



Thought leadership: A McLuhanesque analysis

Mark Woods

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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>The subject of this study, ‘thought leadership’ is an attempt to understand the terminology itself and to place itself in the business context as an important component of marketing communications. This takes the form of an empirically-gathered case study based upon semi-structured interviews of five communications professionals working with and for the global IT consultancy, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) The contextual and historical examination to this study is viewed hermeneutically through the work of Marshall McLuhan and through the lens of social media and other contemporaneous media trends and commentaries. Taken together, the general conclusion is that despite the extant pressures created by fragmenting modern communication media, thought leadership and its adjunct, storytelling is still highly relevant to marketing communications. At the same time, however, a parallel conclusion is that the role of thought leader itself is shifting in the digital age away from an authorial stance towards collaborative co-creation and visionary influence.</p>	
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FOREWORD

The subject of this study, ‘thought leadership’ is an attempt to understand the terminology itself and to place itself in the business context where it is largely lauded as an important component of marketing communications.

The concept of thought leadership itself will be examined in its proper business context specific to content marketing. This will take the form of an empirically-gathered case study based upon semi-structured interviews of five communications professionals working with and for the global IT consultancy Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) internationally – the company for whom the author of this study works.

The contextual examination in the literature review to this study will be largely viewed hermeneutically through the lens of Marshall McLuhan, who could arguably be defined as a seminal thought leader in the field of communications. The background to this study will further examine the exposition and reception of ideas through the lens of social media and broader current media trends shaping the way forward for thought leadership.

Conclusions will be drawn on a general basis from the case study and more broadly in the context of the trends shaping the future of thought leadership in the digital age. This will also be reflected from the author’s own curious position living in the present transformative period of digital communication, having grown up in a world which was once gloriously and imperfectly analogue.

1 RESEARCH QUESTION

RQ: what are the elements that define thought leadership historically and contextually and how are these reflected from the perspective of key communications stakeholders in the employ of Tata Consultancy Services?

TCS is an interesting business-to-business proposition in that it is a wholly foreign Indian-owned IT service provider operating here in the Nordics. Established already in 1968 as part of the TATA conglomerate, TCS is a truly mega corporation headquartered in India with nearly 390 000 employees on its payroll, a market cap of 74.5 billion USD, operations in 49 countries globally.

The company ranked by Forbes as being (somewhat erroneously) in the ‘Computer Services industry’, delivers complex IT provisioning partnership deals to its potential customers across a large number of industry verticals offering a range of business solutions and services. These range from the ‘bread and butter’ delivery of typical outsourced IT services right up to highly automated implementations driven by cloud solutions, software robotics, big data analytics and artificial intelligence. All of the latter can be viewed within the framework of digital transformation which the company is facilitating.

While it is highly successful globally, its recognition as a company and brand presence in the Nordics is still very low. Anecdotally, based upon a conversation with one marketing communications director here in the Nordics, TCS was described by one less-than-enlightened customer prospect as ‘those coders in mud huts’.

This echoes heavily the association in many people’s minds of Brand India as Morgen Witzel points out in his book, *TATA, the evolution of a corporate brand* thus:

‘The associations that Brand India has are poverty, overpopulation and an exotic tourist destination that’s too dangerous to go to,’

This rather unflattering description is indicative on one level of a parochial frame of mind and a heightened level of ignorance but it reveals another truth: that marketing communications efforts for the 25 plus years that TCS has been present in the Nordics have failed to create a clear brand presence or vision of itself in the eyes of potential customers.

Witzel points out that there is a disparity in many respects between the perception of Indian companies and the Indian brand:

‘Somehow, Brand Tata must find a way to become both Indian and global, capitalizing on ‘Asian heritage and Western modernity’ while remaining true to its own values and traditions.’

Equally Witzel points out that brand building is not as critical to B2B consumers because they are: ‘generally more likely to make buying decisions based on fitness for purpose and value for money, rather than on the need for personal self-esteem.’

This may be the case. Nevertheless, TCS as a company has sought to gain trust and engagement with its clients through customer-centricity, which is not only part of their corporate values but also pragmatically speaking, viewed by their management as a bigger driver for their business than external marketing efforts alone can provide.

In terms of soft values, TCS as a company is unique in the sense that in the same manner as its parent conglomerate the TATA group, two thirds of its income is ploughed back into community efforts, i.e. charity. While this modus operandi seems to be at odds with typical corporate practices, it nevertheless is a successful one considering the company’s global reach and financial heft.

While much lip service is paid to corporate values, TCS values are matched closely with its values listed accordingly as: Integrity, Understanding, Excellence, Unity and Responsibility.

Former CEO of TCS, S Ramadorai in his book: *The TCS story...and beyond* returns to this adherence to values thus:

‘Corporate brands require authenticity: One thing that the Tata group has done very well, over the past decade at least, is maintain the alignment between its values, its actions and stakeholder perceptions.’

Former global head of marketing at TCS, John Lenzen also echoed these sentiments when he stated in an interview in the Economic Times of Mumbai:

‘For TCS, we are finding that the branding will need to be more about softer aspects of innovation, partner strategy and thought leadership, and that mirrors our evolution as a global player.’

In that context, thought leadership, viewed as a soft value is still nevertheless a relevant ingredient in the marketing mix, a sentiment echoed in March 2017 where it was identified by the European marketing and communications director, Ashish Babu as one of

five key priorities for marketing: ‘leading with local thought leadership’ thus bringing the focus away from global and back to a local presence.

Thought leadership in modern business has become a valuable resource for its power to engage audiences. Taken apart from pure marketing outreach, its transcendental qualities raise the stakes in business communication and anyone who can encapsulate the zeitgeist of thought leadership in any given field will not only become famous in their own right but also steer the conversation on what is relevant now and in a visionary sense, how business is conducted in the future.

The social media term ‘trending’ is highly synonymous with what thought leadership aims to do because it easily encapsulates the idea that people are indeed talking about a particular subject for its appeal and relevance at the time.

Relevance, authenticity, co-creation and storytelling are strong ingredients in the exposition of thought leadership as Witzel points out:

‘Corporate brands are co-created. As Jonathan Schroeder says, brands are created in stakeholders’ minds. Myths, symbols and stories play a huge role in the process. But stakeholders do not just swallow whole the messages sent out by corporate brand managers. They gather stories from other sources too, from friends and colleagues, from the media, from general word of mouth. From all of these sources they create the image that defines the brand.’

As a marketing communications professional and content marketer in the employ of TCS, one of the central questions I have is whether thought leadership has meaning in the framework of business to business communications and content marketing. By defining the context of thought leadership within a business context, this very modest research aims to legitimize the concept itself and offer avenues forward for its development in that framework.

1.1 Limits to the research

Taken in the context of an academic study, the biggest limitation to this work is the general lack of academic research material on the subject of thought leadership.

Thought leadership can easily be clustered with other marketing buzzwords and now cliché terms like *synergy*, *marketing funnel* or similar which tends to flatten its meaning and trivialize its importance as a component of content marketing.

There are also a great many proponents of the art of thought leadership – the most successful of whom in the business context are modern day showmen with lively and full corporate engagement calendars, thriving social media platforms and publishing deals. Does their bubble reputation validate their content or is there something deeper to their success than mere self promotion?

Given these constraints, the study will take a hermeneutic approach not aiming to validate any theory of thought leadership but rather attempt to illuminate its characteristics first through a very modest qualitative case study involving semi-structured interviews with five marketing professionals examining their personal views on the subject.

Secondly, thought leadership will be historically examined through the keen lens of one of the greatest and most vocal proponents of media and communications Marshall McLuhan. In addition, reference will also be made to the growing and extant body of ephemeral articles in the web which validate its presence and explore the ways and means in which thought leadership is used. By bringing these into the sphere of examination, the study attempts to provide a modest snapshot of the term in its business context.

One could argue that McLuhan, owning the space before mass computing, IT and social media dominated is not the right figure through which to examine thought leadership but his examination of media from all aspects and his incredibly prescient statements on the future of communications are worthwhile in their own right.

2 DEFINITION OF TERMS

2.1 Information Technology (IT)

As discussed above, this research aims to illuminate the concept of thought leadership specific to the field of business to business communications in the field of IT consultancy. According to the definition provided by Wikipedia, Information technology (IT) is:

‘The application of computers to store, study, retrieve, transmit, and manipulate data or information, often in the context of a business or other enterprise’.

Secondly IT is considered: ‘a subset of information and communications technology (ICT)’.

IT consultancy as an industry has risen concurrently with global business facilitating, augmenting and evolving the technologies and services that enable it. In this regard, its importance as a business sector has grown vastly in the past three decades. Increasingly its influence has risen to enable broader ecosystems that not only underpin the workings of society at a functional level, but also as a platform for social developments.

If one considers the development of for example, Cloud computing and all the social media platforms underpinned by the internet and its ecosystems, one can see that the influence of IT as an industry is pivotal in the modern world and to communications in general.

European Director of Communications for TCS, Ashish Babu encapsulates the argument well when he said in interview:

“IT no longer just offers infrastructure and troubleshooting – it is in the process of becoming the strategic business enabler, responsible for helping drive innovation. To this end, it must communicate differently to its customers, which is where thought leadership becomes important.”

IT in the context of business communications is therefore becoming an influencer in its own right thus throwing the idea of thought leadership into an area where technology and social influence intersect. In this sense, the case study is all the more relevant to a future where communication is increasingly fashioned by technology itself.

This idea is explored in the book *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* by Neil Postman published in 1992 that describes the development and characteristics of a "technopoly" defined as a society in which technology is deified, meaning ‘the culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology.’ Within the confines of that definition, one could argue we are evolving into a society guided by dystopian principles with the new golden calf being not mammon but rather technology itself.

On May 6, 2017, *the Economist* published a bold article stating: The world’s most valuable resource is no longer oil, but data and warned of the monopoly ruled over it by the titans of the new industrial age, Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Microsoft. In that context, with their de facto dominance over the new oil, we may have already arrived at our dystopian destination.

2.2 Business to Business

Business to business communications (b-to-b) differs significantly from its more commonly recognized business to consumer (b-to-c) in that the essential sales propositions and themes inherent in the former are largely known and understood by the receiving audience. Not only this but the use of commercial advertising methods while still part of the marketing mix, takes a backseat to other more specialized marketing platforms in such places as industry forums, trade magazines, op eds, advertorials and in industry voice and expert blogs in the owned and earned media space. One could broadly sweep all these marketing outreaches into the content marketing space, which itself has grown in stature with the rise of digital media.

For the purpose of this study, it is good to understand that one of the major shifts in thinking within the marketing community is the shift in B2B marketing away from a company-centric style of communication to a customer-centric one where engagement is the goal. In this regard, LinkedIn for business to business purposes is one of the most important platforms for companies like TCS as a key driver for engagement.

2.3 Social Media

Oscar Wilde famously quoted that there is only one thing worse than being talked about and that is not being talked about. Social media by its very definition is a bi-directional phenomenon where online conversations take on a life of their own and define relevance. Henry Jenkins puts social media in the context of the gift economy when he says: 'The main characteristics of social media/web 2.0 is that they are spreadable media.' (Jenkins, Li, Krauskopf and Green 2009)

Terranova and Donovan also frame the transformation of media through the web when they state 'Since at least 2004, the internet, and more specifically the web, has witnessed a notorious controversial shift away from the model of the static web page towards a social web or Web 2.0 model where the possibilities of users to interact with the web have multiplied. It has become much easier for a layperson to publish and share texts, images and sounds. A new topology of distribution of information has emerged based in 'real' social networks, but also enhanced by casual and algorithmic connections.'

Henry Jenkins said that Web 2.0 is both pleasure and exploitation, both a space of participation and a space of commodification. Convergence is both a top-down corporate driven process and a bottom-up consumer driven process. Corporate convergence coexists with grassroots convergence (Jenkins 2008, p.18). This is most certainly the case with LinkedIn with its largely corporate profile and starting point as an online employment platform to later develop as one of the largest publishers on the web.

According to Lee et al. (2006), a top-down blog can enhance corporate credibility and trust by sharing well-considered opinions about a company and give outsiders new insight Lee et al. (2006) also stress that:

‘The authenticity rather than the number of bloggers is necessary for success. An authentic human voice is important element of blogging because it separates corporate blogging from traditional marketing channels.’

