represents a linear, non-interactive model of (mass) communication. However, with the interactive possibilities of the Internet, this association is not longer relevant. If the transmission view is applied to a web site, the web site would be seen as merely an instrument for the dissemination of news and/or knowledge or information.

However, the application of a ritual view of communication to a web site would result in a different view and subsequently a different appearance of the web site. Such a web site would be seen as portraying or confirming a particular worldview. Visiting the web site would be a ritual or dramatic act that enables the visitor to take part in the portrayal of a dramatic picture of the world. The visitor would not be a passive consumer or observer, but rather an actor in the process.

Within the ritual view of communication, two-way symmetry and interactivity could actually be used as synonyms, as some communication researchers have already indicated (Schickinger, 1998:6; Elliot, 1997:43).

- Message availability is defined by when a message is available. Who determines when a particular message is seen or heard? Interactive messages are available when users want to access them and this characteristic can be called availability on demand. Non-interactive messages have a fixed availability, because they are only available when the sender makes them available.
- Immediacy of feedback is defined by the time it takes feedback to return to the original sender of a message. Interactive messages can be replied to in real time, using the same medium in which the message was sent. Non-interactive messages have severely delayed feedback. For instance, a letter to the editor of a newspaper could take days to reach its destination.

- Type of perception is about how users should perceive their experiences with messages. Interactive messages should be perceived as intelligent and responsive interaction because the microprocessor behind the screen can perform a variety of functions. Non-interactive messages are perceived as exposure as opposed to transaction or interaction.
- Customisation of content refers to who formats, arranges or manipulates the content. Users customise the content of interactive messages by arranging or modifying their contents in different ways. The option of personalised content on the WWW is one way of customising content. Senders customise non-interactive messages and when they refer to mass communication, the same message is sent out to every person in the audience (Anderson, 1995:153-154).

From Table 1 it seems that the most important aspect of interactivity is the power that it puts into the hands of the users of new media. They have more control over their media usage as well as its content than over traditional mass media. With this explanation of the differences between interactive and non-interactive messages, it is possible to take a closer and more critical look at a formal definition of interactivity as well as its identified dimensions.

2.1 A definition of interactivity

Interactivity refers to more self-control, choice, involvement, a richer experience and resistance to influence on behalf of the receiver in a mediated environment (McQuail, 1997:144). The concept of interactivity can be defined from several perspectives, such as an interpersonal perspective, which would be as follows: "the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages" (Rafaeli, 1988:111). Other approaches to define interactivity could be artistic or mechanistic (Steure, 1992:74).

According to Ha and James (1998:461), these approaches to interactivity could easily lead to subjective interpretations of the nature of interactivity because of an invalid assumption in all these definitions. These definitions recognise the fact that interactivity means two-way communication, but they assume that this would be a common desire both for the communicator and the audience.

However, reasons for using a medium such as the WWW may differ from person to person. For example, in most discussion groups, some members are quiet observers who never participate while others are active participants who frequently state their views. Some WWW surfers want to complete a specific task by visiting a web site, while others just like to look around to see what is available on the Web.

Ha and James (1998:461) argue that the notion of mutual interest in two-way communication is unrealistic and that interactivity should rather be defined in terms of the communication needs of the communicator as well as the audience. They propose the following definition:

Interactivity refers to the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to, or are willing to facilitate each other's communication needs.

This definition allows different levels of interactivity and a broader perspective on the concept. Sometimes the audience want a low level of interactivity, because they just want to navigate a web site and select different options without direct contact with the organization. There are also times when the audience want immediate response from the organization, for instance, to solve a problem.

Interactivity in terms of this definition allows for it to be seen as a multidimensional concept that can be implemented in various forms.

