
Mapping mommy bloggers: Using online social network analysis to study publics

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Abstract

The study of public relations is dominated by assumptions about publics. However, much of the research in public relations makes assumptions about the concept of publics without addressing the ambiguity of the term (Vasquez & Taylor, 2001). More research is needed to better understand the complex nature of publics. This is particularly important given the participatory nature of the web, which has given rise to extensive and powerful interest-based networks (Castells, 1996). This paper presents an elementary analysis of the mommy bloggers¹ network to show the potential of using network analysis software to better understand the complex and ever-shifting nature of online publics. The mommy blogger network is both densely interconnected and highly diverse. The results of this study show the enormous potential of online social network analysis as a method for practitioners and researchers looking to better understand key publics.

Introduction

The concept of publics has been studied extensively across social science disciplines. Yet despite the importance of the concept to the study and practice of public relations, the public is often studied exclusively as a means to an organisation's goal rather than a subject of study in and of itself (Vasquez, & Taylor, 2001). The need for increased study of publics is particularly important today given the changes in communication practices brought about through the development of new media tools. Social media has empowered strategic publics by giving them a dynamic platform through which individuals

can communicate and collaborate with a variety of audiences (Wright & Hinson, 2006, 2007, & 2008). The use of online network analysis tools to study the communication practices within and between publics has potential for public relations researchers and practitioners looking to better understand key publics. The purpose of this paper is to provide an example of how basic network analysis could be used by practitioners and researchers looking to learn about the nature of key publics.

With a minimal amount of technical proficiency, any individual with regular Internet access and a computer can start a blog. Those same common requirements are needed to comment on message boards, join social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, and jump into email Listservs. The availability of creating and publishing narratives through outlets that can easily be distributed and shared makes it possible to build a dialogue with others who share similar interests or beliefs. Online networks transcend geographic boundaries. Just as a real life community is not made through interactions at a single location, online communities can be created through a variety of sites that allow people to promote shared traits and interests. This paradigm shift is evident in Castells' (1996) classic study of shifting community structures, *The rise of the network society*. The primary concept explored in this book, which has been largely supported by media scholars since publication, is that the Internet has provided the technological capability for people to organise interest-based networks. But online networks may go beyond just organisation and may lead as well to the development of common language and understandings.

Online network analysis tools make it possible to visualise and study web-based publics. To show the potential of using network analysis tools as a method for studying publics, this paper examines the connected nature of mommy blogs. As one of the first publics recognised by marketers and communication professionals for their power as influencers, mommy bloggers are one of the more established online interest-based network (Lopez, 2009). Originally a term used to belittle homemakers who wrote personal stories about their children and day-to-day lives, mommy blogging has since been reclaimed by a community of active writers who are challenging existing notions of motherhood through their public blogs. Women do not exclusively populate the mommy blogger community. Prolific parenting bloggers such as Shawn Burns of Backpacking Dad and Jeremy Adam Smith of Daddy Dialectic provide a father's perspective on childrearing. As the network analysis section of this paper shows, these daddy blogs are well integrated into the mommy blogger spheres of influence. The process of mommy blogging is more defined by the desire and ability to turn what is traditionally considered part of the private sphere into a public conversation. In doing so, these influential bloggers are radically changing societal constructions of what it means to be a mommy. These online reconstructions transcend electronic borders and have the potential to shape and reshape general societal norms.

Literature review

The study of publics in public relations

When Grunig and his co-researchers launched the Excellence Study in 1986 they set the tone for much of the research that would be developed in the field (Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru & Jones, 2008). Although the development of theory in public relations has been scattered at best (Greenwood, 2010), Excellence Theory is recognised by many as the dominant paradigm of public relations research (Botan & Hazleton, 2006; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2006). The situational

theory of publics, first developed by Grunig in 1968 and continuously refined over the next three decades (J.E. Grunig, 1978, 1978b, 1983, 1987, 1989, 1992, 1997; J.E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984), is an integral aspect of the Excellence Theory and has set the foundation for much of the work in the study of publics (Grunig, Grunig, & Toth, 2007).

