

A Qualitative Examination of the Impact of Social Media on Media Relations Practice

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of social media on media relations practice through the use of depth interviews with public relations practitioners (n=33) and journalists (n=36) to determine what the impact of social media has been on the practitioner-journalist relationship. It finds that while the majority of practitioners interviewed were optimistic about the impact of social media, most journalists were not enthusiastic about the changes precipitated by new platforms. Themes found in previous quantitative research on the impact of social media did seem to hold under qualitative scrutiny, although several new themes did emerge.

INTRODUCTION

While the impact of new communication technologies has not changed the purpose of public relations, or its strategic value to organizations, it has caused a significant shift in how public relations is practiced in particular areas. Specifically, the proliferation of social media has allowed public relations practitioners to more directly communicate with various stakeholder groups. New communication tactics have emerged in this era of information, and many practitioners have adopted social media as an integral aspect of their communication campaigns. Audiences, for the most part, no longer simply *accept* that organizations communicate via social media, they have come to *expect* it.

One area that has not seen widespread adoption of social media as a communication tool is media relations (Wilson & Supa, 2013). And while many critics have questioned the continuing value of traditional media relations tools (such as the press release), practitioners today continue to be actively engaged in media relations as a primary area of practice (Darnowski, Distaso, Fussell Sisco, & McCorkindale, 2013). The relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists, then, remains a very important aspect of many campaigns, and thus for many organizations. Effectively managing these relationships often means that the public relations practitioner must constantly maintain communication, build credibility and trust, and provide the journalist with information that is relevant about the organization (Howard & Mathews, 2006). It would

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seem, then, that social media provides an excellent vehicle for communication between public relations practitioners and journalists. But as Wilson and Supa (2013) found, this is not the case.

This study seeks to explore why public relations practitioners and journalists are not using social media to a large degree in media relations, through qualitative interviews. It extends previous work in the area of media relations (Aronoff, 1975; Kopenhaver, Martinson & Ryan, 1984; Supa & Zoch, 2009; Wilson & Supa, 2013; Zoch & Supa, 2014) that examines how public relations practitioners and journalists relate to each other, and also work that has examined the impact of social media on public relations practice (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser & Howes, 2009; Taylor & Kent, 2010). The goal of this study is to better understand whether social media can play a role in the relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Substantial research has been conducted in the area of media relations, however, a relatively small subset of that literature has focused specifically on how public relations practitioners and journalists view each other (Aronoff, 1975; Kopenhaver, Martinson & Ryan, 1984; Larsson, 2009; Supa & Zoch, 2009, Wilson & Supa, 2013). A more substantial body of literature exists on the impact of technology on the media relations relationship (Briones, et al, 2011; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008; Steyn, et al, 2010; Waters, Tindall & Morton, 2010; 2011), on specific cases of organizations' use of social media to create relationships with various audiences (Curtis, et al, 2010; Smith, 2010;) and the overall importance of social media in public relations (DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011; Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor & Kent, 2010). However, very few studies have been conducted that directly examine the impact of new media technologies (social media) on the practitioner-journalist relationship using qualitative methodology. This study seeks to answer that gap in the body of public relations scholarship.

The Media Relations Relationship

Larsson (2009) states "the news media are the most outstanding, common, and important channel for interest groups to get their messages out and influence their surroundings (p.132). And while establishing relationships with journalists and telling an organizations' stories in the media is only one way to establish reputation and build awareness, media relations remains an integral part of any public relations program. The goal of media relations is to create "systematic, planned, purposeful and mutually beneficial relationship[s] between journalists in the mass media and public relations practitioners" (Supa & Zoch, 2009). This is done primarily by the public relations practitioner acting as a credible source for journalists, respecting the needs of those journalists, and providing useful information in a timely manner (Howard & Mathews, 2006).

Researchers have studied the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists for many years (Aronoff, 1975; Kopenhaver, Martinson & Ryan, 1984; Supa

& Zoch, 2009) and have determined that little change has occurred in the relationship between the professions over the past 30 years. These studies continuously show that journalists tend to distrust public relations practitioners, that practitioners are not considered on an equal level with regard to disseminating information, and that journalists consider public relations and media relations efforts to be essentially equivalent to advertising efforts put forth by an organization. However, Supa and Zoch (2009) found that journalists tended to hold public relations practitioners with whom they worked with regularly to be held in higher regard than practitioners whom they did not know.

