Public relations in an interactive age: the need for new practices, not just new media

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Abstract

Much focus in industry and scholarly research is being placed on 'new' media and how these can be used in public relations practice. However, comparatively little attention is being paid to public relations practices in terms of whether Web 2.0 as a philosophy and way of practising, as well as a loosely described group of communication and media technologies, is being applied. This paper examines one of the major areas of public relations practice, media relations and publicity, and reviews current models and practices within the framework of Web 2.0 described by its leading architects and scholars as a 'philosophy' and a set of principles more than technologies. Analysis reported shows that there is a significant misalignment between public relations practices and contemporary theories and models of public communication, and particularly with conceptual shifts inherent in Web 2.0. It concludes by proposing a number of strategies for realigning public relations with changing public communication practices and the emergent mediascape.

Keywords: public relations, new media, Web 2.0, dialogue, interactivity, authenticity

Introduction

The internet, and more specifically the Web, is the site of convergence of most media and much public communication today (Jenkins, 2006). In particular, what is termed Web 2.0 is resulting in media and public communication "undergoing another paradigm shift", according to Henry Jenkins (2006, p. 5). A number of Web 2.0-based forms of online media, referred to broadly as 'new media', are introducing "profound changes in the nature and organisation of contemporary communication", as Virginia Nightingale and Tim Dwyer note in the opening sentence of their text *New Media Worlds: Challenges for Convergence* (2007, p. 1).

However, Web 2.0 is defined in many ways in extensive literature on the subject and is still not well understood (MacManus, 2005). The term is widely attributed to Tim O'Reilly who used it as the theme of a conference in 2004 referring to a second generation of Web-based services that feature openness for collaboration and interactivity (Boler, 2008, p. 39; O'Reilly, 2005). First use of the term actually dates back to 1999 when it was used by Darcy DiNucci in an article in *Print* magazine (1999, p. 32). However, DiNucci used the term mainly in relation to design and aesthetics in her article targeted at Web designers.

In his description, O'Reilly emphasised a new way of thinking behind Web 2.0 more than particular technologies, even though developments such as RSS (Really Simple Syndication) and search engines are important enablers. In a much-quoted essay titled 'What is Web 2.0', O'Reilly says a central principle of Web 2.0 is harnessing "collective intelligence", a concept discussed extensively by sociologist Pierre Lévy (1997). O'Reilly says "you can visualise Web 2.0 as a set of principles and practices that tie together a veritable solar system of sites that demonstrate some or all of those principles" (2005, para. 7). Another Web 2.0 pioneer Peter Merholz (1999) who created the abbreviation 'blog' in 1999 from the term 'Weblog' that was first coined in 1997 by John Barger (Wortham 2007), refers specifically to the philosophy behind the practices of Web 2.0. In his blog *Peterme.com* under a heading 'Web 2.0 – it's not about the technology', Merholz states:

> Web 2.0 is primarily interesting from a philosophical standpoint. It's about relinquishing control, it's about openness, trust and authenticity. APIs, tags, Ajax, mash-ups, and all that are symptoms, outputs, results of this philosophical bent (2005, para. 5).

Richard MacManus lists a number of definitions of Web 2.0 in a section titled 'What is Web 2.0' on the ICT industry journal site *ZDNet*, including describing it as a platform, but also as "an attitude not a technology" and specifically as "the underlying philosophy of relinquishing control" (2005, para. 2, 3, 5). In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins also emphasises that convergence of communication and content on the latest iteration of the Web is about culture more than technology and, in particular, "participatory culture" (2006, p. 243). As well as describing Web 2.0 as a philosophy, an idea, culture, attitudes, principles and practices rather than technologies, these descriptions point to some of the key practice implications of this widely-used Web communication environment. Merhholz's and MacManus' interpellation for "relinquishing control", O'Reilly's emphasis on "collective intelligence", and rallying calls by other Web 2.0 pioneers for "openness" and "authenticity" are particularly salutary in this discussion.