3. THE DIMENSIONS OF INTERACTIVITY

To elaborate on this somewhat different view of interactivity, Ha and James (1998:461-463) distinguish the following five dimensions of interactivity:

3.1 Playfulness

Play is seen as one of the purposes of communication and it is seen as an interlude from work. As information technology can be used for entertainment purposes, the WWW can enhance playfulness and entertainment value with the click of a mouse. People get excitement and psychological gratifications when playing games, electronic and otherwise. The presence of games on the WWW is very similar to video games and they provide a playful environment in which an audience member can communicate with himself or herself. Play could be seen as inner talk or conversation within oneself to provide pleasure for the individual. Strictly speaking, the playfulness dimension of interactivity refers to inner communication with oneself, rather than with another person. However, Ha and James (1998:461) conclude that people often need to communicate with themselves, rather than to communicate with others.

3.2 Choice

Choice refers to the availability of choice and unrestricted navigation in cyberspace. It is also related to playfulness, as it provides an internal emotional sense of satisfaction. When site visitors perceive the availability of choices they may feel empowered because they are able to choose from several different alternatives.

Another aspect of choice is to minimise effort in the achievement of a task. This could be achieved by providing the option of choosing a particular language when navigating a web site. The choice between text and graphic web browsers is another option that allows visitors with different web browsers to access the full content of the web site.

3.3 Connectedness

Connectedness refers to the ability to link to the outside world and to broaden one's experience easily. With the skilful use of hypertext and images, visitors can interact with the content on a web site as if they were physically present in a natural environment. For instance, in a web site that simulates a showroom, a visitor can feel virtually present and have questions answered with the click of a mouse. Another example is a linked, content-rich press room, which facilitates sound media relations (Callison, 2003:39). Organisations that provide a connected experience on their web sites fulfil the individual information needs of site visitors and build trust from consumers.

3.4 Information collection

Ha and James (1998:463) refer to information collection as primarily a need of the communicator. It becomes more and more important for organisations to keep databases about their customers. More information about their audience can help organizations to formulate messages according to the interests and knowledge levels of the audience.

Monitoring mechanisms are defined as explicit means by which a web site operator can record who has visited the site. It can take on the form of admission requirements such as visitor registration before admitting the user to browse the site. In another variation, a request for visitor's information can also be made for viewing particular portions of a site. This can be categorised as monitoring during usage. User information can also be collected automatically by means of cookie files without the visitor knowing.

3.5 Reciprocal communication

This dimension is similar to the more conventional approach to, and definition of, interactivity, as explained earlier. By adding the previous four dimensions of interactivity, Ha and James (1998:463) expand the earlier views of interactivity to a more complex and multi-dimensional construct.

Reciprocal communication can be enhanced by the presence of response mechanisms on a web site through which the visitor can communicate with the web site owner. A web site can therefore be seen as an invitation for visitors to do something. This is usually also referred to as a feedback loop that could begin with the web site visitor's initiation

of a conversation with the organisation by sending a message to the webmaster. It could also begin with the organisation's provision of information and other content. The organization expects response and feedback from the web site visitors in return for this content. To motivate visitors to become involved and to encourage feedback, the content must be useful to the consumer or the web site visitor.

The more reciprocal communication between the site visitor and the web site owner, the more the site can respond to the particular needs of visitors. If visitors can personalise a web site, they will only receive information according to their interests. Ha and James (1998:463) refer to such dialogues between the communicator and the audience as "collaborative communication".

At the extreme it could be difficult to distinguish between the communicator and the audience, because both have the power to initiate contact and to receive messages. In a reciprocal relationship, there is an initiator who is expecting a return. Note that Grunig and Hunt (1984:26) say that true two-way communication does not distinguish between a sender and a receiver, because communication is not something that one party does to the other party.

In true two-way symmetrical communication terms then, there could be an initiator, but it could be either the organization or the individual web site user. Therefore, Grunig and Hunt suggest that communicating participants be called Person I/ Person II or Group I/Group II and not for example initiator/receiver or sender/receiver. As the reciprocal dimension of interactivity makes two-way communication possible via the Internet, some researchers have proposed that the concepts of symmetry and interactivity are related in some way, if not synonyms.