Overall, there seems to be a consistent theme in research that examines the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists, that being that while positive media relations can be achieved on an individual relationship basis, on the whole, journalists often have negative perceptions of public relations practitioners.

Technology and Media Relations

New media and communication technologies have had a profound impact on public relations, in particular how organizations are able to communicate with their multiple publics. A multitude of studies have examined the phenomenon of social media, and its impact on different types of organizations. Curtis (et al, 2009) examined adoption of social media among nonprofit organizations, concluding that social media can be a very effective tool for those organizations. Briones (et al, 2011) went into depth further on this topic, examining how the Red Cross uses social media as a tool for building relationships.

Beyond examining different changes to organizations and their communication efforts due to social media, other scholars have examined how it has changed the communication dimension. Hanna (et al, 2011) indicates that consumers are now more likely to become co-creators of messages and content, and in turn help to create organizational brands. Diga and Kelleher (2009) reported that public relations practitioners who use social media more regularly had greater perceptions of their ability to communicate, while Freberg (et al, 2011) examined how social media influencers are becoming an important aspect of establishing credibility for organizations. Distaso, McCorkindale and Wright (2011) explored how public relations executives approach social media and measure it for their organizations. Clearly, the examination of new communication technologies is of great interest to scholars and practitioners in public relations.

However, few studies to date have examined the role of social media in the media relations process. Gonzalez and Ruiz (2006) examined the impact of technology in terms of online press rooms, extending on an international scale the work Callison (2003) had conducted with Fortune 500 companies. Waters, Tindall and Morton (2010, 2011) examined a reversal in traditional media relations practice through the use of online platforms, coining the term “media catching” to describe the idea that journalists actively seek out public relations information.

Only one study found directly examines the impact of social media on media relations practice. Bajkiewicz, Kraus and Hong (2011) used interviews with public relations practitioners to determine the impact of social media on media relations practice. They found that the practitioners in their study were using social media to communicate with journalists, particularly with those outside of their normal sphere of influence. Their participants also seemed to indicate that social media was changing the direction of traditional media relations. While their study provides an excellent grounding and some clear themes come away from the study, they interviewed only a relatively small number of public relations practitioners, and did not interview journalists.

This study seeks to pick up where the previous left off, increasing the number of practitioner interviews and including interviews with journalists. Its goal is to determine if similar themes are found, and more importantly, what journalists think of the impact of social media on the media relations function of public relations. It is hoped that this study will provide a baseline for future research in examining the impact of social media on media relations, and perhaps to a larger extent, public relations as a whole.

Therefore, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What impact has social media had on the media relations function of public relations?

RQ2a: Are the themes Bajkiewicz, Kraus and Hong (2011) found prevalent outside of their original sample, including journalists?
and **RQ2b:** What additional themes emerge from the current study?

RQ3: How can public relations best leverage social media when attempting to form relationships with journalists?

METHODOLOGY

A convenience sample of public relations practitioners and journalists were used to determine the impact of social media on the relationship between the professions. Participants primarily were located in the Northeastern part of the United States – though many had experience working in various parts of the country.

A total of 69 (33 public relations practitioners, 36 journalists) semi-structured interviews were conducted. Each group were asked a series of three baseline questions regarding their experience, and then each were asked a series of questions relating to their relationship with the other profession, how changes in communication technology has impacted that relationship, and finally how they felt their profession is perceived by the other. Interviews were conducted in-person, over the phone and via email (participant choice). Follow-up emails were used to clarify any questions with email participants. Each in-person and phone interview lasted approximately one half hour.

Interview responses were transcribed and then coded using open, axial and selective coding (Curtin, 1999). The unit of analysis was the sentence.

RESULTS

The demographics of the individual practitioners and journalists varied across the spectrum, with the exception of geographic location, with most respondents primarily practicing in major cities in the Northeast part of the United States, though several of the journalists were located in smaller communities. Thirty-nine of the interviews were conducted with females, twenty of whom were public relations practitioners. Years of experience varied from less than one year to more than 25 years. Many of the participants had at least some formal (higher education) training in their field, though this varied from as little as one class to graduate degrees on the other end of the spectrum (in fact, several participants held advanced degrees).