In scholarly texts, Bucy (2004) identifies interactivity as a defining element of Web communication, particularly Web 2.0 – albeit interactivity is interpreted in multiple ways and needs clarification. Three levels of interactivity are discussed by Carpentier (2007), McMillan (2002, pp. 166-72) and Szuprowicz (1995) in relation to computer mediated communication. They define these as user-to-system interactivity, user-to-documents interactivity, and user-to-user interactivity. In this paper, user-to-documents interaction and particularly user-to-user interaction are the focus. User-to-system interactivity (person-to-machine interaction in Carpentier's terms) such as clicking a mouse and accessing menus, while significant in Human Computer Interface terms, is a basic and largely perfunctory interaction in terms of human communication. Megan Boler notes that "the Web has always been about voice and conversation" and cites Web founder Tim Berners-Lee who said the Web was never intended to be about delivering content to passive audiences, but to be about "shared creativity" (2008, p. 39).

From definitions offered by the founders and leading protagonists of Web 2.0 and from scholarly literature, the defining characteristics of this emergent communication environment can be identified as openness for interactivity at human-to-human as well as human-to-documents level, shared creativity, collective intelligence, conversation, and authenticity. Explicit in description of this environment also is relinquishing control that characterises one-way top-down information distribution models of *mass media* in favour of a dialogic and collaborative approach.

Understanding the characteristics and principles of practice in this emergent mediascape are significant and worthy of close analysis because of the rapid growth and approaching ubiquity of Web 2.0 media such as blogs, social networks, photo and video sharing sites, virtual worlds and other emergent forms such as microblogging. At the end of 2008, social network MySpace had 117.6 million active members (comScore 2008). Facebook began the year with 60 million active members (Facebook, MySpace Statistics, 2008) and by June had 132 million (comScore, 2008). According to the company's own statistics, Facebook's active membership passed 250 million in 2009 (Facebook Factsheet, 2009), demonstrating a faster adoption rate than any other communication technology or medium in history. Technorati (2009) has indexed and was tracking 133 million blogs in 2008, according to its *State of the Blogsphere 2008* report. In addition, there are 162 million blogs in China, according to the China Internet Network Information Center (2009b). Six billion videos a month were being viewed on YouTube by early 2009 (comScore, 2009), with a total of more than 14 billion online videos viewed monthly across all video sharing Web sites.

As well as being used for personal and social purposes, Web 2.0 is increasingly being deployed by businesses for communication and marketing (McKinsey 2007), and democratic governments worldwide are adopting interactive Web 2.0 media for civic engagement and public participation, termed *e-democracy* (Hernon, Cullen & Relyea, 2006; Kearns, 2002; Wyld, 2007).

Public relations 2.0

Public Relations 2.0 is a term being used to denote use of Web 2.0 media and communication in public relations. For instance, in *PR 2.0: New Media, New Tools, New Audiences*, Deidre Breakenridge (2008) discusses "how the Web has evolved into thousands of information-sharing communities and how social networking and other Web 2.0 technologies give you powerful new ways to reach them".

Contemporary public relations theories strongly support and call for an interactive, dialogic, collaborative approach. These are discussed in detail elsewhere and do not need to be outlined here other than in summary form to contextualise contemporary practices. While the widely-referenced Four Models of Public Relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) identify the origin of public relations in propaganda and *press agentry*, it is a "gross over-simplification" to define the modern practice of public relations in terms of these approaches, according to Glen Broom (2009, p. 89). Grunig's and Hunt's (1984) four models place emphasis on interactive approaches that involve *two-way asymmetric* and *two-way symmetric* communication. Some have criticised the two-way symmetric model of public relations which denotes 50/50 *co-orientation* between organisations and their publics, seeing it as normative and idealised. In a widely-cited paper titled 'Limits of Symmetry', Priscilla Murphy argues that most of those who advocate two-way symmetric approaches admit that it is extremely rare in practice and Murphy proposes a middle ground involving "a sliding scale of co-operation and competition in which organisational needs must of necessity be balanced against constituents' needs, but never lose their primacy" (1991, pp. 120, 127). This thinking has led to a *mixed model* approach to public relations which involves a combination of information dissemination and persuasion matched by listening and responding to public opinion. Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002) revised the two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric models to an integrated *contingency model* which proposes that "contingent decisions must be made ... with both the organisation and the public in mind".

