Public relations and the social: how practitioners are using, or abusing, social media

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Abstract

Widespread discussion of interactive social media and social networks enabled by what is termed Web 2.0 has led to discussion of 'PR 2.0' denoting the potential for these new forms of media and public spaces to realise the two-way symmetrical model of communication recommended in Excellence Theory of public relations, but hitherto regarded as normative and impractical by some scholars, or to reconceptualise public relations in some significant way. However, despite considerable excitement surrounding the potential of interactive social media, there is a lack of empirical data on the ways in which public relations practitioners are utilising these media and how they are influencing or changing PR practice. A number of reported case studies suggest that there are grounds for concern that some organisations are attempting to engage in public communication in the Web 2.0 environment using one-way information transmission and a control paradigm of communication characteristic of mass media and Web 1.0. Furthermore, case studies show that, in some instances, inappropriate and unethical practices are being adopted in social media and social networks. On the other hand, there are case studies of some organisations engaging in new productive ways with their stakeholders using interactive social media and social networks. This article reviews contemporary literature in relation to social media and social networks as well as recent case studies to identify their key characteristics, potentialities, and uses, and report findings of a survey and interviews with senior public relations practitioners in Australia investigating their views and practices in social media.

Keywords: social media, new media, Web 2.0, PR 2.0

Introduction

Discussion of social media and social networks is widespread among public relations practitioners and scholars. As at 1 March 2010, a Google search of the term 'public relations 2.0' revealed 5.13 million references (Google, 2010a). A search on 'public relations social media' returned 86.5 million references (Google, 2010b). Heading the list was a 'press release' about public relations in New York which stated that "social media is one of the most exciting things to happen to public relations" (Waddel, 2010, para. 2). The release expounded:

> Social media helps public relations ... executives build more new relationships across a wider landscape and in a sustainable fashion never before possible. Social media enables professionals to maintain ongoing, quality relationships with influencers, media, customers and partners regardless of where they are (Waddel, 2010, para. 3).

Deidre Breakenridge in a book with the term 'PR 2.0' in the title (Breakenridge, 2008) says Web 2.0 social media "put the public back in public relations" – a phrase she used in the title of her follow-up text co-authored with Brian Solis (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). Widespread industry excitement about the potential of social media to transform public relations is evident in this text and in many practitioner presentations and statements. For instance, in the foreword to Breakenridge's 2008 book, co-founder of the Social Media Club Brian Solis stated: "Welcome to what just may be the greatest evolution in the history of PR" (2008, para. 1). Solis claims that with the shift from PR to PR 2.0 "monologue has given way to dialogue" (para. 19).

In *New Media and Public Relations*, Vincent Hazelton, Jill Harrison-Rexrode and William Kennan go further and claim that public relations is "undergoing a revolution (2008, p. 91). Group Chief Executive of the WPP Group[1], Martin Sorrell, sees some challenges in social media, but in a 2008 speech in New York he also echoed an upbeat view of social media use in public relations, saying:

> 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 (Sorrell, 2008, p. 4).

These and many other industry reports and statements suggest that public relations practitioners are engaging in use of social media and that these interactive applications are helping realise the two-way symmetrical model of communication recommended in *Excellence Theory* (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992; L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Dozier, 2002), but hitherto regarded as normative and impractical by some scholars (e.g. Murphy, 1991). Similarly, claims such as those of Solis, suggest that interactive

social media are enabling a *dialogic model* of public relations as proposed by Michael Kent and Maureen Taylor (2002). Some go even further and claim that social media are transforming public relations and reconceptualising it in new socially-engaged ways.

However, despite considerable excitement surrounding the potential of interactive social media, there is a lack of empirical data on the extent that public relations practitioners are utilising these media and networks and, in particular, how they are being deployed. A 2009 study by Donald Wright and Michelle Hinson claimed to be the "the world's first extensive examination of how social media are being implemented in public relations" (Wright & Hinson, 2009, p. 1). Michael Kent's 2008 critical analysis of blogging in public relations examined the potential of what blogs *can* be used for rather than what practitioners actually do with blogs, and he concluded that there is "very little scholarly research in communication or public relations about blogging" (2008, p. 34). Similarly, Karl Herger and Gwyneth Howell concluded even more broadly that "from a public relations perspective, there has been limited investigation and understanding into the nature of cyberspace as a communications medium" (2007, p. 93).