In answering research question one, “*What impact has social media had on the media relations function of public relations?*”, there were significant differences as to how journalists and public relations practitioners responded. The response from practitioners indicated that the increase of social media has made significant changes to media relations. In fact, only four of the thirty-three practitioners interviewed said that social media did not create a change in media relations. For the rest, the responses can be summed up with one practitioner’s response:

Definitely...it’s an opportunity to talk with reporters and establish a relationship in a less formal way. You can talk with them about anything from the weather, to a mutual favorite sport to the industry they cover. You can show them love by retweeting an article they wrote. Some reporters even tweet media opportunities that you can respond to right then and there...Overall, social media helps you see what kind of person a reporter is. It humanizes them, which in my opinion, makes it easier to talk with them when it comes to client work.

Many practitioners commented that social media made it easier to find out more information about journalists, with one exemplar statement “social media is a great way to gauge what a journalist is actually interested in.” Others stated that the relationship had become more “personal” because of social media, or that they had become “closer” to journalists. One practitioner stated, “I think we’re closer than ever to journalists now. Just like we’re closer to celebrities with Twitter handles.”

Journalists, however, were less agreeable that social media has caused a change in the media relations relationship. Only five of the thirty-six study journalists who participated indicated a substantial change in their relationship with public relations practitioners because of social media. Even those that indicated that a major change had taken place may not signal good news for public relations practitioners. One journalist lamented both the advantages and disadvantages of social media:

Social media is both a gift and a burden. It helps proliferate, well, everything, and allows for stories and voices that might never have been heard to take the spotlight. At the

same time, there's just so much junk that gets passed around on social media that it's hard to keep up with, and it's hard to find within the muck what you're really looking for.

Another journalist stated that the rise of social media made the relationship "less professional and more personal, that public relations people don't always follow the protocols they used to follow in the days prior to [social media]." This journalist indicated they felt closer to practitioners because of this change.

For the most part, though, the journalists interviewed in this study did not indicate a significant change in the media relations relationship because of social media. Many journalists indicated it hadn't changed the relationship at all, and of those who said it had changed only slightly, it was usually because, as one journalist said, "it's another medium they use to bug me." Another indicated that the relationship has not changed "at least with PR pros... [but] the number of amateurs who think referring a journalist to Twitter or a website is public relations has skyrocketed."

Overall, it would seem that the results of this study indicate that the impact of social media on the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists depends on which profession, and which professional, you ask. For many practitioners, the change has been substantive, but journalists are less enthusiastic about the changes social media has produced.

Research question two asked if the themes Bajkiewicz, Kraus and Hong (2011) found were prevalent outside of their original sample, and if those themes were present among journalists. The themes established in the original study found that practitioners were "using social media with reporters," that it created an "unfiltered message," the indication that practitioners "have to use social media," that modern social media required a "balance" between social media and traditional techniques, and that practitioners who did not use social media were in for a "rude awakening" (p.330).

The themes identified by Bajkiewicz, Kraus and Hong (2011) did appear in the current study, though only with the responses given by public relations practitioners. An additional theme also emerged from the practitioners in this study, that of relationship-building potential. Many practitioners noted that social media allows them to get to know journalists better. One response seemed to be an archetype of this sentiment:

Social media has changed things tremendously. You can build a relationship with people you have never even met. I can comment about something client related or I can comment about how the people's kid has the stomach flu and I can say, 'hey, mine too! He hasn't slept all night and is running a fever.' Do you understand? That will stand out in their head next time I pitch to them. They'll remember that I am a real person with a life and family and I am not just some annoying PR professional shoving meaningless stories down their throat.

While all of the themes identified in previous research did manifest in some way, the idea of relationship-building potential was the most prevalent in the current study.

The themes, however, did not hold up when it came to examining journalists' responses. In fact, only one of the themes appeared in one response. That theme being the concept of "have to use" social media, where one journalist stated "It's so easy for PR professionals to form relationships with me, without so much as a single phone call or in-person meeting, that if they don't, it comes off as unprofessional at best, undedicated at worst." But this was not a prevalent sentiment among the other journalists interviewed. For many journalists, different themes emerged during the interviews.

One theme that was fairly consistent was the concept of professionalism, in that journalists have expectations from their social media relationships with public relations professionals. One journalist explicated this by saying if a practitioner were to initiate a relationship "based on finding shared interests beyond work, then engaging in shop talk – that merits a rapid unfriending." Another talked about the ease in cross-promoting in terms of professional courtesy. Public relations practitioners can "retweet or post our articles...it helps us a lot." Also grouped into the idea of professionalism were journalists' responses that complained about practitioners who constantly "bug" them on social media. These journalists seemed amenable to the idea of interacting with practitioners via social media, but had not had entirely positive relationships thus far.

