A STUDY ON USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY PUBLIC RELATION PRACTITIONERS

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has created a wave in the communication process. It holds to itself a plethora of advantages and benefits. This study brings key findings of current and future challenges posed by social media to the public relations practice. Survey method was adopted for this study. The survey method concludes social media are being used in the public relation practice and implied that the use of new media has increased with the use of micro blogging site such as twitter, search engines, video sharing sites such as You Tube, blogs, electronic forums and podcast. Practitioners believe social media continue to improve in terms of accuracy, honesty, trust and truth telling. They also think new media effectively serve has a watchdog for traditional news media impacting corporate and organizational transparency. The possible threats and opportunities presented by the social media for public relations are also explored.

SOCIAL MEDIA

There are many definitions of social media but, at its core, social media uses Internet-based technologies that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Social media refers to Web sites that permit people to interact with the site and with each other using simple interfaces. At the time of publication, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are among the most popular social media sites.

Social media refers to the information that people share on those sites, including status updates, image and video comments, responses to blogs and forums, and any other individual contributions to the online space. This information reflects naturally occurring conversations among people who may or may not personally know each other.

Phillips (2008) explains how “social media has such an immense influence on people because of the human psychology in people’s ‘need to belong’” where they “define themselves through the messages they transmit to others…through the goods and practices that they posses and display”
The way people use the internet has changed dramatically in recent years (Phillips and Young 2009) with a move to social communication rather than simply accessing information, enabled by ‘social media’. A broad term referring to the wide swath of content creation and consumption that is enabled by the many-to-many distributed infrastructure of the internet.

Social media generally allows three stages of interaction with the content

1) Producing  
2) Consuming  
3) Sharing

If we thought social media growth had reached a plateau, consider this: Classmates.com, launched in the US in 1995, took a little over ten years to acquire 40 million registered users (Brown 2009).

It’s an understatement to suggest that social media have had a huge impact on the practice of public relations since the first Weblogs, or blogs, appeared more than a dozen years ago. Since then social media have developed into a number of different forms including text, images, audio, and video through the development of forums, message boards, photo sharing, podcasts RSS (really simple syndication), search engine marketing, video sharing, Wikis, social networks, professional networks and micro-blogging sites.

The way people use the internet has changed dramatically in recent years (Phillips and Young 2009:106), with a move to social communication rather than simply accessing information, enabled by ‘social media’.

Social media sites are among the most used sites on the web (Phillips and Young 2009:106). By 2011, 47% of the UK population had a Facebook profile (Guardian 2011). If we thought social media growth had reached a plateau, consider this: Classmates.com, launched in the US in 1995, took a little over ten years to acquire 40 million registered users (Brown 2009:50). Facebook, founded in 2004, took around three years to achieve 20 million users (Facebook 2011). The latest social network on the scene, Google Plus, attracted 20 million users to its invite-only trial in just 21 days (ComScore 2011). The International Association of Business Communicators reports more than half of all internet users have joined a social network, social network have become the number one platform for creating and sharing content and nearly 75 percent of all internet users have read a blog (Young 2009).

Kirk Hazlet (2013) reported that the challenge in 2013 will be to counter the predispositions of distrust and scepticism and to help clients come to a realization that what is said or done not only is seen but also is perceived as reality by those who have a vested interest in our activities.
SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE PUBLIC RELATION PROFESSION

Social media a two-way form of media through which users constructs personal identities through self-presentation and dialogue have received extensive attention for the way it empowers the public relations function (Smith, 2010). Social media users utilize all outlets of online media forms as integrated tool for communication, which in this “new media, the distinction between consumer and producer tends to blur… [where] users [have the] ability to take control over production and distribution of content” (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

According to Taylor (2010) “Social media’s effect on brand and corporate reputation can be instantaneous and far-reaching”. The influential leaders of Subordinates within a group tend to value “Social media for themselves personally,” and public relations strategies should instil a “motivation when trying to cultivate” followers (Sweetser, 2011). Phillips (2008) explains how “social media has such an immense influence on people because of the human psychology in people’s ‘need to belong’” where they “define themselves through the messages they transmit to others…through the goods and practices that they posses and display”.

Public relations help an organization and its publics adapt in a mutual relationship, and “use social media to increase interactions with publics through a steady flow of inputs and outputs” (Smith, 2010).

Social media is transforming the traditional structure of public relations strategies as it has forced practitioners “to adopt new technologies and to adapt to new sociological realities” with a new ambition “to belong to a large number of groups rather than to broadcast in an online group with a large number of members” (Phillips, 2008).

According to Smith (2010) public relations leaders look at these online “virtual platforms for interactivity and information exchange where issues are debated and defined users collaborate in content creation, are proactive in searching information and value control in social media participation”.