This last statement offers an important distinction in the context of engagement – authenticity which differentiates itself against commercial messages. Lisa Arthur in her book, *Big Data Marketing*. Engage your customers more effectively and drive value states:

‘At its core, big data marketing centers on one thing, and one thing only: driving value by engaging customers more effectively.’

Social media tools of the like of LinkedIn are becoming an interesting component of B2B marketing because of the roles of personal relationships and interactions in these markets. They argue that social media platforms are increasing in adoption by b-to-b marketing because they ‘provide faster and more personalized interactions between customers and suppliers and thus deepen relationships (Kho2008). They also point out that B2B organizations seem to have acknowledged the potential of social media more slowly than B2C companies (Michaelidou et al 2011)

From another academic paper, *Social Media: The New Mantra for Managing Reputation*, Ashish Kaul cited a 2014 Ernst and Young’s study (2014) which stated that companies have:

‘Three key objectives of indulging in social media: building brand awareness, building a community, and engaging with the customer. Reputation management, thought leadership, and recruitment were also focal areas for companies.’

Social media is remarkable in that its influence is seemingly unstoppable and pervasive. At its inception, some fifteen years ago, social media was generally considered NSFW but over time, it has not only become suitable for work but increasingly recognized as an essential part of the marketing communications toolkit as traditional media fade into the background.

There are nevertheless challenges for social media – its incredibly rapid development leaves little time for stragglers. An article by the Reuters Institute makes an informed case for moving ‘beyond the article’ as Creative Director for the New York Times R&D lab Alexis Lloyd is quoted in the report:

‘He argued that journalists and news organizations needed to let go of old, inherited constraints and rethink what news might look like in a thoroughly digital media environment.’

This is the challenge for all who publish on the web – in an age of content abundance, the real winners are those who win in the attention economy where the audience’s primary engagement with any content is click, search and scroll.

2.4 Content Marketing

The engine behind social media could be argued to be content. Content itself and the behaviors around it form big data which in turn informs the metrics that inform the new digital marketing business models. In the foreword to Lisa Arthur’s, author of *Big Data Marketing*, Thomas H. Davenport states:

‘The marketing function is undergoing a dramatic transformation towards a world of data-driven decisions.’

He also cites a Gartner study which states that by the year 2017 marketing organizations will spend more on technology than IT organizations. In all instances, he describes a marketing continuum that:

‘has traditional creative, intuitive marketing on one end (a position that is no longer tenable by itself) and hard-digital data management on the other.’

Lisa Arthur herself states that marketing is moving from the Dark Ages into an ‘Enlightened Age of Data’. Her further contention is that with the use of data, marketing as a function can become a strategic tool. As Arthur also states, however, referencing a

quote from the Harvard Business Review, ‘Data gives you the ‘what’ but humans know the why’.

This is quite a prescient conclusion against the background of thought leadership because our search for information in the web is arguably a fact-driven endeavour but it still takes a human to add the why dimension to make that same content compelling.

From the printed word to the digital world, content is still king, Content is effectively the key driver for all social media – without the participation of the content creators to create content, social media become media without messages and without content there can be no engagement. What then is engagement? Estaban Kolsky suggests that it is:

‘the interaction between people and brands on social networks’ and that it is ‘a function of trust and knowledge’.

In order for content marketing to work, its content must be compelling and in this connection, thought leadership comes into play. Kolsky also points out that engagement is also a function of time because no proper relationship of trust can be established without it. It could be argued therefore that engagement is essentially about building trusted relationships with your audience.

This is particularly relevant to complex business-to-business environments because of the order of magnitude of a typical business transaction and the time over which it is transacted (potentially years). Engagement therefore, according at least to the definitions above, would it seems be the most important goal for any content marketing, be it in social media or through more traditional marketing channels.

In the context of thought leadership, engaging content is a must because the element of trust for the writer to his audience is central. One important part of content marketing in the b-to-b context is thought leadership. Thought leadership as a concept has existed for a longer time but its prominence has grown in the social media space where large audiences can be connected bi-directionally with powerful words and ideas almost instantaneously.

While thought leadership takes many forms, in social media terms we can consider it largely earned content which grows in value through mentions, shares, reposts and reviews. This is the principle engine for engagement in thought leadership – one gains a reputation for being talked about and despite the possibility for buying the illusion of

popularity in say, Twitter, the exposition of great ideas enjoys natural organic growth through appreciative, interactive audiences.

The use of social media has been clearly identified as a key component in its outreach to both existing customers and potential new ones alongside the traditional owned and paid-for news and PR channels. Social media in this sense is superior to the traditional channels because it engenders interaction and in so doing fosters engagement with the brand.

There are nevertheless skeptics about the role of content marketing. One columnist started a long chain discussion with his provocative article in the online forum Marketing Week, *'Is Content marketing a load of bollocks?'* In a reply article, entitled more politely: *'The Big Debate: is content marketing really nonsense?'*, author Jonathan Bacon comes to the conclusion that content marketing cannot be ignored even if its triple fold expansion in recent years has not lead to any measurable increase in engagement. Quoting the head of the Content Marketing Association, Clara Hill in his article thus:

'Voicing her defence of content marketing, Hill argues that it is vital to building long term relationships with consumers. "Brands have become publishers and are now becoming media owners – a real disruption to the industry, which is putting owned media at the heart of strategies," she says.'

Lisa Arthur herself states that marketing must evolve from what she describes as: 'outdated, ineffective, and ad hoc internal marketing processes, coupled with fragmented and missing data' that 'can only lead to flat, one-size-fits-all messaging and interactions.'

Her further contention is that with the use of data, marketing as a function can become a strategic tool as opposed to a tactical one.

This may sound like wishful thinking but the clear message is that big data and indeed metrics are the future key drivers for defining engagement and enhancing it. This last quote is salient because it helps to put content marketing in its proper context. Certainly big data is helping to identify audiences with increasingly targeted accuracy but the content itself, no matter how well matched needs a human at its core.

2.5 Thought leadership – definitions and interpretations

The term thought leadership defined as ‘intellectual influence; innovative or pioneering thinking’ by the Oxford English Dictionary is widely referred to in modern business circles but it has its origins as a term far earlier, to describe Henry Ward Beecher, a Calvinist minister and one of the best-known evangelists of his age thus:

‘Foremost in thought-leadership and influence, because speaking to men as preacher and dreamed dreams, and gripped problems, and found out new ways to emancipation and progress.’

According to the OED reference, Beecher was not only an active proponent of social reform, he was also an abolitionist and a champion of Charles Darwin’s then highly controversial theory of evolution. It is interesting to note therefore that one of the earliest examples of the term is directly linked to social reform, the exposition of new and potentially polarizing ideas and evangelism. In the corporate world, the role of evangelist is also heavily connected to the kind of person tasked with advocacy of causes, services, products and not least, big ideas.

In more recent times, the term emerges in its modern business context. An article in Mashable suggests that it was effectively re-coined nearly 20 years ago in the pages of the business magazine of technology consulting firm Booz & Company, Strategy+Business.

According to the global media company Forbes, thought leadership is a broadly held term with many definitions and can describe either individuals or companies. According to one online article in its index of articles, ‘thought leadership has a positive influence on business growth’, is a function of brand equity and can be broken down into a two part definition as follows:

‘A thought leader is an individual or firm that prospects, clients, referral sources, intermediaries and even competitors recognize as one of the foremost authorities in selected areas of specialization, resulting in its being the go-to individual or organization for said expertise.’

And:

‘A thought leader is an individual or firm that significantly profits from being recognized as such.’

From this two part distinction then we can deduce that thought leadership is about authority, expertise and specialization and that its mastery creates a virtuous circle of

recognition and fame. One can see just from the first references that thought leadership is something that is attained rather than acquired and whether it leads to increased reputation or simply business growth, it is highly coveted as an asset.

Taken in the context of the present study, another article this time from the business-specialized online site *www.entrepreneur.com* usefully posits thought leadership as:

‘A type of content marketing where you tap into the talent, experience and passion inside your business, or from your community, to answer the biggest questions on the minds of your target audience on a particular topic’.

It goes on to elaborate that thought leadership is one of the outcomes of a solid content strategy and that by exposing thought leaders in your business, one can surpass marketing and start the process of what it describes ‘becoming a social business.

This very neatly puts thought leadership in the context of social media and content marketing as a collective entrepreneurial activity where multiple thought leaders help to define the primacy of a company in a given field through exposure of their ideas.

In another salient article from the entrepreneur website, Neil Patel, goes on to define nine characteristics which forms a useful checklist of what thought leaders do: These are: staying current on social media, maintaining a blog, voicing their opinions, saying quotable stuff, possessing a track record, speaking at events, having a personal branding strategy, having influential friends and thinking strategically.

His overall conclusion in the article is that thought leaders are generous:

‘They are generous with their time, their talents, their money and their advice.’

Output it seems is central to the reputation and engagement of any erstwhile thought leader, according to Patel.

Nevertheless, despite the virtuous halo that proponents of thought leadership wish to project to their market, there is equally much scepticism about its effectiveness. In an online article authored by Jeff Pundyk, Senior Vice President, Global Integrated Content Solutions called *Thought Leadership Disrupted*, one of his conclusions was:

‘...the very ideas of what it means to be a thought leader – once limited to an elite group of businesses that truly developed proprietary knowledge is increasingly seen as an overused and self-serving tactic, one that is contributing to the noise rather than cutting through it.’

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

Just three short years after the publication of the Gutenberg Galaxy, novelist and social trend commentator, Tom Wolfe wrote in his article *'What if he's right?'* about one of the most influential thinkers of communications of the last century, Marshall McLuhan:

'But, all right, he may have missed the mark on this or that, but McLuhan will remain a major figure in the social sciences if for no other reason than that he has opened up the whole subject of the way the new technologies are changing people's thinking, reactions, life styles, everything.'

The title, obviously well thought out tells much about the skepticism with which McLuhan was met at the time when he first started expounding his views on communications, both in academia and business. Six decades later, Wolfe's question has largely been answered: McLuhan was right and despite the relative gnomic density of his ideas, his oeuvre reveals the Gutenberg mind at its most inquiring and undistracted.

If the purpose of this paper is to define thought leadership and examine its role in communications, it is to my view, a natural place to reflect it through the visionary eyes of that very twentieth century media iconographer and thought leader. The world which McLuhan predicted in the sixties is the same one in which thought leaders now vie for space. In this context, it is good to understand the overarching themes that have brought us to this point.

McLuhan himself does not fit easily into one academic niche since he too crossed over disciplines in academia from teaching literature in universities for something like 14 years before he began espousing his ideas at the University of Toronto with his Communications and Culture seminars. It was not long after that he published his first seminal work, *the Mechanical Bride* in 1951.

Not only that, but after putting his head above the academic parapet, he happily courted both the business and advertising worlds as platforms for his insights and grew in stature as an academic through the media itself at a time when academia was largely ringfenced from that world.

As such, he broke through the academic veil to become a social commentator in and on the media – in some sense, he stands as one of the most original thought leaders of the 20th century, if not the 21st century that he predicted. His aphoristic, gnomic but unarguably insightful theories on modern communications and their evolution through his various published works form a solid and meaningful basis upon which to build the premise of modern thought leadership.

It is arguable that McLuhan's greatest strength as a social commentator on the media was his thorough academic grounding in literature before his venture into communications. At the core of all literature is the story, a concept that obviously predates the written word. Story telling is an essential component of any thought leader content because in the same manner as literary works, it is the natural and robust carrier for messages and information. McLuhan's strength is one that derives from the

analysis of literature – the ability to identify the tropes and memes that describe societal change, individual philosophies and perspectives that illuminate big ideas.

The written word in the form of the codex has evolved from a hand crafted work dictated to a scribe to a replicable printable artefact and onwards to a digital stream of bits and bytes. It is this evolution that forms the ground for all McLuhan's explorations into communications.

Nicholas Carr in his book, *the Shallows* shared a very telling fact that gives some weight to the importance of the dissemination of ideas thanks to the invention of the Gutenberg press.

According to one estimate, the number of books produced in the fifty years following Gutenberg's invention equaled the number produced by European scribes during the preceding 1000 years. This replication and indeed amplification of ideas gave birth to all the myriad forms of publication which laid the path for our present world which McLuhan predicted.

