
How social media have changed the relational dynamics between medical-health journalists and their public relations sources

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Abstract

This paper will report the results of an Australian study which examined the relationship between journalists and public relations sources in the production of medical-health news, an area of journalism which can arguably affect the public's behaviour more than most. The study, which was conducted over a five-year period, gathered data from a series of purposive surveys and interviews with medical-health journalists and public relations professionals. The study found the relational dynamics between reporter and public relations practitioner during the negotiation of potential medical stories are changing and that social media are a major force behind this change. Practitioners in both fields were found to be using social media as a way of circumventing each other and communicating directly with other significant stakeholders. In the case of journalists, these were elite sources such as researchers and doctors, while public relations practitioners were increasingly likely to conduct direct "conversations" with the public and other stakeholders rather than through the media. The paper concludes that the impact of social media is undermining reporter-public relations source interactions, and considers the implications of this for the future.

Introduction

Social media have rapidly transformed the way journalists source, produce and publish stories (Pavlik, 2013). These applications can vary widely from social networking sites to microblogs which create and exchange ideas, content or information, and are becoming integral to news practices as well as to in-depth

investigations (Abdenour, 2017). In Australia, social media also play a significant role in journalism (Hanusch, 2016) with noteworthy use of Twitter at work (Hanusch & Bruns, 2017). Tweeting habits range from "live" reporting to organisational/personal branding to relationship-building with other users (Canter & Brookes, 2016). Reporters have incorporated social media into news routines for several reasons including sourcing, networking, verifying and monitoring (Gulyas, 2017). Social media - particularly Twitter - allow journalists to "gain instant and convenient access to a potentially unlimited amount of sources and information" (Broersma & Graham, 2016, p.91). Social media platforms have also been swiftly incorporated into medical/health reporting, which has influenced reporters' sourcing practices (Deprez & Van Leuven, 2017; Molyneux & Holton, 2015).

Like journalism, the practice of public relations has undergone a "significant shift" because of social media (Supa, 2014). Their proliferation has permitted public relations practitioners to communicate directly with various stakeholders. In a medical-health context, public relations has been considered "central to the production, distribution and consumption of scientific and medical discourse" (Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2016, p. 243). Social media "allow organisations to become publishers and broadcasters directly distributing their messages to audiences" (Macnamara, 2016, p.123). Public relations information is used widely by reporters who are often alerted to scientific research via a media release (Lynch, Bennett, Luntz, Toy & VanBenschoten, 2014; Sumner, Vivian-

Griffiths, Boivin, Williams, Venetis, Davies, et al., 2014).

Blurring the boundaries of journalism and public relations

Chimbel, Everbach and Lambiase (2014) observed that there is increasing “fuzziness” between the professions of journalism and public relations where jobs in both “have converged, merged and blurred as they find themselves working in the same digital spaces to collect and curate information, create content, provide feedback, follow up with questions, and continue conversations” (p.41). Through the use of Twitter and Facebook, public relations practitioners distribute information to reporters, who then use it in their newsgathering (Macnamara, 2016; 2014; Johnston & Sheehan, 2014). Public relations material continues to provide “issue priorities” to published news content, helping to set news agendas (Ragas, 2013; Macnamara, 2016). This has also applied to medical-health news where public relations help is often required to access experts, research and patient testimonies (De Dobbelaer, Van Leuven & Raeymaeckers, 2017; Morrell, Forsyth, Lipworth, Kerridge & Jordens, 2015).

Medical-health reporting and public relations

As in other reporting specialties, there are purposeful interactions between reporters and public relations operatives in the medical-health area. Public relations departments are commonplace not only in the corporate world of pharmaceuticals, medical devices and equipment, but also in hospitals, government health departments, research sectors, universities and non-profit medical organisations (Riggulsford, 2013). The exchange of resources (publicity for information and vice versa, which takes place between journalist and public relations source during the creation of a news story) is reflected in how medical-health information is conveyed, what is included, what is omitted, and its accuracy (Arroyave, 2012). Concerns about the extent of public relations influence in news accounts continue to be at the forefront of criticisms and debates about journalistic practice (Sissons, 2016; Reich, 2012; Lewis, Williams & Franklin, 2008), including those

regarding medicine and health (Schwitzer, 2017).

