
The phatic nature of the online social sphere: Implications for public relations

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Abstract

This article considers the importance of phatic exchanges—a communication exchange that fulfils a social objective rather than imparting information—on social technologies, such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media and social networks have transformed the communication environment and the way organisations manage their stakeholder relationships. As new social technologies emerge so does the diversity of corresponding communication behaviours, and culture dimensions that underpin the connectivity and requirements for relationship building. Communication characteristics demonstrated by social media users challenge existing notions of relationship management and two-way communication flow. This paper concludes that in order for communication professionals to communicate effectively, they first need to understand the composition and expectations of relationships in the online social sphere.

Introduction

There has been a seismic shift in the relational capacity to influence symmetry and communication flows between organisations and their publics (Men & Tsai, 2013). For organisations, this can make communicating with audiences more difficult as users of social technologies have more control over what messages they receive, from whom, and when they want to receive them.

This article provides an overview and brief history of phatic communication, and the important role it plays in the cohesion of relationships among social media users. It draws on theories from the fields of social linguistics, computer-mediated communication and public relations to analyse the current practices of organisational

social media use by public relations professionals. Specifically, the article considers the use of phatic communication in social media by public relations practitioners to manage organisation–public relationships.

It has been long recognised that developing and maintaining relationships is an “important paradigm for public relations scholarship and practice” (Huang, 2001, p. 270), and an area that will continue to be at the forefront of public relations (Coombs, 2001). Organisations that wish to maintain good relationships with their various stakeholder groups need to utilise the full gamut of communication channels and tools that are available to ensure their messages reach a variety of audiences. This includes social networking service (SNS), such as Facebook, and micro-blogging channels, such as Twitter. According to social media analysts and scholars, social technologies are changing the way organisations are doing business (Qualman, 2011).

Organisations had expected to achieve better results in the online social sphere, but evidence suggests organisations have not understood what the social media experience entails for users (Heller-Baird & Parasnis, 2011). While it is generally accepted that social media has forced public relations, along many other industries and professions, to undergo a revolution (Hazelton, Harrison-Rexrode, & Kennan, 2008), public relations practitioners often apply the old rules in a new game. A report from the Harvard Business Review Analytic Services (Rust, Moorman, & Bhalla, 2010) showed the leading benefit for organisations using social media is an increased awareness of the organisation, along with their products and/or services, on the part of their publics. This is something that has long been achieved through advertising and traditional

marketing tactics. For organisations that seek to achieve more than just raising awareness, such as building effective relationships, the application of the old rules have demonstrated that simply being present is not enough.

For organisations to build relationships in the online social sphere, they need to understand how social technologies are used to satisfy a user's personal needs and goals. Moreover, practitioners need to work within the established culture and practices of a technology (Wang, Tucker, & Rihll, 2011). Public relations scholars stress that social technologies, like more traditional communication channels, should comply with the two-way symmetrical model outlined in the Excellence theory and be used for dialogic communication purposes (Jones, Temperley, & Lima, 2009). However, the nature of social technologies is such that users now have different expectations of what it means to have a relationship with an organisation. The fundamental shift in the organisation–public power–relationship means that audiences can determine the rules of engagement. Navigating these changes can prove daunting for organisations that do not understand that online culture is a continually moving target that lacks context (Miller, 2008).

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach when organisations communicate in the online social sphere. Online communication strategies should be linked to the organisation's wider goals and objectives, and yet for many organisations, developing a social strategy has been ad hoc and experimental (Henderson & Bowley, 2010; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Paine, 2011; Stelzner, 2013). Many communicators have employed the same tactics online as they have offline, and there is little evidence of communicators employing ethnographic research techniques to better understand how audiences actually communicate and behave when using social technologies. Fundamentally, the communication styles and techniques that are used online differ to those used in offline settings. For example, face-to-face communication is synchronous and relies on non-verbal cues but online, there is an

emphasis on written communication. And yet, online communication exchanges have as much importance as those that occur offline. For instance, and central to this paper, is the use of phatic communication in SNS and social media exchanges, such as a Facebook comment or tweet.