The situational theory of publics

To position publics within the framework of excellence theory, Grunig used the definition of publics popularised by Dewey (1927) that described publics as coming into being in response to issues of import to a particular group. Grunig and Hunt (1984) identified four types of publics based on how aware the group was about a problem or issue. Individuals who are not affected by a problem the authors termed nonpublics; people who face a problem but do not recognise it as an issue are latent publics. Publics who recognise a problem are aware publics, and when publics mobilise to address the problem they are active publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Publics, then, are positioned in relation to issues of interest to a particular organisation. Publics are categorised by their awareness of an issue (problem recognition), how much control they believe they have over an issue (constraint recognition), and to what extent they believe the issue involves them (level of involvement; Grunig, 1997). By measuring these variables, public relations practitioners can predict the behaviours of key publics (Grunig, 1989).

Several studies in the field of public relations have used the situational theory of publics to study the behaviours of publics in response to issues such as drunk driving (Grunig & Ipes, 1983), environmental activism (Grunig, 1989), and earthquake preparedness (Major, 1998). However, the theory has been criticised for making assumptions about the state of consciousness of publics defined by their relationship to issues without addressing the complex nature of the communication practices that lead to the development of a group consciousness (Vasquez & Taylor, 2001).

Cultural-economic theory

Over the last decade, theory building work in public relations has shifted away from expansions of excellence theory (Sallot, et al., 2008) and toward critical-cultural research (Vasquez & Taylor, 2001). Researchers taking a cultural-economic perspective on public relations practices address the meaning-making processes that occur within publics, rather than studying publics primarily in relation to an organisation (Holtzhausen, 2000). Within cultural-economic theory, fluid power relations are of utmost importance for understanding publics and their shifting memberships and identities (Gaither & Curtin, 2005) because all identities, including that of organisations, issues, topics, and publics, are constructed within and through discourse (Hall, 1996). The role of a public relations practitioner, then, is to act as a cultural intermediary within the larger cultural discourse, creating shared identities between producers (organisations) and consumers (publics).

Cultural-economic theory has been applied most frequently in the study of international communication practices (Greenwood, 2010). The circuit of culture has been used to structure a study of Western brand expansion in China (Han, & Zhang, 2009), examine the practice of public relations in an understudied international location (Terry, 2005), and critique the implementation of international vaccination campaigns (Gaither & Curtin, 2005). Cultural-economic theory was also the basis for an oft-cited piece by L'Etang (2006) on public relations and promotional culture. Although extremely helpful in understanding the challenges of intercultural public relations practices (Curtin & Gaither, 2006), to date, cultural-economic theory has not been applied to communication work examining online, interest-based cultural networks.

The homo narrans paradigm

The need to study discourse in public relations practice is further refined within the homo narrans paradigm, which blends aspects of situational theory and the cultural-economic perspective. Vasquez (1993)

combined symbolic convergence theory (Bormann, 1985) and the situational theory of publics (Grunig, 1978) to create a paradigm within which publics are considered individuals who develop group consciousness around common problems or situations. The group consciousness forms through shared communications, building on Carey's concept of communication as culture (Carey, 2009). The study of public relations within this paradigm then becomes focused on understanding the fantasy themes and symbolic realities built through the interactions between organisations and publics.

The homo narrans perspective accounts for the changing nature of publics because in addition to addressing cultural meaning making, it also recognises the role of the individual in the meaning-making process (Vasquez & Taylor, 2001). Through their communication practices, individuals create meaning. But because individuals are not unchanging, meaning evolves resulting in a fluid group consciousness. Although the homo narrans perspective of publics can be addressed theoretically, it is notoriously difficult to correspond theory with observational reality (Vasquez & Taylor, 2001). However, the advent of an interactive web makes it possible to observe, measure, and track networks from the homo narrans perspective.

