Not everyone's aboard the online public relations train:
The use (and non-use) of social media by public relations practitioners

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Abstract

While the introduction of Web 2.0 technology and social media is changing public relations practice, it is premature to presume that online public relations is now the norm across the industry. This paper reports on an exploratory, qualitative study that was undertaken to further understanding about practitioners' use and perceptions of social media. Five in-depth interviews were conducted with practitioners working for different types of organisations—agency, government, corporate, nonprofit, and a sole practitioner—to give insight into the different perceptions, experiences and challenges associated with social media. This research builds on an earlier quantitative study (Robson & James, 2011) that found practitioners were trialling social media for public relations purposes and felt their organisation and the resources available to them prevented a more in-depth, ongoing engagement with social media. The findings from this qualitative research provide further detail about the practitioners' 'trial' behaviour, specifically addressing how practitioners could foresee using social media to achieve public relations objectives, the role strategic planning and communication models play in their social media use, and the barriers practitioners perceive as preventing them from enacting social media in their organisation.
Although the insights examined in this paper cannot be generalised to other practitioners, this exploratory research extends our knowledge of social media use in public relations and reinforces a number of questions raised by other researchers in the field, suggesting themes of strategy, two-way communication, and the role of the dominant coalition need to be considered as part of a larger scale study.

Introduction

Over the past 20 years personal computers, the internet, and email have all had a dramatic impact on the day-to-day activities of the public relations practitioner. With each technology there has been much research into their effects and how they can be used to enhance public relations (Anderson & Reagan, 1992; Hill & White, 2000; Porter & Sallot, 2003). The introduction of social media platforms, where networked communities of individuals, groups and organisations communicate online on a one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-many basis (Lieuvrow & Livingstone, 2006a), has again transformed public relations practice. For practitioners the implications of these changes are considerable: social media platforms now account for the majority of internet traffic (Tancer, 2008), media outlets and journalists have embraced the technology for finding and communicating news, and crises spread rapidly around the world in minutes.

However, academic research on the relationship between social media and public relations is still in its infancy. While there has been an explosion of new studies in the past five years, they have predominantly been US-based, quantitative, and undertaken with large corporations with sizeable communication departments (e.g. Avery et al., 2010; Curtis et al., 2010; DiStaso & Bortree, 2012; Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008; Gillin, 2008; Johnson, Bazaa, & Chen, 2011; Lariscy, Avery, & Sweetser, 2009; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton,

2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011; Waters, Canfield, Foster, & Hardy, 2011). Research from Europe, the Middle East, and the Asia Pacific region is starting to be published (e.g Al-Shohaib, Al-Kandari, & Abdulrahim, 2009; Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; Avidar, 2009; de Bussy & Wolf, 2009; Fitch, 2009a; 2009b; Macnamara, 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Verhoeven, Tench, Zerfass, Moreno, & Verčič, 2012). Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) recently stated that "significant gaps remain in knowledge of how organizations are using social media and how these important new channels of communication can and should be utilized in the context of public relations and corporate communication" (p. 289), suggesting there is still much we are to yet understand about the effects of social media on the profession

The purpose of this paper is to extend current knowledge and gain a deeper understanding of individual practitioners' experiences with and perceptions of social media in their public relations practice. Through reporting the results of an exploratory, qualitative study with five practitioners from varied organisational backgrounds, we show that these practitioners have a distinct lack of strategy around their organisation's social media use and primarily use social media platforms, or believe they are best, for one-way communication and message dissemination. Additionally, the paper explores barriers to use identified in previous research and demonstrates that practitioners facing barriers are quick to blame a risk-averse management for limiting the scope of social media adoption in the organisation and much slower to look inward at their own unfamiliarity or fear. We also suggest that passion for and interest in social media plays a role in overcoming barriers to use. This research builds upon earlier quantitative research we conducted investigating the usage of social media by practitioners based in the Lower Hunter Region, Australia (Robson & James, 2011), the results of which are summarised in the literature review section of this paper.

We acknowledge that, in line with qualitative research of this nature, the results discussed here are not generalisable; however, this research contributes to a more in-depth understanding of the complex, emergent experiences practitioners and their organisations are having with social media and suggests important areas for future large-scale research.

Literature review

Social media is becoming part of everyday life for many people. In December 2012, an average of 618 million people logged on to their Facebook account daily (Facebook, 2012). In March of the same year, Twitter announced its 140 million users were sending over 340 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2012). These updates go far beyond the commonly held view of social media existing simply for 'sharing what you had for breakfast'. Research has shown individuals and groups use social media to socialise, gain information, share opinions and content, and participate in public sphere discussions in a way that was not possible with traditional media (Agarwal & Mital, 2009; Engli & Syvertsen, 2007; Lieuvrow & Livingstone, 2006b).