Phatic communion

Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's (1923) idea of phatic communion was developed during his ethnographic observations of the Trobriand Islander's communication practices. Malinowski defines phatic communion as "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words" (1923, p. 315). That Malinowski's concept of phatic has religious overtones has not escaped others. Ehlich (1993) suggests that the word 'communion' was possibly used to emphasise "the intensity of this type of speech". Senft (2009) quoting a personal conversation with non-verbal communication academic, Adam Kendon, states,

phatic communication is probably used because people tend to forget the more general meaning of the term 'communion'; it is precisely that achievement of 'rapport' through the use of speech—a kind of communion, indeed—that Malinowski emphasized, and this is different from what is often thought to be the meaning of communication. (p. 27)

Importantly, phatic communication "does not inform or exchange any meaningful information or facts about the world. Its purpose is a social one, to express sociability and maintain connections or bonds" (Miller, 2008, pp. 393–394). Quick discussions about the weather while in an elevator, or asking someone how they are, fulfil an important social role.

Phatic communication is not expected to undertake, or "perhaps even there must not be" (Malinowski, 1935, p. 316) a transfer of ideas or information. The words or language used in the speech act are in fact not part of the communication because they are irrelevant. An example of a phatic expression is 'how's it

going?’ and ‘the bus is very crowded today’. While seemingly banal, there is a function to the communication in that it “serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas” (Malinowski, 1935, p. 316). Phatic communication acts as a linguistic ping that serves to maintain connection to others (Makice, 2009). Furthermore, Miller (2008) states there is value in phatic messages and they should not be regarded as ‘meaningless’ because the messages contain more than the content suggests: “they are very meaningful, and imply the recognition, intimacy and sociability in which a strong sense of community is founded” (p. 395). Phatic communication is not limited to face-to-face exchanges; online, it is commonly found in written exchanges, such as on SNS and social media.

Phatic communication in the online social sphere

Social media has been described as “Internet applications that enable the sharing of things” including text, images, video and audio (Van Dijk, 2012, p. 180). Researchers have identified a link between phatic communication and exchanges on social platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter (Holmes, 2011; Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005; Miller, 2008; Radovanovic & Ragnedda, 2012).

A technology can be described as being phatic if its purpose encourages users to build and maintain relationships and social interaction (Miller, 2008; Wang, Tucker, & Haines, 2012). Furthermore, the technologies inherently contain characters that can be found in Malinowski’s theory. For example, the technologies are not concerned with the utility of the interaction, the usefulness of the information or the usability of the device. Importantly for public relations practitioners, the value of phatic technologies is measured by the degree to which they contribute to a feeling of ongoing connectedness (Vetere, Howard, & Gibbs, 2005).

Organisations that use technology to manage relationships need to consider how the audience actually uses the technology (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Many social media users are using mobile phones and tablets to access SNS, such as Facebook and Twitter (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). According to a recent report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the number of Americans accessing the Internet from their mobile devices doubled from 31% in 2009 to 63% in 2013 (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Furthermore, 89% of 18–29 year olds, 78% of 30–49 year olds and 60% of 50–64 years are users of social media sites (Brenner & Smith 2013).

Not all communication technologies are initially designed to be phatic. It is often the users who adapt a technology and introduce phatic qualities. For example, the telephone was produced for business purposes, but became a phatic technology upon being used by American women who lived in rural areas, to simply connect (Kline, 2003). Furthermore, phatic technologies can also be used to communicate non-phatic messages. Government agencies use text messages to inform communities about such issues as flooding, traffic and health warnings. Text messages have also been used to quickly disseminate information after terrorist attacks (Crystal, 2008).

From the early days of computer-mediated communication, there has been a natural inclination toward phatic communication by users. As communication technologies evolved, there has been a media culture that is dominated by phatic communication (Miller, 2008). Wang et al. (2012) suggest the Internet is possibly the best manifestation of a phatic technology. The intersection of phatic communication and technologies cannot be better illustrated than posts made by users on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. As Malinowski (1923) pointed out, phatic communication serves to create bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and do not serve any purpose of communicating ideas. For example, a study of the 10,000 most-

liked Facebook pages showed that posts containing ‘me’ or ‘I’ got more likes (Zarella, 2013).