Researching publics

Due to the advent of the interactive web, new possibilities for studying the construction and development of publics have emerged (Gauntlett, 2000). The participatory nature of the web creates quantifiable linkages and a record of conversations that can be reviewed from a qualitative perspective. The interconnected nature of the web makes it particularly well suited for the study of the networks within publics and the connections key publics have to other groups and organisations.

Web 1.0 and Web 2.0: The development of an interactive web

Web-based communication channels provide ample space for individuals to air grievances,

explore hobbies and interests, offer advice, and publish personal thoughts and ideas. While traditional media channels are restricted by professional gatekeepers and financial constraints, anyone with access to a reliable Internet connection and a minimal amount of technical know-how can join the online conversation.

In the study of communications, we talk a lot about the concept of ‘gatekeepers’. This term refers to individuals who have the power to restrict the information that is widely distributed through popular mediums. Newspaper editors, television newscasters, and magazine producers are all examples of gatekeepers who are able to control the flow of information and guide public opinion (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The web provides avenues to bypass these gatekeepers. While the rushing river may still be restricted by those in officially sanctioned positions of information control, there are now millions of small tributaries that make it possible for individuals from outside the mainstream to reach the public (Gauntlett, 2000). The web is a space for creation and collaboration.

DiNucci (1999) coined the phrase Web 2.0 in 1999 in a piece describing the evolution of online communication as a tool that “will fragment into countless permutations with different looks, behaviors, uses, and hardware hosts”. DiNucci’s piece, published when the online world was nearing the pinnacle of the dot-com bubble that burst in spring 2000, foretold a major shift in web content. The first decade of the new millennium has been marked by the steady proliferation of interactive web applications. Using a multitude of simple platforms, opportunities to publish on broad public communication channels are now available to even novice web users. The term Web 2.0 has since come to be used as an umbrella term that refers to web-based programs that are built around user-generated content. Message boards, blogs, wikis, podcasts, and social networking sites are all generally categorised as Web 2.0 applications (Gauntlett, 2000). About 19 percent of Internet users now say they use Twitter or another service to regularly share

updates about themselves, or to see updates about others (Change in internet access, 2010). While membership in defined Internet groups like Facebook and Twitter can be measured – although the rapidly expanding popularity of social media make 100 percent accurate measurement difficult – it is exceedingly difficult to track the popularity of blogging (Sussman, 2009).

People’s reasons for blogging vary. While professional blogging is on the rise and it is possible to make a living writing online content, a 2009 survey conducted by the blog search engine Technorati found that self-expression and sharing expertise continue to be the primary motivations for bloggers (Sussman, 2009). The topics covered in blogs are as diverse as the people who write them. However, a few areas have emerged as particularly ripe for blogger ruminations. Unsurprisingly given the medium, technology is one of the hottest topics for bloggers. The only area ranked as more popular than technology among the bloggers surveyed by Technorati is “personal musings” (Sussman, 2009).

This paper addresses a small but extremely dedicated subgroup of the blogging population who fall under the purview of the ‘personal musings’ model of blogging: mommy bloggers.

Exposing the secret lives of moms: Private and public expressions of motherhood

In the humid mid-summer of 2005, a group of 300 mostly female bloggers gathered in Santa Clara, California, to participate in a real-world conference on blogging. The first annual BlogHer conference covered blogging issues ranging from technology best practices to blogging ethics to industry-specific practices for journalists, academics, technologists, and other professional web writers (Stone, 2005). The original BlogHer conference had only one panel discussing personal parenting blogs. Attendees were anxious to disassociate themselves from the perceived frivolous nature of mommy blogging. At the time, mommy bloggers were at the bottom rung of the blogging ladder. Their blogging was dismissed as a casual habit and few believed that they

would remain active after the novelty of self-publishing wore off. During the closing keynote a participant announced that if women would only “stop blogging about themselves they could change the world”. The personal bloggers, who had endured several days of belittling remarks, bristled at this comment. Alice Bradley, a freelance writer in New York City who had been chronicling her experience raising her son Charlie on her blog *Finslippy*, stood and declared “Mommy blogging is a radical act” (in Lopez, 2009, p. 730). In 2006 an entire session at BlogHer was devoted to mommy blogging and its role in the wider blogging community.