Debate continues over public relations as a management function versus 'boundary spanner' models (eg. Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 35) and the implications of strategic communication (eg. Hallahan et al., 2007). However, in all contemporary public relations theory, some level of two-way interaction is identified as an essential element. Kent and Taylor (2002) propose a *dialogic* model of public relations, arguing that dialogue is central to building relationships which prominent scholars including Jim Grunig cite as the key outcome of effective public relations (Grunig & Hon, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 2001). Dialogic theory draws on Martin Buber's (1958, 2002) "I/Thou" concept of dialogue which considers the other and orientates towards the other and not only the self, in contrast with what he calls the 'I/it' approach which sees others as a thing to be influenced, manipulated or exploited. Buber contrasts dialogue with monologue and 'monologue disguised as dialogue' and argues for the importance of the former.

An interactive dialogic and co-orientation approach to public relations is dynamic and uncontrolled, unlike one-way information dissemination which seeks to control messages and meaning making. Within the specific practice of media relations and publicity this has been long identified, with practitioners negotiating with journalists but unable to control what editors and journalists publish and broadcast. In this regard, public relations has been a distinctly different practice to advertising which in most iterations employs a one-way transmissional model involving controlled content and controlled placement.

The importance of this two-way uncontrolled interactive concept of public relations was highlighted by Group Chief Executive of the WPP Group, Martin Sorrell in a speech in New York in November 2008 on the future of PR in the era of Web 2.0 in which he said: "There are risks and opportunities inherent in the more complex uncontrolled communication environment of social media. But public relations is used to working in an uncontrolled environment. It is its natural territory" (2008, p. 4).

However, the following analysis of media relations and publicity practices suggests that there is a substantial misalignment between applied public relations practices and what has been identified as 'Excellence' in contemporary public relations theory. Furthermore, of most focus here, analysis shows that media relations and publicity practices are not adapting to the philosophy, culture, principles and practices that characterise Web 2.0 and that a significant shift is required for public relations to communicate effectively in the fast-growing interactive online environment.

Analysis of media relations and publicity strategies

An analysis of 10 widely used media spokesperson training programs and guides was undertaken in early 2009 to explore public relations approaches to media and public communication. This research approach was selected for four reasons. First, while recognising that public relations is a broad field, media relations and publicity is a major area of practice (Broom, 2009). Second, media spokesperson training is a site which reflects public relations strategy and advice widely dispersed to organisations and which, in turn, influences the communication policy and approach of many organisations. Third, training can be assumed to represent Best Practice methods, particularly when accredited Continuing Professional Development programs endorsed by the Public Relations Institute of Australia are included, as was the case. Fourth, training programs and associated guides and handbooks allow a non-intrusive method of research, noting that other methods such as interviews with practitioners are likely to be influenced by *reactivity* (Berger, 2000, p. 280; Neuman, 2006, p. 265).

Research questions

This study sought to identify the philosophy, attitudes, and practices of public relations practitioners in undertaking mediated public communication and to compare these with the philosophy, attitudes and practices predominant in interactive Web 2.0 media and public communication environments.

Methodology

Content analysis was undertaken of media spokesperson training course objectives and course descriptions, as well as the full content of course notes, guides or handbooks where there were available. In most cases, course objectives and descriptions were considered sufficient as these clearly stated the purpose of the training and outlined key concepts covered. A quantitative content analysis approach involving counts of key terms and phrases was deemed sufficient to identify the main concepts advocated. However, some attention was also paid to textual and semiotic elements such as headings, bolded and capitalised words, and metaphors such as military references.