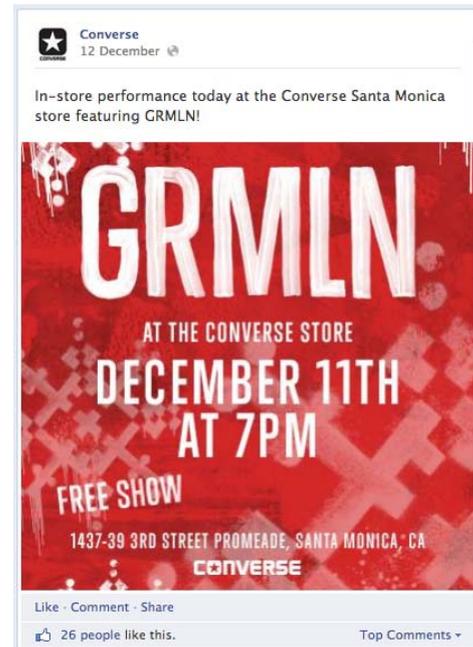
A content analysis on the Facebook pages of 12 New Zealand organisations found that posts made by followers were most commonly phatic in nature (Hopkins, Gray, & Gardner, 2013). Furthermore, a study of Twitter showed that phatic communion was the most common type of tweet with 40.6% of the sample adhering to characteristics of phatic communication (Pear Analytics, 2009). The study offered “I am eating a sandwich now” as an example of a message they categorised as being ‘pointless babble’. But this pejorative label undermines the value of the role that phatic communication plays in reassuring a user that their social life is alive and well (Wang et al., 2012). Licoppe and Smoreda (2005) state “[p]hatic communications becomes increasingly important, because simply keeping in touch may be more important than what is said when one actually gets in touch” (p. 331).

While some researchers and commentators may disparage the phatic nature of social media (Holmes, 2011), according to Radovanovic and Ragnedda (2012), it is these seemingly banal and mindless phatic posts that have made social media so successful. The trivial nature of the posts makes conversations accessible while fulfilling a socially meaningful experience for users, and often in real time. This type of almost constant communication between users has never been available to society in another way, and if anything intensifies the

requirement for relationship building—we are now in each other’s spaces all the time.

It is at this point that organisations and social users are sometimes at cross-purposes. For users of Facebook, Twitter and other SNS, these technologies are almost exclusively about connecting with friends and family. Organisations, on the other hand, significantly overestimate the intentions of users when it comes to interacting and engaging with them (Heller-Baird & Parasnis, 2011). In a public relations context, it has been suggested that outside a crisis situation “technology itself can neither create nor destroy relationships; rather, it is how the technology is used that influences organization–public relationships” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 324). However, an IBM study highlights a dichotomy between users of social technologies and organisations that view these technologies as a means of achieving organisational and communicative outcomes. Social technologies are not something they would consider using to connect with businesses (Heller-Baird & Parasnis, 2011). Furthermore, users will only engage with organisations “if they believe it is to their benefit, feel they can trust the company and decide social media is the right channel to use to get the value they seek” (p. 4). Many users only want a peripheral and ephemeral knowledge of the organisations they follow, but organisations do not provide content to meet this need. While audiences are looking for peripheral awareness, organisations provide audiences with what could be likened to traditional forms of advertising and marketing (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Typical examples of a Facebook promotion



Phatic exchanges in the online social sphere are meaningful to individual users “because they indicate and imply social recognition, online intimacy and sociability” (Radovanovic & Ragnedda, 2012, p. 12), and this is not what many organisations are providing. It is this meaning, which is at the very heart of the social media experience, that organisations are overlooking in their social strategies.

In recent years organisations have been chasing their audiences to the latest popular social network. In their rush to jump onto the bandwagon, organisations lacked direction and a clear strategy. A KPMG report (2011) on the use of social technologies in business states, “there are no rules, there’s a lot of trial and error, there’s a lot of testing, a lot of learning, and then applying it” (p. 4).

Social media, phatic communication and public relations

Organisation–public relationships have been defined as, “the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity” (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62). In an online environment, “relationships

operate in tandem with offline relationships and thus are part of a total organizational–public relationship” (Hallahan, 2004, p. 775). In a normative sense, the intention of the relationship is to build, nurture, and enhance mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994; Ferguson, 1984; Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Grunig, (2009) claims that social media is ideal for public relations practitioners to cultivate and maintain successful relationships.