Elliot (1997:3) suggests that interactivity could be referred to as the "sister concept" of symmetry. This claim is substantiated by a comparison between Rafaeli's definition of interactivity (1988) (see earlier in this article) and Grunig and Hunt's view of two-way communication (1984:26). Rafaeli notes that communication roles should be interchangeable for full interactivity to be possible. Similarly, the two-way symmetrical model allows for equality of roles between the organisation and its publics. The potential for empowerment via the Internet therefore makes it likely to have a balance in power between the organisation and its publics (Ryan, 2003:339).

The ability of the Internet to simulate interpersonal communication enhances the possibility of practising two-way symmetrical communication via this medium. Although the originators of the two-way symmetrical model did not apply this model to computer-mediated communication when it was developed, they did acknowledge the possibility

of mediated two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:320; Elliot, 1997:43; Ryan, 2003:336).

It is, however, important to distinguish between fully interactive communication and reactive communication that is also characterised as two-way communication. In reactive communication via, for example, the Internet, one side responds to the other. But such communication remains reactive until there is a bilaterally flow of messages between participants. For true interactivity, later messages should take earlier messages into account (Rafaeli, 1998; Schultz, 2000:210).

This means that reciprocal communication as the highest level and most complex dimension of interactivity can be studied on a continuum with reactive communication on the one far end and fully interactive communication on the other end. To illustrate this principle, Schultz (2000:211) uses the example of online communication between journalists and readers, and between readers and readers. In *Table 2* Schultz's example is adapted and applied to a public relations context.

	Organization to publics	Publics to publics (Public relations forums)
One-way communication	Public relations messages	Published letters/email to the editor Reader sites Citizens portrayed/quoted
Two-way/reactive communication	Letters (mail, email, fax) Polls Question and answer sections	Letters referring to other letters Online forum postings
Interactive communication	Online discussion boards/chats/forums with PROs participating	Online discussion boards Chat rooms Sequences of emails initiated by forums

Table 2: Different levels of reciprocal communication online

Table 2 emphasises the fact that interactive characteristics must be examined closely before they are called true interactivity. Therefore, the earlier suggestion that interactivity should be viewed on a continuum is stressed again. Reciprocal communication, as one of the dimensions of interactivity, thus also has a lower level (reactive communication) and a higher level (true interactive communication).

4. AN EXPANDED VIEW OF INTERACTIVITY: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Some of the interactivity dimensions can be considered as higher levels of interactivity than others. On the continuum of interactivity (Schultz, 2000:211), *information collection* and *reciprocal communication* are dimensions that could be classified as higher levels of interactivity because they involve direct, two-way exchange of messages between the communicator/source and the audience. These two dimensions could also be considered *source oriented*, because the source is usually the major benefactor of that interactivity, according to Ha and James (1998:463). However, such a view of interactivity would refer to an asymmetrical view of communication.

The ideal would be that both the communicator and the receiver, or both Person I and Person II (to use Grunig and Hunt's suggestion), would benefit equally from the interactivity on the web site. This would constitute symmetrical communication. Organisations that apply the two-way symmetrical model would use these forms of interactivity equally to their own benefit as well as to the benefit of their various publics or customers. Schultz (2000:210) states that fully interactive communication (which could also be understood as higher levels of interactivity) would imply more equality of the participants and a greater symmetry of communicative power than in one-way communication.

Ha and James (1998:464) categorise the other three dimensions of interactivity (*playfulness*, *choice* and *connectedness*) as self-communications that do not have a direct influence on the source. These dimensions are considered audience oriented, because the audience plays a major role in the communication process. The web site provides the device necessary for the audience members to meet their individual needs.

Organisations usually make use of audience-oriented dimensions of interactivity as bait to lead web site visitors to the source-oriented features of interactivity (Ha & James, 1998:464). Often web site visitors could have more appreciation for audience-oriented interactivity than for source-oriented interactivity. The reason is that source-oriented interactivity could involve risks such as the loss of privacy or the disclosure of identity.

It would seem that audience-oriented interactivity eventually leads to source-oriented interactivity as organisations often implement these forms of interactivity to lead the web site visitors to other forms of interactivity (audience-oriented) that have more benefits for the organisation. If organisations strive to function according to two-way symmetrical communication principles, they should also implement source-oriented interactivity to the benefit of their web site visitors.