The interest in mommy blogging as a way to challenge common notions of motherhood has continued, and the 2010 BlogHer conference offered a session titled “Change agents: Radical blogging moms: Don’t even think about not taking these moms seriously” (Stone, 2010). According to the conference site description, the session positioned motherhood as a “catalyst for a new level of activism”. Participating bloggers examined how embracing motherhood as fundamental to their identities impacts how they are viewed and how seriously they are taken.

Corporations have already recognised the power of the mommy blogger community. In 2008 Procter & Gamble (P&G) treated 15 popular parenting bloggers to an all-expenses-paid trip to its Cincinnati headquarters to educate them on the company’s product lines and parenting support programmes (Neff, 2008). In the last year alone P&G sent a popular mommy blogger to the Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, B.C., Kodak sponsored a mommy blogger’s trip to the Oscars, and G.M. Canada sent mommy bloggers on a road trip to Disney World in a Chevy Traverse (Mendelsohn, 2010). The flood of products and promotions offered to parenting bloggers was part of the impetus for an October 2009 requirement by the Federal Trade Commission that bloggers must disclose any and all endorsements or face fines of up to \$11,000 per post (Ostrow, 2009).

Beyond their value to advertisers, mommy bloggers have accrued a great deal of social power through their extensive online and real-world networking activities. Because individuals have a sense of their own personal self, that self modifies the ideas and objects with which they interact (Mead & Morris, 1962). While the role of ‘mother’ is, at least to some extent, socially constructed, the individuals who write blogs about their experience as a mom reconstruct that identity according to their sense of self. As evidenced by their prolific writing about parenting issues, mommy bloggers consider their role of family caretaker as central in their sense of self. The networked nature of the modern web creates numerous opportunities for social interaction based on the primary feature of self-identification – the role of mother. Societal interactions between individuals who are imposing their sense of self on objects or ideas, such as the notion of motherhood, are then able to define and redefine those structures (Blumer, 1969).

Performing motherhood

Sociologist Erving Goffman claimed that everyday interactions were worthy of study because they consisted of presentations designed to minimise social discomfort of oneself and others (Goffman, 1971). People are actors playing parts as they believe they should be played. A mother attempting to appease a screaming child in a supermarket would be highly unlikely to strike the young person. Corporal punishment is not an acceptable aspect of the public performance of motherhood, even if physical punishment is used in the home. Goffman also described the world as consisting of both backstage and front-stage activities (Goffman, 1971). Backstage areas are where people can be themselves and partake in private, socially crude, and potentially embarrassing activities. Through their writing, mommy bloggers make public those backstage activities and in doing so are challenging what is acceptable behaviour as a mother. The popularity of these backstage confessionals shows the potential for web

platforms to challenge the social norms that dictate social interactions.

Mommy bloggers not only challenge notions of motherhood by their interactions with other parenting bloggers, by producing and publicly displaying their own story as to what it means to be a mommy they are capable of changing the entire meaning of the experience. Narrative context is tantamount in the development of a sense of being (Charland, 1987). Charland built on Burke's argument that the rhetorical process is dependent on identification rather than persuasion (Burke, 1966). Essentially, by shared meaning we are able to have discourse. However, that shared meaning is also created by people through discourse. The meaning is not absolute and therefore is both an instrument of collaborative meaning making and a tool for persuasion, misuse, and even propaganda (Burke, 1967). The biological meaning of 'mother' is clear – one has either given birth or not – but the cultural meaning of the term is far more flexible. Through the connections built from blogging, and the communication that happens by those connections, mommy bloggers build meaning.