The notion of dialogue and the need for symmetrical communication are worth reconsidering when theorising what it means to communicate effectively within the online social sphere. Communicating in online spaces is different from other forms of communication (Wood & Smith, 2005). For example, using all capital letters when writing email, in discussion forums or in social networks, is considered shouting (McKee, 2002). To connect with audiences and, importantly for public relations, to develop relationships within the online social sphere, there needs to be a change in the current communication paradigm. For example, Phillips and Brabham (2012) have suggested

that in social environments the terms ‘publics’ or ‘stakeholders’ no longer adequately describe these groups and that they should be reclassified as “participants” (p. 8). In the same vein, core concept of public relations, such as target publics need to be reassessed (Galloway, 2005). Mersham, Theunissen, and Peart (2009) state “public relations will be increasingly about dialogues and conversation” (p.10), and outside the online social sphere this assertion continues to apply. However, analysis of communication behaviours suggests this dialogic engagement is not what users of social technologies do, or necessarily want (Hopkins et al., 2013). In many respects, in order to communicate effectively, public relations professionals must first be technologists. That is, not only do practitioners need to be knowledgeable on the practical elements across a range of social technologies and services, they need to be inherently aware of the culture that exists within a technological application.

For sociolinguists, Facebook offers a new form of message (D’Arcy & Young, 2012). The theory of communication accommodation suggests that participants in conversations will adjust their communication behaviours to accommodate others (West & Turner, 2010). In situations where communication is computer-mediated, a convergence of communication

behaviours tends to produce more enjoyable and meaningful exchanges between people. In a Twitter-focused study by West and Turner (2010), it was concluded that a convergent linguistic style would increase the quality of an exchange. The examples shown in Figures 2 and 3, taken from the social feeds of Girlfriend Magazine, are examples of phatic posts. Despite having over 6,500 followers, Girlfriend Magazine’s tweet, Figure 3, only elicited one response, something that could be deemed a failure if social engagement is measured quantitatively. However, the question in the tweet could be considered entirely rhetorical and Girlfriend Magazine’s purpose was not actually asking what their followers’ plans were, but to remind the reader that they continue to share a social bond. This message is phatic communication.

These examples of phatic posts are in line with Herman’s (2013) assertion that such mundane and ephemeral activities are the “primary reason” (p. 31) that people engage in online communication activities, such as posting comments and ‘liking’ on Facebook. Miller (2008, p. 390) furthers this idea when he suggests phatic posts are “more akin to an exchange of ‘data’ than deep, substantive or meaningful communication based on mutual understanding”.

Figure 2. Phatic message on Facebook.



Figure 3. Phatic message on Twitter.



It could be suggested that phatic messages, such as in Figure 2 and 3, go further to achieve Grunig and Huang's (2000) relationship management goals of trust, mutuality of control, satisfaction and commitment because they are natural and meaningful forms of human communication. Moreover, organisations—instead of using the online social sphere to sell and promote—should look to validate social users and provide background noise.

Implications for practitioners and public relations theory

Relationship management focuses on the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange and linkage (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 2000) between an organisation and its publics. For public relations theorists, establishing and maintaining relationships with an organisation's stakeholders are of the highest importance. It has been stated that relationships, above all else, should be the dominant concept of public relations (Ferguson, 1984; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Ledingham, 2003), and therefore it has been a natural progression for social technologies to play an important role in relationship management strategies. The attraction of Facebook and Twitter are obvious (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Professional communicators recognise the speed and ease in which they can communicate with audiences, not to mention that these services are free, so it no surprise that public relations agencies intended to increase their investment in social media communication management by a substantial 62.9% (World PR Report, 2013).

Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) showed in his notion of the network society that many aspects of society have changed, and communication technologies played an important role in change. For example, there has been a transition in the economic models of production (Fordism to post-Fordism) and consumption (mass consumption to individualised consumption), which in turn has seen an evolution in sociological and economic theories. Accordingly, public relations, and the means in which it is practiced, have changed. A century of public relations practice has given us

an understanding of best practice within industry and a solid theoretical foundation. However, public relations scholars would be remiss if they did not reconsider theoretical constructs considering the monumental transformation engendered by the rise of communication technologies. Grunig (2011) believes that public relations theory is mostly unaffected by communication technologies. He says that new media does not “change the public relations theory needed to guide practice” (p. 27). Contradicting Grunig's view, Levenshus (2010) called for “for new theoretical ground in relationship management that explores the intersection between relationship management and the new online media environment” (p. 333).

