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Decentralization of place brand communication

Each place has a huge number of stakeholders. This article will make an introduction to the topic of decentralization of place brand communication and provide relevant examples of country, city and district branding. By decentralization the author means the process of uncontrollable place brand communication by various stakeholders.

Keywords: place branding, place stakeholders, stakeholder engagement, decentralized communication, distributed communication

Stakeholders and communication controllability

Who are the brand stakeholders in case of a product, corporate or place brand? Stakeholders mean not just consumers but people who have a special interest in a brand project. If we speak about product brand the main groups of stakeholders are those who own the brand by law. Corporate brand stakeholders are mostly the owners and company employees who are interested in the prosperity of their corporation. This means a corporate brand has a lot more stakeholders than a product brand.

Who are the stakeholders of a place? Place brand has three main groups of stakeholders: government, inhabitants and guests. Together these groups form a large pool of place brand stakeholders. For example, Moscow has no less than twelve millions stakeholders of its brand (which is the number of its citizens). This is the reason why place brand communication is much more complicated than that of a product or a corporate brand.

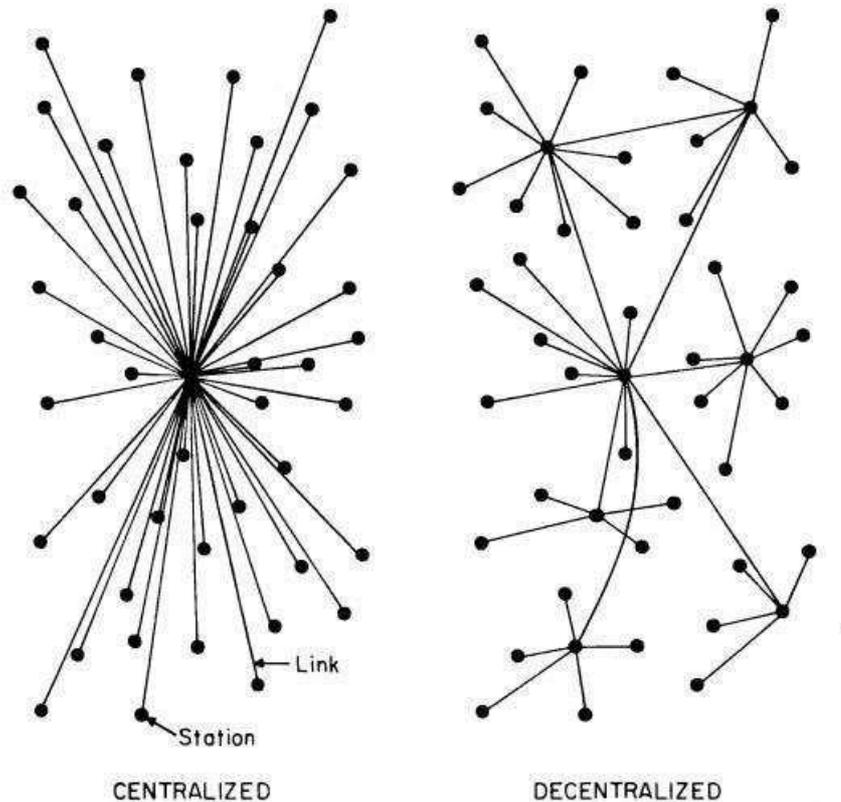
In European academic discussion today there is no such question as whether or not to engage stakeholders to develop the place brand. The urgent question is how to engage stakeholders in the most efficient way. Stakeholder engagement is so valuable precisely because it is difficult and challenging, because it generates disagreement and debate, and therefore new perspective and ideas. There is no way to avoid this tension, but respecting the diversity of stakeholders and engaging them from the start in an open and transparent discussion can help ensure that debate and disagreement is creative and productive [2, p. 83].

If the process of stakeholder engagement is so difficult, can we ever control the brand communication? Product brand communication can be protected by the law. Corporate brand communication can be controlled by policies and money stimulating methods. Place as a brand is in fact protected neither by law, nor by money stimulation, as it has much more touch points than any other brand. This means the

place brand communication can not be controlled the same way as product and corporate brands are. It needs a new approach and new tools.

Centralized and decentralized communication

In 1964 Paul Baran proposed a model for communication types [1]. By the way, it was a military project that was made for the United State AIR FORCE.



On the picture you can see two types of communication: one is centralized, the other is decentralized.

The centralized model has one certain centre of communication and a lot of retranslates. The decentralized model has a few centres and thus there are several subjects of decision making. Most product, service and corporate brands have the centralized model of communication. For example, in China, USA and Russia McDonald's has the same slogan "I'm lovin' it". If a local office wants to implement some local communication, it's necessary to put it in line with the headquarters.

With places it's the other way around. Not many places have centralized brand communication. The most famous cities in the world either have no centralized communication or have their official communication facing strong rivals in their attempts of becoming the mainstream.

Berlin is an example of decentralized place brand communication. The official "Be Berlin" concept does not get much support among inhabitants and guests of the city. Today only some web sources and city buses remind about the "Be Berlin" concept. In the gift shop you will face the hard choice of city symbolics: Berlin bear,

six Berlin letters in six squares, green or red Ampelman (old traffic light style that became extremely popular among tourists) or just another fake NY (the “I love New York” logo). Berlin does not have one idea, it demonstrates how competing concepts decentralize the brand communication.

