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THE NEED TO MEASURE IMPACT

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Measurement of digital media has been a perpetual bane of communicators. The debate rages over the value of “likes” on Facebook, the impact of a Tweet and even what constitutes a valid mention. However, all of this debate misses the fundamental point about the measurement of digital and social media. First and foremost, social media is media, plain and simple. It is a vehicle for the delivery of messages. The only valid measures are those that can demonstrate an impact on the behavior, actions and attitudes of the target audience who is the intended receiver of the message. From that perspective, measuring the impact of digital media should not be significantly different than the traditional measures that have been used for decades with print and broadcast media. We still need to understand how exposure to a message impacts the basic measures of:

- Awareness of the product, brand or issue
- Correct knowledge about the product, brand or issue
- Relevance to the target audience, and
- Intent of the target audience to take a desired action

Each of these measures is based on the reader or viewer having exposure to the intended messages of the communicator. This does not mean that these four fundamental measures are all that is needed to effectively measure digital or social media. As with any advancement in technology, there are changes that need to be taken into account due to the unique nature of the medium being measured. This happened with the advent of moveable type, continued through the invention of broadcast media and is now evident with the prominence of digital media. The most significant addition to these measures is a direct function of the unique social capabilities of digital media. The ability to share thoughts and opinions with

other readers/viewers – in essence, credible third party advocacy – is the primary aspect of digital media that distinguishes it from traditional print and broadcast. Traditional print and broadcast is a unidirectional form of communication. Messages and information are sent by a media outlet that are received and interpreted by the reader or viewer. Interaction with the media source, if any, is limited to at most sharing the article with friends or acquaintances or possibly a letter to the editor. However, in the emerging world of digital media, these limitations disappear. Readers interact at will with writers and editors. Other readers can follow these interactions and comment on the comments. In this brave new digital world, readers are as much a part of the reporting on story as the writer of the article. In many instances, the most influential aspect of the story is not the story, but the commentary that accompany the original post. Readers are just as interested in what their peers have to say as they are in the original article. They want to know how people just like them feel about what was written. They are looking for support and validation from their peers before they make a decision. They are looking for an advocate that confirms and support their choices or preferences. So, what does this mean for the measurement of digital media? In today’s media ecology, an action taken by a reader or viewer – buying a product, voting for a candidate, supporting a cause – is no longer the endpoint of communication objectives. A communicator’s hope is that a reader will not only buy a product, but will also eventually advocate for the value and benefits of that product and provide an endorsement. Unlike traditional word-of-mouth advocacy where friends tell friends about what they like, dislike and recommend, digital media allows virtually everyone to share their experiences and their recommendations with everyone else. Readers can see comments, reviews

and recommendations of others like themselves at will and many readers rely on these endorsements and reviews when making a purchase decision. This significantly extends the reach of the communicator through independent endorsement that many claim has higher credibility than virtually any other source of information. The challenge for digital and social media is learning how to measure advocacy in a way that is valid, reliable, comparable with other communication efforts and predictive of preferred behaviors. These preferred behaviors are almost limitless in their scope and range from an intent to purchase, preference for a political candidate, support for a public affairs issue and even changes in behavior that affect health and well-being. To date, scant research has been done to measure advocacy and its impact on these dimensions. As a starting point, measurement of digital media needs to take into consideration the number, type and sentiment of positive and negative comments as well as

softer measures such as willingness to tell others about their experience, types of recommendations as well as other relevant commentary. These measures are in addition to secondary measures of audience reach, quality of audience, presence or absence of key message as well as the primary measures of audience impact – awareness, knowledge, relevance and intent to take desired actions.

The ability to create advocacy is what distinguishes digital media from virtually every other form of communication. Without this measure, it will be impossible to assess the value, contribution and impact of digital media in any meaningful way. With the decline (dare I say demise) of print media, digital media will become the standard that we measure. Just as we learned to count “eyeballs” when measuring television, we also need to assess advocacy when measuring social media.



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Prior to joining Teneo, Dr. Michaelson was principal of David Michaelson & Company, LLC and president/ chief research officer of Echo Research. Dr. Michaelson also has been Managing Director and Head of Research for Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, Managing Director at GCI Group and a director of research at Burson-Marsteller. Dr. Michaelson has over 30 years’ experience conducting research for numerous *Fortune* 500 companies, universities and philanthropic organizations. Dr. Michaelson is a leading authority in communications testing, message development, measurement of communications effectiveness and branding.

His work with corporate clients includes Novartis, GSK, MetLife, American Express and Citigroup. Dr. Michaelson is a member of the Commission on Public Relations Measurement and Evaluation of the Institute for Public Relations and has published numerous articles on public relations research, and is the co-author of “A Practitioners Guide to Public Relations Research, Measurement & Evaluation” published by Business Expert Press as well as numerous other peer reviewed publications on communications and communications measurement. Dr. Michaelson was elected to the first class of research fellows of the Institute for Public Relations, is the 2008 recipient of the Jackson, Jackson & Wagner Behavioral Science Prize given by the Public Relations Society of America and is the 2009 Measurement/ Research Expert of the Year (PR News).

Dr. Michaelson is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Massachusetts/ Amherst and received his Ph.D. from the New School for Social Research in cultural anthropology.