

Time to bridge the gaps: issues with current social media research in public relations

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Abstract

Social media is a relatively new phenomenon in the field of public relations, and yet it is having a considerable impact on how organisations communicate with their publics and the everyday practice of public relations. Since 2007, there has been an explosion in studies investigating the adoption and use of social media by public relations practitioners. However, despite the popularity of social media studies in academic literature, significant gaps remain in our knowledge of how organisations are using social media. This paper critiques the current body of social media research in public relations, highlighting areas where research is lacking, and suggests future directions for the discipline. Specifically this paper highlights three areas where significant gaps in social media research currently exist: scope, theory application and development, and methodology and calls for more research on how social media is enacted in organisations and how it informs the cultural practice of public relations inside the organisation.

Keywords: public relations, social media

Since the mid-2000s public relations academics and researchers have been interested in the effect social media is having on organisations and the way in which they communicate with their publics, resulting in a number of studies investigating the adoption and use of social media by public relations practitioners. These studies have found that the majority of practitioners are engaging with social media as part of their day-to-day public relations work, and that most practitioners are having similar experiences and facing common challenges around the globe (Robson & Sutherland, 2012). Strategy, governance, measurement and the opportunity for two-way symmetrical communication are recurring topics in the current body of literature.

However, despite the popularity of social media studies in public relations, 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’ (2012: 289). The purpose of this paper is to extend on this statement, highlighting some significant gaps within the current body of social media research in public relations and suggesting future research that will enable the discipline to have a better understanding of the role of social media in public relations. This paper demonstrates that current social media research is lacking in three key areas. Firstly, much of the social media research in public relations has been narrowly focused on adoption rates and practitioner perceptions; to date our understanding of how organisations actually use social media as part of their public relations practice is limited. Secondly, there is a lack of empirical research that applies public relations theories to organisational social media use. Finally, significant research gaps are evident in methodology. Current studies tend to privilege quantitative methodologies and rely on self-reporting, and there is a shortage of longitudinal studies and those with extended time in the ‘field’. While solving the problems identified is beyond the

scope of this paper, I suggest possible research questions and research methodologies that would assist in addressing these research gaps and help the discipline gain a deeper understanding of how social media is, and should be, practiced by organisations.

Issues relating to scope and focus

Firstly, social media research to date has been somewhat limited in scope and focus. The majority of research fits into the second phase of media research, ‘the uses and users of the medium’ (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014: 6), with some more recent work investigating the effects of social media. This section highlights issues related to research questions, participants and geographic coverage.

Much of the current body of social media research in public relations focuses on adoption rates and practitioner perceptions. In a review of the social media literature in public relations journals between 1997 and 2010, Khang, Ki and Ye (2012) found the most frequently researched topic was ‘social media usage and attitudes towards social media’ (2012: 286). Research questions in these studies centre around whether practitioners are using social media, what platforms they have been using, what kind of public relations activity they are conducting via social media and what benefits and challenges they see associated with using social media. Numerous adoption and usage studies have been conducted across different organisation types (e.g. Avery et al., 2010b with health organisations; Curtis et al., 2010 with non-profit organisations), countries (e.g. Avidar, 2009 in Israel; Fitch, 2009 in Singapore and Malaysia; Macnamara, 2010 in Australia) and social media platforms (e.g. Evans, Twomey, & Talan, 2011 with Twitter).

While these studies are very useful in establishing the field of social media research, and in particular understanding the practitioner experience, there is still much we are yet to understand about the impact of social media on public relations. When reviewing the

literature it becomes clear that we know very little about what practitioners and their organisations are actually doing with social media and why they engage in such practices. How do public relations practitioners' plan, organise and enact social media in their organisations? For example, what resources are allocated to it? How much time is allocated to it? What type of information is shared by the organisation? What type of training and organisational learning happens around social media? Future research needs to go beyond the narrow scope of adoption and practitioners' attitudes towards social media and consider how social media is enacted in organisations and how it informs the cultural practice of public relations inside the organisation. Very few studies have considered both what organisations claim they do and what they actually do, with DiStaso and Bortree's (2012) multi-method analysis of transparency in social media being one such exception. However, even here the social media campaigns analysed didn't necessarily "match up" to the practitioners surveyed and interviewed, and it is difficult to conclude whether practitioners were enacting transparency in their campaigns despite claiming they used social media to do so.