Carr writes elegiacally about the written word. He states:

'For the last five centuries, ever since Gutenberg's printing press made book reading a popular pursuit, the linear, literary mind has been at the center of art, science and society. As supple as it is subtle, it's been the imaginative mind of the Renaissance, the rational mind of the Enlightenment, the inventive mind of the Industrial Revolution, and the subversive mind of Modernism. It may soon be yesterday's mind.'

3.1 The medium and the message

A dependable if somewhat predictable starting point for this historical examination is McLuhan's universally famous aphorism, the medium is the message. With its terse yet ambiguous probe into the relationship between medium (platform?), whatever that may be with the message it conveys (content?), there is much room for pondering and misunderstanding. Here is the original statement from *Understanding Media:*

Extensions of Man in its proper context:

'In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.'

Former Chief Strategist of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology Mark Federman in his article '*What is the Meaning of The Medium is the Message?*' concludes that the message is not an obvious one until one looks beyond the obvious:

'A McLuhan message always tells us to look beyond the obvious and seek the non-obvious changes or effects that are enabled, enhanced, accelerated or extended by the new thing. Thus we have the meaning of "the medium is the message:" We can know the nature and characteristics of anything we conceive or create (medium) by virtue of the changes - often unnoticed and non-obvious changes - that they effect (message.)'

This viewpoint, shared by many other critics places McLuhan as a technological determinist. Technological determinism - a theory now apparently debunked by modern theorists - was first coined by sociologist Thorstein Veblen in the early 1900s with the underlying idea that assumes that a society's technology determines the development of its social structure and cultural values.

Much of what McLuhan wrote tends to confirm this view. McLuhan wrote rather cryptically but elegantly in the chapter, *the Gadget Lover* of his work *Understanding Media*:

'Human beings have become the sex organs of the machine world.'

In that sense, technology itself incapable (at that time at least) of replicating itself, used its creators to pollinate and disseminate its offspring – an interesting and novel perspective.

Another critic of McLuhan as a technological determinist was the academic and author Raymond Williams who posited that technology in itself has the power to change societies and the power to condition humans. Although McLuhan strongly believed that the introduction to any new media would change the way we live, Williams argued that the new technology in itself has no real significance to social value *unless it has been adapted to existing social and economic conditions*.

This viewpoint is quite central, I believe to the argumentation that underpins McLuhan's view to technology. At the time he was formulating his theories, he was quite literally standing on Gutenberg's shores examining the hinterland of the printed word and looking forward into a yawning chasm where new technology, principally television at that time and by default, its content engine, advertising were making profound inroads into the way people consumed these new media.

McLuhan was fully aware of this transition seeing it as nothing short of a revolution. His answer to it was nevertheless self possessed, if not even reckless in nature: In the chapter, *The Printed Word of Understanding Media* p.194, he writes:

'Those who panic now about the threat of the newer media and about the revolution we are forging, vaster in scope than that of Gutenberg, are obviously lacking in cool visual detachment and gratitude for the most potent gift bestowed on Western man by literacy and typography: his power to act without reaction or involvement.... Print taught men to say, "Damn the torpedoes. Full steam ahead!'

Those replicable visual elements and formalizations of the printed word had already prepared us for the next phase in the revolution by instilling in us a sense of detachment, not dissimilar in the sense of the suspension of disbelief one needs when opening a work of fiction. He further expounded his idea of the printed word's influence in his work *Laws of Media* where he analyzed the printed word as a tetrad.

The points he highlights are nothing if not prescient and it's not too much of a stretch to imagine that McLuhan was predicting at this point the rise of the thought leader in his pondering:

PRINTED WORD:

- A. amplifies private authorship, the competitive goal oriented individual (letters are an extension of the teeth, the only lineal and repetitive part of the body, as Harold Innes explains, writing on paper leads to military bureaucracies
- B. Obsolesces slang, dialects and group identity, separates composition and performance, divorces eye and ear.
- C. retrieves tribal elitism, charmed circles, the neck verse,; (print makes everyone a reader and Xerox makes everyone a publisher)
- D. With flip from manuscript into mass production via print, there comes the corporate reading public and the 'historical sense.'

As a tool for revealing the truth about the printed word in this instance, the tetrad neatly predicts the rise of private authorship over the collective which enters a new phase as it is met with the emerging technologies creating tribes which he described as:

'an extended form of a family of blood relatives, exploded by print, and replaced by an association of men homogeneously trained to be individuals and building propaganda.'

All these trends can arguably be seen in the new media platforms. The distinction between authors as publishers and audiences as audiences become blurred when the audience is empowered as individuals (albeit homogeneously trained) also to be publishers.

Using the same tetrad probe, I reflected the concept of thought leadership and came up with the following:

The first probe asks:

What does the thing — the artifact, the medium — extend, enhance, intensify, accelerate or enable?

Thought leadership – extends ideas and our sense of the future, enhances reputation, intensifies debate and discussion about big ideas, accelerates shifts in thinking, enables the passage of new and challenging ideas into society.

When pushed or extended beyond the limits of its potential, the new thing will tend to reverse what had been its original characteristics. Into what does the new medium reverse?

When reversed, thought leadership becomes one directional preaching and digital static. It becomes a pulpit, soapbox or vehicle for ideas that are infected with subjective viewpoints over fact based argumentation. In its worst reversal it becomes a rant or tirade that accepts no other points of view.

If some aspect of a situation or a thing is enhanced or enlarged, simultaneously, something else is displaced. What is pushed aside or obsolesced by the new thing; the new medium?

Thought leadership obsolesces independent thought and common sense – it becomes the utterances of the wise man or woman whose knowledge should be received uncritically – like that of a religion. It therefore obsolesces critical thinking and the faculty to challenge everything you know.

What does the new medium retrieve from the past that had been formerly obsolesced?

Thought leadership retrieves the power of the priest over his congregation – it retrieves faith in the unknown and religion. Going further back it retrieves the power of the shaman to interpret the signs of a numinous world that guide the tribe to safety.

Returning to the theme of technological determinism, interestingly, McLuhan refuted the term determinist according to Paul Levinson in his review of his work co-authored with Bruce Powers ‘*The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*’ in 1989, titled: *McLuhan's Space*. According to Levinson, McLuhan viewed the term along with its philosophy and theory as ‘pollutions from the printed age.’ And would have preferred the term, media "explorer".

Like any wise media explorer, McLuhan was cautious if not hyper-aware about the territory he was entering. While he died nearly a decade before the Web came into general existence, he was more concerned of the dangers that technology would have on senses

fine-tuned by literacy, typography and the Gutenberg mind. Once again, presciently he wrote:

‘The electric technology is within the gates and we are numb, deaf, blind and mute about its encounter with the Gutenberg technology on and through which the American way of life was formed.’

McLuhan instinctively understood that humanity was edging towards these new technologies unaware of their weapon-like qualities and his metaphor of the Trojan horse above, is very apt. In the chapter weapons, he further expands this idea when he writes:

‘Literacy locks the mind and senses of its users in the mechanical and fragmentary matrix that is so necessary to the maintenance of mechanized society. That is why the transition from the mechanical to electric technology is so traumatic and severe for us all. The mechanical techniques with their limited powers, we have long used as weapons. The electric techniques cannot be used aggressively except to end all life at once, like the turning off of a light. To live with both of these technologies at the same time is the peculiar drama of the twentieth century.’

The author Will Self, also pondered the weaponizing of technology in an article ‘*Are humans evolving beyond the need to tell stories?*’ in the Guardian:

‘My view is that we’re deluded if we think new technologies come into existence because of clearly defined human objectives – let alone benevolent ones – and it’s this that should shape our response to them. No, the history of the 20th century and now the 21st – is replete with technologies that were developed purely in order to facilitate the killing of people at a distance, of which the internet is the most egregious example.’

Weaponized technologies like the internet coinciding with earlier technologies like printing puts tremendous pressure on humanity to cope. This coping mechanism is also under threat from another facet of the new technology – distraction as McLuhan predicted:

‘Having extended or translated our central nervous system into the electromagnetic technology, it is but a further stage to transfer our consciousness to the computer world as well. Then at least we shall be able to program consciousness in such wise that cannot be numbed nor distracted by the Narcissus illusions of the entertainment world that beset mankind when he encounters himself extended in his own gimmickry.’

And:

‘As long as we adopt the Narcissus attitude of regarding the extensions of our own bodies as really out there and really independent of us, we will meet all technological challenges with the same sort of banana-skin pirouette and collapse.’

McLuhan was also able to see that technologies must be considered as seamless extension of our bodies, rather than separate, discrete artifacts. When he also speaks about the need to ‘program consciousness’ once it has been transferred to the computer world he understood even then, that we could potentially fall victim to illusion followed by the inevitable comedic pratfall predicted by the technological banana skin.

If McLuhan was calling for vigilance against electromagnetic technology in the sixties, he was nevertheless optimistic that it would in some sense free us from the homogeneity

of the mechanical age defined by the printed word. In the chapter *Automation of Understanding Media* he writes:

‘Men are suddenly nomadic gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before, informed as never before, free from fragmentary specialization as never before – but also involved in the total social process as never before; since with electricity we extend our central nervous system globally, instantly interrelating every human experience.’

Nicholas Carr also echoes this sentiment of the wandering nomad as a metaphor for the individual in the internet age:

‘What we’re experiencing is in a metaphorical sense, a reversal of the early trajectory of civilization. We are evolving from being cultivators of personal knowledge to being hunters and gatherers in the electronic data forest.’

In some sense, McLuhan was also predicting the rise of the algorithm that learns our preferences as consumers of information to feed us the content that keeps us distracted in a continuous echo chamber. While he saw that electricity and automation could liberate us from uniformity and raise up the individual, at the same time, working with that same technology, the purveyors of content through media have effectively set us a course to create endless distraction.

McLuhan was very specific on this point:

‘Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numbance of the technological idiot. The content of a medium is just the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.’

Interestingly also, at the crossroads between the mechanistic and electrical, made another observation which seems more relevant today than ever to the always online society in which we live:

‘Whereas in the mechanical age of fragmentation, leisure had been the absence of work, or mere idleness, the reverse is true in the electric age. As the age of information demands the simultaneous use of all our faculties, we discover that we are most at leisure when we are most intensely involved, very much as with the artist in all ages.’

What in essence we would be lacking, at this point, he is saying is the critical faculty of self-awareness; a direct consequence of the numbing of the watchdog of the mind created by gimmickry that leads to a dissolution of the senses and boundaries. As society's values, norms, and ways of doing things change because of the technology, only then do we realize the social implications of the medium. The analogy of the boiling frog is not out of place here.

As an observer of the present communications paradigm ruled by the smartphone, the tablet, multitasking and the absorption of the selfie, there has never been a greater need for thought leaders – visionaries of the caliber of McLuhan able to see clearly through the medium and its longer term influence. McLuhan was in all senses what he himself describes in *Understanding Media*:

‘The artist is the man in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time. He is the man of integral awareness.’

The artist and the man of integral awareness – in other words, the thought leader is capable of seeing further. Five years after Wolfe’s original article *‘What if he is right?’* was published, McLuhan rather irreverently and gnomically as ever replied to the author in a television interview:

‘I’ve always been careful never to predict anything that had not already happened.’

One can see that as ever, McLuhan was indeed right – just as Wolfe had predicted.

3.2 Fast forward to the present

McLuhan made reference to the age of information but according to the author Daniel H. Pink of the book *A Whole New Mind Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* we have already surpassed that time and are now firmly in what he terms, the conceptual age with its own very specific characteristics which he defines thus:

‘Ours has been the age of the ‘knowledge worker’ the well-educated manipulator of information and deployer of expertise. But that is changing....It is an age animated by a different form of thinking and a new approach to life – one that prizes aptitudes that I call ‘high concept’ and ‘high touch’. High concept involves the capacity to detect seemingly unrelated ideas into something new.’

Incidentally, Pink’s book stands as an important pathfinder to the developments that are shaping the future. Even the famous thought leader, Seth Godin is quoted on the back cover describing it as:

‘One of those rare books that marks a turning point, one of those books you wish you’d read before everyone else did.’

According to Pink, the conditions that have led to the conceptual age are quite clear and they are: abundance, Asia and automation. McLuhan was intimately aware of the influence of automation and indeed lived in one of the most prosperous times in the twentieth century but the might of Asia rising and the mainstream development of computing was still in its infancy at his death in 1980.

