Corporate blogging and microblogging: An analysis of dialogue, interactivity and engagement in organisation-public communication through social media

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PhD thesis in Public Communication,
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2014

Certificate of original authorship

I certify that the work for this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.
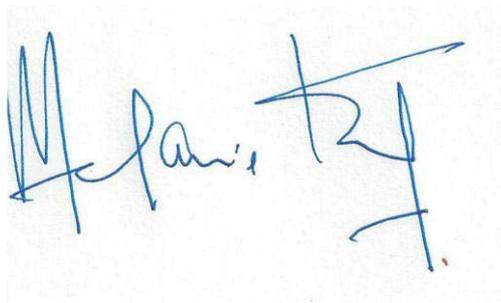
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Date: 5 November 2014

Acknowledgments

I'd like to acknowledge the help and guidance of my supervisor, Professor Jim Macnamara of UTS.

Without the assistance and participation of the interviewees, this study would not have taken place. I'd like to thank them all for their time and effort:

Rachel Beany

Stephen Bradley

Danielle Clarke

Tim Clark

Niki Epstein

Nathan Freitas

Susan Galer

Angela Graham

Ameel Khan

Gareth Llewellyn

Samantha Locke

Frank Mantero

Mat Medcalf

Scott Monty

Andrew Murrell

Dana Ridge

Leon Traazil

Daniel John Young

Sam Zivot

And the 3 participants who chose to be unidentified

Lastly, I'd like to acknowledge my husband, Serge Lacroix, and children, Jordan King-Lacroix and Justin King-Lacroix, without whose support I never could have embarked on this journey.

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Abstract

Corporate blogs and microblogs are social media channels created by and on behalf of organisations. Social media channels are designed to be collaborative, dialogic and participatory (Flew 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Logan 2010) based on their technological capabilities like networking (Flew 2008), as well as being self organised (or bottom up) (Johnson 2001 cited in Macnamara 2014) characterised by the philosophy of interaction.

This study investigates whether there is dialogic interaction on social media between organisations and publics, and explores the factors that influence dialogic engagement. A number of previous studies have concluded that social media are not being used dialogically by organisations. This study looks chiefly at how organisations communicate with publics, and their interpretation and implementation of dialogue in corporate blogging and microblogging. The study examined blogs and microblog posts (Facebook and Twitter) of major organisations in the US and Australia.

Methodology for the study was qualitative with one hour, in-depth interviews with the social media managers of primarily Fortune 500 and ASX 200 companies (n=21) to understand whether they engaged in interaction or dialogue with publics and if not, why not. Methodology also included content analysis of blog and microblog posts, including Twitter and Facebook, of all participating organisations (n=20). The posts were coded and analysed for the presence of dialogue, against definitions drawn from Kent and Taylor (2002), interaction against definitions drawn from Kiousis (2002), Rafaeli (1988), and Downes and McMillan (2000), and engagement against definitions drawn from Mollen and Wilson (2010). Blog and microblog posts were analysed manually first, then using MAX QDA software to determine actual back-and-forth interaction between organisations and publics.

Organisation-public dialogue is an important interactive process moving from confrontation to consultation and cooperation demonstrating trust and engagement. Social media allow organisations the opportunity to build relationships with publics in a dialogic way. The investigation was based on what the theory suggests and the technology allows – interaction, engagement and dialogue.

However, the results reveal social media managers are using two-way dialogic channels in a one-way transmissional way. This can be attributed to two thirds of social media managers are managed within marketing. Communication as part of the marketing discipline has traditionally been one-way, focussing on promotion and transaction. This study's findings also indicate limited interaction between organisations and publics, with most interaction between peers or individuals, and no dialogue as defined by Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002). Social media managers sought engagement, often defined as low level or high level. Low level engagement includes 'likes', shares and retweets, even comments (Flew 2008) which can be argued is not engagement at all based on scholarly definitions (Mollen & Wilson 2010; O'Brien & Toms 2008; Sashi 2012). Participants pursue these types of engagement although research has not yet investigated the true meaning of a 'like' (McCorkindale, DiStaso & Sisco 2013). Users are not personally vested in an organisation when 'liking' it; they are more so when they 'friend' it, (McCorkindale, DiStaso & Sisco 2013).

High level engagement in terms of social media interaction is conversation in comments sections of blogs and microblogs, sharing of individually produced content, and sharing an organisation's message in other networks (Flew 2008). Considerable interaction was found on Twitter and Facebook within a customer-service/complaint model or between individuals.

The importance of this study's findings is that it provides new information about how social media managers use social media to communicate with publics as well as new insights into who in the organisation implements social media and

for what reasons. There have been previous studies investigating dialogue between organisations and publics, most of which found little or no dialogue. This study aimed to discover if lapsed time from previous studies to now have allowed social media managers to grasp the importance of dialogue and thus evolve their commitment to interaction. Additionally, as both Australian and American organisations participated, any differences between the two types of organisations would have lead to an interesting finding, but there was no difference in how American and Australian social media managers communicate.

Dialogue between organisations and publics could enhance greater dialogic discourse in society as "communication as dialogue is being advocated to play an increasingly central role in contemporary human communication behaviour" (Johannesen 1971, p. 382).