

» The use of Big Data in corporate communications strategies

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Big Data is impacting on businesses, journalism and art, and nowadays it must be incorporated into communications strategies

A visual metaphor has been going around the internet for some time, a GIF, as symbolic as it is disheartening. In it we see three identical clocks. The clock on the left, which is constantly going round at a frantic pace, symbolises "information". Next to it, a clock called "time" is going round at the normal speed. Finally, the one on the right represents "knowledge" and although it is making every effort to go round, neither the minute hand nor the second hand can manage to get more than half way round the clock.¹

Looking at these three clocks, the problem is clear: immersed in this morass of information that is coming at us at such speed, how can we hope to generate some kind of knowledge?

New technologies and information systems have contributed to much of the population feeling unable to absorb all the information that is generated by the minute. That is why the challenge for communicators goes beyond developing information and must aim to create knowledge. This is a crucial point if we are to achieve credible and long term positioning for companies.



Given this context and taking into account that worldwide 98 % of data is stored digitally, the emergence of the discipline of Big Data, as the storage, management and analysis of large amounts of data, is almost inevitable. The business community has already incorporated it into business management and, in turn, disciplines such as journalism and art are using it to better represent and understand the world we live in. Communications should not miss this opportunity and should integrate Big Data into its professional practice.

THE IMPACT OF BIG DATA ON BUSINESS

Companies have been the first to realise the importance of adequately managing all the data they generate because never before it has arrived in such a different way and in such high volumes. In Spain companies such as Nestlé, Zurich and BBVA have recently announced the setting up of their Big Data centres in Barcelona, positioning the city as a hub for this discipline. Converting the large volume of data into information that facilitates decision-making is and will be crucial for the positioning and growth of companies, as it has a direct impact on the profit line.

The challenge now for traditional sectors such as food, insurance and banking is to hire professionals who are knowledgeable about mathematics, technology and business and who will accompany the companies on the path to deciphering this huge amount of data, allowing strategic decisions to be made on the basis of evidence. All of this has led to publications such as the Harvard Business Review calling "data scientists" experts as the "sexiest" job of the 21st century.²

Beyond the growing demand for these new professionals, Big Data is starting to be researched, and in some cases it is already being applied as a tool for talent management. This is a trend that some have already dared to call "the talent algorithm". Some companies have realised that they have hundreds of pieces of data about their employees (assessments, climate surveys, interactivity in collaborative portals, etc.), which allows them to have an individualised view of each person and to optimise their talent and performance.

¹ <http://imgur.com/gallery/GjEazNc>

² <https://hbr.org/2012/10/data-scientist-the-sexiest-job-of-the-21st-century>

JOURNALISM, ART AND DATA MANAGEMENT

Journalism has not escaped the arrival of Big Data. Cases such as the "Panama Papers" are a clear example. A total of 11.5 million documents were analysed in what is considered the biggest data leak in the history of "data journalism". To achieve this, the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung decided to partner up with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). For a year, more than 370 journalists from 107 media organisations from 76 countries came together to decipher all of the material, which included emails, faxes, pdfs, notes, etc.

As for art, there are those who have already thought about how data and statistics can be made attractive and understandable to the general population, occupying a new niche between art, science and sociology. Specifically, since its creation in 2013 the Domestic Data Streamers group in Barcelona has been researching how data can be converted into interactive systems and display experiences that go beyond the computer screen and traditional computer graphics.

They define themselves with the phrase "Turning Excel forms into erotic lyrics" and have already exhibited their projects in museums and institutions around the world such as the California Academy of Sciences, Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB), Qatar Foundation, Unicef, Smart City Expo and World Mobile Congress.

For example, they created the exhibition called "Lifeline"³ at Disseny Hub Barcelona. The installation consisted of a grid of 800 balloons marking the point between the real age and the age at which each person wants to die, from data drawn from a survey of 1,200 people. White balloons represented those who did not know at what age they wanted to die, while the black balloons symbolised those who were clear about the age at which they want to die. The very young tended to want to live for longer (between 100 and 130 years), while those aged 21 or 22 opted for a more realistic option, choosing to die between 75 and 85. However, from 45 years onwards the death curve rose to 90-95 years as the preferred age to die. 12 % of respondents said they wanted to be immortal.

