

Teaching Public Relations through Social Media: Proposal for a New Course in New Media Education

Communication & Journalism Research
4 (1&2) p 13 - 23
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ISSN 2348 – 5663

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Abstract

Millions of people use social media services daily, opening up attractive opportunities for businesses. Social media offer myriad new communication channels for organizational members to share information and talk to various stakeholders. Social media offers an exciting new area for the public relations discipline to produce research and pedagogy that is in high demand by students, industry constituents, and other disciplines. This paper presents the outline for a new course in new media education titled “Public Relations and Social Media” from an integrated, management and corporate communication perspective. The course will prepare public relations practitioners to employ social media’s potential for building and maintaining relationships with a wide range of stakeholders. Public Relations by its very nature, is practical and skills-oriented. The proposed new course seeks to fill the pedagogical gap of a lack of interactive, experiential learning in public relations through social media.

Keywords

Social media, public relations pedagogy, new media, integrated communication, corporate communication

Introduction

New media is becoming the preferred term for a range of media practices that employ digital technologies and the computer in some way or another. New media definitions remain fluid and are evolving, with some definitions of new media focusing exclusively upon computer technologies and digital content production whilst others stress the cultural forms and contexts in which technologies are used.

One key feature of new and emerging media technologies is that they are often portable and facilitate mobility in communications. Social media describes a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers' intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

New media has a wider reach than anything before it (Lindgren cited in Galloway, 2005). They propose a comprehensive list of social media encompassing a wide range of online, word-of-mouth forums including blogs, company sponsored discussion boards and chat rooms, consumer-to-consumer e-mail, consumer product or service ratings websites and forums, Internet discussion boards and forums, blogs (sites containing digital audio, images, movies, or photographs), and social networking websites: Wikis, blogs, social networks: Twitter, Blogger, Facebook, MySpace, Ning.

Scholars such as Ashcroft & Hoey (2001), Mangold & Faulds (2009), Hurme et al. (2001), Wang et al. (2009) and Pavlik (2008) define several advantages of internet-based communication. It gives freedom of speech and wider distribution of information. Social media is subtly changing the relations between organizations and their constituents. This form of media extends attention and thought of communication process participants. Internet technology facilitates a more distributed and plastic form of thinking. This shift is more than merely a change in the way we read or a change in our behaviour (Bull et al., 2008).

The terrain of public relations practice is shifting with new media bringing about substantial increases in stakeholder strength through facilitating communication within stakeholder groups and between different stakeholder groups (Merwe, Pitt & Abratt, 2005). The Internet gives public relations practitioners a unique opportunity to collect information, monitor public opinion on issues, and engage in direct dialogue with their publics about a variety of issues (McAllister & Taylor, 2007).

What are social media?

The following criteria define social media:

Incorporate old and new internet technologies - The World Wide Web is about 20 years old. The internet is 50 years old. Social media incorporate all of the technologies developed over those time spans from e-mail through forums, instant messaging, file sharing, video transmission and more.

Multimedia - Blogs, podcasts, video, photos, forums, internet messaging, texting. The internet subsumes all audiovisual and print media because it can transmit them. Social media, by extension makes use of all media forms. There is even a growing possibility of haptic communication - the mechanical simulation of touch - across the internet, which social media will adopt once it is fully developed.

Geographically collapsed - There is no distance in social media. One can follow the Tweets of another who is half-way around the world or “friend” another thousands of miles away or blog to anyone on any continent who is interested in what you have to say.

Immediate - It takes less and less time for one to publish on social media. With a service like Twitter or internet messaging, it is a matter of seconds – the time it takes to type or speak. Social media can be – and often are – live.

User-generated and published information - However, users often republish information they have discovered elsewhere, so user generation is loosely defined

Internet-based but not totally so - Meetup.com, for example, uses the internet to set up local face-to-face meetings. The internet is the organizing agent but communication is personal.

Community sharing - posts and comments, file sharing, community of interest. Community interest varies by individual and group. Some blogs, for example, spark hundreds of comments. Others generate none. The community of interest can be active or passive.

Challenges posed by the internet age

Due to its fragmented nature, social media present a Return-On-Investment problem. One may put in a lot of work reaching influential people for little result. Effort expended in social media may not work out in cost-per-thousand terms. One has to think in cost-per-influential terms – reaching the right audience, no matter how small it might be.

A second challenge is influence. How do you know any blog, tweet or Facebook page carries reach and influence with a target audience? There are no straightforward techniques for learning this. You can follow blogs, tweets and Facebook postings to determine if they are appropriate. You can investigate where the blog might show or be linked in other people’s blogs through such services as Technorati .You can determine the blog ranking as well in Technorati. You can examine the number and type of friends on a Facebook page. You can check the number of followers of tweets that an individual or organization sends. However, none of these is a guaranteed way to determine the type and influence of audience you might reach. There is no Audit Bureau of Circulation for social media.

The third challenge is time. To use social media effectively requires learning one’s way into each medium and building trust with participants. Clients expect practitioners to have established relationships in order to get messages out, but this is not always possible unless one is going to the same audience continuously. For example, if you are a media relations specialist in the auto industry, you can over time discover and cultivate the influential people in that

industry. But, what if you leave the auto industry and move to airlines? You will start over. Agency practitioners especially face this challenge because they often work on multiple accounts in different industries. They learn to research quickly and to build lists swiftly but that doesn't mean they have built the relationships needed for social media. For this reason, a general PR practitioner might be handicapped entering the social media environment.

