Distributed Influence: 
Quantifying the Impact of Social Media

An Edelman White Paper

By Jonny Bentwood, Edelman
Introduction

At the end of 2006, *Time* magazine quoted Thomas Carlyle as saying that "the history of the world is but the biography of great men." They went on to explain that he believed that it is the few, the powerful and the famous who shape our collective destiny as a species. This theory took a serious beating this year.

For the first time in history, technology has reached a point where everyone has a voice. This voice, articulated through social media, can be extremely powerful and can force individuals, companies and communities to change the way they behave.

In Edelman’s 2007 Trust Barometer, results showed that employees or ‘someone like me’ are trusted far more than any other group of people. Combining this with the advent of social media tools such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter has made an individuals voice louder than ever before.

Consequently, the need to understand which individuals are the most trusted or have the loudest voice has become increasingly important. However, at present there is no agreed reliable process for identifying who these people are or for quantifying the online value of one person over another.

This white paper aims to address this issue. It is not written as a fait accompli but rather as a contribution to the conversation.

Following the publication of the Edelman’s Social Media Index in July 2007 with David Brain (CEO Edelman Europe), a roundtable was devised to bring together a group of interested stakeholders representing all key constituencies to address the question of influence and how it should be measured. These people were:

**Measurement**
Max Kalehoff, Nielsen NetRatings/Buzzmetrics
Advertising Research Foundation
Sarah Petersen, StrategyOne

**Advertiser**
Henry Copeland, BlogAds

**Publisher**
Jeff Jarvis, Buzzmachine
Steve Rubel, me2revolution
Keith O'Brien, PRWeek

**Edelman**
Richard Edelman, Edelman
Jonny Bentwood, Edelman
Rick Murray, me2revolution
Interactive Agency
David Dunne, Edelman

Industry Observer
Peter Kim, Forrester
Charlene Li, Forrester
Dr. Walter Carl, Northeastern University

The content in this White Paper is a summary of what was expressed at this roundtable.

Calculating an individuals online influence is becoming more important each year as people seek advice from their peers on the Internet regarding what they should think, buy and say.

Many people have recognised this and agree that there is an inherent need to develop a metric, or set of metrics, that allows publishers to more accurately quantify their value as a medium such that they can attract more and higher quality and relevant advertising and sponsorship revenues.

Conversely, advertisers and marketers need to have a reliable metric that provides them with a more scientific (and thus more defensible) way to plan and measure the outcomes of their campaign.

Traditionally the method of calculating influence is by using ‘inbound link’ tools such as Technorati. However, many people agreed that this system is inherently flawed. Social media by its vary nature is more than just blogging.

The Internet, according to Doc Searls is a place where people connect. To that end, the very term ‘social media’ is frowned upon by those who many would claim to be its most prominent and influential users. Nevertheless, ‘social media’ has been adopted as a term that most accurately explains the myriad of ‘user generated content’ platforms that are being used on the Internet today.

The initial catalyst behind the roundtable was the publication of the Social Media Index. A summary of which is shown below.

Traditionally, an individual’s web influence was measured by the success of their blog. In its simplest form this was done by counting how many people subscribed and linked to it. However, in today’s Web 2.0 world, this is no longer a credible metric as people are currently using a variety of different social media tools to inform and hold conversations with their audience.

FACT: There is a definitive need to assess any social media publisher’s influence on the market as a whole.
What is becoming increasingly clear is that the more engaged an individual is within the different channels available, the broader influence that person has.

The Social Media Index is a model, which recognises and attempts to quantify the impact and influence of multiple social media tools.

**FACT: This methodology is not the standard.**

The standard is a long way down the road. I have selected one way (of many) to analyse different individuals with the aim to provoke debate so that together the community can create a standard. This could include what social media tools to analyse (e.g. Facebook or MySpace or both?) and what weighting should be given to each category (e.g. is Twitter just as important as blogging?).