Ideally, source-oriented interactivity should therefore also lead to audience-oriented interactivity where mutual trust and strong relationships can be built and where the audience could experience just as many advantages as the organisation (see *Table 3*).

	Source orientated	Audience orientated
Low interactivity	Eventually also benefits the organization	Playfulness Choice Connectedness
High interactivity	Information collection Reciprocal communication	Should also benefit the audience

Table 3: The implementation of interactivity dimensions

Ha and James (1998:470) illustrate how the levels of interactivity could fulfil the communication needs of different types of people. For self-indulgers and web surfers, the playfulness and choice dimensions fulfil self-communication and entertainment needs. For task-oriented users, the connectedness dimension can fulfil information needs. For expressive users, the information collection and reciprocal communication dimensions allow them to initiate communication with web site representatives or people of common interest online.

For the five dimensions to be applied to the organisational web site optimally, the functions and possible forms of interactivity need to be investigated.

5. FUNCTIONS AND FORMS OF INTERACTIVITY

Interactivity could have different functions on an organisational web page. Ghose and Dou (1998:30-34) identified and categorised five functions of interactivity: customer support, marketing research, search for more information, advertising/promotion/publicity and entertainment.

To make use of each interactive function, these researchers also categorised several forms of interactivity to support each interactive function. These forms of interactivity can also be categorised in terms of the dimensions of interactivity, namely playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection and reciprocal communication (the

dimensions applicable to every form of interactivity will be indicated in brackets). The connection between the functions, forms and dimensions of interactivity will be illustrated without discussing each element in detail. For a more detailed discussion of these aspects, refer to Ghose and Do (1998) and Naudé (2001).

5.1 Function 1: Customer/public support or service

This function is one of the most important functions of interactivity, especially for the development of long-term relationships between an organization and its customers or publics. Reciprocal communication is the most important dimension of interactivity applicable here. Customer support as an interactive function could take some of the following forms:

- *Software downloading* (choice, connectedness, and playfulness if games are downloaded);
- *Online problem diagnostics* (reciprocal communication);
- *Electronic-form (e-form) inquiry* (reciprocal communication);
- *Order status tracking* (connectedness);
- *Comments* (reciprocal communication);
- *Feedback* (reciprocal communication, information collection);
- *Online forums* (reciprocal communication).

5.2 Function 2: Marketing research

The interactive nature of the Internet makes it possible to conduct marketing research via this medium. By doing this, organisations can collect more information on their publics or customers, who they are and what their preferences and dislikes are. The most important applicable dimensions of interactivity are reciprocal communication and information collection. The following forms of interactivity could therefore be applied:

- *Site survey* (reciprocal communication, information collection);
- *Product survey* (reciprocal communication, information collection);
- *New-product proposals from web site visitors* (reciprocal communication).

5.3 Function 3: Search for more information

This function allows the web site visitor to search for specific information on a particular subject. It is especially valuable on very large web sites and on sites where visitors have to make important decisions, such as buying a house or a car. Choice and connectedness are the most important dimensions of interactivity for this function and the following forms of interactivity could be applicable:

- *Key word search* (choice, connectedness);
- *Personal-choice helper* (choice, reciprocal communication) - A function that can

make relatively sophisticated recommendations on consumers' choices based on their input of preferences and decision criteria;

- *Virtual reality display* (connectedness);
- *Dealer/branch locator* (choice).

5.4 Function 4: Advertising/promotion/publicity

Playfulness is an important dimension of interactivity applicable here, but other dimensions could also be applied, possibly in the following forms:

- *Newsgroups* (reciprocal communication);
- *Electronic coupons* (playfulness, choice);
- *Online orders* (choice, connectedness);
- *Sweepstakes/prizes* (playfulness);
- *Multimedia shows* (playfulness, choice);
- *Push media* (choice, playfulness) - Similar to TV channels. Users select to participate and receive multimedia-rich information directly to their screens on a regular basis;
- *Interactive job placement* (reciprocal communication).