Reflecting these three elements, it is quite ironic that the case study analysis on thought leadership as a tool for building brand awareness is for Tata Consultancy Services – a technology company hailing from the east that derives its wealth and power from those same elements. Nevertheless, it is clear that technology at its own high point in society or *‘the Technopoly’* as Neil Postman describes it, also obeys the laws of high touch and high finish, just as Pink points out in his book when he references author Virginia Postrel on her concept of the aesthetic imperative:

‘For businesses, it’s no longer enough to create a product that’s reasonably priced and adequately functional. It must also be beautiful and meaningful.’

Beauty and meaning it seems would be more the realm of the artist but this is the ultimate aspiration of any commercial endeavor in our present times. Pink reiterates this thought thus:

‘Today it’s economically crucial and personally rewarding to create something that is also beautiful, whimsical or emotionally engaging.’

In order to create these conditions, he further categorizes the importance of six elements or as he describes them ‘senses’. He defines as: Design, Story, Symphony, Empathy, Play and Meaning. Summing these up, the author states:

‘Anyone can master the six Conceptual Age senses. But those who master them first will have a huge advantage.’

With his starting point of design, Pink points out how important design is to any commercial or artistic endeavor. He speaks about the ‘democratization of design’ and this is very much in keeping with the multi form ways in which we can communicate with each other. Social Media platforms offer any number of democratized design packages through which users can now communicate. This democratizes the medium, in the same manner that the printing press in its time democratized the expression of ideas.

Taking up the sense of story, Pink highlights one of the key ingredients to successful thought leadership thus:

‘The essence of persuasion, communication and self-understanding has become the ability to fashion a compelling narrative.’

In this quote one can see that stories offer the writer not only the means to engage with the reader through a compelling narrative but also to engage with himself. In this self-reflecting manner, the story becomes one of the conveyors of persuasion – a very important part of the thought leader’s skill set.

He further quotes cognitive scientist Mark Turner in his book *The Literary Mind* to underline the importance of story and in many ways also underlines why it is so central to thought leadership:

‘Narrative imagining – story is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend on it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, of explaining....Most of our experience, our knowledge and our thinking is organized as stories.’

When Pink further elaborates stories as: ‘important cognitive events, for they encapsulate, into one compact package, information, knowledge, context and emotion,’ he is also anticipating another sense, that of symphony – the ability to bring disparate elements together to form coherent and above all, pleasing wholes. This also underlines the design principle which is the first of the high concept, high touch senses. In this his conclusion is that symphony answers to a very modern desire not for analysis but rather a higher form of understanding – the synthesis of ideas – essentially the ‘big picture’ which is again the mark of the holistic thinker and the thought leader. Pink also emphasizes the importance in symphony of the use of metaphor claiming it is integral to self-reflection and creative thought processes.

Quoting, the linguist George Lakoff, he states:

‘Human thought processes are largely metaphorical.’ His conclusion in a highly connected world is that ‘metaphorical imagination is essential in forging empathic connections and communicating experiences that others do not share.’

In short, it seems that metaphor is a highly useful tool in any thought leader’s toolkit because like stories they communicate experiences and empathic connections – the type that ensure messages are remembered and communicated forward.

The last three senses which Pink suggests are inherent to the conceptual age can all be characterized as the most specifically human; empathy - that quality so essential to literature that allows us to walk in another man’s shoes; play, the very means by which humans learn to learn; and meaning, the archetypal highest human aspiration as defined by psychologist, Abraham Maslow in his widely acknowledged definition of the hierarchy of needs in his 1943 paper "*A Theory of Human Motivation*" in *Psychological Review*.

Pink takes his premise for these three senses against the technological and materialistic world from which we are emerging. In many respects he is taking up the challenges outlined by McLuhan himself to beware of gimmickry and to engage all our faculties. As he says himself about empathy – that most human of qualities:

‘In a world of ubiquitous information and advanced analytic tools, logic alone won’t do.’

Once again the role of the thought leader is essentially a human one.

He continues this theme in the examination of the last two senses in the conceptual age – play and once again highlights the importance of one of its key elements – humour, about which he says:

‘It’s time to rescue humour from its status as mere entertainment and recognize it for what it is – a sophisticated and peculiarly human form of intelligence that can’t be replicated by computers and that is becoming increasingly valuable in a high concept, high-touch world.’

In that quote he touches upon the societal effect that technology is playing upon humanity – the dehumanizing principle of machine over man and man’s own ascendancy over machines with again one of his most powerful means for conveying ideas – humour itself.

In times of great change and disruption, this last sense highlighted by Pink, Meaning takes on an important role in the transmission of ideas. It’s not enough to report the benefits of technology but equally important to contextualize their influence in the social sphere. The search for meaning has become a holy grail for modern man and in a post materialist, post religious world, its importance has grown decade on decade since the 1960s.

Anecdotally, many social commentators describe the current paradigm of the working world as the ‘Fourth industrial revolution – one characterized by disruptive technologies that will shift the way society works irrevocably and in a timeframe not more than 20 years into the future.

If we overlay this idea with that proposed by Pink of the conceptual age, we can see that there will clearly be winners and losers in the future job market and their ability to work with disruptive technologies will be the main measure of success. The winners will also be able to master skills that computers, algorithms and robots cannot – skills like thought leadership.

This idea is explored by Israeli academic Yuval Noah Harari a lecturer at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, in his book: *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. In an interview with the Guardian, he places self-actualization in very hard terms against technology and makes a grim prediction for the workforce of tomorrow – one where most of us will be ‘pushed out of employment by intelligent robots and on to the economic scrap heap’ to become ‘the useless class’.

In the interview he states:

‘Children alive today will face the consequences. Most of what people learn in school or in college will probably be irrelevant by the time they are 40 or 50. If they want to continue to have a job, and to understand the world, and be relevant to what is happening, people will have to reinvent themselves again and again, and faster and faster.’

And:

‘This is something that shouldn’t be left to scientists and private corporations. They know a lot about the technical stuff, the engineering, but they don’t necessarily have the vision and the legitimacy to decide the future course of humankind.’

With education under pressure to change by the same technological forces facing humans, who then has the legitimacy to show the way forward and give meaning to a world continuously morphing? Would this be the role fit for the thought leader?

Nicholas Carr certainly seems to stand up for the human when he says:

‘One of the greatest dangers we face as we automate the work of our minds, as we cede control over the flow of our thoughts and memories to a powerful electronic system.’

This is the one prediction that informs the fears of both the scientist Joseph Weizenbaum and the artist Richard Foreman: one they describe as:

‘a slow erosion of our humanness and our humanity’.

Weizenbaum also quoted by Carr also rallies this call when he states:

‘We must have the self-awareness and the courage to refuse to delegate to computers the most human of our mental activities and intellectual pursuits, particularly the ‘tasks that demand wisdom.’

The futurist John von Neumann, equally prescient to technology as McLuhan was in relation to media, predicted the point at which computers become self-aware, as the technological singularity:

‘The accelerating progress of technology and changes in the mode of human life, give the appearance of approaching some essential singularity in the history of the race beyond which human affairs, as we know them, cannot continue.’

At the point when von Neumann was espousing his ideas, this was firmly rooted in the Gutenberg Universe of Marshall McLuhan and while we have not reached that singularity yet, acceleration may yet have reached a point where it is close by. The role of science fiction informing science fact is a hard and fast element of many thought leaders.

3.3 A thought leader for our times

One of the most noteworthy pundits and authorities on thought leadership in the business context is arguably Seth Godin. As a successful entrepreneur in his own right, he has evolved into a highly respected author of seventeen books and a celebrated commentator in business on thought leadership.

In Episode 13 of a web podcast, entitled '*The business of thought leadership*' under the title '*You Don't Need Oprah*', Godin in a Q&A session with the host Nicky Billouy, Godin cites the influence upon him in his formative years of what he terms 'hard science fiction' as a genre from the likes of Isaac Asimov and Sean Coyne in gaining an understanding of what is to come or as he is says in the interview – 'to understand tropes, conventions and structures'.

These are arguably the working tools of any successful thought leader at a time when science fiction is quickly becoming science fact.

When asked about tactics for successful thought leadership, he rejects the notion of tactics in any case but reluctantly offers two tactics: the first is the diary-like devotion to writing:

'You should blog every single day – write something that's got your understanding of the world or your prediction what will happen next. Knowing you have to blog tomorrow will help you think differently today. That accountability is priceless.'

In that respect, he again refers to the journeyman approach that Asimov approached to writing which resulted not only in highly prescient science fiction works but also the sheer volume of extant work published - more than 500 books and an estimated 90 000 letters and postcards.

The second tactic he denotes is the role of selling your ideas and finding the target group you wish to engage:

'Second thing you need to go sell – you need to find the kind of person you want to influence and sell them.'

The acting of selling for a thought leader like Godin is essentially one of self-promotion since he is effectively selling the Seth Godin brand. And like any successful thought leader, it is important to stand behind your own beliefs. Revealingly, Godin outlines expert action steps as a thought leader which help in his parlance to ‘take it to the next level’. These are:

‘Strike the word ‘commercialization’ from every action you take if you desire to be a thought leader.’

‘Your problem is not that you have enough good ideas, it’s that you don’t have enough bad ideas.’

While these have something of a mantra quality to them, the summary offers a charter of some description for thought leadership. Yes, thought leadership is about selling ideas but it is not about selling products or services (except perhaps the service of thought leadership itself). The minute a commercial message creeps into the monologue, the conversation ends as quickly as interest in a show dissipates at the commercial break.

Secondly, he returns to the importance of productivity as outlined by his reference to Asimov as well as his understanding that ideas both good and bad have their place in the discussion and evolution of thinking and finally, the importance of decisiveness and accepting that you must have a narrative or voice which is intrinsic to what you want to accomplish – the compelling narrative’ which Pink points out in his chapter on storytelling.

3.4 What next?

In his book *the Shallows*, Nicholas Carr takes Marshall McLuhan as his starting point for an exploration of how the new media has affected the way in which we process information and the way in which we understand the world - a fait accompli, achieved in an incredibly short 20 year timespan:

‘What’s clear though, is that for society as a whole the Net has become, in just twenty years since the software programmer Tim Berners- Lee wrote the code for the World Wide Web, the communication and information medium of choice. The scope of its use is unprecedented, even by the standards of the mass media of the twentieth century.’

In that time span, Carr argues that we have lost the ability to achieve deep reading of the type available to the Gutenberg mind and in its place, the world of hypermedia has led to a situation where concentration is impossible and distraction is the default:

‘Try reading a book while doing a crossword puzzle; that’s the intellectual environment of the internet’.

McLuhan himself was aware of this long before the internet, when he said:

‘The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, rather they alter patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.’

This utterance is also borne out by research as Carr points out quoting: Patricia Greenfield a prominent developmental psychologist who teaches at UCLA and reviewed more than fifty studies of the effect of different types of media on intelligence and learning ability. She concluded that:

‘Every medium develops some cognitive skills at the expense of others.’

Unfortunately the cognitive skills enhanced by the web are not suitable grounds for thought leaders to flourish, an idea also supported by Will Self in an article on the post literary world we live in:

‘I’ve referred throughout this piece to Gutenberg minds, and I do indeed believe that each successive knowledge technology brings with it a different form of human being.’

So what kind of human being forms the audience for the thought leaders of today and tomorrow? Carr describes a world where we are almost certainly reading more words today than we did twenty years ago but far less on the printed page. Tellingly, he cites the fact that the three top selling Japanese novels in 2007 were originally written on mobile phones.

Within this paradigm, Carr citing Tufts University Developmental Psychologist, MaryAnne Wolf says we sacrifice the facility that makes deep reading possible. We revert to being ‘mere decoders of information.’ Carr’s argument is that we have reached the gates of the post literary world where the screen has supplanted the page as the primary conduit for information:

‘Experiments indicate that as we reach the limits of our working memory it becomes harder to distinguish relevant information from irrelevant information, signal from noise. We become mindless consumers of data.’

So, in the space of twenty years, human beings have been subtly evolved by the medium to decoders of information and mindless consumers of data. Is there any hope for thought leaders to reach their public with compelling narratives and transformative ideas anymore? Has the strip mining of relevant content replaced the slow excavation of meaning, as Carr himself wonders?