At the same time, mainstream mass media consumption is declining (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2008); in the United States the internet has now surpassed all other media sources except television as people's preferred outlet for news (Pew Research Center, 2008). Journalists often use social media to source the news (European Commission, 2012) and it is now common to see a Facebook post or tweet quoted in the evening news. Many organisations share information, run promotions and conduct customer service via social media, and while others elect not to directly participate in social media, their publics are likely having conversations about the organisation's brand, products and practices on social media platforms regularly. Social media has the ability to publicly highlight an organisation's shortcomings rapidly, and the reputation of

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organisations such as Netflix, Qantas, McDonald's, Dominos, Nestle, and BP has suffered some reputational damage through social media controversies. These changes suggest, in the current media climate, public relations practitioners need to be considering social media as part of their communication strategy.

Since 2007 there have been a number of studies exploring the adoption of social media by public relations practitioners. In one of the only longitudinal studies in this area, Wright and Hinson (2010) found that 96% of practitioners in the United States spent some of their time working with social media and 81% felt that social media had changed their external public relations. Outside of the United States, while actual adoption rates vary widely, studies have shown that social media platforms are of increasing importance to practitioners around the world (e.g. Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; Avidar, 2009; Fitch, 2009a; Macnamara, 2010b; 2011; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Zerfass, Fink, & Linke, 2011). Public relations appears to be moving further and further online. In fact, European practitioners perceive that by 2013, social media will be the second most important means of communication, preceded only by digital communication (Verhoeven et al., 2012).

Despite an influx of studies exploring adoption rates and popular social media platforms there has been limited application of theory in social media research. Largely, it has been the potential for two-way communication and co-created meaning that has made social media a prominent topic among public relations academics; however, few studies have specifically applied theoretical models to social media activity. Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principles is the exception here, with a number of content analyses using these principles as a theoretical foundation (e.g. Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters et al., 2011). Other research studies have drawn upon concepts from public relations theory more generally, looking for examples of relationship building, dialogue and the excellence principles, primarily two-way symmetrical communication, in social media practice (e.g. Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Evans, Twomey, & Talan, 2011; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Macnamara, 2010b; 2011; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009).

Although the literature indicates that practitioners are demonstrating awareness and knowledge of social media and its principles, organisations generally fail to make efficient and effective use of the potential for two-way symmetrical communication and dialogue (Robson & Sutherland, 2012). Even where studies demonstrate evidence of dialogue and two-way communication, questions have been raised about whether it is easier to say than do. When Macnamara's (2010b) respondents suggested "a strong commitment to dialogic and Excellence theory" (p. 32), he felt interviewees may have been reporting what they thought the researcher or others wanted to hear, and when Evans et al.'s (2011) respondents talked about relationship building, they "were offering advice based on their opinion of how Twitter functions successfully and not how their firms currently employ the tool" (p. 15). Organisations that are embracing social media platforms are primarily using social media to "gather, package and disseminate information" (Lordan, 2001, p. 584).

Kelleher (2007) proposes that while the social media environment can be daunting for public relations practitioners, if their publics are using social media platforms, practitioners should be meeting them there. However, some have argued that social media means practitioners must "develop a new form of cultural literacy" (Galloway, 2005, p. 572) as the old principles of media relations do not work effectively in this new world where everything is instantaneous, mobile, and searchable (Galloway, 2005; Macnamara, 2008). Some authors suggest the social media sphere requires organisations to be transparent, authentic, give up control, engage, collaborate, and be personal, relevant and speedy with their communication (Hearn, Foth, & Gray, 2008; Henderson & Bowley, 2010; Macnamara,

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2010a; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Waters et al., 2009).

There has been much discussion about these "social rules" (Rodriguez, 2006, p. 120) in both academic and trade literature; however, again, to date there has been little empirical or theoretical work to support these suggestions of practice. While some exploratory research has suggested social media requires authenticity, transparency, sharing and giving up control (DiStaso & Bortree, 2012; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Macnamara, 2010a; 2010b; 2011) and other principles such as two-way communication, dialogue and a strategic approach are adapted from existing theoretical frameworks as discussed above, it would seem many of these social media principles have been extracted from popular literature and social media enthusiasts. That is not to say these principles do not have merit nor that the platforms do not require these principles, just that there needs to be more research undertaken to support them, which is likely to occur as the field moves towards more explanatory social media research.