Few studies have examined the relationship between journalists and public relations sources in the specific production of medical-health news despite long-standing evidence of public relations input. As long ago as 1992, Schwitzer warned of the pervasive influence of pre-prepared public relations material (such as video news releases or VNRs) being used uncritically by reporters:

What the viewing audience does not often see directly is the expansion of the PR effort by physicians, hospitals, and pharmaceutical and medical device manufacturers. But the audience is directly affected if and when television journalists fail to inject balance and perspective into marketing messages that are often skilfully packaged by vested interests (Schwitzer, 1992, p. 1969).

Decades later, VNRs, which are used to fill TV media “holes”, continue to confuse audiences with “fake” news (Clark & Zhou, 2015). These client-sponsored videos can also be distributed via social media platforms, which is significant as one in ten people consider social media to be their main source of news (Newman, 2017). As Schwitzer (2017) warned, social media have now become the conduits of “contaminated” health news in a “polluted stream of information”. Schwitzer lays the blame on public relations news releases from “questionable commercial interests” such as:

companies selling herbal cures for cancer, but also from mainstream government health agencies, researchers, universities, clinicians ... and industry-funded advocacy groups (Schwitzer, 2017, p.1).

Media dissemination of medical-health news affects the salience of topics, government policy and public understanding of health (Chapman, Haynes, Derrick, Sturk, Hall & St. George, 2014). Lariscy, Avery and Sohn (2010) observed that analysis of source-reporter relationships in the medical area is “imperative” because of the audience’s

“voracious appetite for health information” (p.115).

In Australia, Morrell et al. (2015) found that a common method of health-related industries contacting reporters was either through a media release or direct approach by a public relations officer. Other public relations methods included setting up social media campaigns and posting on blogs. These tactics gain particular significance in Australia where direct-to-public advertising of prescription medicine is banned and where the role of health news can become “a source of publicity for health-related industries” (Morrell et al., 2015, p. 598).

Although Forsyth, Morrell, Lipworth, Kerridge, Jordens and Chapman (2012) argued that health-related industries use media “to promote knowledge of and interest in their products and services” through public relations efforts (p.131), the behind-the-scenes processes involved in the production of these stories, often with the help of public relations intermediaries, remain largely hidden from public scrutiny. Research into the relational dynamics between public relations practitioners and journalists in the medical-health round (or beat) in an Australian context is emerging (Furlan, 2015), although the influence of public relations on news processes generally has been an ongoing concern (Pearson, Brand, Archbold & Rane, 2001; Bacon, Loh, Taylor & Pavey, 2010; Moynihan & Henry, 2006).

Shin, Lee and Park (2012) considered public relations sources to be among the most influential because they are reliably able to offer subsidised information and a range of services:

they become external suppliers of news materials, by giving interviews, making speeches, supplying background information, offering corporate reports, or suggesting a story via news releases, news conferences, pre-planned events, or official proceedings (Shin et al., 2012, p.20).

Macnamara (2014) found that tensions in the relationship are likely to increase as public relations operatives continue to disseminate information directly to the public through social media without journalist mediation. The aim of

this paper is to explore how social media have affected relational interactions between medical-health reporters and public relations sources in an Australian context and the implications of any changes. This is part of a wider study regarding relationships between the two professional groups in the medical-health field (Furlan, 2015).

Methods

The study consisted of purposive surveys in 2008 and 2013 and semi-structured interviews in 2009. In 2008 there were 25 journalist respondents (from 80 invitations sent) and 17 public relations practitioner respondents (from 69 invitations sent). The 2009 interviews were with 15 media professionals (seven journalists and eight public relations practitioners). In 2013 there were 24 journalist respondents (from 79 invitations sent) and 17 public relations respondents (from 69 invitations sent). The surveys were paired and co-orientational (using same or similar questions to both professional groups).

Although Facebook was launched in 2004 and Twitter two years later, no respondents in 2008 indicated that they used social media, although the survey’s open questions provided an opportunity for them to do so. During in-depth interviews with 15 participants in 2009, only one journalist and one public relations practitioner foreshadowed the importance of social media, and predicted that these could change the reporter-public relations source relationship. By 2013, the seismic shifts in industry practice wrought by the digitisation of news and the rise of social media in practitioners’ routines, required additional questions on social media practices (Furlan, 2015). This article focuses primarily on the rich responses from 2013 specifically on social media usage and its impact for journalism-public relations interactions, with occasional context from the 2009 interviews. When reporting the results, below, journalist survey participants are coded “J”, followed by a numeric ID, and public relations participants are coded “PR” plus a numeric ID. Interview participants are coded JI and PRI, also with numeric identifiers only.