Written communications is in a state of crisis in the evolutionary shift from mass media to social media. A recent paper in the Stanford Social Innovation Review by Bruce

Sievers & Patrice Schneider *The Civic Media Crisis and What Philanthropy Can Do* quoted in the Guardian newspaper on March 19th 2017 neatly epitomized the crisis thus:

‘Five trends of the late 20th and early 21st centuries reveal this general pattern: 1) a radically diminished funding base for print media, 2) increasingly fragmented audiences, 3) an accelerating pattern of random and instantaneous digital dissemination of information, 4) video’s increasing displacement of the written and spoken word, and 5) diminishing amounts and lower quality of civic education, and related declines in knowledge of public affairs. Individually, these trends are problematic; together they pose a severe threat to democracy.’

Taking aside the broader social implications of a threatened democracy cited by the authors, a pattern is nevertheless emerging in which the old certainties of mass media largely defined by print are being atomized by the speed, variety and instantaneous nature of the new media platforms and the visual form supplanting the encoded written word.

The atomization is reflected not only in mass media but also every other platform for communication including corporate communications.

Within this context, one could argue that the consumers of content, whether broadly defined as the public, or indeed more specialized audiences as is the case with corporations (in the context of this study, industry communicating business to business or business to consumer), still crave good content.

This notion was characterized by writer Paul Muggeridge of the London-based content marketing company currently employed by TCS, Formative Content who neatly contextualized the space in which consumers digest content as:

‘A fire-hose, post truth environment in which there is a hunger for authentic interesting content and a place in which writers must now create their own audiences’.

This reflects the cited Guardian article Facebook needs news, ‘*So why shouldn’t it pay for it?*’ which signals the shift from traditional print media to Facebook as the platform for content, particularly news. Facebook, like LinkedIn and indeed YouTube are all encouraging the audience to publish themselves and this user generated content has formed a deluge.

At this point the analogy of the fire hose becomes apt: consumers are quite literally being deluged with content, largely their own, albeit interspersed with professional communicators, luminaries and thought leaders mashed and served into an algorithmically filtered, user generated news feed where once verifiable and trusted sources are now replaced and dissolved with alternative facts, obfuscation and opinion-led argument.

Whether this is a cause or a consequence of consumers’ attention spans now notably being shorter than the proverbial goldfish is no doubt grounds for another study. Nevertheless, the challenges for good writing and authors (in the context of this study’s examination of thought leadership) are multiple in the space between the lens of the medium, the fractured and imperfect news kaleidoscope and the perceiving eye.

This fragmentation of language as a phenomenon is also reinforced by a recent web report from BI intelligence *7 Predictions about the future of Media* which succinctly maps media according to the tracking of eyeballs – a veiled reference to Phillip Kingston’s

book on internet marketing in which the coined the phrase ‘the war for eyeballs’ in its title. The report states ‘money follows eyeballs’ and one of its key conclusions apart from the obvious one that traditional media like print and television are in decline irrevocably supplanted by digital is that messaging platforms are the future for digital communication.

Messaging with its epigrammatic, succinct and vernacular style further lends itself to the dissolution of rules around grammar and even spelling in favour of brevity and speed of communication. The dissolution that started with the simplest form in the emerging mobile platform communication medium the SMS continues in that space by the evolution of social media as a platform for mass communication.

Commentator Michael Merzenik in his August 11 2008 blog post ‘*Going Googly on the brain*’ blog warned that:

‘There is also absolutely no question that our brains are engaged less directly and more shallowly in the synthesis of information where we use research strategies that are all about ‘efficiency’, secondary (and out of context) referencing’ and ‘once over lightly’.

Nevertheless, in this post literary world dominated by new myriad forms of communication in the mobile and computer screen from the blog to the Snap chat, there is hope but it comes at a price as Mark Federman, quoted in *the Shallows* himself says:

‘The time has come for teachers and students alike to abandon the linear hierarchical world of the book and enter the Web’s world of ubiquitous connectivity and pervasive proximity – a world in which the greatest skill involves discovering emergent meaning among contexts that are continually in flux.’

Or, to requote the venerable Marshall McLuhan again:

‘Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!’

4 A CASE STUDY ON THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

In this short case study, I follow a qualitative approach. For the purpose of this study I attempt to gain insights into thought leadership as reflected by five stakeholders in the present and former employ of Tata Consultancy Service: From another academic paper, *Social Media: The New Mantra for Managing Reputation*, Ashish Kaul cited a 2014 Ernst and Young’s study (2014) which stated that companies had:

‘Three key objectives of indulging in social media: building brand awareness, building a community, and engaging with the customer. Reputation management, thought leadership, and recruitment were also focal areas for companies.’

In the research paper by Mälaskä et al from Oulu Business School, the contention is that social media platforms are increasing in adoption by b-to-b marketing because they ‘provide faster and more personalized interactions between customers and suppliers and

thus deepen relationships (Kho2008). They also point out that B2B organizations seem to have acknowledged the potential of social media more slowly than B2C companies (Michaelidou et al 2011). This is certainly corroborated by the picture presented by the interview findings of those from TCS.

The five interviewees presently or previously employed by TCS are as follows:

- A self-proclaimed futurist and blogger for TCS **Frank Diana**,
- Communications director for TCS in the Nordics, **Mattias af Geijerstam**
- Former TCS Marketing Communications Director for the Nordics, **Jirimiko Oranen**
- Director of Communications for TCS the UK and Northern Ireland, **Peter Devery**
- Technology evangelist for TCS, **Ashok Krish**

The questions themselves were formulated in a manner to gain a frame of reference for the term and then to understand the elements that comprise thought leadership in their own words. Qualitative content analysis pays attention to unique themes that illustrate the range of the meanings of the phenomenon rather than the statistical significance of the occurrence of particular texts or concepts.

I have selected a summative approach to qualitative content analysis because it goes beyond mere word counts to include latent content analysis. Latent content analysis refers to the process of interpretation of content (Holsti, 1969). In this analysis, the focus is on discovering underlying meanings of the words or the content (Babbie, 1992; Catanzaro, 1988; Morse & Field, 1995).

Communications and branding have emerged as important areas of management in B2B marketing (Mäläskä et al, 2011) and that social media tools are becoming an interesting component of B2B marketing because of the roles of personal relationships and interactions in these markets. They argue that social media platforms are increasing in adoption by b-to-b marketing because they ‘provide faster and more personalized interactions between customers and suppliers and thus deepen relationships (Kho2008). They also point out that B2B organizations seem to have acknowledged the potential of social media more slowly than B2C companies (Michaelidou et al 2011) and this is certainly corroborated by the picture presented by TCS.

The questions themselves were formulated in a manner to first establish credentials and intent from the various interviewees and then to progressively drill down the information and ascertain the key elements in the use of thought leadership.

The semi-structured interview consists of the following list:

1. In your own words, describe what you think 'thought leadership' is.
2. If you could choose six adjectives to describe the key components of thought leadership, what in your opinion would they be?
3. Can thought leadership be measured or are its assets intangible?
4. What is your own benchmark for thought leadership success?
5. Is thought leadership defined by its content or the medium in which it is transmitted?
6. How has thought leadership been transformed by social media in your opinion?
7. Which platforms do you use and why?
8. How important is storytelling to thought leadership?
9. Does thought leadership automatically lead to business growth for companies and individuals?
10. Is virality important to establishing thought leadership or is it better in the b-to-b context to target key individuals with messages?
11. Who are the thought leaders you admire and why?

Answers from all five respondents are included below the specific question with abbreviated initials to indicate quote ownership. An overall analysis in brief is then given to the answers thereafter.

In your own words, describe what you think 'thought leadership' is.

FD: Thought leaders are the informed opinion leaders in their field(s) of expertise. They are trusted sources who move and inspire people with innovative ideas; and turn ideas into reality. In my case I believe thought leadership should move from a marketing oriented function to a future oriented function.

PD: It can take any form - a speech, written article, media interview. Behind all of those it clearly articulates a point of view which leads or challenges an industry sector product – it's personal in the tone of voice and the personality and experience of the person saying and backed up by demonstrable proof points and statistics.

AK: Thought Leadership is the knowledge essence of years of practical experience.

JO: *Thought leaders are visionaries and big picture painters. Their insightful views reveal truths that others may have overlooked and lead others to think differently and appraise information with fresh eyes.*

MA: *A person or an organization that is a thought leader is not only the expert in a specific area. It is also the go-to person/organization. A point of reference. A thought leader should never communicate in a me-too manner, but instead always be ahead of his or her peers. To be a thought leader it's never enough to just have the knowledge, you also need to be able to get the knowledge across in an attractive way – i.e. you need to be very good and innovative in communications.*

Analysis:

One conclusion to be drawn from the above answers is that thought leadership is directed by individuals but not exclusively so – organizations can also be considered thought leaders in their own right, even if they themselves rely upon spokespeople to expedite it. There is a clear correlation with experience which enables big picture thinking as well as the important skill of being able to articulate your ideas/visions clearly. While opinion and prediction are important aspects of thought leadership and the personalities behind it, clearly proof points and facts form the framework that defines strong thought leadership.

If you could choose six adjectives to describe the key components of thought leadership, what in your opinion would they be?

FD: *Insightful, expert, futuristic, thoughtful, passionate, visionary*

PD: *Hands-on, Insightful, Interdisciplinary, Big Picture, Story-telling, Memorable*

AK: *Compelling, educative, challenging, controversial, new, insightful*

JO: *Novel, insightful, intelligent, quirky, informed, thought provoking*

MA: *Unique, communicative, knowledgeable, quotable, sought after, trustworthy*

Analysis:

The answers to this particular question are probably the most easy to interpret – there are clear adjectives shared by many interviewees – the most obvious being insightful and new or novel/futuristic. Clearly enough, thought leaders stand out because they are able to perceive patterns and truths that are not otherwise obvious and that these may lead to new or indeed quirky ways of thinking to existing problems.

There is a clear correlation with experience and expertise and a desire to impart knowledge as well as to provoke, challenge and compel. These insights form the basis of bigger ideas – the type that can themselves become quotable and ultimately meme-able in nature and structure. The meme-able structure of ideas tends to suggest an enduring quality which lends the necessary gravitas.

Can thought leadership be measured or are its assets intangible?

FD: Thought leaders can be measured in areas of influence, impact, following, quotes, use of assets, etc.

PD: A lot of its assets are intangible but it can be measured to an extent – some outcomes can be measured through its effect on communities, sharing – there are a lot of different KPIs whether they can tell you whether that person is a thought leader or not, no.

AK: If authorship of scientific research can be measured in terms of scholar-index, where the number of papers that cite a given paper is a measure of impact, it's possible to arrive at some rough approximation of thought leadership index by measuring things like reach, link-backs on social media etc.

PD: I think you could argue that it can be measured in social media terms in typical things as shares, likes, reposts, quotes and comments i.e. the influence it has on others and of course in referencing in other works.

MA: It can indeed be measured. One could for example ask a specific and relevant target group about what person or organization could be perceived as a thought leader.

Analysis:

The general consensus to this question is that thought leadership is a measurable concept but a common consensus how that is achieved is not met. Clearly enough, in the digital age, all intellectual property can be quantified and as one respondent points out,

in the academic world, this is even clearer when work is quotable in a scholar index. In the framework of social media platforms, there is common agreement that influence can be framed within the usual social listening markers which are nominally likes and shares as well as the instigation of feedback and discussion.

As with the conclusion of the main thesis, there are multiple iterations of the thought leader from those in the self-help/self-promotion industry whose impact can be measured in followings, and publishing revenues to intellectual and spiritual thought leaders who can inspire whole movements. All these are in some way quantifiable but the measures are multiple.

What is your own benchmark for thought leadership success?