LinkedIn is the most popular of the business-oriented social networking sites that are used mainly for professional networking. It was launched in 2003 and currently claims to have more than 35 million registered users in more than 200 different countries, many who are executives with Fortune 500 companies (LinkedIn, 2009). LinkedIn encourages use of its site to “find and be introduced to potential clients, service providers and subject experts who come recommended; create and collaborate on projects, gather data, share files and solve
problems; locate business opportunities and find potential partners (LinkedIn, 2009).” The site also permits the posting and distribution of job listings and provides opportunities for users to discover connections that can help them land jobs and close business deals.

The most widely used, free-access social networking sites are Facebook (www.facebook.com) and MySpace (www.myspace.com) and the online social networking space also has other significant players such as business and professional networking sites like LinkedIn (www.LinkedIn.com), Ecademy (www.ecademy.com), Plaxo (www.plaxo.com) Xing (www.xing.com), Yorz (www.yorz.com), Ryze (www.ryze.com) and others.

Method and Procedures

The study gauges how public relation practitioners are using social media and to know the effectiveness of social media use by individual PR practitioners. Therefore survey methodology has been used in this study.

Researcher decided to conduct questionnaire of 100 public sector media relations practitioners, as researcher considered this to find out some information about their general use of social media, in terms of monitoring, pro-active use and effect on their role. This sample of 100 was split evenly between practitioners in public relation organizations. Researcher found no research in this area previously, and wanted to establish some general patterns of behavior conducting qualitative interviews. However, Researcher aware that disadvantages of surveys includes the number of respondents and accuracy and honesty of answers. Researcher decided to survey public relation practitioners in the public sector, as it is arguable that these practitioners are the most publicly accountable and therefore need to be the most aware of new media, in terms of both monitoring their online presence but also how they are seen to use it.

Analysis and Discussion

- Facebook is found to be the most important factor in the usage of social network in public relation. However there is also Twitter and Google plus is also being important factors in the usage of social networks in public relation practice.
- Nearly 45 percent respondents agree that Facebook using most often
- Nearly 27 percent respondents agree that twitter using often
- Nearly 16 percent respondents agree that Google plus are using in public relation
Finally 7 percent agree that YouTube and 3 percent agree that other network, 2 percent agree that MySpace.

The study observed that Social media and other new communications media have a profound impact on the working patterns of public relation practitioners. They have empowered a wide variety of strategic publics by giving them dynamic new communication vehicles which have been effective within a variety of internal and external audience. New media such as blogs, micro blogs and social networks are changing the way organizations communicate with different publics i.e. employees, customers, stakeholders, communities and the government.

Facebook to be the most important new communications medium for public relations messages, Respondents to the survey reported about in this paper they used Facebook too often than any of the other new communication media, Twitter was the next used new media site followed by Google plus and video sharing outlet YouTube. More than half of respondents believe promotions in social media that gain more audiences in public relation. Even though nearly 69 percent agreed that social network interact with people effectively.

Results also uncovered that photo sharing that does not make popular and nearly 66 percent of respondents agree that video sharing is somewhat important among social media target audience.

**Conclusion**

Subjects were asked approximately what percentage of their time working in public relation was spent with blogs or other social media. Results showed more than half of respondents spending their time on Social media 53 percent devoting between 26 – 50 percent, 27 percent between 0-25 percent followed 13 percent respondents devote 76-100 percent, 5 percent of respondents indicating they spend less than 1 hour any of their working time with social media.

In spite of a huge growth in terms of importance, social media do not compare favourably to the traditional media when it comes to wider reach for target audience only twenty percent of this study’s respondents agree social media for the reach in public relations.

However, nearly 86 percent of respondents feel social media are a low cost means to develop relationships with members of the public. This finding indicates that social media are an important means to communicate, but because the communication isn’t viewed as credible it may be difficult to make message on this medium to be viewed as such. The survey also
showed that public relation practitioners feel that social media are an effective tool for communicating purpose in public relations. This research study also found dramatic increases in public relation use of weblogs or blogs are very effective for communication and also the findings indicate the respondents sharing the opinion and their work experience, Innovations in PR the content carried by the blogs are very effective than any other social media platform in public relations.

This research study also found dramatic increases in public relation use of blogs and search engine marketing. While the importance of micro-blogging sites such as twitter and video sharing sites YouTube are also increased and the forum and message boards and the importance of podcasts decreased slightly.

The effect of social media on PR performance the finding indicates that 26 percent to 50 percent reported by 63 percent of respondents agree social media role in public relations. More than half of respondents reported to this survey they don’t have any challenges to maintain social media account.

References