Qualitative as well as quantitative analysis is required because reported case studies indicate that some organisations and companies are attempting to engage in the Web 2.0 social media environment using "traditional methods" of one-way information transmission and a control paradigm of communication characteristic of *mass media* (Gregory, 2004, p. 246). Furthermore, a number of case studies show that, in some instances, inappropriate and even unethical practices are being adopted in social media and social networks, resulting in public criticism and crises affecting the public image and reputation of organisations.

For example, some public relations departments and agencies have created fake blogs such as *Wal-Marting Across America* and LÓreal's *Claire*. In the former case, public relations firm Edelman created an organisation called 'Working Families for Wal-Mart' which allegedly published the blog. Other bloggers including *Wal-MartWatch* and later *BusinessWeek* soon revealed that the authors were employed by Edelman on behalf of Wal-Mart ("Wal-Mart, Edelman flogged for blog", 2006) and that the organisation was a case of 'astro-turfing' (Gogoi, 2006). LÓreal faced similar criticism and reputation damage when it was revealed that its blogger, Claire, was the company's public relations department and not an independent beauty expert as implied (Crampton, 2005, p. 10).

In December 2009, a senior executive of Hill & Knowlton in Australia, sparked a public controversy by posting critical comments on Twitter about Sensis, a subsidiary of one of the firm's clients, Telstra. Fergus Kibble posted a series of 'tweets' questioning the environmental responsibility of Sensis distributing millions of printed copies of its Yellow Pages directory (Kibble, 2009). He posted photos of dumped unwanted Yellow Pages directories which

were still online as at March 2010 (Twitpic, 2010). Some may be sympathetic to Kibble's view, but this case illustrates the changing nature of media and the different practices applying in social media. Kibble may have intended the tweets as personal comments, but his Twitter profile at the time listed him as General Manager of Hill & Knowlton's Sydney office – a profile since amended. Also, even though some of the tweets have been removed, they remain available online because of Google caching and Web archives[2]. On the Web, traditional media conventions such as retractions do not work and comments can remain accessible for a long time, which has major implications for public relations.

Already embroiled in one of the largest automotive safety crises in history with more than eight million cars and trucks recalled by the end of 2009 (Rook, 2010), Toyota faced a further public relations disaster in December 2009 when a Facebook competition for user-generated videos to promote its Yaris small car resulted in the winner being labelled "sexist", "offensive", "juvenile" and "incestuous" ("Toyota 'she can take a good pounding'", 2009). The winning video in Toyota's online 'Clever Film Competition' featured a young man knocking on the door of a girl's home and introducing himself to her father as "Horny", before adding "I'm here to take Jennifer's virginity out tonight." The young woman walks into shot wearing a black mini-dress and calls out "I'm coming", upon which the young man mutters: "You will be soon." The video featured numerous other innuendos including "I'll have her on her back by eleven", "she can take a good pounding", and "I'm ready to blow". While this campaign was created by an advertising agency (Saatchi & Saatchi), it illustrates a lack of strategic public relations in the planning of major online campaigns.

Such incidents demonstrate that some professional public communicators are using social media and social networks in naive and even deceitful ways, causing considerable harm to the reputations of their organisations and their brands. These were not isolated cases. They followed a widely publicised online Cinderella-type search to find a man who allegedly left his jacket in a Sydney cafe. The story which gained mainstream media headlines and 60,000 views of a YouTube video turned out to be a hoax promotion by fashion chain Witchery Man (Marcus, 2009). Even Tourism Queensland's multi-award-winning 'Best job in the world' campaign that won the first-ever Grand Prix Lion award for public relations at the Cannes International Advertising Festival in 2009 used a social media hoax. It was later revealed that a story of a woman entrant in the competition who allegedly tattooed an advertisement for the Great Barrier Reef on her arm to win the dream island job was concocted by Tourism Queensland to gain publicity (Ramachandran, 2009a, 2009b).