Sample

The sample was selected in two parts by searching the Web site of the Public Relations Institute of Australia which identified two media spokesperson training programs (one in NSW and one in Victoria), followed by selection of the 10 most highly ranked media training programs in the Google search engine using the search terms 'media training' and 'media spokesperson training'.

The sample was small and the study was exploratory in nature. However, the findings are considered important because they reflect a threshold point in public communication by the public relations industry – a site where practitioners state explicitly and in detail their philosophies, principles, and recommended Best Practice for interacting with media and the public.

Key findings

This study found that all media training programs and guides examined recommend preparing 'key messages' and staying 'on message', with several stipulating that this practice should be followed irrespective of questions asked. Most significantly, 10 of the 12 programs and guides studied prominently claim to help interviewees and PR practitioners *control* and/or *manage* media interviews. Eight of the 12 programs and guides explicitly claim to teach participants to "control" media interviews and messages that they disseminate. Two others use the term "manage" in relation to media and messages. While ostensibly a more flexible term, the course description of one of the latter programs tells potential participants: "learn to manage the media on YOUR terms" (original emphasis). Only two of the media training programs studied focussed on development of

media communication skills without making claims to 'control' or 'manage' media and content.

No terms were found in materials analysed referring to public benefits. All course objectives and statements of outcomes analysed referred to empowerment of interviewees and achievement of strategic organisational objectives.

In a scholarly analysis of media interviews, Bell and van Leeuwen say that interviewers have four distinct advantages over interviewees including being able to choose the topic, being able to "direct the answerer towards certain kinds of answers" and "they can compel the answerer to answer (at least in all but a very few situations)" (1994, p. 7). However, analysis of contemporary media interview training programs and guides indicates that this is increasingly not the case.

In *Managing the Interview*, media trainer Graham Kelly poses the question 'who controls the interview' and advises interviewees: "You do, despite what the journalist may think" (1995, p. 36). He proceeds to instruct interviewees on how to "subtly ensure your own agenda is met". The third edition of *Managing the Interview* is offered as an e-book as part of one of the media training programs studied.

Another well-known media trainer, Roger Fry, promotes a "systems-based approach to handling media interviews" which focuses on three elements: message, style and structure. Fry (2008) says that his systems approach to media starts with "proactive message formation" and involves "structuring to make a message watertight – impervious to challenge". In the third element of his system he promises participants will learn "how to get and keep control" and he claims that journalists use prepared quotes from his trainees "almost without exception".

Along with several commercial programs offered by media trainers, this analysis examined a leading corporate training site. Microsoft provides media training tips to its executives and business partners online under the heading "Six tips for taking control in media interviews". Advice includes "stay on track with your message" and "bridge ... to deflect any attempts to derail your message" (Krotz, 2009, para. 16, 17).

International as well as local media training programs were reviewed. Media Training Worldwide (2009) which claims to offer media training to leading corporations and organisations globally states in an outline of its training:

> Whether you are preparing for interviews with the *Wall Street Journal*, CNBC or *Business Week*, we can make you shine. Our goal is simple: to make you confident, comfortable and relaxed in any interview situation AND give you the ability to *control* not only your message but also your exact quotes used by the media. [original emphasis]

While it could be argued that commercial training programs and the policies of particular companies are not representative of the public relations industry,

focus on 'controlling' media and public communication is shown to exist in the mainstream of public relations by accredited professional development workshops organised by the Public Relations Institute of Australia. A PRIA workshop in Melbourne in May 2009 titled "The role of controversy in public relations: How to control the media and influence the agenda" stated in the course description on the PRIA's Web

> Media and public affairs consultant Michael Gillies (www.
> michaelgilliesmedia.com) specialises in moulding issues and events
> to control media coverage and influence the agenda (Public Relations
> Institute of Australia, 2009a).

