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Jun 29, 2017 by Cari E. Guittard

# Re-Thinking Social Engagement Strategies in the Age of Trump <sup>[1]</sup>

Whether you are an executive working for an American multinational company, university, or NGO, or a diplomat serving in our embassies and missions abroad, in the age of President Trump we need to all radically rethink and reconsider our social engagement strategies. After working with numerous global companies, NGOs, and governments in this space over the past several years, particularly in supporting the development of their thought leadership and crisis response efforts, several concerns have emerged that we should keep in mind going forward:

1. We are only going to experience **more uncertainty and increased asymmetric threats** to our interests globally;
2. A steep erosion in the **reputational capital of the American brand** which affects all

who represent our interests (both in the public and private sector) as well as **heightened mistrust** of American institutions, brands, companies, and their representatives;

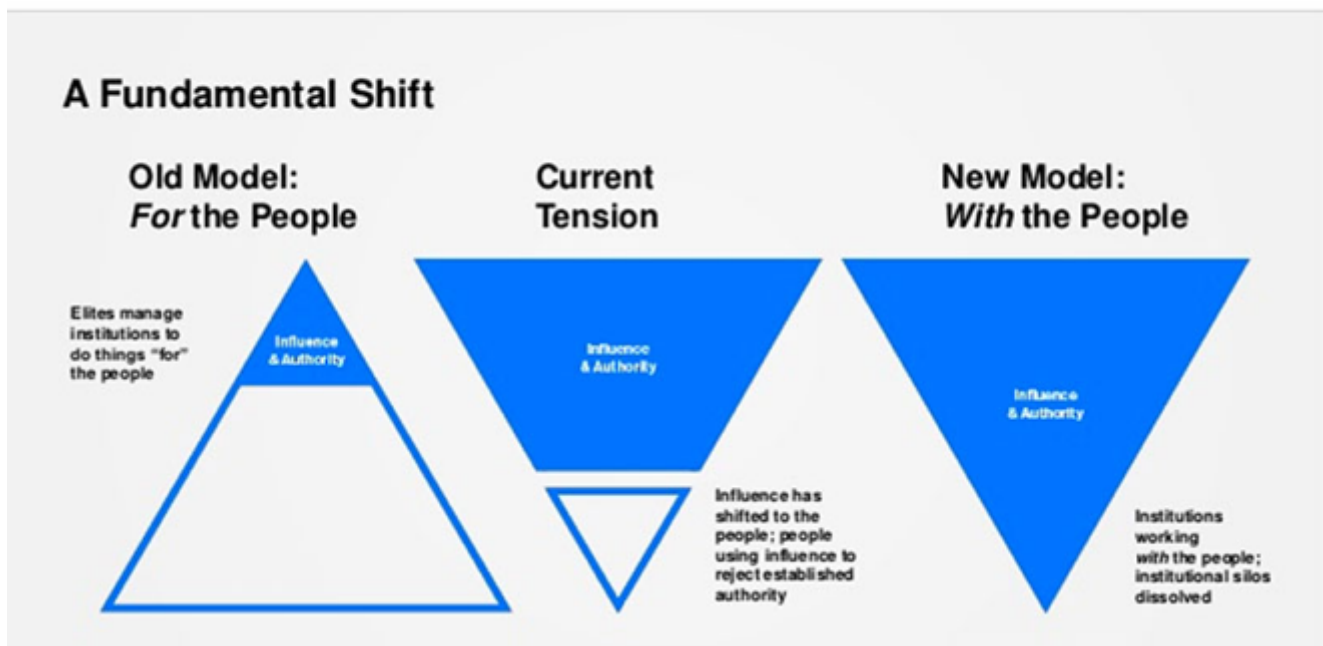
3. Many global institutions and companies approach their **social engagement oftentimes as an afterthought – underestimating the power of publics to impact their bottom line or policy direction** – not as a critical part of their long-term strategic direction championed by senior leadership within the organization.

## Getting Back to Basics to Shore Up Reputational Capital Globally

How any organization engages with publics around the world should not be an afterthought, something to focus on only when crisis strikes or to launch a new campaign; it should be *embedded within every strategy and risk decision*. Building such a strategy begins and ends with regularly listening to all stakeholders and devising a social agenda that includes the benefits the global organization brings to local and regional populations. People need to see, feel, and hear about the impact a global organization is having on the people locally for the multinational to remain relevant and also to shore up their reputational capital. And they need to hear about it from their peers, people they trust, not from CEOs or government officials. For American-based multinationals and institutions this is even more critical as we have a President espousing anti-globalization and protectionist rhetoric.

## Key Social Engagement Recommendations – How & What Is Just as Important as Who

- **How** – Actively build social engagement strategies into your overall global strategic direction at the highest level with buy-in and support from senior leadership. Resist the twin temptations of focusing on the short-term and tying your strategic direction to any political movement. Start with intimate listening events and gatherings of peer groups.
- **What** you communicate matters – clarity and simplicity are always smart and every communication, every engagement begins and ends with *listening to all stakeholders*. And if President Trump has taught the world anything in his first few months, social media is not a panacea – live by the tweet, die by the tweet.
- **Who** – Regardless of whether an organization is public or private, it should regularly tap into senior public diplomacy practitioners and their expertise so they can lead the development and execution of social engagement strategies. Engage and activate trusted spokespeople: peer groups, technical experts, academic advisors, and mothers who are my first go-to influencers anywhere in the world. Partner with trusted institutions locally and regionally (often NGOs).



## With the People

None of this is rocket science nor is it anything seasoned global executives or public diplomacy practitioners don't already know. However, my experience with senior leadership in many of these global organizations is that they don't always have the extensive background or expertise in social engagement that practitioners do and they have fallen into the habit of outsourcing this engagement as yet another aspect of their limited PR or communications efforts. In the age of Trump though, global organizations, especially those with American origins, must do all they can now to shore up their reputational capital and strengthen bonds of trust with the people they engage with and serve – *customers, employees, influencers, citizens* – around the world.

*Graphic courtesy of the Edelman Trust Barometer 2017*

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