5.5 Function 5: Entertainment

Entertainment is important in terms of the generation of return visits to a web site. Web site visitors must enjoy their visit to the site. Enjoyment could be reached by any of the other functions of interactivity as well, but entertainment is for many web site visitors one of the main reasons for visiting a web site. The most important dimension of interactivity applicable to this function is, of course, playfulness. The following forms of interactivity are examples:

- *Electronic post card* (playfulness);
- *Web surfer postings* (reciprocal communication, playfulness, connectedness) - a section for surfers to write their stories, opinions, or experiences regarding the organisation, its services or its products;
- *Games* (playfulness).

6. THE APPLICATION OF INTERACTIVITY IN PRACTICE

New interactive functions are constantly being developed. Ha and James (1998:464) emphasise that the dimensions and forms of interactivity applied on an organisational web site would be influenced by aspects such as the nature of the organisation as well as the intended functions of the web site. To know what the intended function/s of the web site are, it is important to have strategic goals for the web site.

In an empirical study on the interactive features of web sites, Ghose and Dou (1998) found that interactivity mechanisms are a significant factor affecting the attractiveness of web sites. They conclude that organisations should critically examine the degree and forms of interactivity on their web sites and improve their web sites accordingly. Ha and James (1998) found a discrepancy between the interactive capability of the WWW and the actual implementation of interactivity in most web sites. In another study, data suggested that organisations using the web to build relations with publics should consider important design factors regarding interactivity on their web sites. It was concluded that the more an organisation depends upon its publics for achieving its mission, the more important it is to employ dialogical features into its web site design (Kent et al., 2003:75; cf. Ashcroft & Hoey, 2001:73). In order to do this, interactivity should be understood and applied appropriately.

Improvements in web site interactivity could provide two benefits. Firstly, they could lead to the organisation's web site being included on a list of the best web sites, such as the Lycos top 5%. Such recognition could encourage more people to visit the web site. In the second place, a web site with more interactive mechanisms would be more appealing to those who visit the site. Those visitors are more likely to become actively involved in the organisation's web communications, therefore creating dialogue and better relationships with the organization's different publics.

Ghose and Dou (1998:40-41) emphasize that it would not be possible or advisable for organisations to include every single interactive function into their web sites. Organisations should consider combinations of interactive functions that fit into their WWW communication strategy and web site goals.

It is because of the interactive nature of the Internet that researchers refer to its potential to create dialogue, especially with regard to dialogue between the organisation and its diverse publics, with different interests. The outcomes of interactivity are engagement in communication and relationship building between a company and its target consumers or publics (Ha & James, 1998:459; Spalter, 1995; Fishburne & Montgomery, 1995:288). The reason for these outcomes is that with the use of this medium, there are more opportunities to resolve problems, to address individual needs and to collaborate individually with each customer through dialogue (Peppers & Rogers, 1995:121).

7. DIALOGICAL/SYMMETRICAL RELATIONSHIPS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS ON THE WEB

Besides the general guidelines for applying interactivity to an organisational web site, discussed above, some researchers refer specifically to the possibility of dialogic or symmetrical relationships through the WWW and have set up guidelines on how this could be achieved.

In 1995 when the WWW was still in its infant shoes, Pizzo (1995:22-23) predicted it would be possible to create powerful relationships because of the interactivity of the medium. No other medium till then had permitted the same level of interactivity as the WWW and he suggested that organisations should learn how to use it to enter into dialogue with the general public, customers and suppliers.

Other researchers also stress the possibility of dialogue and long-term relationships through the use of the WWW (Freitag, 1999; Weber, 1996; Esrock & Leichty, 1999; Cohen, 1997; Boehlke, 1996; Harden, 1996; Johnson, 1997). They stress that the WWW would increase the role of the public relations practitioner as a facilitator of two-way symmetrical communication. In this facilitative role, they stressed the cultivation of long-term relationships with highly segmented publics and the determining of public needs, attitudes and opinions. This must take place before, during and after the design and implementation of each public relations campaign.