Publicly available sources such as Margaret Gee's *Australian Media Guide* (2007; 2013) were used to recruit medical-health journalists. Consultancies available from accessible sources including those registered with the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA, 2017) and listed as having both "media relations" activity as well as "health, biotechnology or pharmaceutical" clients provided potential public relations recruits over the review period. Purposive sampling of reporters who considered themselves to be 'medical' or 'health' journalists primarily working in newsrooms was used to recruit a range of media outlets, including print/online, radio and television. Purposive sampling of public relations practitioners working in the medical-health sector indicated a range of employment from corporate multinationals operating in Australia with separate health public relations units, private consultancies, medical research institutes to government health departments.

Results

As mentioned earlier, the review period coincided with turbulent changes in journalism practice and production, the digitisation of news and social media platforms being increasingly used during newsgathering routines. Journalists in both surveys indicated the most common method of contact with public relations practitioners/material was via email. By 2013, although social media were acknowledged as tools used in sourcing information, few participants listed them as "common" ways of interacting with public relations practitioners. However, half found social media useful in the course of medical newsgathering. The majority of respondents also indicated they "rarely" or "never" received public relations material via social media. A journalist who sometimes used social media noted that "I try to remove myself from public relations lists as much as possible, but some always sneaks through" (J4). Participants were also asked whether social media had changed the relationship between medical reporters and public relations practitioners. Participants were equally divided between either considering the

relationship had not changed or choosing to be neutral on the issue. However, several participants who agreed that the relationship had changed as a result of social media, added individual comments:

Some aspects of PR releases are part of Facebook campaign[s](J1);

Social media makes[sic] it easier for PR people to get their message out and to contact journalists with ideas. Journalists can also use it to contact people when needed (J9);

PR practitioners can target reporters directly/conversely reporters can access patients and researchers directly without the need for PR practitioners (J14);

Social media increases the diversity and range of sources for journalists who thus are less reliant on "official" information sources, such as PR people (J15);

They give people another avenue of alerting reporters to potential stories without needing to employ a PR practitioner (J22).

Twitter emerged as the pre-eminent social media platform according to almost all journalists surveyed. Of the respondents, half listed Twitter as the only social media they use; seven used Facebook as well as Twitter; and two also selected LinkedIn, Pinterest and Instagram as well as Twitter and Facebook. One respondent did not specify the social media used, only the rationale: "To follow academics, medical journals and prominent public health figures" (J23). Another respondent (J1) remarked that Twitter is the "best" social network for journalists and indicated also being a Facebook client "because medical students, particularly, use it". Another participant, stated that Twitter allows reporters:

to follow researchers and research organisations to see what they are reading and recommending. It's a good way of finding out about new research or issues (J21).

Another observed: "Sometimes Twitter has some great links to journals etc." (J20). One reporter recognised that "Twitter and Facebook

both give you the ability to connect first-hand with researchers or families without a PR worker being the middle man” (J22).

Most reporters listed emails and/or telephone calls as their preferred methods of contact, usually initiated by the public relations practitioner, although in 2013 reporters also indicated that they make first contact:

I call them if I have a story I think their organisation can help me with (J1);

If a press release is worth following up I might ‘phone them for more information, contact numbers etc. (J16);

I almost always email PRs for more information if they’ve sent me a media release that I’m going to use (J19).

Participants in 2013 also voiced complaints about public relations people trying to contact them:

They hound me day and night with emails! (J8).

I make great efforts to avoid contact with PR practitioners, as I believe their role actively interferes with my medical writing work. However, on email and social media, they occasionally sneak through my defences! (J4).

Nonetheless, one participant defined the relationship as reciprocal:

It is a two-way street—if I need something I will usually phone and follow up with an email. I also try to meet key people, eg minister's press secretary/hospital PRs for the occasional coffee (not so much corporate PRs). When they approach me it is usually by email then phone. (J16).

As with the journalist surveys, the 2013 surveys sent to public relations professionals were intended to update the study data. Despite the emergence of social media as early as 2004, no public relations respondents in the 2008 survey reported using them.