The PRIA site went on to state that 'managed controversy' "is one of the most effective and powerful tools in PR" and described it as a "powerful weapon" that "every PR practitioner who wants to get ahead should know". Under benefits and outcomes of attending the training, the PRIA site said: "Gain the knowledge and skills that will give you an edge in this industry and help you get ahead – and improve your relationship and dealings with key journalists!" The exclamation mark at the end of the last statement perhaps indicates some doubt or conscience about whether attempting to control media will improve relationships with journalists. With the same media skills also being applied to communication through new forms of interactive media and communication networks, this approach can be seen to be in direct conflict with the philosophies, principles and practices that characterise some of the most popular and fastest-growing media in use today.

Further evidence of application of a control paradigm in public relations was illustrated a few weeks later in a PRIA NSW training seminar titled 'Managing media interviews'. The seminar promised "learn to manage the media on YOUR terms" [original emphasis]. The trainer, Pat Kennedy, was described as having "extensive experience in media management" (Public Relations Institute of Australia 2009b).

It should be stated that, in both these cases, the training seminars were delivered by independent trainers. However, these examples of professional development programs endorsed and conducted by the industry's professional institute, as well as leading industry training programs, illustrate a deeply embedded and consistent focus on one-way transmission of messages, management, and control in public relations practice. No philosophy of collaboration, sharing, openness, or relinquishing control is evident in training of spokespersons in what Mark Poster (1995) calls the 'second media age'.

In 2006, Philip Young from the University of Sunderland told an online forum organised by the Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication in the UK "we are seeing the end of the command and control model of PR". He said that emergent Web 2.0 media "shift PR from command driven, top down communication to a symmetrical conversation" (Young, 2006).

However, research indicates that Young's statement was prescriptive rather than descriptive and that the interpellations of Web 2.0 as a philosophy, a culture, and principles and practices of openness, interactivity, dialogue and relinquishing control are not being implemented in major areas of public relations practice such as media relations and publicity.

This analysis also notes that one of the most common methods of evaluating media relations and publicity is Advertising Value Equivalents (AVEs) which calculate the cost of buying media space and time gained as editorial (Jeffress-Fox, 2003). Apart from their invalidity as a measure of editorial media coverage given differences in placement and tone of advertising and editorial respectively (eg. editorial can be negative), and the anomaly that the calculation is actually a comparison of cost not value (Macnamara, 2000), the use of so-called Advertising Value Equivalents further illustrates a philosophy of one-way message transmission and control in public relations. PR practitioners using AVEs are explicitly arguing that their engagement with media and their outputs are the same as mass media advertising.

Associating public relations with mass media advertising further illustrates conflict and incompatibility with emergent Web 2.0 media and public communication practices. Advertising is facing serious challenges in the era of Web 2.0, according to industry data and a number of analyses. Many Web 2.0 media such as blogs and social networks either do not accept advertising at all, or accept only minimal forms of advertising such as Google 'Ad words'. When Facebook attempted to launch what it called "social advertising" and expand its advertising content, users revolted, causing the network to capitulate quickly (Mesure & Griggs, 2007). A study by Deloitte (2007) has warned that public antipathy towards traditional advertising is growing, with 76 per cent of internet users finding online advertising intrusive and 28 per cent saying they will pay to avoid advertising in future. A new generation of cynical media users are embracing TiVo to filter out advertising on television and using ad blocking software such as AdBlock on the internet (Cohen, 2007). Traditional controlled forms of advertising are declining in favour of interactive approaches such as viral advertising and interactive rich media advertising (Wells, Spence-Stone, Moriarty & Burnett, 2008). In short, even advertising is having to relinquish control and abandon one-way message transmission to be relevant and effective in the Web 2.0 environment.

The reason for the decline of traditional advertising is not changing technology. Technically advertising can easily be placed on any Web site. The challenges to advertising emanate from a social and cultural revolution more than a technological revolution. The philosophy, culture, principles and practices of one-way top-down monologue are being increasingly rejected in favour of interaction, collaboration, dialogue and conversations.