By manipulating language, it is possible to define a particular experience and recruit and sustain supporters of that shaped experience (Burke, 1970). The manipulation of the language of motherhood through mommy blogs could lead to a cultural shift in what constitutes a 'good mother' a 'bad mother' and even the position of the role of mother in Western society.

The web, particularly for the younger, tech-savvy generation, can bolster ties within communities that exist offline (McMillan & Morrison, 2006). For a dispersed community, such as full-time parents who tend not to be clustered in distinct locations but instead are scattered across the country, Internet technology can be used as a tool to build a shared community and reinforce common conceptions of motherhood. The purpose of this paper is to show the potential in using new media tools to track the development and interactions among members of the highly

influential mommy blogger community. By better understanding key publics, particularly highly influential online interest-based communities, practitioners will be better able to work with publics to achieve communication goals.

Research question: How can network analysis tools illuminate the construction and dynamics of an influential online public such as mommy bloggers?

The following data shows how mommy bloggers are building a shared culture through online communities and examines how individuals within the mommy blogger network act as influencers and connect to other online publics. This is of interest both to public relations researchers and practitioners building campaigns involving online interest-based networks.

Method: Online social network analysis

To better show the interconnected nature of the online mommy bloggers, it is useful to understand the general nature of the online blogging network. Previous social network analyses of blog connections have shown that certain 'A-list' blogs tend to dominate when random blog links are reviewed (Herring, et al., 2005). However, many blogs appear as isolates, linking to no other blogs in a random sample. This indicates that the blogosphere overall is both partially interconnected and sporadically solitary. Other research has shown that within interest groups, clusters of highly connected groups of bloggers are present. These clusters overlap within the group but have their own systems of primary influencers (Chau & Xu, 2007).

Social network analysis can be used to show the web of connections that help define a public. In social network analysis, the actors within a network are called nodes and the connections between those actors are called ties, links, or connections. Social network analysis has long been used to map social connections between individuals where the ties or connections refer to interdependencies such as friendship, sexual history, financial

relationships, and common interests. To show construction of influence within the mommy blogging network, blogs are the nodes instead of individuals. The connections or ties between nodes are links between websites.

To determine how mommy bloggers defined their online networks, I first isolated the primary mommy blogger influencers. The online parenting magazine Babble.com produces an annual list of top mommy

bloggers compiled by its staff and contributors. Babble.com also offers readers the opportunity to vote for their favourite mommy bloggers, encouraging their audience to identify and rank top mommy bloggers that the Babble judges may have overlooked. The top 10 mommy blogs identified by Babble.com and the top 10 blogs identified as favourites by Babble.com readers were used as the original nodes for the network analysis (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Top 20 mommy blogs (Source: Babble.com)

The Pioneer Woman	http://www.thepioneerwoman.com/
Dooce	http://www.dooce.com/
Nie Nie Dialogues	http://nieniedialogues.blogspot.com/
Amalah	http://www.amalah.com/
Mighty Girl	http://mightygirl.net/
Woulda Coulda Shoulda	http://wouldashoulda.com/
Finslippy	http://www.finslippy.com/
Sweet Juniper	http://www.sweet-juniper.com/
Her Bad Mother	http://herbadmother.com/
Parent Hacks	http://www.parenthacks.com/
Bug and the Sweet Banana	http://boogaboojones.typepad.com/
Jen's List	http://www.jenslist.com/
Because I Said So	http://mom2my6pack.blogspot.com/
Flourish in Progress	http://www.flourishinprogress.com/
The Lumberjack's Wife	http://www.thelumberjackswife.com/
Girl to Mom	http://girltomom.com/
Stark. Raving. Mad. Mommy	http://www.starkravingmadmommy.com/
Short Fat Dictator	http://www.shortfatdictator.com/
Portrait of An Adoption	http://www.chicagonow.com/blogs/portrait_of_an_adoption/
The Artful Parent	http://www.artfulparent.typepad.com/