Another theme that seemed to rise from the journalists' responses was the related idea of transparency. One journalist commented that since social media interactions often take place in a public forum, there is the potential to "keep everybody honest." Several respondents indicated that social media allows them to research the public relations practitioner, in order to "verify" who they are. And while transparency is certainly a part of professionalism, the responses in this study merited it as a separate theme.

So the response to research question two is that the themes identified by Bajkiewicz, Kraus and Hong (2011) did hold up with public relations practitioners, with the additional theme of relationship-building. They did not hold, however, with journalists, with the themes of professionalism and transparency being most prevalent with that group.

Research question three asked how public relations can best leverage social media when attempting to form relationships with journalists? While none of the questions directed toward journalists directly addressed this, we can infer some best practices based on the responses given during the interviews. First, it is clear based on the themes that emerged from the interviews that professionalism and transparency are important aspects of building relationships with journalists on social media.

Another important aspect that the interviews revealed is the concept of not using social media to harangue journalists. One journalist commented that using "too much pressure" will ultimately lead them to reject information from that source. Several journalists indicated that patience is a quality that public relations practitioners need to have in abundance. One journalist summed up this concept:

As an editor, I can't always use a release or new item that a PR professional sends me, even if I tell them I'm planning to, because I often have breaking news that just comes first in the paper. It's also annoying when PR people follow up too aggressively to see if something has run in the paper or if I'm covering it. I have a demanding schedule, and that kind of communication is not only detrimental to my schedule, it's detrimental to my relationship with that professional.

That same journalist mentioned that patience and courtesy are the two most important aspects of a public relations professional.

The other characteristics mentioned in the interviews as being necessary in effectively leveraging social media are the same characteristics often reported as being important in all aspects of media relations, either those that use modern communication technologies or more traditional methods, and will therefore be elaborated upon in the discussion.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine the impact of social media on the media relations function of public relations through a qualitative perspective, using interviews with both public relations practitioners and journalists. This effort represents one of the only examples where the journalists' perspective was sought, and it is the hope of the researcher that this will spark future research studies that examine media relations from the journalists' perspective. What is needed in the future is a more comprehensive study that can truly determine the impact of social media on media relations, and the importance that journalists place on social media in the public relations – journalist relationship. Future studies might also incorporate quantitative methodology in order to increase reliability which may lead us to theory building in the field.

Conclusions

This study had findings very similar to those of previous studies with regard to better managing the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists. The idea that public relations practitioners must provide valuable information (Howard & Mathews, 2006) that is newsworthy (Zoch & Supa, 2014) and targeted (Supa & Zoch, 2009) is not a new concept in effective media relations. However, these same characteristics also apply when communicating via social media. New communication technologies, in this way, do not change the relationship dynamics, but they may highlight their importance because of the speed at which the communication is taking place.

One area that seemed to potentially have an impact on the media relations relationship is the idea that social media allows for practitioners and journalists to establish a more personal relationship. Several practitioners and journalists indicated the possibility of enhancing the media relations process by integrating more of a personal relationship; however, this must be balanced with an understanding that it is still a professional

relationship, and that professionalism must still be adhered to, lest the practitioner be considered one of the “PR unprofessionals” some journalists mentioned in the research.

Previous research has determined that not all journalists are necessarily open to using social media to engage with public relations practitioners (Wilson & Supa, 2013). This study confirmed this, as some journalists clearly stated they did not use social media to interact with public relations professionals. It falls on the public relations practitioner, then, to determine the best way to interact with individual journalists. When a preferred method cannot be determined, either through previous experience, colleagues, or online database information, the default should probably not be social media, but rather a more traditional form of communication.

Overall, the practice of media relations will continue to evolve as new media technologies continue to be developed and adopted. And though some pundits question the value of media relations, preferring instead “direct to consumer” communication, content marketing, or other methods that attempt to reach audiences besides media relations. However, media relations as we traditionally understand it, is not only still a key function of public relations, it is still one of the best ways to establish credibility, trust and reputation with key audiences. The integration of social media into the media relations mix has the potential to elevate the mutual benefit for both practitioners and journalists, but at least for the current study, that potential has not yet been realized.

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