Social media can offer benefits to public relations practice, but the literature also suggests practitioners and organisations are facing a number of barriers. DiStaso, McCorkindale and Wright (2011) found that the lack of control and potential for crisis associated with social media presented a challenge to organisations and practitioners. Other constraining factors in the literature include lack of familiarity with the social media space; fear of the technology; lack of technical know-how and IT resources; information overload; fear of the requirement for transparency; lack of governance, policy, and training; lack of planning and preparation; and lack of time and commitment needed to monitor and participate (Alfonso & de Valbuena, 2006; de Bussy & Wolf, 2009; Lariscy et al., 2009; Macnamara, 2010b; 2011; Michaelidou et al., 2011).

In an earlier study, we surveyed 48 practitioners from the Lower Hunter Region in Australia about their experiences with and perceptions of social media.[1] We found that practitioners in the region had high awareness of social media and frequently used social media platforms in their personal lives and for their own professional development. However, when it came to using social media to achieve public relations objectives, only five respondents could be considered active, ongoing users of social media for this purpose, despite 86% of practitioners claiming they had used social media to achieve public relations objectives at some point in time.

When asked about what barriers or constraining factors might be limiting their social media use to achieve public relations objectives, external barriers relating to the organisation and the resources they provide the practitioner—time, staff, and budget—were ranked higher than any of the practitioner's own internal constraints such as unfamiliarity or fearing the technology. A factor analysis identified three underlying factors that practitioners identified as limiting their public relations social media use: internal and external resources, two-way symmetrical communication, and organisational culture. It appeared that these practitioners, and their organisations, were resource-challenged and risk-averse when it came to using social media to engage with their publics.

The infrequent, ad hoc usage of social media to communicate with their publics and the barriers to use required further exploration to understand the experiences of practitioners and we felt qualitative interviews investigating how and why these practitioners are using social media would build on our findings and create a more complete set of knowledge about practitioners' social media use. While the effect of social media on public relations is still not well defined, it is evident that public relations practitioners need to be educating themselves on whether or not social media can benefit their practice, the principles for participation in the social media environment and the potential constraining factors and challenges they may face.

Reflecting on this body of literature and the results of our earlier quantitative research we

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developed the following research questions to guide this study:

RQ1. To what extent, and in what circumstances, do the interviewees use social media to achieve their organisation's (or their clients') public relations objectives?

RQ2. What benefits, if any, do the interviewees see in using social media to achieve public relations objectives?

RQ3. What are the barriers or constraints, if any, limiting the interviewees from using social media to achieve public relations objectives?

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to extend the findings from our earlier survey of 48 practitioners and gain a more holistic view of the experiences practitioners were having with social media. We specifically wished to investigate the way these practitioners had used (or could foresee using) social media to achieve public relations objectives and gain further detail about their perceived barriers to social media use in their organisation that would be unobtainable with quantitative techniques.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between June and July 2010 with five public relations practitioners who have a relatively high profile in the Lower Hunter[2] public relations industry, where the quantitative study was undertaken. Purposive sampling was used whereby each practitioner was chosen from a different type of public relations background: agency, government, corporate, nonprofit and sole practitioner. Each agreed to participate in the study after being invited to do so via email. The interview questions were formulated from the findings of the earlier survey and were designed to explore practitioner experiences with social media while ensuring that the same issues were covered in each interview. While a relatively small sample, many other exploratory studies in this area have been undertaken with 10 or fewer participants (e.g. Fitch, 2009a; Fursdon & James, 2010; Kirby, 2007; Macnamara, 2010b). Such studies offer

rich insights into this relatively new phenomenon in public relations. These studies point to areas for further research and explore participants' experiences and perceptions in a way that cannot be achieved with quantitative studies (which have been more common in social media research to date).

The interviewees ranged in age from 26 to 42 and all were female. This was in line with the composition of the local industry (typical case sampling). Interviewees' job titles were communications specialist, communication manager, community relations officer, communications manager, and acquisition marketing manager. Although one practitioner worked in a marketing role, she was responsible for the organisation's social media efforts. Practitioners are referred to by organisation type from this point forward and the codes (A) agency practitioner, (C) corporate practitioner, (G) government practitioner, (NP) nonprofit practitioner, and (SP) sole practitioner are used to maintain the practitioners' anonymity as required by our university ethics approval.