At the same time, there are case studies of some organisations engaging in new productive ways with their stakeholders using interactive social media and social networks. The Obama presidential election campaign in the US, the UK Power of Information Task Force report (UK Cabinet Office, 2009), the recent Australian Government 2.0 Taskforce report (2009), and online public consultation trials in Australia (Macnamara, 2009, 2010a, 2010b) illustrate growing use of interactive social media for effective citizen engagement in the public sphere. Apart from its one 'rush of blood' resulting in hoax videos, the Queensland Tourism 'Best job in the world' campaign illustrated highly successful and cost-effective use of social media for marketing, attracting almost seven million unique Web visitors per month and generating comment in more than 230,000 blogs as well as mainstream media worldwide (SapientNitro, 2009).

Literature review

It is necessary to examine literature in two fields to understand the potential of social media and the conventions and cultural practices relating to their use, as well as identify empirical data on the ways in which they are being used in public relations. First, a brief review of literature on Web 2.0 is summarised, as it forms the underlying communication architecture of social media which Lisa Gitelman (2008) points out incorporates protocols and cultural practices as well as technologies. This identifies the potential uses and benefits of social media, as well as requirements and conventions pertaining to their use. Second, existing literature on public relations applications of social media is reviewed.

Despite the misgivings of some political economy scholars, and cultural theorists concerned about the 'digital divide', many scholars and practitioners examining the impact of Web 2.0-enabled social media on journalism, the public sphere, marketing, and communities, mirror the enthusiasm of public relations practitioners. In his award-winning book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins noted that "media industries are undergoing another paradigm shift" (2006, p. 5). In the opening sentence of their text *New Media Worlds: Challenges for Convergence*, Virginia Nightingale and Tim Dwyer state that Web 2.0-based social media are introducing "profound changes in the nature and organisation of contemporary communication" (2007, p. 1). In his historical review of media from parchment and printing to hypermedia, Ronald Deibert concludes "that we are currently living through a revolutionary change in technologies of communication is beyond dispute" (1997, p. 4). Douglas Ruskoff prefers to describe current ICT developments as a renaissance, but also concludes that we are witnessing a major shift in human perspective and understanding (2003, p. 32). As well as impacting mainstream media such as

newspapers (Meyer, 2008), journalism (Deuze, 2008; Pavlik, 2008, p. 77), and the public sphere giving rise to *e-democracy* (Hernon, Cullen & Relyea, 2006; Hirst & Harrison, 2007, p. 356; Macnamara, 2010a, 2010b), McKinsey (2007) has confirmed that Web 2.0-enabled social media and networks are increasingly being deployed by businesses for communication and marketing.

However, despite extensive literature and public discussion, Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 and the public communication practices that they enable and inform are not yet well understood. The term Web 2.0 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 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 investigating the development of Web 2.0 and interactive social media such a blogs, it is necessary and useful to consider the views of the pioneers and architects of these communication media, as well as scholarly studies that followed later. 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*" (2005, para. 7) [italics added].

Pioneering blogger who coined the term 'blog', Peter Merholz, refers to a *philosophy* behind the practices of Web 2.0 [italics added]. Under an evocative heading 'Web 2.0 – it's not about the technology', Merholz wrote in his blog *Peterme*:

> 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).

Web analyst Richard MacManus provides a number of definitions of Web 2.0 including describing it as a platform, but also as "an attitude not a technology" and specifically as "the underlying philosophy of relinquishing control" (2005, paras 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).