By 2013, this had changed dramatically, with more than half of respondents indicating they used social media either “all the time” or “often” in the course of their work. Asked to specify which social media they used and their reasons for doing so, four gave a general

rationale such as, “Spreading news, engaging a stakeholder/group, sharing content” (PR4). However, the majority indicated a preference for Twitter. One also added Facebook, another included Instagram “and many other platforms. Because it’s essential” (PR9). Another respondent only listed Facebook “to audit a client’s comments etc.” (PR12). One respondent used LinkedIn to:

connect with professionals and share news with potential customers on behalf of clients. Some Facebook and Twitter also – more on the side of compiling a calendar/key messages (PR10).

The reasons for using Twitter included immediacy and accuracy, exemplified by the following answer:

Twitter allows real-time interaction and high visibility through retweets; ultra-fast method for spreading news of your activities and retweets preserve your initial framing and context (PR16).

A minority of respondents referred to interactions with reporters/media when discussing social media, such as in the following comments:

Twitter-to share immediate news with the MR [medical research] sector and interested journalists; Facebook-for internal comms [sic] with our MR staff more than any other reason (PR3).

We mostly use Twitter to engage journalists-as this is their preferred source (PR6).

Mostly Twitter to monitor public sentiment about issues and identify which media/politicians and other stakeholders are contributing to relevant discussions (PR1).

Twitter, in order to promote a message to people who have already indicated their interest in my organisation by following it (PR14).

One participant described their social media relations as “the process of leveraging news coverage into other online and social media platforms” (PR13). Another used social media as a way to facilitate “broadening the message,

reaching new audiences” (PR10). However, the majority either disagreed or strongly disagreed that most of their contact with medical reporters was through social media, indicating that social media are not being used extensively in communicating with journalists. But one participant anticipated the strength of social media in disseminating story ideas:

[I]t is a growing space. While it’s not currently a way we’ve had journalists pick up stories, it will be the way it will head in the future (PR17).

Responses from other participants were positive about social media’s usefulness in communicating with reporters and included comments such as:

Some health journalists now only get their stories from Twitter...(PR6);

Because they use it, like everyone else (PR9).

Three respondents commented on the immediacy and speed of social media, saying:

[it] ensures very fast and accurate dissemination of basic news (e.g. new report released - see link) (PR16);

It’s quick, tantalising and offers us the opportunity to be part of national discourse with the sector (PR3);

The fact that something is triggering a discussion on twitter (or indeed that health journalists are tweeting about it) can be an important trigger for a future story (PR14).

While less than half considered social media useful in promoting medicine/health issues to reporters, the vast majority considered social media to be useful tools in medical public relations generally. The increase may be a product of the fact that the work of public relations practitioners is far-reaching and involves much more than just media relations (Johnston & Sheehan, 2014). Others focussed primarily on the immediacy of social media and the fact that journalists are increasingly using them:

Journalists are relying on social media more and more. Updates can be provided through social media where

journalists can access through mobile devices; this is particularly beneficial as many of them are on the road all day (PR5).

One explained that social media have “improved all media” (PR9) and another commented that social media provide “Direct, immediate engagement from medical experts; targeted engagement” (PR17). When asked to reflect on which social media tool medical journalists prefer, the vast majority of public relations respondents nominated Twitter. Asked whether “social media have changed the relationship” between the professions, more than half of public relations practitioner respondents were neutral. Only four respondents confirmed the relationship had changed as a result of social media use. Those who considered the relationship altered, added some insights:

It’s no longer based on conversation, but more quick leads (PR6);

We don’t talk as much F2F [face-to-face] (PR2);

It’s created some new platforms via which we exchange information (PR14);

Can contact them more often (PR12).

Respondents indicated they had “other strategies to cultivate relationships with medical-health journalists” apart from social media:

I still find a phone call is the most powerful form of communication with key journalists. I only call when there is a real story and they know they are getting a really strong lead when it’s me on the phone. I also have regular coffee catch-ups with my key reporters (PR3).

One respondent found that in their work, social media “helps with following journalists, understanding what they’re interested in, and identifying influential contacts” (PR17).

During in-depth interviews in 2009, journalists and public relations practitioners were asked about their attitudes, practices, relationships and the future of journalism and public relations. While most agreed a close relationship between public relations and

journalism was destined to continue, one considered the relationship would become more fragmented:

[J]ournalists no longer have the monopoly on being the sources of information, anyone can do it now. So I think PR are going...more and more direct to the audience. They no longer need journalists quite so much...they're doing their own stuff on You Tube or all the social media sites...(JI3).