FD: *Impact. Are your ideas embraced? Do people quote you? Do they re-use your content? Do they engage with you?*

PD: *Not boring, educative – two things I look for – don't bore me even if it's a boring subject and second, tell me something I didn't know.*

AK: *How regularly it changes and reinvents itself based on disruptive changes that are happening at an exponentially increasing pace 2. Validation from peers on multiple platforms.*

JO: *Are people talking about you? – are your thoughts quotable and are they being quoted? Are leaders listening to what you have to say?*

MA: *Guide Michelin, The Economist*

Analysis:

Engagement, whether one interprets it as embracing ideas, wanting to share them as quotes or to actively return to the source and listen further to what has been said or written is an obvious benchmark for thought leadership according to the respondents. One other common trope which is borne out in the main thesis background study, is that increasingly, thought leadership should also be entertaining as well as informative. The search for novelty 'tell me something I don't know' is also a defining factor for one respondent. In the context of academia, peer review is also a strong measure of success as

well, interestingly as the ability to reinvent oneself, which again points to seeking for novelty and discovering fresh ideas.

Is thought leadership defined by its content or the medium in which it is transmitted?

FD: *Both. Content is critical. But the world has grown increasingly complex, so the mechanisms you use to deliver that content become critical. Visualization and methods of communicating complex things in simple ways are very important.*

PD: *The content needs to match the medium – thought leadership is driven by the medium – content through the wrong medium might make you look stupid.*

AK: *Both. In today's world, thought leadership needs to adapt itself to the nature of the medium and by extension, that medium's audience. A post on LinkedIn needs to be different from a post on Harvard Business Review. A post on Twitter needs to be crisp and short while Instagram prefers more visual story telling. The key thing here is that all of these are important platforms from a thought leadership dissemination standpoint*

JO: *Both. Content is king but the medium you choose is also a king maker. For example, in business terms, I still believe that LinkedIn Pulse is a more successful medium for publishing thought leadership than say, Medium. Each platform has its own benefits and audiences.*

MA: *Both – but medium is getting more and more important.*

Analysis:

The consensus among respondents to this question is unanimous – both are important but the interesting distinction in a time of multiple platforms thanks to social media, selecting the right medium is every bit if not more important than the message itself. Clearly, this speaks as much about audience expectation in the various media as much as the intent of the person transmitting. Once again referring to the conclusion of this study, Donald Trump (if he can be characterized as a thought leader) is well suited to the short blunt 140 character tweet in all its simplicity, while more nuanced thought leaders (equally able to summon large audiences) might more happily choose a TED talk to amplify his or her ideas to support more tightly-defined academic findings in peer reviewed works.

It's also good to remind ourselves once again that McLuhan's famous meme 'the medium is the message' tells us to look beyond the obvious and seek the non-obvious changes or effects that are enabled, enhanced, accelerated or extended by the new thing.

Media are extensions of ourselves and choosing one over another to impart ideas tells much about the kind of mind is extending itself towards the audience it seeks for.

How has thought leadership been transformed by social media in your opinion?

FD: *It has provided everyone with a platform to become one - it does not make you a thought leader - but provides you an ability to become one. It has provided a method for engagement and dialog that allows people to test their ideas, learn and educate.*

PD: *It has created a vast majority of good things and a vast majority of bad things – it's obviously easier to share and create content – social media gives me opportunities to share audiences and build communities – but it is also responsible for a great deal of junk content. A long time ago when social media just started a very smart lawyer said to me it's not about communications it's about behaviours – everyone can see what we are doing now – so communication is the icing on the cherry on the cake – the cake is the behaviours.*

AK: *It has made dissemination and real-time feedback easier and at the same time, it has unearthed a new generation of thought leaders while making it hard for a lot of traditional experts to hold sway in this newer medium. It has also unleashed an era of micro-influencers, people with local expertise and their own social network reach.*

JO: *I like to think of social media as the democratization of thought leadership – give everybody a platform to post from and the best will still rise to the top. Having said that, there are too many voices these days and this tends to bury good messages.*

MA: *It has totally changed the game. It's not enough to get an article published in Harvard Business Review, for example. You need to get the message across in a much shorter time and in other formats. For example TED Talks.*

Analysis:

The answers above largely vindicate the findings of the previous question, or rather draw a tighter bead upon it. The watershed for thought leaders is clearly pre and post social media. Some thought leaders who emerged pre social media still retain their relevance in spite of their non-participation in the new media, some fade from view entirely or retain niche audiences while others expand to new audiences while retaining the old.

Social media represents a revolution in the means to reach large audiences almost instantaneously – something the old media never achieved. This leads to content inflation or to use a metaphor, an overcrowded marketplace where a great deal of content is available without there being clear markers as to whom one should seek for the best thought leadership.

The creation of large audiences per se does not necessarily reflect the quality of the content but may better speak of the author's ability to amuse or entertain or identify tropes and themes that find their mark in general audiences.

As an aside to the content inflation point, one of the benefits of social media is obviously that non-typical thought leaders can emerge without the need for Public Relations or advertising. This reflects one respondent's observation that social media has also given rise to the micro-influencer whose influence while not registered on a grand scale is nevertheless significant in its content and audience impact.

Which platforms do you use and why?

FD: Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Google+, Medium, StumbleUpon, Pinterest, YouTube, Word press, Instagram and others. I use them for the reasons mentioned above

PD: LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook – largely Twitter for work news and information – not long form, some- linking to media and breaking issues. You need to tailor the message to the platform. Linked in for professional content though less and less so. Facebook. I've completely changed the way I use Twitter. I only follow four to six people and six people lists with tech people, Tata people, media and PR – I build lists I don't follow them. If I see 800 people following me I block them because they aren't interested in what I'm saying.

AK: I use almost all Social media platforms. Word Press for blogging, Tumblr for memes, SoundCloud for music, Twitter for general banter and Instagram for visual story-telling.

JO: Twitter, LinkedIn and to a lesser extent, Facebook. I use Twitter for the speed and immediacy with which you can inform, LinkedIn is as I have said, an excellent platform

for business thought leadership and while Facebook is ubiquitous, its subject matter tends to be less serious, in my opinion.

MA: LinkedIn (easy to decide on feed and to get inspired), Newsletters (McKinsey for example), Seminars (those who are there as speakers are supposed to be thought leaders).

Analysis

Clearly, the respondents in this case study overwhelmingly favour social media platforms with only one respondent mentioning newsletters and seminars as platforms (nonetheless valid as an answer in all instances). The range of social media platforms incorporates all the usual suspects but also interestingly, some respondents also qualify their usage with reasoning. One respondent's intent to block large Twitter followings reveals the perception that less audience is definitely more in that platform, in his opinion, while another trivializes it as a platform 'for general banter'.

The same respondent also interestingly references non-typical platforms like Tumblr and SoundCloud to reflect a seeking for memes and entertainment. The fragmentation of media predicted by McLuhan is in full force in the age of social media.

How important is storytelling to thought leadership?

FD: Critical. People follow stories. Clarity and articulation and crispness are key.

PD: Hugely important. So often good thought leadership content is let down by poor storytelling skills and effort constructing a story out of some boring tech content full of stats is not easy – you have to put effort into it – you have to refine, think me too – what would I want to read. Or it can be said in a 30 second video instead? The more complex it is, the more simply it has to be told.

AK: Storytelling is, IMO, the most important aspect of thought leadership. A quick glance at humanity's history will you that it's stories and mythologies and memes that have survived millennia, not PowerPoint presentations.

JO: Absolutely essential. Good story tellers are always in demand. In fact the best ones are thought leaders and vice versa.

MA: *Crucial!*

Analysis

The responses to this question are somewhat predictably unanimous in their support for story telling as an essential component of thought leadership. One aspect of this is the zeitgeist elevation of the story by the advertising and publishing industries over decades as the de facto conveyance of message and information. Nevertheless, inside every cliché there is an irreducible truth and that truth is that stories precede our Gutenberg galaxy by millennia, are incorporated into mythological structures that survive as such and endure to this day. As one of the respondents wryly observes PowerPoint presentations will not survive the test of time.

By contrast, one could cite, for example, the central Buddhist work, the Pali Canon which was preserved orally until it was committed to writing approximately 454 years after the death of Gautama Buddha (and which in its largest part, the Sutta Pitaka contains the discourses and sermons of the Buddha himself). The stories told by the Buddha are still quoted today and their capacity to illuminate and instruct adherents and non-believers alike are testimony to the power of the story as a conveyance and the thought leading influence of the storyteller.

Does thought leadership automatically lead to business growth for companies and individuals?

FD: *It's not always about business growth. Seeing the future, elevating brands, looking at horizon 3 opportunities are all, providing insight and foresight for decision making are just some examples of other outcomes.*

PD: *I'm going to have to take a guess and say automatically, no. It's a bit like advertising when you say I know one pound of the hundred I spent on advertising was spent well, I just don't know which pound. Exactly the same with TL and content management. It's definitely about influence.*

AK: *For individuals, certainly yes. For companies, it's harder to quantify. On the one hand, it's critical for companies to showcase their thought leadership on the plethora of sharing platforms that exist today but at the same time, it's a crowded landscape where it's hard for a good message to shine through. So, I wouldn't jump to immediately correlate this to business growth directly, but I do think that a company whose thought leaders are engaged with the wider community continuously become better at what they do and by extension, that is good for the company.*

JO: *There's no direct red thread to having great thought leaders representing you and better business but clearly some thought leaders are successful because they self-*

promote their own brand. The line between thought leadership and marketing can be a fine one in the business world.

MA: I guess you would often have a problem in claiming causality, but in the long run, yes.

Analysis: The last response to this question is perhaps the most telling – the respondent views the question as somewhat leading but nevertheless, the answers taken together reveal a general consensus that thought leadership belongs to business but whether it directly contributes to growth is difficult to quantify.

Nevertheless, one respondent equated thought leadership with marketing and clearly a whole industry that has sprung up around the subject supports that view. Other respondents laterally refer to its importance as a means to showcase in-house knowledge and talent and on a subtle level, increase influence. These observations are also valid, particularly where technological disruption of the like found in the IT industry requires novel thought processes and revelations.

Is virality important to establishing thought leadership or is it better in the b-to-b context to target key individuals with messages?

FD: Dialog and engagement are what matters. Credibility as a thought leader can be established faster in viral type scenarios.

PD: I think in the b-to-b context it's better to target key individuals and groups and communities. Virality is much more important in b-to-c. We're not looking at huge audiences of stakeholders, we're looking at a targeted audience of stakeholders. If it happens then great but it's not a KPI.

AK: I sincerely believe companies must stop thinking about virality. One cannot ensure virality in the content one puts out. It's a highly random outcome based on a complex set of variables that are hard to predict. There are some broad principles on how to make content engaging for various audiences and it's good to follow them. The best advice is – be insightful. The virality and reach will happen as an outcome.

JO: In the b-to-b context, it's clearly better to be able to establish recognition with your key audience, for example using targeted account marketing. Virality is more of a con-

sequence of the powerful insights you may have as a thought leader. Great ideas are always infectious.

MA: I'd say both are just as important and should work together. The test for thought leadership to me is if a person or an organization is quotable - then if it is on Twitter or in face to face interaction is secondary.

Analysis:

Virality is a term that first emerged in common parlance in the time of the internet although one could argue that memorable ideas that spread far and wide have indeed been around for millennia. The virus is an interesting metaphor because it implies a host (in this case an audience or audiences) and a self-replicating particle which uses the host structure to achieve its goals. Clearly again, virality is a desirable feature in say an advert for a product or service but possibly undesirable in the transmission of bigger ideas.

A number of respondents with a particular emphasis on business- to-business communications reinforce the importance of insight over virality seeing any potential spread of ideas in that manner as a consequence rather than a means to an end. The thought leader in this instance is therefore not defined by the medium or its transmission but rather by the quality of the content which may or may not lead to a viral uptake.

Who are the thought leaders you admire and why?

FD: Futurists. The list is too long to include. I work a lot with Gerd Leonhard, and I'm a big fan. As the uncertainty of the future increases, futurists will play a bigger role.

PD: Can I say brands as well as people? I think despite many problems Airbus are phenomenal thought leaders in their industry which is hugely complex. I think aerospace have done an exceptional job turning things around and making themselves thought leaders.

AK: Seth Godin, Gene Roddenberry (Star Trek), Charlie Brooker (Black Mirror), Charlie Stross (Sci-fi author), Isaac Asimov, Neal Stephenson (sci fi author), Neal DeGrasse Tyson, Carl Sagan, Dion Hinchcliffe, Sir Ken Robinson, Louis CK (stand up comedy), George Carlin (Stand-up comedy), Dave Chapelle (Stand up)

JO: Richard Branson, who provides sound, concrete advice based on his own experience

Sheryl Sandberg, COO, Facebook, a strong advocate of female thought leadership - which the world needs to make the planet a better place for all of us. President Sauli Niinistö, who has taken a strong role as a thought leader of a nation facing turbulent

times.