**Methodology summary:**

Each blog has been given a score out of 10 based upon 6 criteria:

- Blog - analysed Google Rank, inbound links, subscribers, alexa rank, content focus, frequency, number of comments
- Multi-format - analysed Facebook - number of friends
- Mini-updates - analysed Twitter - number of friends, followers and updates
- Business cards - analysed LinkedIn - number of contacts
- Visual - analysed Flickr - number of photos uploaded from you or about you
- Favourites - analysed Digg, del.icio.us

Each score out of 10 was given a defined weighting which created a total score for each category. The sum of each of these numbers created an individual’s Social Media Index. This index tells you the sum total of a person’s influence over multiple social media platforms.

To explain how this works, the first step was to list top blogs purely by the current recognised scheme of inbound links (via Technorati) - the top 30 were analysed. The table below shows the first 5 blogs in this space:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Blog</th>
<th>Multi-format</th>
<th>Mini-updates</th>
<th>Business cards</th>
<th>Visual</th>
<th>Favourites</th>
<th>Social Media Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 TechCrunch</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>98</td>
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<td>2 Search Engine Watch</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Micro Persuasion</td>
<td>96</td>
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<td>96</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The second step was to take the same 30 blogs and score them based upon their use of multiple social media platforms. The first 5 again are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Blog</th>
<th>Multi-format</th>
<th>Mini-updates</th>
<th>Business cards</th>
<th>Visual</th>
<th>Favourites</th>
<th>Social Media Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Micro Persuasion</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TechCrunch</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scobleizer</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>86</td>
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<tr>
<td>GigaOM</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaping Void</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This methodology was then used a larger group of blogs. The overwhelming majority of new entrants to this more ‘pure’ Social Media Index are individuals which is probably not surprising given that corporates or even collectives don’t really use Twitter or Facebook . . . people do. Obviously each platform has different primary functions and some are much more personal (Facebook) than others. But bloggers quite openly use Twitter and Facebook and MySpace to market their blog posts and many blogs these days have widgets cross marketing the individual’s Facebook or Twitter profiles. And the personal and the professional was a line blurred for many of us years ago.

There are of course many platforms that we did not include in this, like MySpace, Jaiku and Pownce and of course this list is very English-language centric and includes none of the local social sites which dominate in countries like Korea and Germany.

This presentation of the Social Media Index was never intended to be an end in itself. Rather it was hoped that it would create conversations with the aim that people would move closer to understanding how to measure influence. The resulting roundtable was one of the more tangible outcomes of this.

### Defining influence

**in-flu-ence**

Pronunciation [in-floo-uh-ns]  
Pronunciation Key - Show IPA Pronunciation *noun, verb, -enced, -enc-ing.*

- *noun*  
  the capacity or power of persons or things to be a compelling force on or produce effects on the actions, behaviour, opinions, etc., of others: *He used family influence to get the contract.*
One of the common words used at the roundtable was ‘influence’. However, a straw poll of participants revealed that it could be defined in multiple ways such as:

- It is a noun and a verb; it is an action and an outcome
- It is credibility - having someone pay attention to you
- It is the shaping (and the process of) the opinions, actions and/or behaviours of others
- It is personal and builds from the inside-out and the bottom-up, generally one person, or one personal network at a time.

Ultimately, it’s not a purely rational thing. Much of what ‘influences’ is driven by emotion with uncontrollable external forces like family and the opinions, behaviours and actions of many (the crowd).

Following the roundtable Max Kalehoff attempted to answer the question of defining influence. He surmised:

“With all the attention around influence, and many unanswered questions, what we need most is more practical testing, tied to specific marketing objectives and applications.

The marketer’s Holy Grail of influence is the ability to recognize patterns and optimize outcomes — whether for advertising, media-planning, public relations, word-of-mouth marketing, etc. Without question, influence often rides on nothing more than spontaneity. However, deeper understanding will lead to bets and actions with more favorable odds.”

Using this theory, the roundtable concluded that in the context of social media, an influential person is not necessarily the individual who has the ‘bright idea’. Influence can largely be determined by the meme.