Transcripts of the recorded interviews were analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by King and Horrocks (2010). The process began by identifying parts of the transcripts that would assist in answering the research questions and assigning descriptive codes to these sections, resulting in 73 initial descriptive codes. These codes were then grouped and assigned an interpretative code that defined the common meaning. From this a number of overarching themes arose that were linked back to the research questions and the broader literature to strengthen the study. Finally, data summary tables were prepared, linking participant responses to the interpretative codes and overarching themes, which assisted with determining the frequency of a theme and also cross-case analysis. By conducting a deep analysis and providing rich description of the participants' responses, we aim to provide sufficient context for the reader to grasp the minute detail and intricacies of these practitioners' experiences with social media. Although the insights in this paper cannot be generalised to any population, this research

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contributes to a more in-depth understanding of the experiences practitioners and their organisations are having with social media.

Findings

Four major findings emerged from our research, each of which will be examined in turn. The emphasis is on using the participants' own words to portray the richness and complexity around organisational social media use.

1**. The majority of interviewees used social media to achieve public relations objectives on an ad hoc basis, and all practitioners lacked a strategic approach to their use.** The majority of interviewees had used social media to achieve public relations objectives at some point in time, with two practitioners actively using social media on an ongoing basis. Ad hoc uses of social media tended to be monitoring of opinion during issues or times of crisis, for example:

> ...I didn't do it all the time, but when things broke, I'd be like, "Oh my gosh, quick, I've got to find out what bloggers are saying." (NP)

> I suppose one of my roles as the communications manager is to be across some of that external commentary that's happening…I monitor sites like Twitter for mentions of [organisation]. (G)

The corporate practitioner outlined her usage of Twitter and YouTube and had plans for a Facebook page. She had also run two campaigns that used social media, although she stressed that she was "still finding my feet". The agency practitioner had a number of social media-only clients and had implemented monitoring services for each of her clients. The sole practitioner had worked in organisations or with clients that had used social media, but had not directly been involved in any social media projects.

All practitioners indicated that social media should be integrated with other channels and that it should only be used if relevant to target publics and goals. For example:

> I just think it is a really good extra layer to add to your communications channels. (G)

> …if that works for their audience and their purpose, great, but if it doesn't, you got to pick the right…utensil for the job. (SP)

This suggests social media should be part of a wider strategy or communication plan; however, there was little evidence of practitioners having a strategy from the interviews. Even the corporate practitioner who provided the most detail into her organisation's social media activity explained:

> I've just recently set up a YouTube account... I haven't really got a strategy around it…it's probably something that we're kind of building up to…so, at the moment, it's just kind of been on the side, dabbling type stuff. Once we're out there saying we've got [social media], um, I think at the very least I'll have to have some sort of communications plan… (C)

Both the government and nonprofit practitioner reiterated that their organisations had no plan in place to implement social media in the next 12 months:

> I can't see anything changing in the next 12 months. (G)

> At this stage I don't believe they're even willing to think about it, to be honest. (NP)

2. **All participants understood the rules and ideals around social media (authenticity, interactivity, two-way communication, etc.) but they are not necessarily adopting them in their practice. The interviewees primarily used social media platforms, or believed they are best for, one-way communication and message dissemination.** Each participant referred to social media having 'rules', mentioning interaction and engagement, authenticity and transparency, and the importance of timely, relevant and interesting content. For example:

> At least you have an interaction, and it's something that we haven't had

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before…you can interact with your customer. With your client, with your friend, with whoever it is…it builds a trust. (A)

Tweeting about something that happened yesterday…doesn't seem acceptable. It's got to be real time. (C)

If you've got someone blogging on your behalf or tweeting on your behalf, you can tell straight away…The second you get found out, then there goes all your brand reputation. So, it's a big risk to not be authentic in the online environment. (G)

Interviewees argued that social media could be beneficial for crisis and internal communication, media relations and customer service. However, when it came to discussing how their organisation used social media, or how they could potentially use social media, practitioners tended to focus on one-way communication models. Four out of five practitioners suggested social media was an effective channel to promote events or competitions, while some practitioners also said that they could see the benefit in disseminating messages via social media if they could disable responses; for example:

…Something like Twitter where we could effectively disable response, and it's just a one-way medium, would be beneficial for us because we wouldn't have the concern about engagement, public posting. It would be just an additional communication channel for us to be able to say: Here's a media release we have put up. Here is a link to it. Here is a recruitment drive we are doing. Here is a new initiative… (G)

…just use it to just push out information. Don't worry about the collaborative end if you're scared of that. Just use it to do that and then build a relationship with people and then move them along the continuum. (SP)

The sole practitioner also believed, "social media is simply an electronic way of doing exactly what the community forums, and the feedback lines, and all of those other mechanisms that were designed to create that loop", however, when talking about how she would integrate social media into her current project she said:

…I might even look at establishing a Twitter account for that project, so that we can *get messages to them quicker*. [emphasis added] (SP)