Nelson Mandela, who said that it always seems impossible until it's done.

MA: Barack Obama – he has a vision, he has credibility and he is second to none in communicating his knowledge,

Simon Sinek – as above

Carl Bildt – brilliant intellect and integrity

Analysis:

The lists above exemplifies the point that thought leadership is a grab bag for multiple professions and identities.

In this list one finds influential politicians, both past and present, business evangelists and charismatic executives, standup comedians, scientists and authors of fiction, nonfiction and science fiction. Added to this list is also the concept of brands as thought leaders which is perhaps a natural extension of the idea that brands communicate and in all instances, aspire to a personality before their audience.

One of the most interesting interpretations for me is that of the futurist because, in the IT industry at least, the futurist as thought leader signals in some way the overarching influence of technology in all aspects of life, not solely business.

In many ways it becomes clear in the interview with Seth Godin quoted in the main study about his particular obsession with Asimov and other prolific science fiction writers. Their ability to accurately interpret the future through the lens of technology represents a level of prescience and insight that is typically only afforded to those in full cognizance of facts rather than conjecture of what may be.

People whose insights cross the line between science fiction and science fact draw willing audiences because they are first the master storytellers – Arthur C Clarke comes readily to mind in this connection. As the many imagined worlds projected by such luminaries enter the realm of fact, one is assured that thought leadership is rooted not only in its ability to make sense of the past and present but also in its ability to interpret and predict the future.

One final thought about thought leadership and technology comes from McLuhan himself, always eminently quotable and prescient about the future:

‘The future masters of technology will have to be light-hearted and intelligent. The machine easily masters the grim and the dumb.’

5 CONCLUSION

When the author of this study was young and in a time before the internet and only terrestrial channels, radio and print (and comics) for entertainment, he read quite voraciously. One particularly memorable format at that time for him was *Readers Digest*. The pocketbook format was unforbidding (about the size of a modern Amazon Kindle), the subject matter was cherry picked from a swathe of good writers and the standard of copy was high.

More important than anything else, the long form content was designed to provide a month’s worth of happy literary consumption (30 articles, one per day) across a band of interesting subjects from popular science to human affairs and usually a lengthier article at the end condensed from a published book.

The reason *Readers Digest* is mentioned because it was a neat introduction, at an early stage to long form content which had been aggregated in a single platform. Certainly newspapers offered longer reads (the then broadsheet, *the Times* comes to mind but as a broadsheet newspaper, it remained resolutely inaccessible as a platform (while *Readers Digest* offered no such barriers).

The publishers had obviously hit upon a literary format that worked both in terms of authorship, accessible content and length of content – long enough to inform, short enough to keep you entertained without being bored. Most people born post internet with formative reading skills would probably find their attention wandering with this format; the click and scroll of the illuminated screen has intensified our restless search for information and distraction.

This assertion is somewhat vindicated by an incidental fact gleaned from Wikipedia. The US edition, which was founded in 1920 in Midtown Manhattan, New York was only overtaken as the bestselling consumer magazine in 2009 by an interior design magazine. I think it exemplifies the lost battle for eyeballs – design has finally won over content.

The principle ingredients of *Readers Digest* are nevertheless there for what in my opinion, make thought leadership possible. The first point is the engine for the exposition of ideas: the printed word, preferably on paper but in modern times, simultaneously or exclusively online also.

To this, the author would refer back to Nicholas Carr's work '*the Shallows*' the central position of which is that the absorption and reflection that takes place in deep reading is largely missing in the large bulk of online content. Reading from the printed page is a highly directed activity in a way that watching a screen with visual content is not – it requires concentration.

Also, extended reading requires the reader to follow argumentation, exposition and style from the author –all the elements that make up the craft of writing. Authors and their readerships share an intimate pact which allows for the communication of ideas – this is missing when the medium or media through which ideas are transmitted are fragmented.

This brings me to a second point: platform. The platform for thought leaders is essential – something that is familiar, accessible, regularly contributed to, portable and well structured. This is what makes magazines, newspapers, paperbacks and indeed radio endure – they are reliable purveyors of information – go to destinations of familiar branded content. Take, for example, the publication *The Economist* – it's widely considered to be the gold standard for English journalism and a highly influential platform for social and political commentary and thought leadership. This position is the sum total of many years of careful brand management and the cultivation of both great writers and a readership looking for the best content.

At a time when the digital smorgasbord of content weighs heavier and heavier, discerning readerships still seek for the best authors and thought leaders. Aggregating platforms like magazines, newspapers (many of which, like the Independent now exist only online) and online social media sites like Facebook continue to be their go-to destinations.

If there were one medium which has done more to erode the conditions that ensure thought leadership continuity, it is arguably television. McLuhan as a man of Literature

died before the internet's arrival but terrestrial television as a medium was every bit as influential and remarkable in its time for him. The intimate dance television played with the advertising industry was also well known to him and in the early days, the two media were a wellspring of novel form and invention on both sides of the content fence.

The modern television format has, however, been eroded by the baleful influence of commercial forces. Theatre adapted for television becomes soap opera, news has been reduced to flashy sound bites, columnists and social commentators have become talk show hosts and investigative documentaries have been replaced by reality television shows. There are more channels than ever, but less real content. Even public broadcasting services have seemingly started to pander to the lowest common denominators of entertainment in a bid to capture audiences.

Added to this, content creators i.e. journalists, and journalism as a rich reservoir of thought leaders by itself, have been discredited as a professional class with predictable consequences for the media in which they work.

The essential point to make, is that television as the first ubiquitous visual platform quickly devolved from a medium for conveying information into a platform largely driven by a commercial agenda, the animus of which is to entertain rather than educate. Further fragmentation of content into episodic form interspersed with commercial adverts only serves to disrupt the flow of ideas and engagement from the audience.

And while reading requires active engagement from the audience, television engenders alpha brain wave passivity. It's fair to say that television as a medium while it still has the capacity to inform and educate, is not a rich reservoir for thought leadership for that very reason. Neil Postman in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* argued that television had altered the nature of society such that people preferred amusement over truth.

Blogger Zander Nethercutt takes this idea further in his blog '*We cannot amuse ourselves to death*' by arguing that in a consumer world of finite resources bent on growth, the only consumable resource left with an infinite level of expandability is entertainment.

There is no doubt that the media industry is hugely profitable and powerful both politically and socially. If we extrapolate that entertainment has become a standing feature of

the new economy, it's fair to assume that information will suffer as a consequence being subordinate to the greater need for audiences to be entertained.

A report by the online publication *Business Insider* states that in 2017 that modern consumers of information digest most of their material from mobile devices with computers a close second. In the meantime, as digital media consumption increases, everything else is in decline, particularly so, legacy TV.

Interestingly, the hegemony of print and television is being supplanted by platforms like YouTube which has already surpassed the network giant CBS in size. As traditional media step aside, the clear winners in media provision and control are Google and Facebook. In that space, the Business Insider report suggests that the new rising star of content packaging will be social video – i.e. highly mashable video presentations on social media platforms. Whether that prediction is borne out in truth is too early to say but to adapt a well-worn cliché, the writing is most likely on the Facebook wall.

Social media has become a rich playground for people to post content of all descriptions. The ability to fashion one's own content, distribute to chosen audiences in real time and establish continuous dialogues with them is a marked evolution of media and one which is unlikely to be supplanted.

However, the same democratizing conditions that enable individuals to publish themselves against a predilection for amusement over truth has led to a sorry pass: content inflation and the crossing of lines between information and entertainment to become infotainment and the preference for opinion over fact.

Even neglect for simple standards in the journalist's handbook – such things as grammatical and typographical accuracy and the checking of facts has led to the overall perceived dumbing down of written communications. It's no surprise therefore that an audience primed for entertainment over information would opt for an easier-to-digest format, one that required less critical thought or reflection.

In that space, the Instagram-esque bubble reputation or the mass Twitter following is more sought after than selected groups of discerning, intelligent netizens whose common desire is to inquire, be informed, be inspired and to *share* – the natural audience for thought leaders.

In that social media space, people able to exploit the sensational and the entertaining in real time are increasingly the winners. There is already clear evidence that people with cynical agendas whether in business or politics can now actively manipulate mass audiences using big data to interpret trends and influence opinions. What was done in a rather clumsy uni-directional fashion in the age of print and television is now being tweaked to perfection in the digital age through social media.

Populists like Donald Trump have essentially hijacked the machinery of democracy to attain positions of power and disrupt the status quo of American politics. It's no surprise that a reality TV star and political ingénue can become president of the US riding a simple slogan like '*Make America Great Again*' (now itself further reduced to the convenient acronym MAGA). It can be no surprise either that he chooses the 140 character medium of Twitter to communicate his ideas while railing against the fake news of the fourth estate.

Taken purely from a business perspective, the fact that a single tweet from Donald Trump to a global audience can wipe millions of dollars from a stock market-quoted company in hours (or indeed start a thermonuclear war) is grotesque testimony to the power of social media as the de facto tool for modern mass communication and on a base level, thought leadership.

The polemicist Naomi Klein in an article about Donald from *the Guardian* made an impassioned plea that "we all have to kill our inner Trump". Among other things, she says, the president "is the embodiment of our splintered attention spans". One essential ingredient of resistance, she suggests, is to retain a belief in telling and understanding complex stories, keeping faith with narrative. Once again, she is referring to two essential truths behind thought leadership – the need for focus over distraction and the importance of understanding and channeling complex as opposed to pre-digested stories and fake news.

In the age of science, much of what counts for thought leadership is dependent upon the cool rational glare of reason and the measure of proven fact. That is not to say that thought leaders exist whose opinions and view don'ts count more than facts alone.

There will always be a place in the pantheon of thought leaders for men of Literature for whom the story and the craft of writing lift them on to higher planes of thought and im-

agination that inspire great readerships. To that I would add the long tradition of the satirist whose biting humour strips bare artifice and cant to reveal underlying and often inconvenient truths. In the Age of Enlightenment, Voltaire comes easily to mind. In the Twentieth and Twenty First Century, it could equally well be the standup comedian speaking truth to power.

In the business world, it seems there are different types of thought leader – the ones who are skilled masters of self-promotion - the confectioners and repackagers of big ideas like Seth Godin and Tony Robbins. And then there are the visionaries who are both successful captains of industries and the promoters/developers of disruptive technologies. People like Steve Jobs and most lately Elon Musk are good examples of this, as indeed are Sergey Brin and Larry Page of Google fame.

Thought leaders exist and will continue to exist long into the digital age. If there is any light at the end of poorly paved social media tunnel, it is in the wisdom of connected crowds and the instantaneous collaboration of rational thought and will. Erik P.M. Vermeulen in a blog *entitled a guide for dealing with the future* has suggested that we re-appraise the traditional roles that could well be interpreted as those of the thought leader to encompass new descriptions:

‘In this new world, “bosses”, “teachers” and “leaders” will be more and more replaced by “influencers”, “creators” and “visionaries”.

This is a “flatter” world in which the influencer-creator-visionary is a more modest figure that seeks to inspire, to motivate and to nudge those around him or her. The influencers of today understand that they too are on a journey of constant learning and don’t have all the answers.’

Continuous learning, co-creation and the acknowledgement that there is no one definitive truth are all good signposts on a journey towards the creation of meaningful thought leadership in the global village anticipated by McLuhan.

If we can avoid the worst dystopian scenarios and put the new media to good use (while acknowledging the old), there may yet be hope as the printed word dissolves permanently into a stream of bits and bytes.

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Analysis of content creation in social media by B2B companies

Oulu Business School, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland

Saila Saraniemi

University of Oulu, Oulu Finland and

Minna Mäläskä

Oulu Business School, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland

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APPENDICES

Written interview with Frank Diana, 14. 3. 2017 via email: Frank Diana, Futurist for TCS

In your own words, describe what you think 'thought leadership' is: Thought leaders are the informed opinion leaders in their field(s) of expertise. They are trusted sources who move and inspire people with innovative ideas; and turn ideas into reality. In my case I believe thought leadership should move from a marketing oriented function to a future oriented function.

If you could choose six adjectives to describe the key components of thought leadership, what in your opinion would they be?