London is another example of no city brand idea. Official London campaign “Lond ON” failed to become mainstream. Other attempts like “Think London”, “LON DON” and Olympic London did not surpassed the results of a city positioned through the Underground style. Neither London, no Berlin has one central idea to communicate to the world. Different groups of stakeholders try to promote their own concepts and government doesn't know how to manage this process. As a result different consumers have different place brand image in their minds.

Gangnam decentralized communication case

One of the most remarkable events in social media in 2012 is historical 1 billion YouTube views record that was made by PSY and his song “Gangnam style” [4]. The majority of the listeners don’t know what Gangnam really is.

Gangnam is one of the districts of Seoul with half a million inhabitants. It's nearly 5% of total Seoul population. It is a luxury district, rap artist PSY compares Korean Gangnam to Beverly Hills in USA. The song “Gangnam style” in fact is just a joke, parody on Gangnam lifestyle. It is not a great example of how a place can be promoted in the right way if we want to leverage the place identity force.

Before (and after) PSY YouTube record Gangnam government had some official district brand communication. The slogan is: “The city of hope. The global city of Gangnam”. The official webpage describes fantastic tourist, investors and other facilities of the place. Few foreigners and even Koreans have seen the official promo video of Gangnam. It means that Gangnam currently is much stronger associated to the image of “sexy ladies” rather than the “Global city” that they have to link it to. The new image of Gangnam can be measured quantitatively. 1.5 billion views, 7 million likes on YouTube and 5 million likes on Facebook. The difference in the number of followers between PSY’s official twitter and Gangnam district official twitter is significant: 2 million worldwide fans vs 16 thousand Koreans. PSY has his twitter in English (which means the worldwide communication), while Gangnam district has it only in Korean.

Of course Korean officials have already tried to leverage “Gangnam style” equity. But it's an open question whether such viral popularity is an opportunity or a problem for the place brand communication.

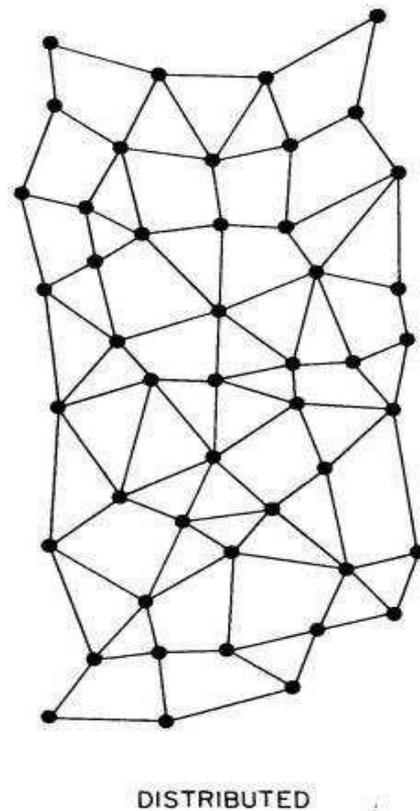
Here are two examples. Korean tourist organization made “Gangnam style” parody video competition and finished it with success. By the way parody from London, the winner of competition, already has 5 million views on YouTube. There’s

an opposite example of failure – the initiative of Seoul tourist board. As the Telegraph reported [3] Seoul tourist board combined official promo of Gangnam district with “Gangnam style” elements. The video seemed to be a success and got half a million views. But then it was removed from YouTube because of the property rights. The reason was that the tourist board had not aligned this initiative with PSY.

Looking at this fail of Seoul tourist board we pose a question – who is the owner of a place brand? The famous singer or stakeholders including half millions inhabitants of Gangnam? PSY has protected “Gangnam style” as commercial brand but he can't protect the right to speak on behalf of all place stakeholders. “Sexy lady” image is very far from the real essence of Gangnam district identity. But today and for a long time Gangnam will keep on having the strong image of energetic and “sexy lady” district. Perhaps, Gagnam is the best example of decentralization of place brand communication. Not all Gangnam stakeholders are happy with PSY’s song, it has already 600 thousands dislikes on YouTube. It's more than the whole population of Gagnam.

Distributed communication

A new tourist promo of Canada with the slogan of “Keep exploring” is an example of mutually beneficial cooperation of official promotion, stakeholders engagement and virality [5]. Video made from Canadians home video collection is an excellent example of efficient crowdsourcing. Canada advertising is an example of the third type of communication. Paul Baran in 1964 [1] named this type Distributed communication. It means communication without centre and without competing groups of stakeholders. Distributed model lets all stakeholders communicate the essence of the brand in the way they like to do it. At the same time all stakeholders are part of one network.



Distributed model is the model of future for the place brand communication. The future where place brand will be the idea that is relevant to the place identity and will unite all the diversity of stakeholders. In the distributed model of place communication each stakeholder becomes a touch point for place brand. Perhaps distributed model won't become a mainstream in the future of place brand communication. But today this model seems to be the most promising one for the long-term development of place brand.

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