A public relations practitioner also predicted that social media would change the “power dynamic” in the reporter-public relations source relationship:

[T]hings like You Tube and Twitter and Facebook and other sort of electronic media give people - PR professionals - broader opportunity to get their message out (PRI4).

One print tabloid reporter cautioned about the use of “social” in social media regarding public relations practitioners:

[S]ome of them I know well enough that they've ended up on my Facebook, you know. And then there are others who think because they know who I am, want to be on my Facebook, and I think, ‘No, I'm not actually friends with you’. So some of them you do chat with and become quite friendly, which can be a worry because they will get annoyed with you from time to time if what you write is not sort of flattering to their cause (JI7).

Discussion

A key theme emerging from the data was the significance that social media have rapidly assumed in industry practice and their swift uptake by practitioners on both sides.

Journalist participants indicated they use social media in a variety of ways; to seek potential sources of medical stories, or as a proxy for significant “leg work”, such as “checking out” ongoing health debates, picking up story ideas, being up-to-date with health discussions and learning about the latest research. Some of the participants’ responses

indicate a very active form of newsgathering, such as contacting researchers or doctors directly through Twitter. At other times, it involved using social media as an opportunity to monitor the pulse of the health environment by “following” the developments in the field through others such as scientists, or keeping abreast of the latest conversations regarding medicine and health.

Journalists indicated that using social media in this way increased the diversity and range of views incorporated in news reports. A journalist who took part in the 2009 interviews foreshadowed the importance of social media and predicted that these could change the reporter-public relations source relationship. She noted that public relations practitioners at that time had already begun to use social media to connect directly with audiences rather than seek out reporters. Indeed, a public relations interviewee posited that social media offer “broader” opportunities to communicate directly with numerous stakeholders. By 2013, more than half of the reporter participants were using social media and finding them useful in medical newsgathering. Some also considered social media had changed the reporter-public relations source relationship by facilitating access to researchers or the public directly (and vice versa), for example, thereby circumventing public relations intermediaries. This trend was also evident in public relations practice, with public relations practitioners, in the words of one respondent, “broadening the message” by seeking new audiences through social media without depending solely on reporter intervention.

These findings suggest that reporters are enjoying the freedom social media afford the user in reaching sources that were previously difficult to contact directly, and that this ability appears to have reduced the need for public relations mediation in medical-health stories. While at times social media are used to foster immediate communication between reporter and public relations source when the former are “on the road” all day, a number of journalist respondents indicated they liked using social media precisely because it provided the ability to evade public relations professionals and go directly to a primary source such as a scientist

or a doctor. At the same time, while more than three quarters of public relations practitioners indicated they found social media useful in medical-health public relations generally, less than half found them useful in medical-health promotion to journalists. This suggests that not all public relations practitioners are cultivating relationships with individual reporters using social media tools. The data suggest that social media grant the freedom to make fewer connections between reporters and public relations practitioners while at the same time links with other stakeholders (for example the public, medical communities and health industries) flourish.

Research elsewhere has highlighted that not all journalists are open to using social media to interact with public relations practitioners because some see it as a way to invite unsolicited communication—just another way to “bug” them (Supa, 2014; Wilson & Supa, 2013)—a sentiment widely shared by journalists in this study. The vast majority of participants indicated they rarely or never receive public relations material via social media, and only one indicated media releases are increasingly part of Facebook pages in targeted public relations campaigns, which journalists can access. This suggests that public relations sources are not using social media extensively in media relations, a finding consistent with Wilson and Supa (2013).

Reporters in this study found Twitter useful for scouting potential news story ideas, finding suitable sources, keeping up-to-date with the latest research, spotting trends and as a research tool. This is similar to the findings of Weaver and Willnat (2016) in the U.S. Others have found that both journalists and public relations practitioners see the potential of Twitter in the workplace but have not fully engaged with it (Wilson & Supa, 2013). This is consistent with the results of this study, which found evidence that Twitter is the preferred tool of evasion. Responses by reporters support the idea that Twitter empowers them by facilitating direct communication with previously well-guarded sources, making them less reliant on public relations “go-betweens”.