Insightful, expert, futuristic, thoughtful, passionate, visionary

Can thought leadership be measured or are its assets intangible? Thought leaders can be measured in areas of influence, impact, following, quotes, use of assets, etc.

What is your own benchmark for thought leadership success?

Impact. Are your ideas embraced? Do people quote you? Do they re-use your content? Do they engage with you?

Is thought leadership defined by its content or the medium in which it is transmitted?

Both. Content is critical. But the world has grown increasingly complex, so the mechanisms you use to deliver that content become critical. Visualization and methods of communicating complex things in simple ways are very important.

How has thought leadership been transformed by social media in your opinion?

It has provided everyone with a platform to become one - it does not make you a thought leader - but provides you an ability to become one. It has provided a method for engagement and dialog that allows people to test their ideas, learn and educate.

Which platforms do you use and why?

Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Google+, Medium, StumbleUpon, Pintrest, Youtube, Wordpress, Instagram and others. I use them for the reasons mentioned above

How important is storytelling to thought leadership?

Critical. People follow stories. Clarity and articulation and crispness are key.

Does thought leadership automatically lead to business growth for companies and individuals?

It's not always about business growth. Seeing the future, elevating brands, looking at horizon 3 opportunities are all, providing insight and foresight for decision making are just some examples of other outcomes

Is virality important to establishing thought leadership or is it better in the b-to-b context to target key individuals with messages?

Dialogue and engagement are what matters. Credibility as a thought leader can be established faster in viral type scenarios.

Who are the thought leaders you admire and why?

Futurists. The list is too long to include. I work a lot with Gerd Leonhard, and I'm a big fan. As the uncertainty of the future increases, futurists will play a bigger role.

**Interview with Peter Devery, Director of Communications for England and Northern Ireland, TCS
21.3.2017 Paris, France**

In your own words, describe what you think 'thought leadership' is:

It can take any form a speech written article media interview behind all of those clearly articulate a point of view which leads or challenges an industry sector product – it's personal in the tone of voice and the personality and experience of the person saying and backed up by demonstrable proof points and statistics

If you could choose six adjectives to describe the key components of thought leadership, what in your opinion would they be?

Compelling, educative, challenging, controversial, new, insightful definitely

Can thought leadership be measured or are its assets intangible?

A lot of its assets are intangible but it can be measured to an extent – some outcomes can be measured through its effect on communities, sharing – there are a lot of different KPIs whether they can tell you whether that person is a thought leader or not, no.

What is your own benchmark for thought leadership success?

Not boring, educative – two things I look for – don't bore me even if it's a boring subject and second, tell me something I didn't know.

Is thought leadership defined by its content or the medium in which it is transmitted?

The content needs to match the medium – thought leadership is driven by the medium – content through the wrong medium might make you look stupid.

How has thought leadership been transformed by social media in your opinion?

It has created a vast majority of good things and a vast majority of bad things – it's obviously easier to share and create content – social media gives me opportunities to share audiences and build communities – but it is also responsible for a great deal of junk content. A long time ago when social just started a very smart lawyer said to me it's not about communications it's about behaviours – everyone can see what we are doing now – so communication is the glaze icing on the cherry on the cake – the cake is the behaviours.

Which platforms do you use and why?

Linkedin, Twitter and Facebook – largely Twitter for work news and information – not long form, some-linking to media and breaking issues. You need to tailor the message to the platform. Linked in for professional content though less and less so. Facebook, I've completely changed the way I use Twitter. I only follow four to six people and six people lists with tech people, Tata people, media and PR – I build lists I don't follow them. If I see 800 people following me I block them because they aren't interested in what I'm saying.

How important is storytelling to thought leadership?

Hugely important. So often good thought leadership content is let down by poor storytelling skills and effort constructing a story out of some boring tech content full of stats is not easy – you have to put effort into it – you have to refine, think me too – what would I want to read. Or it can be said in a 30 second video instead. The more complex it is, the more simply it has to be told.

Does thought leadership automatically lead to business growth for companies and individuals?

I'm going to have to take a guess and say automatically, no. It's a bit like advertising when you say I know one pound of the hundred I spent on advertising was spent well, I just don't know which pound. Exactly the same with TL and content management. It's definitely about influence.

Is virality important to establishing thought leadership or is it better in the b-to-b context to target key individuals with messages?

I think in the b-to-b context it's better to target key individuals and groups and communities. Virality is much more important in b-to-c. We're not looking at huge audiences of stakeholders, we're looking at a targeted audience of stakeholders. If it happens then great but it's not a KPI

Who are the thought leaders you admire and why?

Can I say brands as well as people? I think despite many problems Airbus are phenomenal thought leaders in their industry which is hugely complex. I think aerospace have done an exceptional job turning things around and making themselves thought leaders.

Interview with Ashok Krish June 2017 at TCS offices in Stockholm, Sweden

In your own words, describe what you think 'thought leadership' is: Thought Leadership is the knowledge essence of years of practical experience.

If you could choose six adjectives to describe the key components of thought leadership, what in your opinion would they be? Hands-on, Insightful, Interdisciplinary, Big Picture, Story-telling, Meme-able

Can thought leadership be measured or are its assets intangible? If authorship of scientific research can be measured in terms of scholar-index, where the number of papers that cite a given paper is a measure of impact, it's possible to arrive at some rough approximation of thought leadership index by measuring things like reach, link-backs on social media etc.

What is your own benchmark for thought leadership success

– 1. How regularly it changes and reinvents itself based on disruptive changes that are happening at an exponentially increasing pace 2. Validation from peers on multiple platforms.

Is thought leadership defined by its content or the medium in which it is transmitted? Both. In today's world, thought leadership needs to adapt itself to the nature of the medium and by extension, that medium's audience. A post on LinkedIn needs to be different from a post on Harvard Business Review. A post on Twitter needs to be crisp and short while Instagram prefers more visual story telling. The key thing here is that all of these are important platforms from a thought leadership dissemination standpoint

How has thought leadership been transformed by social media in your opinion? It has made dissemination and real-time feedback easier and at the same time, it has unearthed a new generation of thought leaders

while making it hard for a lot of traditional experts to hold sway in this newer medium. It has also unleashed an era of micro-influencers, people with local expertise and their own social network reach

Which platforms do you use and why? I use almost all Social media platforms. Wordpress for blogging, Tumblr for memes, SoundCloud for music, Twitter for general banter and Instagram for visual storytelling

How important is storytelling to thought leadership? Storytelling is, IMO, the most important aspect of thought leadership. A quick glance at humanity's history will show you that it's stories and mythologies and memes that have survived millennia, not PowerPoint presentations.

Does thought leadership automatically lead to business growth for companies and individuals? For individuals, certainly yes. For companies, it's harder to quantify. On the one hand, it's critical for companies to showcase their thought leadership on the plethora of sharing platforms that exist today but at the same time, it's a crowded landscape where it's hard for a good message to shine through. So, I wouldn't jump to immediately correlate this to business growth directly, but I do think that a company whose thought leaders are engaged with the wider community continuously become better at what they do and by extension, that is good for the company

Is virality important to establishing thought leadership or is it better in the b-to-b context to target key individuals with messages? I sincerely believe companies must stop thinking about virality. One cannot ensure virality in the content one puts out. It's a highly random outcome based on a complex set of variables that are hard to predict. There are some broad principles on how to make content engaging for various audiences and it's good to follow them. The best advice is – be insightful. The virality and reach will happen as an outcome

Who are the thought leaders you admire and why? Seth Godin, Gene Roddenberry (Star Trek), Charlie Brooker (Black Mirror), Charlie Stross (Sci-fi author), Isaac Asimov, Neal Stephenson (sci fi author), Neal DeGrasse Tyson, Carl Sagan, Dion Hinchcliffe, Sir Ken Robinson, Louis CK (stand up comedy), George Carlin (Stand up comedy), Dave Chapelle (Stand up)

Interview with Jirimiko Oranen 17.05.2017 Helsinki

In your own words, describe what you think 'thought leadership' is: Thought leaders are visionaries and big picture painters. Their insightful views reveal truths that others may have overlooked and lead others to think differently and appraise data with fresh eyes.

If you could choose six adjectives to describe the key components of thought leadership, what in your opinion would they be?

Novel, insightful, intelligent, quirky, informed, thought provoking

Can thought leadership be measured or are its assets intangible? I think you could argue that it can be measured in social media terms in typical things as shares, likes, reposts, quotes and comments ie the influence it has on others and of course in referencing in other works.

What is your own benchmark for thought leadership success?

Are people talking about you? – are your thoughts quotable and are they being quoted? Are leaders listening to what you have to say?

Is thought leadership defined by its content or the medium in which it is transmitted? Both. Content is king but the medium you choose is also a king maker. For example, in business terms, I still believe that LinkedIn Pulse is a more successful medium for publishing thought leadership than say, Medium. Each platform has its own benefits and audiences.

How has thought leadership been transformed by social media in your opinion? I like to think of social media as the democratization of thought leadership – give everybody a platform to post from and the best will still rise to the top. Having said that, there are too many voices these days and this tends to bury good messages.

Which platforms do you use and why? Twitter, LinkedIn and to a lesser extent, Facebook. I use Twitter for the speed and immediacy with which you can inform, LinkedIn is as I have said, an excellent platform for business thought leadership and while Facebook is ubiquitous, its subject matter tends to be less serious, in my opinion.

How important is storytelling to thought leadership? Absolutely essential. Good story tellers are always in demand. In fact the best ones are thought leaders and vice versa.

Does thought leadership automatically lead to business growth for companies and individuals?

There's no direct red thread to having great thought leaders representing you and better business but clearly some thought leaders are successful because they self-promote their own brand. The line between thought leadership and marketing can be a fine one in the business world.

Is virality important to establishing thought leadership or is it better in the b-to-b context to target key individuals with messages?

In the b-to-b context, it's clearly better to be able to establish primacy with your key audience and big data algorithms as can be found in account marketing enable this. Virality is more of a consequence of good thought leadership.

Who are the thought leaders you admire and why?

Richard Branson, who provides sound, concrete advice based on his own experience

Sheryl Sandberg, COO, Facebook, a strong advocate of female thought leadership - which the world needs to make the planet a better place for all of us. President Sauli Niinistö, who has taken a strong role as a thought leader of a nation facing turbulent times.

Nelson Mandela, who said that it always seems impossible until it's done.

Interview with Mattias af Geijerstam, Stockholm June 2017

In your own words, describe what you think 'thought leadership' is: A person or an organization that is a thought leader is not only the expert in a specific area. It is also the go-to person/organization. A point of reference. A thought leader should never be communicate in a me-too manner, but instead always be ahead of its peers. To be a thought leader it's never enough to just have the knowledge, you also need to be able to get the knowledge across in an attractive way – i.e you need to be very good an innovative in communications.

If you could choose six adjectives to describe the key components of thought leadership, what in your opinion would they be? Unique, communicative, knowledgeable, quotable, after sought, trustworthy

Can thought leadership be measured or are its assets intangible?

It can indeed be measured. One could for example ask a specific and relevant target group about what person or organization could be perceived as a thought leader.

What is your own benchmark for thought leadership success?

Guide Michelin, The Economist

Is thought leadership defined by its content or the medium in which it is transmitted?

Both – but medium is getting more and more important

How has thought leadership been transformed by social media in your opinion?

It has totally changed the game. It's not enough to get an article published in Harvard Business Review for example. You need no get the message across in a much shorter time and in other formats. For example TED Talks

Which platforms do you use and why?

LinkedIn (easy to decide on feed and to get inspired), Newsletters (McKinsey for example), Seminars (those who are there as speakers are supposed to be thought leaders)

How important is storytelling to thought leadership?

Crucial!

Does thought leadership automatically lead to business growth for companies and individuals?

I guess you would often have a problem in claiming causality, but in the long run, yes.

Is virality important to establishing thought leadership or is it better in the b-to-b context to target key individuals with messages?

I'd say both are just as important and should work together. The test for thought leadership to me is if a person or an organization is quotable - then if it is on Twitter or in face to face interaction is secondary.

Who are the thought leaders you admire and why?

Barack Obama – he has a vision, he has credibility and he is second to none in communicating his knowledge

Simon Sinek – as above

Carl Bildt – brilliant intellect and integrity