Only the corporate practitioner demonstrated any evidence of two-way communication and engagement via social media:

…there was somebody on Twitter who twittered…@[organisation name] so, therefore, directly speaking to us…basically she just wasn't happy with the way that she'd been treated in the phone call. So, given that I had her full name…I could then talk to my complaints team and pass the information through to them…She'd mentioned the name of the person that rang her…That particular consultant was trained in, maybe, what was appropriate and given feedback…I was able to go back, and go, 'Thanks for the feedback. I've fed it back. It's gone right through to the source'. I can't remember if she replied, but I remember she, at least, posted something that said… along the lines of 'had an issue, but [organisation] sorted it out, happy about that'. (C)

Using social media for conflict resolution and the positive outcome for both parties also suggests evidence of symmetrical communication as it is defined in the excellence theory (J. E. Grunig, L.A. Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). On the other hand, in discussing one of her social media campaigns—a sporting partnership website that had a live Twitter feed which she managed—the corporate practitioner revealed:

…there's a live Twitter feed from [the player's] Twitter, which essentially I

manage…but it's essentially, it's got his name on it. The [sports team] PR guy sends us a Tweet every Monday from [the player] because he talks to all the players…So, [lowers voice] I'm not sure if [player] says it or not, but it comes from him…I assume [he is happy for it to happen]. Who knows? ...I'm sure they told him at the beginning and he was okay with it. (C)

This suggests a disregard for the principle of authenticity and transparency discussed earlier. Further, her discussion around this initiative implied that it was primarily used for one-way communication:

Every now and then, we'll intersperse ['his' tweets] with one about the competition. [I get] a lot of people talking back to him and commenting on the games...and all the people following and stuff…I've kept trying to tell our corporate affairs team about it…I don't know if [sporting team] would want to [respond]. (C)

3. **The majority of interviewees were quick to blame management for limiting the scope of social media adoption in the organisation.** Interviewees were quick to cite external barriers, such as management's lack of understanding and familiarity, organisational culture, fear of two-way communication, and resources, as the major barriers preventing them from using social media to achieve their public relations objectives; for example:

[Management are] not particularly technologically savvy…I think they're too scared…that may well change with a top-tier management change…. That's the only thing I can really see that's holding things up. (NP)

The risk-averse culture is the massive one for us…it is very much an organisational culture…And I think a lot of it is resourcing as well. We could probably do it better if we had staff people assigned to it. We don't

even have a web unit, so we are nowhere near having social media position. (G)

They see PR very much as presenting a brand and an image…We've spent a hundred years saying how good we can be at doing that. If we now go to them and say, 'Hey, let's just let the audience play with us a bit more and give them some power', I'm not sure there would be many organisations that will embrace it fully to begin with. (SP)

Only the corporate practitioner overtly expressed her organisation as having a progressive management team, and she found this enabled her to 'trial' social media:

I'm lucky that our management's quite progressive and open to things, that it was a case of me essentially going, 'Look, I think it would be great to do this. There's little risk associated; um little time, resources associated. These are the time benefits, I think. Can I do it?' They were like, 'Yeah, sure'. (C)

Despite three interviewees having manager in their titles, interviewees often used terminology that distanced themselves from management; for example, the nonprofit practitioner referred to having to "go to management" (NP). Even the sole practitioner with 20 years experience said (referring to her last role as a government practitioner):

When you work in a big organisation for a very, very long time, a lot of your time is spent working out how to actually get upper management to listen. (SP)

4. **The majority of interviewees suggested that passion for and interest in social media plays an important role in overcoming barriers to use.** While practitioners devoted more time to discussing organisational barriers, three practitioners also described internal barriers. Some practitioners felt a sense of inertia with the communication tactics they used and were somewhat reluctant to introduce new communication channels; for example:

…it's not like we've got a whole team of practitioners who are inspired and engaged and informed. It's kind of a sense of inertia, like, 'Let's just keep doing things the way we've always done them. (G)

Others felt that they or their team lacked the technical know-how to implement social media in their organisations; for example:

…[technology]'s still a bit of a burden to me…If something goes wrong, it's like, oh, I don't know how to fix this still. Whereas if, you know, media, if something goes wrong, I know what I'm doing. (NP)

This could explain why practitioners, despite feeling social media was important to public relations, lacked the interest or confidence to show management the relevance of new technologies and advocate for the inclusion of social media in the organisation's communication strategy. Both the agency and corporate practitioners, who were using social media to achieve public relations objectives on an ongoing basis, cited that they had a passion or interest in social media:

It's something that I'm interested in and I think that's the way everything's going to go…I want to be there…it's an area of interest. I find it all really fascinating. (C)

Conversely, the nonprofit practitioner did not consider herself passionate and felt that this was impacting on the organisation's preparedness to implement social media. She suggested that someone with a passion might find it easier to overcome the barriers she was facing:

…to successfully tap into social media you do have to have someone who has that passion. And I guess in a way, while I say we should do this…we don't amongst us have a particular passion or interest in that technology side of things. (NP)

The government practitioner also reiterated the role of passion and interest:

…particularly in government, you need someone to drive that initiative. I think there are not enough people working in public relations in the government sector who are invested in this new technology, or educated about the new technology. And without those kinds of key players really pushing for this to be integrated as part of their communications, I can't see anything changing in the next 12 months. (G)

The agency practitioner also suggested that interested public relations practitioners like her needed to lead the way in organisations:

I think you'll find that there're always one or two people in a circle who know more than others…who want to learn about it and want to see the changes and want to see different things. We'll have to lead it, because no one else will. (A)

Discussion

This section provides interpretative insights into the findings of this study and discusses the practical and theoretical implications that arise in light of this research. The implications of these findings are intended to extend our knowledge of social media use in public relations by building on the findings of other researchers in the field and suggesting areas for further academic research.

Social media strategy (or lack thereof)

In our earlier quantitative study (Robson & James, 2011) we found the practitioners surveyed were familiar with the concept of social media and likely to have used social media for public relations purposes at some point in time, but few practitioners could be considered active, ongoing users of social media. Similar to others (e.g. Avery et al., 2010; Kitchen & Panopoulos, 2010; Macnamara, 2010b), we felt that these practitioners were trialling social media to evaluate how it might be incorporated into their ongoing public relations activity. The findings from this qualitative study extend this concept further indicating that a key defining factor of these 'triallers' is that there is neither a communication strategy around their

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organisation's social media use, nor a plan in place to incorporate social media into the organisation's communication in the future. While interviewees acknowledged that social media needs to be integrated with the other organisational communication efforts, there was little evidence of practitioners having any strategy or communication plan behind their social media usage. While Holtz (2002) recognises that most organisations and public relations practitioners start with tactics when in comes to online public relations, excellence theory and strategic management proponents suggest that practitioners need to develop a tailored strategy to ensure social media and the resources allocated to them are being used effectively and efficiently. As James (2009) states, "if everyday public relations is undertaken without strategic intent, one would need to wonder why it would be undertaken at all and if such activities could be called public relations" (p. 111). Elsewhere in the literature there is little evidence of a strategic approach to social media. Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) and Gillin (2008) both found that less than 30% of practitioners had a strategic approach to their social media use. Instead most organisations seem to apply a 'build it and they will come' attitude to their social media and just put whatever information they have elsewhere into their social media presence and claim they are embracing social media. This appears to be the case with some of the practitioners interviewed. Both the sole practitioner and the nonprofit practitioner talked about taking existing information (weekly update emails and event invitations respectively) and publishing that information via social media.

However, in this study, the corporate practitioner actually referred to her organisation's social media use as a 'trial' and implied that a more integrated strategy was intended in the near future. Additionally, our quantitative research showed a mediating relationship between personal, professional development and public relations use of social media, suggesting a "natural evolution of adoption" (Porter, Sweetser Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007, p. 94) between these

types of use. Practitioners start by using social media in their personal life, progressing to utilising social media for their professional development—establishing a personal brand online and building their network of like-minded professionals. They then begin to use social media to achieve public relations objectives. When reflecting on both the quantitative and qualitative studies, the results hint at a 'familiarity threshold' with social media use: practitioners tend to use social media in an ad hoc manner to increase their familiarity and understand how they can use it to achieve public relations objectives before implementing a specific strategy or integrating it with other communication tactics. Further research needs to investigate the relationship between practitioner knowledge and confidence and social media strategy, as well as the role strategy plays in contributing to achieving public relations objectives or having 'success' with social media. As specific questions relating to strategy or planning were not asked in the original quantitative study, these issues should be explored in future survey research.