Studies focused on improving social media practice in public relations have rarely been conducted (Khang et al., 2012); what Wimmer and Dominick (2014) call the most evolved phase of media research. Currently, there is a dearth of academic research that attempts to test how social media should be used and practised in the context of public relations; instead, suggestions of best practice are given based on existing theoretical principles or industry case studies without any empirical research to support such statements.

Audience research and reception studies is another area of limited exploration. Most research into social media in public relations focuses on the organisation or the practitioner with little regard for how publics engage with or perceive organisational social media use. Pasadeos, Berger and Renfro (2010) mention audience or consumer-centred research as a largely unexplored area in public relations research, an assertion with which I would agree.

Two sub-sections of research that appear to defy this trend are crisis and health communications. A number of studies in these areas (e.g. Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012; Freberg, 2012; Freberg, Palenchar, & Veil, in press; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011) have focused on determining how publics perceive and react to social media messages around topics as varied as driver safety, the H1N1 virus and consumer product recalls. While health and crisis messages are obviously important to publics, future research that adapted the insights generated from this research to other situations would be useful in determining how publics regard an organisation's social media messages and the effect they have on relationship building and management. Research by Dodd and Campbell (2011), Kim and Kwon (2011) and Vorvoreanu (2009) has begun to fill this gap, but there is much room for future research to provide the field with a better understanding of how publics engage with organisations via social media. Finally, as recognised by Austin, Liu and Jin (2011) in their study of government health messages, much audience-based research to date has been conducted in an experimental setting. More research is needed in applied and naturalistic settings to understand how publics engage with and perceive an organisation's social media efforts.

Lastly, while there have been a number of international studies (Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; Avidar, 2009; Fitch, 2009; Macnamara, 2010; Verhoeven, Tench, Zeffass, Moreno, & Verčič, 2012), many studies in public relations are restricted to one geographic region or analysed in a 'compare and contrast' manner and do not truly transcend geographical boundaries. Wright and Hinson's longitudinal study into social media states that it represents practitioners from around the world; however, in their latest report (Wright & Hinson, 2012) over 90% of participants were from North America, which is understandable considering three out the four public relations associations used for recruitment were based in the United States.

Notwithstanding the fact these studies have been important for establishing social media

research and understanding local experiences, the discipline's knowledge of social media would benefit from a truly global research approach that transcends geographical borders.

Issues relating to theory application

Despite an abundance of social media discussion in academic journals, trade publications, conferences and online, there has been little application of theory—beyond academics and practitioners claiming social media technologies enable two-way symmetrical communication and building relationships with publics. This section brings attention to the discussion around theory and stresses the opportunity theory application and development offers for further understanding social media use and advancing public relations theory.

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, while theory has been discussed in relation to social media, there currently exists a lack of empirical research that rigorously applies public relations theories to organisational social media use. Rather, much of the research has 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 et al., 2011; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Macnamara, 2010; 2011; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009).

One theory that has been applied in the literature is Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principles, with a number of studies using the principles as a theoretical foundation for content analysis. As one of the only theories that has been specifically adapted to apply to online communication, the dialogic principles have been applied to websites (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003), blogs (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007), Facebook (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Waters, Canfield, Foster, & Hardy, 2011), and Twitter (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010) to investigate how

organisations use these tools to build relationships with publics. While many of these studies have claimed that practitioners are more likely to be using social media to 'push' out messages rather than to embrace genuine dialogue with their publics, the work of Kent and Taylor provides one possible theoretical framework to both further the field's understanding of social media and make improvements to existing practice. Future research should consider adopting the dialogic principles within an action research methodology to assess the theory's ability to improve an organisation's efforts at relationship building via social media.

Some studies have applied public relations theories such as rhetorical theory (Smitko, 2012), framing theory (Austin, 2011), and co-orientation theory (Avery, Lariscy, & Sweetser, 2010a), while others have adopted theories from outside the traditional public relations literature to explain social media adoption and its effects (e.g. Avery et al., 2010b with diffusion of innovations theory; Byrd, 2012 with stewardship theory; Curtis et al., 2010 with the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology). However, these tend to be applied on a case-by-case basis and there is no discernible body of social media literature centred on these theoretical approaches as of yet.