In Jeremiah Owyang’s Dow Jones White Paper on ‘Tracking the Influence of Conversation’, a meme was defined as: “an idea or discussion that grows and spreads from individual to individual into a lengthy commentary”.

Jeff Jarvis strongly believed that for someone to be influential they will likely to be either a meme starter or a meme spreader:


This person typically is creative, forms opinions and articulates them well. They have the ability to state a view at the right time. Their readership is not necessarily large but views the individual as trustworthy.


This person thrives by sharing opinions and wants to do it first. They are trusted and have a large readership.
However, following the roundtable, I believe that there are a further three types of influencer that should be taken into consideration. They may not be as strong an influencer but they still have a high impact in the community. These people are:

3) **The meme adapter**
   This person reads what is going on outside their traditional sphere of knowledge. They take the opinions of others and reform them so that it is tailored to their bespoke niche group. This information is then published and spread to a smaller but highly targeted audience.

4) **The meme commentator**
   This person does not create content but reads the views and opinions of others and takes part in conversation via adding comments. They are far more likely to share the knowledge of this topic with their peers through offline discussion rather than published content.

5) **The meme reader**
   This person does not create any online content. However, they tend to be a vociferous consumer of information to which they read, learn and share with their peers in the offline world. Although not having the same reach as the meme spreader, their views are trusted and are able to promote these ideas in an alternative method.

The common themes behind the memes are:

- Topics and context
- Believability and credibility of message (both real and perceived)
- Relationships. Number and quality of people in any one conversation and number of talkers and listeners.
- Time. What happens now?

Focusing on the two categories with the greatest impact. The super-influencers fall into two buckets (meme starters and meme spreaders) and are by their nature the minority.

- **Meme starters** - e.g. Dave Winer, film critics
- **Meme spreaders** - Glenn Reynolds, or people with a platform

Nevertheless, it was agreed that there are very, very few super influencers. Arguably the most real ‘influence’ is effected by people not even on the ‘influencer’ radar screen.

Marketers face the continuing dilemma of how to gain the maximum impact for their investment. Understanding that there are very few meme starters or spreaders, we asked the question on whether the most effective target would be the easily
influenced as oppose to the few influencers.

These people can be defined as follows:

- **Individual influencers**: people who lead the crowd (influenced by societal observations, memes)
- **Influence-ables**: the people in their personal networks who follow their lead

Either way, we’re likely also talking about the effect of influence on the aggregate - or watching the crowd and its impact on how people act. In some rational decisions, and in essentially all emotionally-based / impulse decisions, the action, opinions and behaviours of the crowd shape the actions, opinions and behaviours of those still on the outside.

The concept of the ‘crowd as the influential’ was an area that Henry Copeland strongly believed in. He cited Duncan Watts who explained that people “people almost never make decisions independently” and that “what people like depends on what they think other people like”.

No conclusions were drawn regarding who marketers should target. Where there was consensus though was through continuation of Henry’s point regarding the crowd. Because the crowd is online, the best way to interact with them is in that environment where they can readily see how others are reacting, both positively and negatively.

If inbound links and other ‘popularity measures’ are redundant, the roundtable queried whether it was possible to sell:

1) Influence
2) A meme
3) Search results

As an alternative, Jeff Jarvis highlighted Flickr’s innovative way of approaching this. Although the methodology of this contains a large amount of secret source, the concept, was explained as follows:

- What amount of effort goes into a photo - i.e. number of links, number of comments, use of tags etc.
- A social analysis - the relationship that emerges based on the photo and not the photographer.
- A mapping of the first two points.

The redeeming social value is an aggregated metric of these points.

The reason why this methodology resonated with the group was that it tried to calculate influence in an alternative manner. This
approach did not look at the creator but rather the effort that went into the publication and the amount of discussion that it created amongst a wider community.

In this instance, popularity was not the primary metric as effort and dialogue were now included. The roundtable agreed that any meaningful social media metric had to ensure that popularity measures were not promoted at the expense of these other factors.