In scholarly texts, Bucy (2004) confirms 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. 166−172) and Szuprowicz (1995) in relation to computer mediated communication. The latter define these as user-to-system interactivity, user-to-documents interactivity, and user-to-user interactivity. User-to-system interactivity such as clicking a mouse and accessing menus (what Carpentier calls person-to-machine interaction), while significant in Human Computer Interface terms, is a basic and largely perfunctory interaction in terms of human communication. It is user-to-user interactivity that is most significant in Web 2.0, as well as open user-to-documents access to edit and even create content rather than simply consume content. 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 architects of Web 2.0 as well as scholarly literature, and from analysis of examples of Web 2.0-enabled social media at work in the public sphere, the defining characteristics of this emergent media environment are summarised in a 2010 social media research monograph as "open interactivity" at human-to-human as well as human-to-content level expressed through conversation, collaboration, and co-creativity harnessing collective intelligence (Macnamara, 2010a, pp. 38−39). Explicit in description of this environment is relinquishing control that characterises one-way top-down information distribution models, and a requirement for authenticity instead of pre-packaged imagery and content. The characteristics of social media, in these terms, align closely with definition of Excellence in public relations as outlined by Dozier, L. Grunig and J. Grunig (1995), J. Grunig and L. Grunig (1992) and L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Dozier (2002) and dialogic models of public relations as discussed by Kent and Taylor (2002) and others.

Within public relations literature, a 2009 survey by Donald Wright and Michelle Hinson (n=574) found strong interest in social media by PR practitioners. However, Wright and Hinson reported that "meaningful gaps exist when measuring differences between what is happening and what should be happening in terms of all of the social media", particularly in relation to what are considered the most important social media (2009, p.19). Wright and Hinson identified the social media and social networks most used by practitioners are Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn (2009, p. 15). Table 1 provides a summary of the relative importance assigned by PR practitioners to various social media compared with their actual use as a mean score on a five-point Likert scale.

Table 1. Mean ANOVA analysis of 'how important social media are' and 'how important they should be' (Wright & Hinson, 2009, p. 19).

Social media or network	How important are these media in your organisation's PR efforts	How important should these media be in your organisation's PR efforts
Blogs	3.34	4.00
Online forums/message boards	3.07	3.78
Photo sharing	2.60	3.19
Podcasts	2.81	3.64
RSS	3.20	3.90
Search engine marketing	3.63	4.11
Social bookmarking	2.74	3.38
Social networks (Facebook, etc	3.20	3.64
Microblogging (Twitter)	2.80	3.48
Video sharing (YouTube)	3.20	3.67
Wikis	2.91	3.61

The Wright and Hinson survey found that public relations practitioners continue to rely predominantly on traditional media for accessing news, with 85 per cent using newspapers 'very frequently' or 'somewhat frequently' on a five-point Likert scale, 79 per cent relying predominantly on television news, and 71 per cent relying mostly on radio news, compared with 58 per cent who say they frequently get news from blogs.

These quantitative findings indicate an under-utilisation of social media in public relations compared with perceptions of the potential uses and benefits afforded by these new forms of interaction and communication. Only four per cent of PR practitioners report spending more than half of their time working with social media – perhaps unsurprising. However, only 11 per cent say they spend 26–50 per cent of their working time engaging with social media and 30 per cent spend 11–25 per cent. Almost half (48 per cent) or PR practitioners spend less than 10 per cent of their working time engaging with social media, and seven per cent spend no time at all with social media (Wright & Hinson, 2009, pp. 23–24). Notwithstanding, Wright and Hinson found that 73 per cent of respondents reported that social media have changed the way they communicate and 72 per cent believe social media have enhanced public relations (2009, p. 23).

A further alarming finding, however, was that less than 40 per cent of respondents' organisations measure what members of external strategic publics communicate about them on blogs or other social media, and only a quarter measure what employees communicate about their organisations in social media.

In other studies of social media use in public relations, Tom Kelleher (2009) found that the production of corporate blogs is "distributed" and performed "by a wide range of people representing an organisation" who "do not think of themselves as public relations people" (p. 185). This indicates that social media are being used in organisations, but it does not present a picture of public relations as leading or active in this area of communication. To the contrary, it suggests that PR practitioners are lagging in using social media. Another 2009 study reported that PR practitioners mostly maintain personal blogs, and use blogs as a professional communication medium at low levels (Porter, Sweetser & Chung, 2009). Significantly, Xifras and Huertas (2008) reported that organisations filter comments heavily in customer blogs, as they do not want to give customers freedom of expression.

