



WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

Lecture: Jacquie Hughes

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First of all, a warm hello and thank you so very much for inviting me to share this occasion with you in beautiful Allen Hall. My name is Jacquie Hughes, and my background is as an investigative journalist, film maker and – for the past 10 years – commissioning editor at the BBC, responsible for commissioning amongst other things, religion programming from independent producers.

For those of you who know Father Christopher Jamison, you will know about his starring role in some series I commissioned – The Monastery, followed by The Convent, The Retreat and most recently, The Big Silence. Our relationship then, goes back six or seven years when I began to ponder how I could tell a religious story in a different way, and Fr Christopher was brave enough to join the conversation... and here we are, still in conversation...

Now, I contemplated starting my introduction a different way – I could have equally truthfully said “Hello, my name is Jacquie Hughes and I’m a dinosaur”, albeit a dinosaur who seems to have just about escaped extinction...

Because when I started working in the media, it was in print journalism with a hot metal press. Every letter of every word was crafted from molten lead, then ‘set’ on a ‘form’ on the print floor by an army of skilled craftsmen. We journalists would be invited to sub-edit and correct the text by reading – in mirror image – at the stone. There was total separation between the crafts of the editorial floor and those of the print floor and never the twain would meet. Indeed, such lines of separation were so clearly enforced that any soft handed journalist who dared touch the stone could risk a downing of tools and a walk out.

When I moved into radio, it was with a reel to reel recorder, and I would sit with my blade and tape splicing and dicing my reams of recorded material in an edit suite. Similarly with television. I began working in current affairs and we still shot on film. Every ten minute long reel was carefully considered before being shot, and every programme required a team of skilled camera operators, assistants, sound recordists and sparks and later in the cutting room, editors and assistant editors working their magic on the miles of celluloid with their Steenbeck machines and white cotton gloves.

Spin on 20 years and along with everyone else I find myself in the Digital Age. An age in which we can witness, record, edit and upload our content in real time, broadcast it to the world, blog about it, update it, respond to feedback about it, in an instant. Anytime, anywhere, to everyone.

So the tools of the trade have changed out of all recognition, but what of the trade itself? The two are not to be confused. It is my belief that the changes represented by the dawn of the digital age and the arrival of social media are of an altogether different sort than those I’ve just run through from my own career. Because it’s not just the technology of communication that’s changed. Communication itself has changed. There has been a Communications Revolution, and it’s a genuinely global phenomenon.

We've moved from a world in which we trained journalists, filmmakers and broadcasters were the magicians, the wizards, the keepers of the great secrets of the media. We decided which stories to tell, how to tell them and – critically – when to tell them: Only we had the knowledge and the access to the stories and the means to capture and communicate those stories. We 'owned' the news, we owned the stories, we owned the conversation.

Now, anyone with something as simple as a mobile phone can broadcast anything to the world, 24/7 and the idea of 'owning' the story is history. This represents a huge challenge to all of us, and one that journalists and programme makers and those in traditional media wrestle with all the time. What becomes of what we do in this new world?

Given all the user-generated postings, the tweets, the blogging, the uploading of images and personal accounts of events, the unfiltered data, the noise and the gossip, what becomes of proper journalism: the inquiry, the testing of ideas and statements, the weighing up of all sides, the striving to record accurately and impartially a complete a picture as possible? What value does that have? what value do we have?

I've heard many people say it's had its day: The trade of journalism is dead. The story is owned by the people, not the journalists. We are all content creators now.

But I'm much more optimistic than that. I honestly believe that in a world of ambient noise, people will look for distinct voices. When bombarded with 'as-it's-happening' imagery and stories, people will crave context, clarity and expertise. They will seek out the cool, considered, more objective and rational back-stories. They want to know how it all fits together and what it all means. And for that, they will look to trusted sources, trusted voices, trusted channels of information.

That's the good news.

But there's no room for complacency here. No comfort to be found in the belief that "oh well, that's alright then, because that's the camp we are in, we are those trusted storytellers".

It's no longer viable or valid to stick to the old 'top down' business model of delivery of communication, the one way traffic, the "we have something good to give to you" model. It's obsolete. The conversations are going on anyway, all around us, and our role is to join the conversation, to verify, to debunk, to contextualise - in other words to add value. And we can only do that by engaging.

The very existence of Social Media shifts every one one of our interactions with audiences from the passive to the active, from inaction to action in a state of permanent momentum. Communication is now all ways, back and forth, all the time, in all of the places and platforms that those we want to engage with happen to be. The recipient is in the driving seat now. They are as in control of the narrative as you are. That's the shift. That's the challenge.