In discussing social media and theoretical implications for public relations, Grunig has said:

From a theoretical perspective, in addition, I do not believe digital media change the public relations theory needed to guide practice, especially our generic principles of public relations. Rather, the new media facilitate the application of the principles and, in the future, will make it difficult for practitioners around the world not to use the principles. (Grunig, 2009: 3)

Grunig argues that not only do the excellence principles still apply in a social media world, but that the changes in the way we communicate are almost forcing practitioners to adopt these principles in their communication with publics. Phillips and Young (2009)

disagree and contend that new media has major implications for theories of public relations. Despite this contention, there has been little empirical research conducted from either party to support these claims. Regardless of whether the excellence principles do or do not stand true in a social media world, empirical research is needed to support or reject such assertions. The discipline needs more explanatory research to understand the theoretical implications of social media and also to understand the role social media plays in organisational communication and relationship building.

Further, in a trend study of internet-related public relations literature since 1992, Ye and Ki (2012) found that 55.7% of articles examined had no theoretical framework. Considering their measure for theoretical application was the mention of a specific theory or the presence of research questions or hypotheses, this would include many of the studies mentioned above, which drew upon concepts from public relations theory more generally as well as those that specifically applied theoretical models. Therefore, it seems clear that the majority of research into online public relations lacks a theoretical framework and the discipline would greatly benefit from more empirical research into social media that seeks to explicitly apply, and further develop, the principles of established and emerging theories that are being more generally discussed in relation to social media. More knowledge is needed to understand what is occurring in organisations using social media and theory application presents an important opportunity to both further our understanding of both social media and public relations theory.

Issues relating to methodology

Significant research gaps are also particularly evident in methodology. This section discusses issues related to privileging quantitative methodologies, self-reporting and a shortage of longitudinal studies and or those with extended time in the ‘field’.

Much of the social media research to date has been undertaken in the United States and published in United States-based journals, which have a strong tradition of favouring quantitative methodologies. In fact, over 80% of social media research in public relations journals are underpinned by a quantitative methodology (Khang et al., 2012). While such studies have identified patterns and processes associated with the way social media is affecting the public relations industry, more qualitative research is needed to understand the lived experience of practitioners and organisations enacting and managing social media.

Quantitative methodologies have sometimes been employed where the topic of interest seems more aligned with a qualitative research paradigm. Gilpin's (2010) study of online organisational image used bimodal network analysis to identify the way in which online and social media properties performed an organisation's identity, although the research purpose and constructs were more closely aligned with a subjectivist epistemology. My point is not to undermine Gilpin's contribution to the field, but rather to highlight the need for more research that acknowledges and accepts every organisation is individual, and they will plan, implement and evaluate social media in a way that is unique to them. While Daymon and Holloway go as far to say quantitative research is 'incompatible' (2011: 5) with a digitised and democratised media world, I disagree, acknowledging that quantitative research in this area has contributed important insights about practitioners' use and perception of social media. However, more qualitative research has the potential to contribute a better understanding of the role of social media in public relations and organisational communication. Qualitative research is holistic, captures processes over time and can capture the complex, emergent experiences practitioners and their organisations are having with social media, and this will assist in addressing some of the shortcomings related to research scope discussed earlier.

Additionally, the approaches and methods used in both quantitative and qualitative studies have often relied on practitioner self-reporting via surveys and interviews (e.g. Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; Avery et al., 2010b; Bajkiewicz, Kraus, & Hong, 2011; Briones et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2011; Macnamara, 2010; Verhoeven et al., 2012). While this has helped us understand adoption, usage and perceptions of social media, it is perhaps not the most appropriate method through which we should examine the role of social media in the organisation and the type of communication an organisation undertakes using the medium. In previous studies of social media, data has been separated from its contextual setting and the focus has been on what practitioners say about their use of social media, rather than what they do, with suggestions of “talking the talk, rather than walking the walk” (Evans et al., 2011; Macnamara, 2010; Robson & Sutherland, 2012). More research is needed in applied and naturalistic settings as well to explore how public relations practitioners’ plan, organise and enact social media in their organisations.