In trying to 'amp-up' its promotional messages and lock down and control communication, public relations has failed to follow its own 'Excellence' theories

and guidelines, it has lost its distinctiveness from advertising and propaganda that it has strived to achieve, and it is out of step with the social media revolution that many scholars see as significant as development of the printing press and the birth of broadcast media (Balnaves, et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Nightingale & Dwyer, 2007). In colloquial terms, it could be said that public relations is travelling the wrong way down the information superhighway.

The philosophy, culture, principles, protocols and cultural practices of communication in the era of Web 2.0 represent a major paradigm shift away from controlled content and distribution of messages that have characterised mass media and traditional advertising and much public relations practice. Public relations needs to embrace these changing practices as much or more than new communications technologies to be relevant and effective in the early 21st century mediascape.

These practices centre on openness rather than control, negotiation rather than management, and interactivity in the forms of collaboration and dialogue or conversation. The term 'conversation' is used widely in relation to Web 2.0 and is so familiar that its significance can be easily overlooked and trivialised, as G. Stuart Adam (2009) remarks in the foreword to the 2009 revised edition of James Carey's classic *Communication as Culture*. Carey positions conversation as central to society, saying that humans establish coherence and order in the world to support their purposes through communication carried out interactively in conversation (2009, p. 65). However, like a number of contemporary advocates of Web 2.0, Carey warns that language, the fundamental medium of human life, is increasingly conceptualised as an instrument for manipulating others and getting them to believe what we want them to believe, rather than as a collectively applied means for negotiating meaning and building culture and relationships (p. 64). He points to the replacement of conversation in modern societies with propaganda and polemic. Jowett and O'Donnell (2005) further illustrate that the issues raised here are not trivial. They identify as a "propagandist" those who "attempt to control information flow and manage a certain public's opinion" (p. 44). While they argue that persuasion is ethical because it seeks to shape perceptions and behaviours in an open, transparent way which is uncontrolled, communication strategies that seek to *control* and *manage* constitute propaganda, according to Jowett's and O'Donnell's and other definitions.

Fundamental to interaction and conversation in interactive Web 2.0 online communication, as well as daily life, is authenticity (Scoble & Israel, 2006, p. 149). As cited earlier, Martin Buber (1958, 2002) drew an important distinction between monologue, monologue disguised as dialogue, and what he terms authentic dialogue (as cited in Littlejohn & Foss 2008, p. 217). While a normative and largely subjective concept, authenticity is surprisingly well recognised and quickly detected on the internet – or, conversely, often it is lack of authenticity that is recognised and earns the ire of online communities. Drawing from several intellectual traditions, Richard Johannesen (2001) identifies five characteristics of authentic dialogue including honesty and accuracy, genuineness, empathy, and a "spirit of mutual equality". As well as adhering to fundamental requirements such as being truthful, these characteristics of authentic dialogue mean that communicators need to speak in their own voice and the process must involve two-way interaction to hear and consider the views of others, including dissent and even criticism. Inherent in these processes is giving up attempts at control.

A number of scholars have identified that dialogue, conversation and authenticity are conspicuously lacking in contemporary public communication (Boczkowski, 2005, p. 21; Deuze, 2005; Deuze, 2007, p. 240). While this may be understandable in advertising, it seems inexcusable in public relations given its normative definitions, its theoretical underpinnings, the evolution of interactive media that enable two-way dialogue and conversation, and the widely evident shift towards these interactive 'social media'.

Management is often risk-averse and sees potential risks in a more open, interactive communication environment in which consumers and citizens can comment and even criticise (Scoble & Israel, 2006). While risks exist, they come concomitant with opportunities. In adopting the philosophy, culture, principles and practices of Web 2.0, public comments, criticisms and alternative ideas can be aired in interactive discussion spaces. What management too often misunderstands is that these conversations are already happening in other places to which they have no access to gain understanding and to contribute answers to questions, corrections of misinformation, and responses to balance discussion. Conversations are happening at the water cooler, in the staff canteen, in coffee shops, and in private online spaces denied to management or which management ignore. By allowing dialogue and conversation in its communication, management gains opportunities to defend criticisms, as well as to harness support and endorsement, noting that online communication also positively discusses policies, products and services.