Public relations professionals need to take a pragmatic approach to the role social media can play in developing relationships. Discussions on organisation's use of social media need to shift focus from ‘why’ to ‘how’—for practitioners and academics. As such, audiences will respond to phatic messages in the online social sphere in a way that is meaningful to them. The value of transmitting ‘nonsense writing’ is the connected presence (Radovanovic & Ragnedda, 2012). Furthermore, there is no reason to believe a user necessarily wants a reply to a post made on an organisation's Facebook page. The phatic nature of social technologies means users do not expect everyone who reads their message to reply.

If organisations want to develop meaningful relationships in the online social sphere, they will need to move away from self-interested messaging and refocus on the culture and norms within any given social network. Additionally, organisations will need to navigate established norms, adhere to communication styles within particular social technologies and importantly, recognise social spaces are not commercial spaces. Gordhamer (2009) suggests that among the areas most affected by the emergence of social media is the need for organisations to move away from trying to sell and control their image, to making connections and being themselves. These changes all relate to an organisation's transparency and engagement, which according

to Gordhamer, allows an organisation to display their personality and build relationships. Until now, creative ideas and organisational outcomes have driven how an organisation uses and manages its Facebook page. In a move toward an empirical solution, research partnerships between Facebook's data science team and universities, such as Stanford University (Bernstein, Bakshy, Burke & Karrer, 2013) and Cornell University (Kramer, Guillory & Hancock, 2014) will enable organisations to make data-based decisions when developing social strategies, such as tone of message and timing of posts.

Social technologies have given rise to another quantifiable measure of communication success in the form Facebook 'likes' and followers on Twitter. Many organisations look for a return on investment (ROI) with their social programme, and quantify the monetary value of a Facebook 'like'. Despite a growing number of books and blog posts educating communicators how to increase the size of social audiences, these writings are predominantly focused toward generating revenue from these audiences instead of building relationships (Belew, 2014; Carter & Levy, 2012). Accordingly, practitioners may need to develop justifications to senior management for the use of natural, communication styles, such as phatic communication, as part of a wider social strategy, because any return on investment will be paid in the long-term.

Dialogue, which has always been a goal of the organisation–public relationship dynamic (Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008), should not be confined to a literal communication exchange when situated within the context of the online social sphere, that is, communication does not need to be two-way. Social linguistics and online communication culture provide communicators with a range of contextual norms and expectations that imply a dialogue within a single communication action. That is, when someone sends a tweet saying they had a hard day, there is an intrinsic understanding by users of the technology that their followers will not necessarily reply and engage in a dialogue.

The expectation of having their tweet read is meaningful enough.

Conclusions and future directions

Public relations practitioners should look to adapt their communication practices within the online social sphere to reflect the majority of SNS and social media users. That is, to simply connect with people. The widely used practice of promoting brands and products, demonstrated in Figure 1, is inconsistent with creating a meaningful and legitimate experience that is sought by social users. The significance of phatic communication to social media culture and practice has already been established (Miller, 2008); however, communication professionals are slow to adapt such linguistic techniques to their organisation's social communication. Instead, there is evidence to suggest organisations prefer to employ communication styles that reflect their offline practices such as advertising or promotional tactics (Radovanovic & Ragnedda, 2012).

Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, do not provide public relations practitioners with a 'silver bullet'. Although computer-mediated communication and social technologies have allowed public relations practitioners to reach audiences that were once problematic, it could be suggested that social media has in fact made communicating with audiences more complicated. Facebook users have demonstrated a penchant for the phatic, and for Twitter users, the architecture of the technology imposes a phatic element to every message. Thus, organisations should adopt communication practices that reflect the culture in which the communication exists if they aspire to build more meaningful relationships within the online social sphere. Phatic communication will create more meaningful experiences within the online social sphere than posts that are designed to promote a product. While organisations continue to use communication tactics that were successful in a pre-Internet age, such as advertising and promotion, they do so to their detriment.

Communication within the online social sphere has created nuanced challenges for

existing theories of relationship management, and there is a need to further examine organisation–public relationships within the online social sphere. Longitudinal investigation is needed to offer insights as organisations refine their online relationship management strategies, and new SNS and social media platforms emerge. Furthermore, for organisations to build effective relationships, more attention needs to be placed on the style of communication that reflects the culture and context in which it is being communicated.

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