Approach to communication

Dialogue and two-way symmetrical communication have been held as the ideal public relations models for over 25 years now (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984), and social media has been promoted in the academic literature as one of the best ways to open up the organisation to dialogue and build ongoing relationships with publics (J. E. Grunig, 2009; Kelleher, 2007; Kelleher & Miller, 2006), yet there is still very little empirical evidence of this model being used in practice. Interviewees discussed some of the principles or 'rules' of social media, which suggests they knew how to implement social media in an organisational context. However, practitioners appeared to completely disregard this when it came to either their own social media efforts, or, how they thought their organisation could use social media. Practitioners tweeted on behalf of others without disclosing the fact, claimed they would use social media if they could "disable response[s]" (G), suggested social media platforms were great to disseminate messages and for "promoting their events" (NP), and had

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used social media to "to try and convert them to sales" (C). Although the corporate practitioner provided a good example of two-way symmetrical communication, she made no mention of building relationships, dialogue or customer service being primary objectives for her organisation's current or future social media activity. At this stage there is little evidence to suggest these public relations practitioners are using social media to build dialogic relationships, or that they wish to use social media to facilitate two-way communication in the future.

This is similar to findings in other studies (Alfonso & de Valbuena, 2006; Macnamara, 2010a; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011). Verhoeven, Tench, Zerfass, Moreno, and Verčič (2012) found practitioners ranked the opportunity for open dialogue with social media behind content, ability to measure costs and benefits, and faster retrieval and dissemination of messages. Practitioners in our quantitative study ranked building relationships as the eighth biggest benefit of social media, and two-way communication thirteenth, with benefits more associated with marketing such as targeting, brand positioning and reach all ranking higher. J.E. Grunig (2009) states "many practitioners are using the new media in the same ways they used the old" (p. 1), and this certainly seems to be the case with the interviewees in this study. It seems practitioners are still privileging message dissemination and image when it comes to social media.

Constraining factors
Interviewees primarily felt that it was their organisation and its management that were constraining their use of social media to achieve public relations objectives. Organisations were concerned about the lack of control over messaging which suggests a possible reason why social media platforms were predominately used for one-way communication. DiStaso, et al. (2011) surveyed 25 United States practitioners in 2010 and also found control to be a major factor in considering social media. If the management team has a risk-averse culture or

has encountered anecdotal reports of social media disasters, they are unlikely to support social media initiatives.

The prominence of organisational barriers may suggest why there was a lack of strategy around current use, or future adoption, of social media for public relations purposes. Comments about "going to management" suggest that these practitioners may not have decision-making power at a strategic level and hence, they were quick to blame those above them for constraining the organisation's social media use. Without the support of the dominant coalition, it is almost impossible for a practitioner to implement communication programmes at a strategic level, thus limiting the success of any social media efforts and the public relations department itself (Dozier, 1992; James, 2007). However, the nonprofit practitioner said, "Which, I guess, I could say it's our team's fault for not putting it on their radar", acknowledging that the one of the key roles of public relations is providing counsel to management. As Dozier (1992) explains, "if practitioners are to help organizations adapt to changes in the environment, they must participate in the management decision-making process, not simply implement decisions made by others" (p. 342). These findings differ markedly from another study of five senior Australian public relations practitioners who felt that both themselves and their management were highly or moderately knowledgeable about social media, and that they were committed to using social media for dialogue and relationship building (Macnamara, 2010b). The role of the dominant coalition and decision-making power in adopting and implementing social media warrants further investigation and suggests an area for future empirical research. Interviews with senior management about the social media adoption process would allow us to see points of connection and points of dissent in their thoughts compared with practitioner-focused research studies such as this one.

The role of the social media champion
While practitioners were familiar with social media, this did not necessarily translate into being comfortable implementing social media

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on behalf of their organisation. Passion seemed to play an interesting role in the uptake of social media at work. Organisations may benefit from employing a social media enthusiast or champion to overcome the barriers and kick-start the organisation's adoption process. Effective champions can assist with adoption of innovations in organisations because they are confident, enthusiastic and persistent in obtaining the support of the dominant coalition and key stakeholders (Howell, 2005, p. 108).

Sweetser and Kelleher (2011) also established that practitioners who were motivated about social media were more likely to be proactive in implementing social media. "It may make just as much sense to look for a social media enthusiast to practice public relations as it does to try to 'convert' a non-motivated public relations person to handle an organization's social media efforts" (Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011, p. 428). Fitch (2009a) found that three Singaporean public relations agencies had done exactly this in order to introduce social media to their clients. Although Macnamara (2010b) found that Australian public relations practitioners had mixed views on specialist positions, such positions could assist with practitioner concerns about the speed of response and impact on workload that have been identified in the literature. This enthusiast or champion could be an external consultant; in our earlier quantitative study we found that consultants use more social media platforms and are less likely to fear two-way communication than their in-house counterparts (Robson & James, 2011).