To get to one standard of measurement, we would need access to and the ability to aggregate all data, and that demands a whole new level of openness and sharing that is not available.

Regardless, there was general consensus that we may never be able to get to one standard. This because this ‘old world thinking’ implies that the people with the money are in control.

We believe the inverse is true, and thus it’s the people with the content who will dictate - or at a minimum have an equal say in dictating - the metric standards by which their content is monetized.

Understanding that it is both the people who create and spread content combined with the fact that it is impossible to predict which opinions will turn into memes, the roundtable believed that a different approach was called for, namely to understand the origins of influence.

Using meme regression as a way to identify how topics spread and influence causes action, we created a model that tried to explain how the process works which we called the ‘Arc of Influence’.

### The arc of influence: influencers perspective

- **Engage**
- **Influence**
- **Attention**
- **Action**

1) **Grab attention**
   How do influencers grab a users attention? What methods and social media tools do they use?

2) **Engage**
   How does the influencer engage with the audience? Is it done
in an informative, entertaining or challenging way?

3) **Influence**
   Does the influencer create high quality content? Is it personal and relevant. i.e. Does it demonstrate need + context + timeliness

4) **Action**
   Does the influencer inspire the individual to act

Following this discussion, we proposed inverting the arc by putting the consumer in control and trying to work out how they get influenced so that they accordingly act.

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You don't go for the most influential but the most easily influenced - Max Kalehoff

It was hoped that this model could be used as a more effective way to engage than the historic way of merely counting page views.
impressions to identify influence.

The ideal scenario was to use this concept to determine the precise time and place when both the influencers and the influenced would like to be engaged. What the roundtable concluded was that a system equivalent to Myers Briggs was needed for micro-communications. This would enable people to be able to map target media, meme creation, consumption and sharing habits.

Peter Kim explained that a starting point in this exercise would be to identify the characteristics of the different target audiences which could be explained via Forrester’s Social Technographics ladder.

Source: Forrester report on Social Technographics

Nevertheless, there are certain things to beware of that everyone agreed should be top of mind:

- As we move closer to structuring our communications efforts on a micro / individual level, we have to take care to respect the privacy of those we seek to connect, converse and ultimately do business.
- From Google Health to Digitas creating 4,000 versions of the same advert or a new mobile company that’s mining cell phone conversations. The more we know about an individual, the more it is possible to manipulate.
- Transparency must reign.
We also recognise that individual behaviour isn’t 100% predictable. Indeed we can’t rationalise everything, because emotion and impulse still drive and will always drive a majority of economic and psychological buying decisions.

The final discussion topic at the roundtable was to see if there was a formula that could be created to measure an individual’s online presence. The following system was proposed:

**Volume and Quality of Attention x Time**
Size and Quality of Audience

This formula still needed a fair amount of work which we are following through at the moment. It is interesting to see that since the roundtable met, several popular web sites have all tried to create a new formula that also focused on time and attention to portray someone’s influence.

Whereas the initial social media index moved the argument forward by dismissing inbound links as the sole way to score an individual, by adding these variables it is hoped that a more realistic score can be achieved.

However, I recognise that this data is largely unavailable (although some sites like compete.com may be able to help with some of it). Unless this data can be readily and publicly accessible, it is hard to conceive how reliable any published results may be and therefore difficult for marketers to act on accordingly.

Moving forward there are several questions and concepts that need to be answered and understood to help people maximise the impact of their online marketing activities, namely:

1. How does one use this information – such as the index, the identification of meme spreaders, adapters, commentators - to shape a communication strategy?

2. What role does traditional media play, particularly as they join the conversation with their own blogs, Twitter streams, Facebook apps, etc.?

3. Much of what has been discussed in this White Paper focused on people who create and shape ideas that become influential. However, these are just passing moments in time. The higher order bit is the influence these events have on the longer term through search.

This can be illustrated this by showing how influential blogs, Twitter posts are indexed very highly in Google. For
example, a **Google search on Dell technical support** will bring a negative blog post by **Jeremy Zawodny** as the third choice.