The prize - if it's grasped - is a virtuous circle of Communication (to), Interaction,(with) and ultimately Engagement.

I want to come back to this theme shortly, as I believe it's one that holds good not just for journalists and broadcasters, but for every single one of us in the business of having something to say, a message to impart, a story or an idea, a belief, a vision, a hope to share.

According to Google's CEO, Eric Schmidt, by the end of today, the web will have filled up with more information than existed in its entirety prior to 2003. It's a raging torrent of postings, tweets, re-tweets, photos, status updates, audio clips, video and so on. The digital space is, after all, infinite.

And the rapid growth in digital access - thanks largely to mobile devices and wireless broadband - means there are literally billions of digitally active people on the planet - a trend that continues to grow and grow.

Indeed, access to digital media is now considered so important, that it's included in this country's standard of living surveys, and the last government and this remain committed to rolling out Digital Literacy, and supporting people's access to and knowledge of digital media.

There was a really interesting research report released recently called This Digital Life which pulled together some fascinating stats on global digital trends - not just the numbers, but behaviours and attitudes - the value people in different parts of the world put on various digital activities. They concluded that there were six distinct types of digital behaviour, or digital groupings, which I won't go into here, but will share a few highlights from the survey with you here:

Globally, 61% of online users use the internet daily against 54% for TV, 36% for Radio and 32% for Newspapers.

In rapid growth markets, engagement with digital activities has overtaken that of mature markets, so in places like Egypt and China people rapidly and enthusiastically becoming fully actively digitally engaged. In China, four out of five people with digital access are blogging, and over half of those in Brazil have written their own blog or forum entry, compared to less than a third in the US.

The Internet has also become the default option for photo sharing among online users in rapid growth markets, particularly in Asia. Thirty eight percent of book sales are now through Amazon (which also reported that its ebooks outsold hardbacks published in print this year).

By far the biggest driver of growth in the digital world is social media and social networking, in some big part thanks to the transition from PC to mobile. Mobile users spend on average 3.1 hours per week on social networking sites compared to 2.2 hours on email. Both those figures almost double in newer markets such as Latin America, the Middle East and China. The heaviest users of social networking are in Malaysia, Russia and Turkey, people there spend up to 9 hours a week on social networks. Goodbye email, hello social networking.

So, what are we actually talking about here? What is this umbrella term, Social Media? Well, a definition would go something like... "the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and the construction of words, pictures, videos and audio"...

But that technical description can not touch on the behavioural change social media represents. People in the business talk about the 'social layer' that now sits on top of people's lives. We are all conducting a huge part of our lives in social space: we carry out a considerable amount of communicating, sharing, posting, accessing, forwarding, blogging, buying, liking, advocating, influencing, reading, listening and viewing in digital spaces, on all manner of platforms, all the time, anytime.

At this point I was going to play a small film from YouTube, which - in less that 30 seconds - gives a better summary of the scale of social media than I can in words, but our ability to set up a screen here deserted us.

Here's a link:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFZ0z5Fm-Ng>

Note: The stats are more than a year old now so treat with care.

Here are some of the take outs:

Number of years to reach 50million users

Radio:38 years

TV: 13 years

Internet: 4 years

Facebook: added 200 million users in 9 months.

If Facebook were a country, it would be the third largest in the world.

There are 60 million status updates on Facebook daily.

More than 200,000,000 people blog, and more than half are posting content daily. 25 percent of search results for the 20 largest brands are linked to User Generated Content, in other words people recommending or 'liking' things and sharing those preferences. We know already that consumers trust peer recommendations over anything else.

So the figures are quite astonishing, but what they can't quite capture is the power of the social space for transformation and change. Social space is where all the big conversations are happening, all the influencing and advocacy is going on, where tribes and communities, and friends and followers and influencers spring up in an instant, and where ideas and stories can go viral in minutes and change perceptions and knowledge in an instant.

You only have to look at the role social media has played in recent news events - from natural disasters to the Arab Spring to understand its power.

You know, it was no coincidence that controversial, Islam-baiting US preacher Terry Jones chose to film his Koran burning stunt, post it on YouTube, subtitled in Arabic. He didn't need a big congregation, he needed a cheap camera and access to the Internet. He knew his stunt would be seen by millions in no time. And it was.

There's a very real academic debate going on about all this - does spending so much time on multiple social sites make us all more shallow and unable to concentrate on anything for very long? Is it actually rewiring our brains for less depth?

Or is that just the same argument they used for the arrival of mass printing, or radio or television and actually what the digital age heralds is the democratisation of access for all, the chance to take communication and the creation of content out of the hands of the few, and deliver it into the hands of the many? A new Renaissance.

