Putting the social back into social media

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I am from a humanities background and as a journalist I resist statistics and even facts. So perhaps it's not a surprise that I think social media is an art rather than a science. Or rather it's a sociology, not a science.

I spent this morning in a packed breakfast seminar with a load of very talented and motivated social media people from commercial, marketing, public sector and charitable organisations. All of them were in search of croissants, coffee and social media insights.

Kevin Hoy from Greater Manchester Police explained the success of their excellent Twitter day which brought the reality of policing that city to the social media world.

Photo by @mjserres

And Ann-Mari Freebairn from the RAF Benevolent Fund talked about their very creative Battle of Britain anniversary campaign. It used story-telling online to attract attention and establish a fresh narrative about the RAF, its history and why we should care.

I wittered on about the curious role of humour and social media in the General Election 2010.

What struck me was that we are now at a point where social media uptake is so mature that the easy fruit has been picked. Campaigns like the GMP and RAF need to have fantastic content, real purpose and clever and sustained implementation.

And anyone who promises to be able to evaluate empirically what it achieves is not being entirely honest. Qualitative understanding of metrics is key and will be a skill more akin to journalism than mathematics.

Experience has shown that different platforms produce different types of engagement and that there are many audiences not one.

You CAN shape the conversation to a degree, but most often the medium is not the message. So your content must be foremost and it must be good.

In that sense, social media marketing is learning the lessons of online journalism. We either have to add real value or we have to act as connectors/curators. Ideally, both.

We can judge if we have been successful by trafffic, profit and attention. But the ultimate goal must be that people keep us in their networks.

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