CASE STUDY: NOW WE’RE TALKING

Telstra set up its Now We’re Talking website as a space for shareholders and the public to jointly explore the social impact of new media (Burgess n.d.). The site includes discussion forums, blogs, podcasts, news, and features. In one way, it can be seen as a brave attempt to embrace new media to promote conversations and dialogue. Alternatively, it can be seen as a somewhat cynical move to promote its own communication technology to consumers.

According to Telstra Group Managing Director, Public Policy & Communications, Phil Burgess (n.d.), the site is designed to increase public discourse around telecommunications and the digital revolution. The site presents blogs from mostly Telstra employees and in doing so offers a diversity of enthusiastic voices that are not the corporate or organisational voice in any traditional sense. For instance, in a post in the news and features section, the chief editor of Now We Are Talking, Jeremy Mitchell (2008), responded to a news story in the *Australian Financial Review* about Singtel (the owner of Telstra competitor Optus). His post is passionate, opinionated, colloquial, and fiercely nationalistic on the issue of foreign ownership of Australian entities. Not only does the website enable Telstra to respond quickly to the news article in a public forum that is not edited or moderated by an external gatekeeper, but the very nature of the site enables it to do so in a very personal, non-corporate way.

Although Burgess suggests the site is a space for all people to share diverse points of view, critics of the site argue that the website is not as democratic as Telstra suggests. Telstra argued that an online poll, in which 97 per cent of respondents blamed Telstra for blocking the growth of broadband in Australia, had been spammed and removed it (Moses 2007). This led to critical articles in mainstream media, with headlines such as ‘Now We Aren’t Talking’ and ‘Why We Hate Telstra’ (see, for example, Moses 2007; Pesce 2007). The response from some bloggers to Now We’re Talking is also less than positive. One blogger wrote: ‘There will be no bad news stories about Telstra on there … Ever!!’ (Whirlpool 2006).

Given the level of cynicism towards corporate blogs, do you think there is a role for websites such as Now We’re Talking? While there are clear advantages in terms of promoting debate among online publics, telling the organisation’s point of view and responding quickly—without external gatekeepers—to mainstream news stories and government announcements, there may also be disadvantages, particularly in terms of resistance from online publics.

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