This research has a number of implications. From a theoretical perspective this qualitative study, like several others, suggests that online public relations practice shows little or no evidence of a strategic approach that embraces two-way symmetrical communication. There is a distinct 'disconnect' between reports of practice and normative theoretical perspectives and this should be further explored: is it the theory or the practice (or both) that needs to be addressed? While some may suggest that the

ideal of two-way symmetrical communication needs rethinking in light of social media (e.g. Phillips & Young, 2009), we agree with J.E. Grunig (2009) when he says "rather than challenging the Excellence theories, I believe that the digital media actually facilitate the theories and make it much easier for organisations to apply them—if, indeed, they choose to do so" (p. 6). However, further investigation is required to understand how practitioners can overcome barriers and move towards adopting social media for relationship building and two-way communication, as the current assumption seems to be that if the technology makes it possible, it will happen. Firstly, practitioners may require more education and training to assist them in applying the principles of social media discussed in this paper to their actual practice. This has implications for public relations education. By providing students with case studies demonstrating how social media can be used for dialogue and relationship building and emphasising social media platforms are not useful only for message dissemination and promotion, educators can produce graduates who are better prepared to embrace a strategic approach to social media. Secondly, a social media champion may help practitioners overcome external and internal barriers they are facing. In the future, action research that introduced a champion into an organisation would be useful to the public relations discipline in determining the effect this role has on overcoming barriers to adoption and making ideal social media practice a reality.

Conclusion

In this paper we show that while practitioners in this study were engaging with social media as part of their public relations practice, the majority lacked a strategic approach to their current use and their plans for future use. While ad hoc use is understandable in the familiarisation stage (Holtz, 2002), it is of concern that only one practitioner had future plans to develop a strategic approach to her organisation's social media efforts. Interviewees primarily used social media

platforms, or believed they were best for, one-way communication and message dissemination, failing to embrace the two-way nature of the technology and the principles of excellent public relations practice.

Additionally, none of the practitioners interviewed appeared to be part of the organisation's dominant coalition and were quick to blame management for constraining the organisation's social media adoption. This suggests that these practitioners may not necessarily have the power to adopt social media and implement a strategic approach as is suggested in the literature. If the dominant coalition are not experienced with two-way symmetrical communication via other channels in the organisation they are unlikely to be comfortable opening the organisation up to feedback and dialogue via social media. On the other hand, this study also shows a practitioner's own uncertainty around social media and its ability to open the organisation up to two-way communication can prevent them from providing counsel to management and putting forward a business case for social media in their organisation. Finally, passion appears to play an important role in social media uptake and practitioners who were interested in social media and keen to learn more, seemed to have made more effort to overcome unfamiliarity and uncertainty to incorporate social media into their organisation's communication activity.

These findings suggest several implications that should be explored in further research. Firstly, while J.E. Grunig and others continue to suggest that social media provides the perfect environment to enact two-way symmetrical communication and relationship building, the continuing lack of empirical evidence needs to be investigated. Do these theories need to rethink some assumptions or do public relations practitioners need to become better acquainted with the theory to improve their practice? While we do believe that social media offers new opportunities for practitioners to engage in dialogue with their publics, mere access to the technology is not enough. Further research is needed to understand how practitioners can overcome barriers they may be facing and move towards adopting social media for relationship building and two-way communication.

Secondly, this study and others mentioned within this paper show a low level of strategy around organisational use of social media, despite it also being emphasised as being necessary for successful public relations practice in the excellence and strategic management theories. Further research to investigate the role strategy plays in having 'success' with social media is needed to determine just how important a strategic approach is. Additionally, the role of the dominant coalition in adopting and implementing social media warrants further investigation and suggests an area for future empirical research. Finally, at this point in time, indications are that organisations could be justified in recruiting for a social media position if their current public relations department is lacking the skills, knowledge, and most importantly, the passion to put forward recommendations for the adoption or non-adoption of social media. Future research that explored the effect and success of the social media champion role would be useful to the discipline.

This paper builds on our previous quantitative research into social media use (Robson & James, 2011) and supports other studies from Australia and internationally by providing further insight into the 'hows' and 'whys' of practitioner social media use and non-use. While we acknowledge that this study has a number of methodological limitations, particularly due to its small sample size, the research is a valuable qualitative pilot study that contributes to a more in-depth understanding of individual practitioners' experiences with social media in their practice and indicates important areas for future large-scale public relations research.

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[1] For the full results and discussion of this study see Robson, P., & James, M. (2011). Trialling PR2.0: An exploratory study of the non-capital city practitioner's social media use. Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal, 12(2), 19–40.

[2] For specific detail about the Lower Hunter public relations industry see Robson, P., & James, M. (2011). Trialling PR2.0: An exploratory study of the non-capital city practitioner's social media use. Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal, 12(2), 19–40.