Kent and Taylor (1998:323) argue that the potential of the WWW for public relations can be realised only by understanding and applying dialogical communication theory and the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). These authors explain the relationship between two-way symmetry and dialogical communication as one of *process* and *product*. Grunig (1992) argues that organizations should set up structured systems, processes and rules for two-way public relations. This means that two-way symmetrical communication must provide the necessary procedures for dialogue to take place. Dialogue is hence seen as the product, while two-way symmetrical processes and systems make dialogue possible.

The question is how the technology of the WWW can affect communicative relationships if it is accepted that relationship building is the foundation of two-way symmetrical public relations. It must be stressed that a technological deterministic view is not acceptable. Technology in itself can neither create nor destroy relationships. It is how technology is used and applied that can affect relationships between an organisation and its publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998:324).

The WWW has proven to be a very good information dissemination tool and useful for “getting a message out”. The dissemination of information should, however, not be confused with dialogical communication. Activities like environmental scanning by means of monitoring the WWW and subsequently reacting on this information are not the same as dialogical communication. Rather, dialogical communication would be the appropriate term for long-term relationships between organisations and publics that can be created, adapted and changed through the use of the WWW (Kent, 1998:31; Pizzo, 1995:22; Cooley, 1999:41).

The potential of the WWW is, however, often still underutilised by organisations. Many organisations see web presence as a necessity, but the interactive content of the web site does not receive enough attention, is not managed properly and suitable research is also not being done (Kent & Taylor 1998:322-325; Johnson, 1997; Karlberg, 1996; Kent, 1998:31; White & Raman, 1999; Cooley, 1999; Stone, 1999:28-29; Esrock & Leichty, 1999). Kent and Taylor proposed five principles for applying two-way symmetrical communication on the web (1998:326-331). As some of these principles overlapped, four principles are proposed here.

7.1 Principle one: The dialogic/feedback loop

The presence of a dialogic loop is probably the most important reason why an organisation’s web site should exist. Some web site developers might think that an email address or a place for web site visitors to leave comments is sufficient for an effective dialogic loop. However, dialogical communication is a process of open and negotiated dialogue and should be characterised by a give and take of all the parties involved (Kent, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Habermas, 1984; Pearson, 1989; Stewart, 1978).

Therefore, the feedback loop is a very important starting point for dialogical communication on the web (a point also stressed by Marrelli, 1995:244). This can allow publics to pose questions, problems and concerns directly to the organization. It is, however, very important for the organisation to ensure that it has the necessary resources to engage in this type of communication. Specific individuals should be designated to handle Internet contacts. They should have the necessary communication skills and ought to be trained to answer questions and explain organisational policies professionally and timely, as with any other medium. Dialogic loops incorporated into web sites should therefore be complete. Organisations should monitor their web sites closely and the web site should be just as important as their customer service lines or other forms of contact with the publics.

Cooley (1999:41-42) gives specific advice on how to handle dialogic loops effectively. According to her, the first step is to provide information on the web site on aspects such as investor relations, organisational programmes and policies, community involvement and employee relations. This could open the door to public participation and discussion. The next step should be the creation of a forum for comments and suggestions. This forum could function like a chat room where the visitor can enter a message and receive an immediate response from a company representative or another visitor. Such a forum could function like a 24-hour, 7-day focus group.

To function optimally, the forum needs a central monitor (who, according to Kent (1998), should be a trained communication specialist) to initiate discussion, to persuade visitors to participate and to monitor the messages.

Cooley (1999) describes the role of a central monitor as follows:

- Providing information on matters of public interest
- Listening and responding to legitimate concerns and questions
- Providing a space for interaction on issues of public interest
- Protecting the privacy of discussion participants
- Using public opinion to shape organisational programmes and policies.

In a survey, Cooley (1999) found that organisations in the computer and telecommunications business displayed the highest level of interactivity on their web sites. She employed the following scale to “rate” the level of interactivity of web sites:

- 25% Interactive – sites that included information on contacting the organisation;
- 50% Interactive – sites that included information on contacting the organisation for specific concerns such as ordering or donating money;
- 75% Interactive – sites that included surveys on either the effectiveness of the web site and organizational practices or a form for entering comments;
- 100% Interactive – sites that provided a forum for online interaction or public discourse.