In one of very few qualitative studies of social media use in public relations, Kate Fitch interviewed 10 practitioners in Singapore and Malaysia in 2006 and undertook a follow-up study in 2009 based on interviews with three social media practitioners employed by multinational public relations consultancy firms in Singapore (2009a, 2009b). An interesting observation on Fitch's 2009 study sample was that none of the social media specialists employed in major public relations firms had worked in public relations before. They were specifically hired in 2006 and 2007 for their social media skills from backgrounds in technology journalism, digital marketing and advertising, and blogging respectively. Therefore, these respondents are not typical of PR practitioners.

This finding is perhaps explained by Alison Theaker who found a lack of confidence and lack of training in relation to social media among PR practitioners (2008, p. 353). This was also found in a study of European practitioners by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA, 2007), which cited a lack of "employees with the necessary skills to handle new communication challenges posed by social software" as the major barrier constraining public relations. An outcome of this lack of skills and training is "ambivalence" and "anxiety", according to Fitch (2009b, p. 28).

Fitch's study also raised some concerning points in relation to ethics that resonate in case studies cited in this analysis. Fitch reported one respondent saying: "The internet is the Wild West, right, anything goes. There are no rules". Another said: "We're really writing the rule book as it is. There are no rule books, no textbooks to learn from." The third interviewee agreed in

relation to rules saying "there aren't any" and added that "with one exception, the usual public relations rules or ethical codes of behaviour either lack relevance or do not apply to public relations practice in social media". The same practitioner noted that her employer organisation had a 'bible' in terms of ethics and codes of practice but admitted that she had not read it. These attitudes were justified on the basis of "the need for flexibility of practice – 'we have to be creative'" (Fitch, 2009, p. 5). Fitch also reported "limited evaluation of social media activity" (p. 8).

Research questions

To gain further understanding of uses of social media by public relations practitioners and their impact on public relations practices, a study was conducted among senior Australian public relations practitioners in early 2010 to investigate (1) how social media are perceived and used in their organisations and (2) how social media are seen to be influencing or changing public relations practice if, in fact, they are. Exploration of these research questions was framed within contemporary public relations theory, particularly Excellence Theory (L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Dozier, 2002) which places emphasis on interactive practices that involve *two-way symmetrical* communication, and dialogic models of public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002), as well as cited literature on interactivity and social media theory (Boler, 2008; Bucy, 2004; Nightingale & Dwyer, 2007; Pavlik, 2008).

Methodology

A qualitative approach was taken given that the aims of this study related primarily to questions of how, rather than the extent of use, and also because of the dearth of qualitative research in this area. The study was conducted in two stages. First, a survey questionnaire was deployed with some closed-end questions to collect basic data on social media used and time spent with social media, as well as a series of open-ended questions to begin to explore objectives, perceptions, concerns, and viewpoints of practitioners. This was followed by depth interviews with a number of practitioners to further explore their practices, understandings, perceptions, and future intentions.

Sample

A sample of 15 senior public relations practitioners was purposively selected. Three were invited to participate from each of five sectors to gain a range of perspectives reflecting the field of practice: large consultancies; small consultancies; corporations; government; and non-government organisations (NGOs) such as associations. Noting that sampling in qualitative research is informed by the conceptual question rather than a concern for statistical representativeness (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29), participants were selected

based on position titles considered to be best able to represent the views and practices of the agency or organisation overall, such as CEO or Managing Director in large and small consultancies, and 'director', 'manager' or equivalent 'head' titles for public relations roles in corporations, government, and NGOs. Names and titles were obtained using a number of lists including the Registered Consultants Group of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (2010), the Directory of Australian Associations (Crown Content, 2010), and the 'contacts' sections of Web sites.

Twelve survey questionnaires were received and analysed, followed by depth interviews with five PR practitioners of 10 who agreed to be interviewed.

Limitations

While the sample was adequate for qualitative exploration of the research questions, quantitative data collected is non-generalisable. Also, sufficient data was not available to identify differences between sectors such as business, not-for-profit or particular industries. Further research could usefully explore these areas.