There have been several research studies focused specifically on analysing an organisation’s social media content, often through content analysis (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Dekay, 2012; Lovejoy et al., 2012); however, these have tended to look at a specific medium over a short period of time with content classified using quantitative measures, relating back to the problems of scope and the proliferation of quantitative research discussed earlier. Only a handful of studies attempt to give in-depth insight into an organisation’s social media efforts with most investigating a single platform over a period ranging from 12 hours (Smitko, 2012) to one month (Dekay, 2012; Lovejoy et al., 2012). While valuable for providing information on how an organisation uses a specific platform at a point in time, these studies still leave the deeper questions raised earlier unanswered. Arguably, it is difficult to gain a holistic sense of how organisations enact social media and their purpose or strategy for engaging with social media in such a short time period and after reviewing only

one of their social media platforms. Additionally, these studies are primarily conducted from the ‘outside’ with researchers unable to give any indication of what the organisation is attempting to achieve with its social media. One of the very few academically published ‘insider’ case studies is Supa and Kelly’s (2012) analysis of State Farm’s social media in the United States, however this account lacks methodological rigour and theoretical grounding, as do most case studies in industry publications. The field needs to bridge academic rigour and in-depth analysis to bring about a more complete understanding of the role social media plays in organisational communication.

Finally, in addition to concern about short time frames in the “field”, there are only a few examples of longitudinal studies that help us to understand the role social media plays in public relations practice over time, namely Wright and Hinson’s studies (2012, the latest) investigating how emerging media are being used in public relations and USC Annenberg’s Generally Accepted Practices Studies (2012, the latest) which include questions addressing the use of social media by practitioners. As social media and public relations practice continue to evolve, other researchers who have published in the field should consider the value of repeating past studies to document and investigate how social media use and practitioner perceptions have changed over time.

Implications

Recent studies investigating social media have continuously raised questions around strategy, governance, dialogue, collaboration and engagement. Research addressing the gaps indicated in this paper would help the public relations discipline to understand some of these lingering questions and enhance our understanding of the way social media is understood, organised and practised by, and within, organisations.

While the research gaps around scope, theory application and development, and methodology can be addressed by future research that focuses on one of these areas, it is important to highlight that the gaps discussed in this paper are closely interrelated. One approach that could address all three limitations is ethnography. There have been very few case studies and organisational ethnographies published in public relations academic literature (L'Etang, 2012). In-depth qualitative methodologies such as these would allow researchers to widen their research scope and take a holistic approach in investigating organisational social media use to understand how practitioners and their organisations plan, implement and evaluate social media. Waters et al. (2009) have previously called for case studies to be conducted to provide other organisations with insights into successful and failed efforts; however, this call has largely gone unanswered in academic research. It is time this was addressed.

Some may ask, what does ethnography have to do with theory application and development? While traditionally ethnography has been associated with an inductive approach to research, there is no reason such an approach cannot contribute to theory development, by discovering 'relationships that have not been explicitly spelled out in theoretical formulations' (Wilson & Chaddha, 2009: 550). Ethnographic approaches can also be used deductively (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2010; Wilson & Chaddha, 2009), although considered contentious by some, whereby theoretical assumptions and concepts are tested, verified and extended in an ethnographic setting.

Additionally, action research could be useful to address the research gaps indicated and to move social media research in public relations into Wimmer and Domminick's (2014) fourth stage—improving the use of social media. Action research that investigated how existing public relations theories and principles could guide and improve an organisation's social

media use would further public relations practice as well as refine current theoretical frameworks.

The methodological approaches discussed here are far from the only way that these research gaps could be overcome, and I welcome the contributions and ideas of others to this discussion. Research that addresses these gaps will assist with theory development, help practitioners plan, implement and evaluate their social media activity, and guide future public relations education.

Conclusion

This paper highlights three areas where current research on social media in public relations is lacking: scope, theory application and development, and methodology. Future research seeking to address these gaps would help researchers to understand why a lack of strategy and governance is prevalent in organisations, why organisations are failing to embrace the dialogic, collaborative and engagement features of social media to build relationships with their publics, and gain a deeper understanding of how social media is organised and practiced by organisations. In a similar vein to L'Etang (2012), this paper acknowledges that there have been very few case studies and organisational ethnographies published in academic literature and suggests such methodologies as a possible solution for gaining a more in-depth understanding of the cultural practices of public relations practitioners in relation to social media. While this paper does not set about to solve the problems discussed in a single paper, it brings attention to significant gaps in the current body of literature and suggests directions for further research that would advance the discipline's understanding of the role social media plays in public relations.

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