We may never know the answer to that, but what is unquestionable is that there has been a revolution in the way we communicate. And it is beholden upon all of us to understand it and the behaviours that go with it.

Connectedness is at the heart of it all. We can tell from the sheer amount of time people are spending in social space that they like to feel connected, part of a community - of many communities. They put real value in the recommendations of peers, in sharing ideas and acting in concert.

There is an inherent behavioural contract in place in this world - the idea of 'forward sharing'. A term that describes the drive to discover nuggets of info, ideas, text, pictures, stories - anything considered of value - and to share it forward. It's a key tenet of the social web. Others have said "Sharing is the power pulse, the passionate heartbeat that makes social media a transformation, a complete game changer for everything from commerce to education. Sharing makes people feel good. It is powered by honest communications. Fueled by the passion of people to connect with ideas and products and causes, and share that connection forward".

This is good news for you, I would suggest: Catholicism is a relational religion. You are who you are because of your relationship with others, and initiating conversations - the call to dialogue - is at the heart of the religion.

What else stands out in this cluttered world ? The power of stories, and the power of pictures. People are drawn to stories by instinct. We programme makers are always looking to tell stories - not hand down information. The classic offer at the heart of what we do is that via the micro we illustrate the macro; in other words, by telling a personal story we shed light on a bigger truth.

This, I think, should hearten you all. It's about the importance of storytelling - and you have some great stories to tell.

Yes, there are lots of undesirable aspects to the social web. The ease with which gossip can spread unhindered, the way sharing - especially if it's sharing a 'dislike' - can turn into something bordering on bullying, the over sharing which shakes up all our concepts of privacy, the sheer noise and clutter and trivia, the unbelievable amount of time that humans can spend online... The 'long tail' of digital which means every single error, flaw, misjudgement, utterance said in haste, lives on forever and ever and ever...

But what's heartening I think, is that we can begin to see the ways in which behaviours are settling. Social space is amazingly self-policing - communities that grow up around ideas, or interests or shared passions are very protective of the core values of that group : they sniff a rat and kick it out pretty quickly.

On a similar note, authenticity has real value - people are quick to spot fake voices, and gravitate instead to credible, genuine content and ideas that are aligned with their values. They expect transparency and honesty. They demand meaningful dialogue.

We see the growing attraction of premium, quality content, of trusted sources, material and individuals. We see viable social networking sites set up dedicated purely to answering users' questions, others to seeking out and sharing the best news stories and other content. These are behaviours that play to both our strengths.

Our challenge as story tellers and communicators - and I would dare to suggest it is the same challenge you all face - is to work hard to understand all this and what it means for what we do. We have great stories to tell, stories we know would capture the imagination, enrich lives, change perceptions. We have worked hard at what we do and our experience and expertise amounts to something.

There's a phrase I like, which I've used and I now see used all the time - 'social by design'. It means having at the forefront of your strategy for communication, your social strategy. A clear understanding of how social media works.

There is no hierarchy, people aren't waiting for some official pronouncement, they are gravitating towards content and conversations they value, or which come recommended to them. How will people find what you have say ? On which platforms and how? Who will be your storytellers, your advocates, influencers, messengers? I would say every single person in this room should be a storyteller, an advocate, and be prepared to engage - truly engage - all the time.

Smart companies get this. They realise that they need to do something more than just unleash their 'subject matter experts' into digital space, but rather activate them in multiple channels at once and equip them in how to create compelling narratives They call it Transmedia Storytelling. I think this idea offers you - offers all of us - the chance to take ownership of our story, rather than let others own the narrative. But be under no illusion that you can 'own' the conversation. Be part of it, actively, respond and engage but don't presume to own.

Now it's easy to be dismissive of all this and think that what we have to say and offer is beyond space and time and that we shouldn't have to get down into the swirling ocean of social space, but I don't think we have a choice. And the prize, as I've said, is chance to reach and genuinely engage with millions of people..

As part of my background research for this talk, I read back through the last three years World Communications Day speeches, including this year's by Pope Benedict. I was amazed by how informed and up to date 'on the money' about all this these speeches were. Here's an extract:

The new technologies are not only changing the way we communicate, but communication itself, so much so that it could be said that we are living through a period of vast cultural transformation. This means of spreading information and knowledge is giving birth to a new way of learning and thinking, with unprecedented opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship.

Pope Benedict himself has said: I would like then to invite Christians, confidently and with an informed and responsible creativity, to join the network of relationships which the digital era has made possible. This is not simply to satisfy the desire to be present, but because this network is an integral part of human life. The web is contributing to the development of new and more complex intellectual and spiritual horizons, new forms of shared awareness.

I don't think any of us would argue with that, would we?

Thank you.