Findings – how Australian PR practitioners view and use social media

Analysis of the perceptions and reported practices of senior Australian public relations practitioners indicates generally upbeat views on social media and a belief that these new forms and communication media offer opportunities to improve and even transform public relations. This study confirmed some of the findings of other research, but also revealed some perplexing inconsistencies and areas for further investigation and address within the industry.

All practitioners said they their organisation used social networks and most also claimed to use blogs at least once per month. Furthermore, around half reported that they also use microblogging, video sharing sites, and photo sharing sites. The most popular sites among the practitioners researched were LinkedIn, Facebook, and YouTube. This confirms the popularity of Facebook and LinkedIn as reported by Wright and Hinson (2009, p. 15), although it shows YouTube more popular in Australia and Twitter slightly less popular (the fourth most cited social media in this study). Podcasting was surprisingly little mentioned with only one practitioner reporting use of this form of communication.

Views are mixed on whether organisations and agencies should appoint social media specialists. This is perhaps explained by a highly confident air expressed by PR practitioners about their knowledge and understanding of social media. A majority claimed to be "highly knowledgeable" or "moderately knowledgeable". Also, most claimed that their management was

"highly knowledgeable" or "moderately knowledgeable" about social media. Intriguingly, this is contrary to the findings of Alison Theaker (2008) and the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (2007) which indicated a lack of social media knowledge and skills in public relations. When pressed in interviews about this, practitioners clarified that, even if they do not have the specialist knowledge and skills, there are people in their organisation who do.

Notwithstanding, two practitioners claimed to spend 20 or more hours per week using social media for work, and the majority of those surveyed and interviewed claimed to spend 10 or more hours a week using social media for work. While the nominal scale used for this question is not directly comparable with Wright and Hinson's Likert scale rating of the perceived importance of various social media for PR, analysis does suggest a far higher claim to social media use among Australian practitioners.

Furthermore, in relation to objectives and method of use, claims exceeded the researcher's expectations and most reports of how social media are being used. A large majority of practitioners claimed to use social media primarily for inbound information from stakeholders, with only a small minority saying these media are used in their organisation or consultancy primarily for distributing information to stakeholders. In fact, more practitioners claimed that they use social media for research and 'listening' than for 50/50 symmetrical communication. If this is the case, it indicates a strong commitment to dialogic and Excellence Theory in public relations practices in relation to social media. However, this finding is considered questionable and suggests rhetoric within public relations unmatched by practice, based other information provided in this research and the findings of other studies.

For example, while a substantial number of practitioners reported using social media for gathering feedback and building relationships, an equal number said they use social media for marketing and brand promotion, and some cited sales as their objective. Most marketing, promotion, and sales-related communication is outbound and predominantly one-way, making this claim for high levels of interactivity inconsistent. Also, claims to high levels of listening and interactivity are inconsistent with the finding by Wright and Hinson (2009) that there are significant gaps between actual and desirable practices, and the finding of Xifras and Huertas (2008) that organisations heavily filter comments in blogs.

The popularity of LinkedIn supports the finding of Porter, Sweetser & Chung (2009) that social media such as blogs are used more for personal than professional purposes, as the principal use of LinkedIn is for job hunting and recruitment, according to the site's own profile and user instructions (LinkedIn Learning Centre, 2010).

In discussions and comments, practitioners cited "creating conversations", "dialogue", "engaging stakeholders", "listening" and "building community" as important aspects of using social media. However, even though several cited improved relationships and engagement with stakeholders through social media use, almost half of respondents said social media had not changed PR practices. Several described social media as "an additional channel to speak to stakeholders" or "just another channel".

Important requirements in using social media were cited as "transparency", "disclosure", "honesty", "ethics" and "measurement". However, none cited a need for training in these areas or acknowledged, without prompting, that lack of transparency, honesty and ethics occur. Around a third of practitioners researched conduct no monitoring or evaluation of social media and, of those who do, most said they rely on Google Blogsearch or their traditional media monitoring firm (e.g. Media Monitors). Only one practitioner cited specialist social media measurement services, naming Radian6, Alexa, and Google Analytics. Interestingly, even though most practitioners said they used blogs, none mentioned free blog tracking tools such as BlogPulse.