Unlike public relations participants, journalists in this study referred to the public

sparingly when considering the use of social media. This suggests that, rather than using social media as a platform to stay connected with their readers, listeners or viewers as a two-way exchange, reporters may be using them primarily to source stories, locate emerging health debates, distribute information and raise their own public profiles. This adds weight to the idea that social media tools are being used as “listening devices” rather than promoting dialogue with audiences (Hermida, 2011). Molyneux and Holton (2015) found that health journalists in the US were adopting social media for the purpose of personal branding. One of the reasons offered was a desire to engage in direct conversations with audiences, but that does not seem the case from the majority of responses given in this study. More recent research by Deprez and Van Leuven (2017) found Twitter is not used by medical reporters to reach out to “ordinary citizens” (p. 14). On the other hand, Holton (2013) found that “entrepreneurial” or freelance health journalists in the US place more emphasis than colleagues working in newsroom environments on the role of the audience, in as much as they use social media to focus more on reciprocity and participation with members of the public. Others found that journalists working in smaller markets use Twitter to share opinions and engage readers more so than journalists working for more “elite” news organisations with a wider readership/audience (Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012). In the study reported here, journalists’ use of social media suggests they are increasingly being used as primary sources for story ideas and for late-breaking news. Yet only one journalist indicated she used social media to interact with audiences. This respondent, a full-time medical reporter, said she used “readers’ comments” as a way of sourcing story ideas, but it is unclear whether this method should be considered an “active” or “passive” newsgathering process because one can access such information second-hand. This contrasts with the findings of a recent survey of US journalists where two-thirds of respondents indicated they interact with their audience either hourly or daily via social media (Cision, 2017).

Social media clearly provide a direct and immediate avenue to a myriad of potential sources, many of whom have been previously inaccessible without public relations practitioner intervention. Rather than relationships between journalists and public relations practitioners staying much the same, as was predicted by the majority of respondents in 2009, the data suggest that social media are already undermining the relationship between the two professions. By the time of the conclusion of this study, the trend appeared to support circumvention rather than connection, although it remains to be seen whether this reflects a phase of adjustment or a more permanent change.

The changes in public relations attitudes detected over time appear to have been partly a product of the use of social media, which have increased direct access to the public, and produced modification of industry practices and routines. Bajkiewicz, Kraus and Hong (2011) detected a corresponding change in traditional media relations, which they predicted could eventually “cease to exist” (Bajkiewicz et al., 2011, p.331) as public relations professionals reach directly mass publics through social media. Public relations respondents in this study indicated a strong uptake of social media, particularly Twitter, which they recognised as the preferred tool of reporters. Public relations participants regarded social media as a means of ensuring immediate dissemination of information to the public, with “real-time” interactions possible with varying stakeholders. According to public relations respondents, social media not only permit instant dissemination of relevant news and announcements but also provide opportunities to monitor public/client sentiment about issues, locate trends in health discussions, identify major political players in debates and provide national visibility to the employer organisation. Further, social media were considered useful in enabling public relations practitioners to connect with new audiences, or share news with potential customers or consumers.

Despite these advantages, fewer than half of public relations respondents reported they find social media useful in medical-health promotion to journalists and the vast majority

did not consider social media as the main method via which to contact medical reporters. Wilson and Supa (2013) found a similar reluctance on the part of practitioners in both camps to use Twitter to communicate with each other. One reason for this contradiction (using social media frequently but not often with reporters) could be that, as Avery, Lariscy and Sweetser (2010) argued, public relations practitioners may take advantage of the “unedited nature” of social media to circumvent traditional media gatekeepers by targeting publics directly (p.193). This is consistent with some of the responses provided by public relations practitioners in this study, who described in detail the freedoms social media afforded them by reaching numerous stakeholders. While Avery et al. (2010) argued that social media may facilitate greater convergence of goals (between reporters and public relations practitioners) as information sources merge and there is “enhanced assessment of accuracy” in shared information and more agreement on news values (p.193), this study found little evidence to support this prediction.