In another study, Naudé (2001; see also Naudé, Froneman & Atwood, 2003a; Naudé, Froneman & Atwood, 2003b) studied interactive public relations on the web sites of South African NGOs and employed a more qualitative measure based on Cooley’s scale. Web sites were analysed as having a limited, somewhat moderate or high level of interactivity. This study confirmed the relationship between interactivity and a two-way symmetrical approach to public relations, as it was found that NGOs with a high level of interactivity on their web sites were more inclined to apply the two-way symmetrical model to their public relations activities and vice versa.

7.2 Principle two: The usefulness of information

Another important aspect is the content of the web site. In many cases, organisations try to hide the insufficient content of their web sites behind fancy graphics and headers (Harden, 1996). The content on the web site should be useful to different kinds of publics. Therefore, it is not advisable to provide only industry or user-specific information. Information of general value to all publics should also be provided as background or historical information about the organisation.

The hierarchy and structure of the information should be logical and clear to web site visitors. Accessibility, usefulness and valuable information are important content principles to apply in web site creation. Web site visitors should be given the opportunity to sign up for mailing lists and discussion groups if they want to.

The organisation should not only promote its own interests by means of the web site. Another aim could be to address the interests, values and concerns of different publics in order to create informed partners with whom to engage in two-way symmetrical communication.

7.3 Principle three: The generation of return visits and the conservation of visitors

The likelihood of return visits by various publics is an important element of building long-term relationships via organisational web sites (Kent, 1998:32). To obtain return visits, the first important element is the necessity of useful and timely information for a variety of publics (Esrock & Leichty, 1999; Harden, 1996:12). As stated by Kent (1998:32): “Web sites that are not of value to an assortment of publics communicate at best an attitude of elitism, and at worst, an unconcern for a segment of their audience”.

Web sites that provide limited or unchanging information will not generate return visits, as they are no longer useful after one visit and therefore not conducive to dialogical communication. Sites that are updated regularly and that contain valuable information for the relevant publics appear credible and give the impression that the organisation is responsible, therefore helping to create the pre-conditions for dialogic relationships (Marrelli, 1995:248).

With regard to the conservation of visitors, web site designers should be careful not to include links from their sites to other useful or interesting sites without clearly marked paths for visitors to return to their sites. Once visitors leave a site making use of a link, they may never return to the original site. Designers should also carefully consider where to place advertisements in order to avoid the loss of visitors' attention to the site itself. Visitors may be led astray by prominent and seemingly interesting advertisements.

7.4 Principle four: The intuitiveness/ease of the interface

In order to enhance visitors' usage of a web site, the table of contents should be well organised and hierarchical. The relationship between graphics and text should promote efficiency and download speed, as too many graphics might annoy users who are in a hurry. Web sites should not be designed to be accessible only to users who have the latest hardware or software.

Web sites should be interesting, informative and contain valuable information to their visitors. Graphics and sounds may be useful tools, but content should take precedence over aesthetic considerations. Dialogic public relations wants to create lasting and valuable relationships with its publics and therefore the web site should not be used merely as propaganda, marketing or an advertising tool.

8. CONCLUSION

This article made an attempt at analysing the theoretical components of interactivity in terms of its implications for public relations on the Internet. Interactivity on the web should not be applied without taking note of these theoretical dimensions, as organisations could gain much more from their web presence if this concept were applied properly. Interactivity can enable organisations to use the web as an extension of its dialogical communication efforts to enhance the practice of a two-way symmetrical approach to public relations. The relationship between interactivity and two-way symmetry stresses the fact that the web should not just be used to disseminate information (a public information approach), and that two-way symmetry is indeed possible via the Internet.

To apply this, however, organisations should realise that it would take significant effort on their part and that interactive features on the web should be managed professionally. As Internet users become more web-literate, they would be less likely fooled by interactive features that are not managed properly. In fact, such web sites only pretend to be interactive, as interactivity does not only refer to technical requirements, but also to the human interaction with, and management of, the medium.

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