4. Much of the discussion focused on the top of the pyramid. However, in the long tail, every vertical has a set of influencers. Further, as does every local market. How does this model hold in niches? How can it be applied?

5. **Richard Edelman** explains in his blog that “**corporations can’t buy reputation or brand loyalty any more. These are earned through performance over the long-term**”.

   He continues to explain that PR should “**aim is to educate when possible, build bridges when necessary, and respect the new market-based conversations always. We should start at the end point—to dream about where we would like our client to be—and then create a dialogue-based communications program to get them there**”.

   This philosophy should be the guiding principle for marketing professionals to engage with the online community. By following the theories and concepts mentioned in this White Paper, it is hoped that a greater understanding of influence and impact can be gained. However, unless the application of this knowledge is done in a transparent, honest and ethical way within social media then the end result will be damaging.

### Conclusion

If there’s one constant in digital media, it’s change. Every 12 to 18 months the landscape expands. New channels seem to join existing, more mature formats that only started to dot the horizon a few months earlier.

For example, consider that in 2005 blogs were the single most important emerging centre of influence. A year later this broadened as millions began to upload videos to YouTube, a site that didn’t even exist until late 2005. Finally, by 2007 the traditional media had fully embraced these channels. The New York Times as of this writing has more than 50 blogs, all of which support comments. Meanwhile, the Internet continued to grow as powerful new centres of authority, like Facebook and Twitter, witnessed dramatic growth.

As we begin 2008, the lines have truly blurred between the mainstream sources that we have years of knowledge in how to engage and quantify and a digital landscape that is more dynamic. As the pace of change continues and the generation that grew up with the web enters adulthood, it ensures that measuring influence will continue to become even more complex and challenging.

Still, there some basic truths have emerged that are grounded in
human nature and can guide the PR professional accordingly.

First, even as they use their digital presences to coalesce audiences into communities, the basic ethos of the traditional press remains grounded in information. People visit media sites to stay informed, even as the way reporters work is becoming far more open and collaborative. This means that, for now, that the traditional methods of measuring the influence of the media remain largely the same.

In the social sphere meanwhile, whether it is a dispersed community (e.g. blogs) or a more centralized one (MySpace), a different spirit has evolved. This one is grounded in open collaboration toward a shared outcome. The agenda here could include everything from information to entertainment to connections, social change and virtually thousands of others.

Communicators who desire to build and measure influence need to think about the ethos of each venue, devise the right kinds of appropriate programmes and set up methodologies for measuring the impact of their efforts. Edelman has devised a basic approach to help guide companies.

Arguably, marketing communications spans two different continuums. Programmes are at one end or the other or somewhere in between. This is depicted in the schematic below. Programmes can either be closed or open (Y axis) or they can be designed for communication or collaboration (the X axis).

The result is four distinct quadrants:

1) **Controlled Communication:**
   One-way tactics such as TV advertising, online advertising and media relations that are great for branding and visibility, but are seldom collaborative

2) **Open Communication**
   Online initiatives, such as viral videos, that are designed to generate discussion, but not necessarily produce a shared outcome

3) **Controlled Collaboration**
   Programmes that facilitate participation but are is more controlled, for example numerous efforts to solicit consumer generated ads

4) **Conversational Collaboration**
   Win-win initiatives that open a dialogue toward reaching a broader goal
Currently, most marketing communication programmes sit in on the left hand side of this matrix. However, as companies and organisations become more aware of the tenor of each venue and what works, we believe they will begin to mix in strategies and tactics from the right side.

As a result, the outcome is that programmes on the left will measure online influence through metrics like impressions, conversations, in-bound links, friends and more.

Meanwhile, the right hand side - particularly Conversational Collaborative programmes - will adopt entirely new methodologies that measure based on outcomes. For example, this could include ideas generated, donations or other means of measuring advocacy and so forth. This is fertile ground and one that has not been the dominion of marketers, but it will be going forward.

The future of communications is in the mixing of these quadrants and understanding how they work together to influence the public.