Another example, the "Sand Falls" installation in the Big Bang exhibition at the CCCB, was designed to extract quantitative data from works of art and their influence over the visitors. Using sensors positioned in the works of arts, the time each person spent

"Lifeline" exhibition in Disseny Hub Barcelona.



Source: Video of the exhibition - <https://vimeo.com/93634967>

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in front of certain works of art was captured and the information was then represented in hourglasses.

INTEGRATING BIG DATA IN COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

Business, talent management, journalism, art... But can we integrate Big Data into communications strategies?

Big Data is fertile ground for communicators and a unique opportunity to accompany companies in the generation of knowledge for society. It must permeate and form part of communications strategies, just as it is already doing in business strategies. In this way, an interpretation of the data from a communications perspective will allow companies to gain flexibility and adapt

better to the needs of all their stakeholders.

The large amount of information a company generates every day, either from within the business or from external interactions with its stakeholders, must reach the communications teams. For example, the analysis of data applying a communications filter can allow for the identification of newsworthy events to communicate from a company, the creation of studies that help to reflect the reality of a sector through quantitative data, the understanding of which publications and messages achieve a higher level of engagement, and even for the identification of new consumer trends and forms of behaviour. Internally, the data that a company collects through its employee interaction tools and channels can help it to adjust its internal communications and messages. The story of a company must be also able to adapt itself to reality and information that this monumental volume of data provides. Once extracted and selected, the opportunities to visualise the data are endless and can be adapted to multiple channels and formats.

However, applying Big Data to corporate communications raises several issues that must be taken into account to ensure that the implementation of this discipline is effective:

I **Privacy.** Data collection and the use made of it is still a matter to be resolved. Big Data values information that was hidden until now and interprets it to make predictions that are consistent with the data extracted. Some experts in the field have emphasised the need to specify the purpose of this data collection, to limit the amount of information gathered and to be transparent about what information is stored. We have all personally experienced advertisements appearing on the websites we visit that reflect our personal preferences and previous searches, in the hope that the offer shown will allow the company to close a new sale. With each click we are providing clues about who we are and what our preferences are.

But this does not have to be a bad thing, rather the opposite. One example of a company that has used Big Data to cultivate the relationship with its customers and optimise its customer service is **Amazon**, always suggesting products or resolving customer concerns. If knowledge is combined with the emergence of large volumes of data, companies will be able to carry out highly individualised and well informed interactions with their users and, ultimately, more human ones.

In short, in the world of Big Data and bearing in mind personal privacy, the how, when, where, why and what that is done with the collected information is yet to be defined.

³ <https://vimeo.com/93634967>

2 The hyper contextualisation of messages. Big Data helps to fully customise communication and segment communities and the narrative used. The goal is to make the communication more effective and capable of responding to the different demands of the target audience.

For example, the **Financial Times** (FT) has a team of over 30 people dedicated to data management in order to increase the circulation of the American newspaper and, at the same time, make paper advertising more competitive. The FT started collecting data in 2007, asking users to register to read eight free articles each month, supplying their email address, zip code, sector, profession and position. This information was very useful for the newspaper, allowing it to offer more targeted advertisements and also to define the behavioural patterns of its readers, helping to convert them into full-time subscribers. The Financial Times has now over 5 million registered users.

3 The technological application to communications. The use of technology in corporate communications has gone from being an afterthought to being an essential factor. Managing the communications of a company means

being capable of analysing the news and conversations that take place 24 hours a day 7 days a week, not only locally, but globally. It is therefore essential for communications professionals to have the technological tools that allow them to analyse these large volumes of data and present them intelligently. Mastering this makes it possible to analyse opinions, reputation and the link with the brand. Technology is allowing us to move from mere monitoring to intelligence.

The use of Big Data to improve the positioning of a company and to differentiate it from its competitors is a winning formula when it comes to the relationship with stakeholders. Communications professionals who make the most of Big Data will achieve a strong competitive advantage as they can explain the reality of companies, at the same time as making them more transparent and closer to their stakeholders. The challenge is enormous, but the communications industry has the ability to deal with it and in this way contribute to ensuring that information does not outrun the creation of knowledge. Communicators must be capable of slowing down the speed of the information clock and pushing the hands of the knowledge clock. And Big Data can be one of the tools to achieve this.



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