Conclusions

Despite a growing body of theory espousing two-way interactive dialogic communication, rapidly growing social media facilitating conversation and dialogue, and the rise of *prosumers* (Toffler, 1970, 1980) and *produsers* (Bruns, 2008) signalling the demise of passive audiences, this research shows that key areas of public relations practice remain grounded in a control paradigm focussed on one-way top-down monologue. This issue warrants further research to identify the extent of application of the control paradigm and pathways for public relations to adapt to the Web 2.0 and emerging Web 3.0 environment. Technological change is highly visible and gains attention, as well as a degree of fashionableness and glamour. But changing philosophies and social and cultural change are less obvious and more deeply-rooted. Public relations needs to

identify and adapt to changing social and cultural practices, not just changing communication technologies. That means changing public relations *practices* – what practitioners do with communications technology – not just changing tools and channels. In conclusion, some examples of control paradigm practices and alternative interactive PR strategies adapted to the Web 2.0 environment are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Control paradigm of pr v an interactive pr paradigm
(Macnamara, 2010, in print)

Control paradigm of pr	Interactive pr paradigm
Operates as the central media contact point	Provides training to help organisation spokespersons speak directly with media
Writes and distributes all media releases and statements	Writes guidelines for making public statements Writes guidelines for organisation blogs and encourages organisation experts to write blogs, Twitter, etc
Publishes corporate newsletters, brochures, etc	Assists in publishing organisational blogs, podcasts, wikis, etc
Responds to inquiries, usually with pre-prepared statements	Proactively participates in online forums, blogs, social networks, Twitter, etc to represent the organisation in an open, honest way – and urges organisation and independent experts to present information in the organisation's interest
Responds to management requests and operates fully within organisation policies	Regularly surveys key stakeholders to identify information needs, interests and attitudes Provides intelligence and strategic advice to management on future planning
Monitors major media, particularly key contacts, and tracks news releases	Monitors press, radio, TV, blogs, YouTube, Twitter, social networks, etc for strategic insights and intelligence as well as evaluation Analyses media and public discussion qualitatively as well as quantitatively

It is argued that major opportunities await communication professionals who understand the mood of those who New York journalism professor Jay Rosen (2006) calls "the people formerly known as the audience". Public relations has an unprecedented opportunity to live up to its name and facilitate true communication and build relationships between organisations and their publics.

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The new frontier: Singaporean and Malaysian public relations practitioners' perceptions of new media

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Abstract

Recent research into social media use identified mid-2006 to early 2007 as the period when Singaporean public relations agencies first recognised the need to embrace new media (Fitch, 2009a). This research draws on interviews conducted with ten senior Singaporean and Malaysian public relations practitioners in mid-2006 and offers an historical review of their attitudes to new media at that time. The results reveal that experienced public relations practitioners were fearful of the changing communication environment, even as some embraced the opportunities created by new media. These findings are significant in terms of understanding the implications of new media and changing communication patterns for public relations.

Introduction

Public relations has faced major challenges since the mid-2000s with the increasing use of more interactive social media platforms. The communication environment is significantly more complex; publics have a newfound capacity to share information and to develop relationships. The implications of low cost, high speed, networking opportunities for 'traditional' public relations are profound. Several scholars point to the dearth of research into the impact of new media, and in particular, of social media, on public relations. Kent (2008) and Wright and Hanson (2008) suggest there has been a lack of critical analysis and research into the role of blogs (as one kind of social media) in public relations, and Australian researchers argue that an "ambiguity exists in the literature" and that "from a public relations perspective, there has been limited investigation and understanding into the nature of cyberspace as a communications medium" (Herger & Howell, 2007, p. 93). This paper attempts to address this gap by investigating the impact of new media on public relations.