To determine the structure of influence among mommy bloggers, I used the web crawler program IssueCrawler to track two iterations of links from the 20 original mommy blogs. IssueCrawler is a publicly available crawler system offered by the Amsterdam-based Govcom Foundation at www.issuecrawler.net. Crawler systems record and follow the hyperlinks from a starting point indicated by the programmer. In this case, the 20 mommy blogs listed above were entered as the starting point of the crawl. The IssueCrawler program followed the links present on each of the 20 mommy blogs and recorded the web pages each of the links led to. This process produced a record of the first iteration of links. Because IssueCrawler was instructed to follow two iterations of links, the program then followed all the links presented on the pages found in the first step of this

process and recorded the resulting web pages. IssueCrawler can track up to three iterations of links, known as crawl depth, but for each iteration the number of nodes identified in the network increases exponentially.

Graphically plotting the linked web pages is particularly helpful in showing clusters of highly connected groups of sites. It can also be helpful in identifying key influencers within online communities such as mommy bloggers. The following network map shows the most densely connected members of the mommy blogging network mapped using IssueCrawler. The nodes in the centre of the chart are the most densely connected and indicate high levels of interactivity with other blogs. Because the web crawler used tracks links between sites, these centre nodes represent the blogs with the most internal links within the larger network of mommy blogs.

Figure 2: Top 20 mom blogs – two iterations of links



The 20 original blogs are frequently linked with one another either through their first or second iteration of links. Also, the extremely networked nature of the above graph shows that common websites build links even between

mommy blogs that are not directly connected. To further reveal influencers within the mommy blogger community, I reduced the number of nodes in the graph to show the blogs that had the highest number of inbound links.

community. Content is not distributed from a single source and evenly dispersed among a listening audience. Instead, interest-based groups form online around networks of influencers who wield a great deal of power over the dissemination and creation of information and ideas. Mommy bloggers are not just talking to each other. They are reinforcing messages through their network ties, but individual mommy bloggers are also reaching a large number of isolates on the fringe of the mommy blogger community. This core network, combined with extensive reach, makes the mommy blogging community a particularly ripe area for persuasive communication practices.

Discussion

Much like the dominant paradigm that has informed all of communication scholarship over the last century of scholarship, the area of public relations typically views the act of communication as a transmission process. It is assumed that messages travel from an organisation to a public and from publics to an organisation. One of the most widely used definitions of public relations states that the role of a public relations practitioner is to manage the relationships that form between an organisation and its publics. ‘Excellent’ professional communicators manage relationships by acting as the eyes, ears, and mouth of an organisation. They observe the situations occurring among their key publics, listen to the concerns and ideas of their audiences, and share information on behalf of the organisation in the following manner:

Organisation ←→-----Messages-----
 ←→ Publics

Grunig’s ideas regarding the practice of public relations broke away from the common practice in media scholarship of looking at audiences as an undifferentiated mass. The work done by Grunig and his many co-researchers builds from the foundational belief that publics develop independently of media messaging or organisational concerns. Publics form because they react similarly to a problem or issue (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000;

Grunig & Hunt, 1984), and not because of organisational or media categorisations.

The participatory nature of the web allows researchers to observe the process of the cultural creation of publics through communication. People are building, redefining, challenging, and reinforcing cultural norms to an extent that would have been impossible without the connectivity of the net. Communication researchers and public relations practitioners may be experiencing difficulties in adjusting to new communications tools because they are trying to pound square pegs into a round hole. The transmission paradigm of communication, based on the relationships between a producer, message, and audience, does not work well when applied to online communication practices. However, by shifting away from viewing public relations as the process of finding the best way to reach different audiences and instead look to how professional communicators can engage with existing publics to help shape culture, public relations professionals may be better able to build relationships with online communities. New technology has not only expanded the tools in the professional communicator’s toolbox as some researchers have pointed out (Hallahan, 2008), it has also challenged the role public relations people should play in the communication process.