The major challenges in using social media are seen as the need to respond quickly, authorisation to comment publicly in government organisations, identifying clear objectives and business reasons for using social media, and "loss of control".

Conclusions

On the surface, findings of this study suggest that public relations departments in organisations and consultancies are using social media in ways that exploit their interactive two-way communication capabilities and realise Best Practice as described in dialogic models and Excellence Theory of public relations. Furthermore, self-reporting by senior public relations practitioners in Australia indicates a high level of knowledge and skill in use of social media.

However, a number of the findings of this study are inconsistent with other research conducted in the US, UK, Europe and Asia over the past few years. As well as noting a lack of empirical data on use of social media in public relations, this study identifies contradictions and likely *reactivity* (responding with what the researcher or others want to hear, or which casts respondents in a better light) which call for further investigation.

In particular, further research is recommended into levels of interactivity, the issue of control, practitioner knowledge and skills, and ethics in social media use which are shown to be topical issues, but far from clear or resolved. It is also recommended that future research utilise ethnographic methods and content analysis as well as surveys or interviews to validate practitioners' claims through observation of practices and communication content.

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Endnotes

1   WPP is one of the world's largest communication groups engaged in advertising, public relations and direct marketing communication with 140,000 employees in 2,400 offices in 107 countries, and annual revenues of $12.8 billion in 2008. The group owns PR agencies including Hill & Knowlton, Burson Marsteller, Ogilvy PR, Carl Byoir & Associates, and Cohn & Wolfe (www.wpp.com).

2   See   http://74.125.155.132/search?q=cache:gbGgX20ICDM J:https://twitter.com/ferguskibble+sensis+site:twitter.com/ ferguskibble&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=au&client=firefox-a

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Social media and its implications for viral marketing - Rohan Miller and Natalie Lammas

Social networks and the challenge for public relations - Ashleigh McLennan and Gwyneth V.J. Howell

Public relations and the social: how practitioners are using, or abusing, social media - Jim Macnamara

Public relations, education, and social media: issues for professionalism in the digital age - Deirdre Quinn-Allan

'There's formaldehyde in my water': absurd discourse about the Sydney desalination project - a case study - Brendan Elliott

Advergames, their use and potential regulation - Grish Purswani

Australian book publishing and the internet: How two Australian book publishing companies are using the Internet to engage with customers - Cathryn Isakson

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Editorial Note

In 2010 social media has demonstrated its power as a communication tool; we knew through Twitter that Australia had its first female Prime Minister, thanks to the fast fingers of various MPs sitting in the Caucus Room. How we as public relations academics and practitioners address this new sphere of communication is open to debate.

This range of challenges is explored in all four refereed papers, each addressing different aspects of this new domain. Miller and Lammas explore tradition WOM and how effective new strategies are in 2010 in terms of product promotion. McLennan and Howell discuss the uses and effectiveness of social networking sites for public relations practitioners and the challenges these sites also present in terms of communication with key publics. While Macnamara reviews contemporary literature in relation to social media and social networks as well as recent case studies to identify their key characteristics, potentialities, and uses, and report findings of a survey and interviews with senior public relations practitioners in Australia investigating their views and practices in social media. Quinn-Allan discusses the options and opportunities of integrating social media into public relations courses while being mindful of the ethical implications that are present in such activity.

In addition, there are three unrefereed papers, the first is a case study focusing on Sydney Water, the second a review of advergames and how this new tool is being used in the social media realm. Our third paper is from public relations postgraduate student, Cathryn Isakson, who concentrates on how publishers are taking advantage of the internet through virtual and online communities.

As well as public relations academics the APPRJ welcomes contributions from practitioners and postgraduate and undergraduate students in public relations.

This is the online edition of the Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal will now occur on an annual basis each Winter.

Dr Gwyneth V.J. Howell