US research into social media (for example, Supa, 2014) found public relations practitioners were using them to forge “informal” relationships with journalists. However, only two respondents in this study mentioned reporters when considering the usefulness of social media. One of them noted how using social media facilitated contact with journalists on their mobile devices when reporters are “on the road” all day. The other demonstrated the ease with which Twitter facilitates instant communication “with the MR [medical research] sector and interested journalists” (PR3). The limited evidence to support the idea of connections being forged through social media use between reporter-public relations source also contrasts with research conducted by Chimbel et al. (2014) that found journalists and public relations practitioners in the US were “following” and “befriending” each other on social media as a way of monitoring each other’s activities. One reporter interviewed highlighted how “friending” public relations practitioners on Facebook can be a “worry” when stories published are unflattering to the

public relations cause (JI7). Social media usage by public relations practitioners in this study reveals that, rather than building relationships with reporters, social media afford public relations users alternate priorities such as maintaining “conversations” with publics and other stakeholders, internal communications, and monitoring public/government sentiment about issues and activities which have appeared foremost in medical-health promotion, public health and emergency management (Levac & O’Sullivan, 2016). Similarly, Jackson and Moloney (2016), found social media are affecting the relationship between reporters and public relations sources as the latter have more direct contact with end-users.

Conclusion

The research reported here coincided with the growing popularity of social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The latter, established in 2006, now has 3 million active monthly users in Australia (Cowling, 2017) and was also the preferred social media tool of the majority of reporters and public relations practitioners involved in this study. Respondents from both fields indicated they use Twitter and other social media during the course of their work. One of the findings is that their use appears to be a threat to the reporter-public relations source relationship in the medical-health sphere; there are signs it is undermining rather than strengthening it. Reporters indicated they used social media to contact elite medical sources directly (such as researchers, doctors and specialists) rather than using public relations intermediaries, while public relations practitioners sought to forge links directly with audiences and other stakeholders, and in doing so, circumvent media gatekeepers. A minority of journalists considered that social media facilitated public relations practitioners’ access to them, but they did not view this positively. The responses suggest that social media contribute to the direction and focus of story genesis and generation, and are likely to do so increasingly in the future as their use by journalists continues to expand in all areas of news production.

Social media use by reporters in many ways supports journalism’s traditional watchdog role. Responses provided by journalists suggest that social media achieve this by facilitating practitioner autonomy and independence during newsgathering, thus permitting immediate and direct access to sources previously guarded by public relations operatives. One of the most common criticisms of public relations practitioners by journalists was that they obstruct access to the people journalists want to interview. Indeed, a minority of older, more experienced journalists reminisced about how they were once able to “ring up any doctor” easily without being vetted by a public relations intermediary. Journalists’ responses suggest that using social media can overcome such public relations impediments and permit direct connections with elite sources as happened many years ago before public relations became pervasive in hospitals, health organisations and government departments.

Journalistic notions of public service appear to be nurtured through the freedoms provided by social media, where terms and conditions during story creation are not dictated by external individuals working in public relations. This suggests, in theory at least, that reporters should be able to revert to old-fashioned “digging”, and find their own information and angles independently by using social media platforms. Accordingly, journalists may in future increasingly regard the “boundary spanning” work of public relations practitioners as intermediaries between medical expert and reporter as largely superfluous.

The implication of this for the way medical-health news will be sourced, reported and published may be significant because journalists have already indicated they are actively using social media to seek elite sources and information directly, “follow” scientists or do independent background research. An “active” form of journalism, lauded in the literature as being synonymous with the ideal watchdog role (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng & White, 2009; Larsson, 2002), encourages independent agency. Such a form can be enhanced by the ways in which journalists involved in this study used social media. Yet social media also facilitate the

proliferation of “fake” health news which may benefit vested interests. At this stage, information consumers still trust the news media more than social media in their ability to separate fact from fiction (Newman, 2017). But there are challenges authenticating health information on social media sites with no filter to screen what is published (Levac & O’Sullivan, 2016). The journalistic process of verification and fact-checking has never been a more important tool in the dissemination of accurate, unbiased health news to the public.

The facility that social media provide journalists to connect with significant health-medical sources without public relations mediation not only affects newsgathering but also the relational dynamics between reporter and public relations source: social media can promote evasion rather than connection. Further research on social media is needed to confirm their long-term effects on personal interactions between health-related practitioners in both professions to determine whether the opinions expressed by participants in this study are representative. But if, as appears likely, social media use weakens the relationship, the consequences may be profound. Reporters will always prefer to get news directly from the “horse’s mouth”, in the words of one reporter in this study, rather than “second-hand” from a public relations mediator, and social media will continue to facilitate this.

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