Audience as producer

Participatory media does more than just build interest-based communities and give publics a voice; the communication tools used by these communities allow users to build meaning through shared thoughts, ideas, and concepts. The radical nature of mommy blogging comes not from the bloggers’ willingness to discuss private topics but rather in their ability to reconstitute motherhood through the accumulation of many pieces of commentary on the process of raising a child. By studying publics that connect through online tools, public relations researchers could acquire more nuanced understandings of the culture building process and their role in guiding group think. Furthermore, practitioners can use network analysis tools to create visual representations of

online communities to determine key influencers and map communication linkages.

Although only a relatively small percentage of individuals are regularly creating content on the web, according to a recent survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2011), more than 75 percent of Americans are web users. The potential audience reach of online influencers is enormous. When we consider the interconnected nature of these interest-based networks, there is great potential for ideas that are created or refined online to reach an engaged group of readers. While not experts in the traditional sense of earning authority through institutional qualifications, individuals who create popular blogs about their lives earn expertise through their work. Leaders of online publics are effectively side-stepping institutional methods of credentialing and building influence through virtual interactions.

For example, the next generation of parenting experts will not be a future Dr Spock or Dr Ferber, it will be (and maybe already is) the community of mothers, fathers, and caregivers who have built a massive collection of knowledge on raising children and made it all available in a virtual space. While paediatricians may bemoan the body of web-savvy patients who believe their knowledge supersedes that which can be accessed only through years of medical training, there is great value in the sheer volume of experiences shared on the web. Dealing with stubborn diaper rash or a screaming child at 3 a.m. used to mean a frantic call to a child's primary physician or perhaps a plea to family members for advice, but parents now have the option of accessing the combined knowledge of a massive network of parents.

Limitations

While a network analysis can show general connections between blogs indicating the potential for creating and challenging societal meanings, without a more substantive qualitative study it is difficult to identify the strength of network ties. Social network analysis only shows the presence of links and does not provide the context in which those

links develop. Furthermore, qualitative research may better show the role public relations has in communicating with active online publics.

The term 'mommy blogs' is fairly broad and the blogs included in the study are only one organisation's view of top parenting blogs. It is possible that popular mommy blogs exist but were not identified by the parenting site Babble.com or the readers who nominated their favourite mommy blogs on the site.

Directions for future study

The area of public relations research has been dominated by studies that focus on organisational practices and the production of persuasive content within the paradigm of communication as transmission. Public relations studies also often use case studies of particular campaigns to examine persuasive content in media messages. The network analysis presented above shows the importance of studying the role of audience in the persuasive process. Much media research tends to focus on examining the influence of a single content producer on an audience member's decision making. As the interconnected nature of the mommy blogger network shows, influencers are emerging organically from within the societal groups they represent. Future projects will examine audience members as both influenced by media messages and producers of influential messages.

Conclusion

Vasquez and Taylor (2001) identified four perspectives on publics. The mass perspective and situational perspective identify publics as single populations of individuals, whereas the agenda-building and homo narrans views recognise the dynamic nature of publics. Homo narrans in particular recognises the development and maintenance of a public as an evolving process based on intergroup and organisation-public communications.

Online network analysis allows researchers to create visual representations of the interconnected nature of publics. While the process is useful in examining networks from a wide variety of theoretical perspectives, it is a particularly valuable tool in examining the

dynamic nature of publics identified through the homo narrans perspective. Within this perspective, communication is the root of cultural development. It is difficult to track constantly changing networks, but by mapping links and messages using online network analysis software, a measurable visual representation of communication practices can emerge.

Public relations theory recognises the importance of publics, but as a field of study public relations scholars have not devoted adequate resources to the study of the complex nature of publics. Online interest-based networks are particularly ripe for further study given their potential to challenge power dynamics and organise around issues of interest to the community. Both public relations researchers and public relations practitioners can improve their understanding of online, interest-based publics using basic social network analysis tools.

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¹ Since this analysis was conducted with bloggers who self-identify using the vernacular common in the United States of America, the relevant Americanised term 'mommy' is used throughout this article.