Doing PR through the social media

Responding to the demands of emerging media in an environment where traditional media demands on public relations practice are not reducing significantly will be a major area of concern for the profession in coming years. Evaluation challenges will be further complicated by the seeming fluidity of both the new media technologies themselves and the conventions of their use. It is imperative that public relations practitioners and educators embrace the full potential of new media if they are to overcome threats from other specialist areas within organisations as new media technologies cut across disciplines. The public relations terrain may seem more attractive, and be more prone to invasion from those outside the profession, if a perception develops that the area is now more technology-driven and less about 'touchy-feely' communication or traditional media.

The rapid success of social media has left corporations "in the dust" as they seek to promote their products on these platforms, develop strategies and policies, and fill newly created social media-related positions with qualified individuals (Kelly, 2010, p. 30). Companies are scrambling to hire and/or develop the newly created positions of social media directors (and similar positions) while simultaneously trying to figure out how best to use social media in the organization (Gillette, 2010).

Although by no means comprehensive, the following list offers observations supporting the need for developing pedagogy in social media:

- Social media use is thriving.
- Companies are devoting increased resources to tracking and developing involvement in social media.
- Leaders increasingly understand the need to use social media but are not sure how they fit into their organization. (Bhushan, 2014)
- Social media are so new that companies are seeking leadership to drive strategy.
- The demand for thoughtful leadership in social media is being met by so-called experts who are providing companies with the equivalent of social

media snake oil (Baker, 2009), necessitating the development of legitimate training and intellectual capital.

- Social media campaigns must be implemented as a part of a larger, well-defined organizational communication channel strategy.
- Companies are actively seeking candidates to fill social media leadership positions.
- The demand for candidates with a sophisticated understanding of social media is greater than the supply (Gillette, 2010).

Impact on public relations education

If new media are to be embraced, public relations practitioners will need more technical skills in areas such as web publishing, new software operation, online security, search engine optimisation, web analytics and web trend analysis software operation. They will need enhanced online information architecture skills and skills related to managing an increasing amount of complex information digitally. Writing for cross-media delivery will continue as a major component of practice but the demands for multimedia elements will bring even more challenges in this area.

Research has shown that public relations practitioners who embrace new technologies such as blogging are perceived within organisations as having more power, in that they are willing to be leaders in the industry and use new tools to better reach target publics (Porter, Trammell, Chung & Kim, 2007).

Alexander's (2004) comprehensive exploration of the challenges for the public relations curricula remains in large part the state of play in the field. Identifying the need for educators to provide a thorough grounding in how technology can facilitate relationship management, he stated that there is 'an urgent need for academics and practitioners to review current course and subject content and work towards ensuring future practitioners are capable of working in the new public relations environment' (2004, p. 4). There is a perception among students that their undergraduate courses may not be adequately preparing them for practice in the areas of new technologies and electronic communication. One study found that about one-third of students in the US felt either not very prepared or under prepared to work in these areas (Gower & Reber, 2006).

Unfortunately, no similar studies are available in India.

One of the main challenges for academicians is that many of the vocationally-oriented areas covered in current public relations curricula are still deemed to be highly relevant to current professional practice requirements. This raises the question of what should be let go from the existing public relations curriculum to accommodate new and emerging areas.

Public relations however, is not alone is trying to address these issues. Journalism education is also facing challenges associated with new media. One study showed that although journalism students reported receiving their news online, they still expected to work in traditional areas of print and broadcast journalism with only a few anticipating working in online journalism (Heider, 2006).

The situation for public relations academics has been equated with being like Alice in Wonderland down a hole trying to make decisions and forge programs in a fluid environment and that 'it seems like the technology, options, and opportunities change faster than a single course can wind its way through the university approval bureaucracy' (Wickham, 2006, p.91). This could also be applicable to public relations courses.

Deuze's (2006) discussion of journalism educational challenges, perhaps, shows a way forward. If Deuze's (2006) concepts (p. 23) are applied to a public relations context the challenge is not about working out how to 'to adapt our already overloaded curricula to the convergent future' but is about having a debate on why we should still educate public relations practitioners, what set of ideas about public relations and its role in society guides this education, and what our definition of graduates is as they go out into the world.

Given these observations, public relations academics and practitioners need to demonstrate leadership to managers who are still trying to figure out how companies can best use social media in their respective organizations. Public relations scholarship is on the threshold of a rare opportunity to build its status as pioneers in the development of social media scholarship and curricula. And this needs to be done forthwith. Scholars have been advocating social media's potential to add impact to our discipline's research (Meredith, 2009; 2010) and pedagogy (D'Angelo, 2010; Meredith, 2009; 2010).

The discipline of marketing has been aggressively addressing the need for content relating to social media. For example, the American Marketing Association has offered many excellent virtual events and webcasts on social media topics. While the marketing discipline is doing an admirable job steering the marketer's use of social media to speak to customers, public relations scholars and academics have been rather slow in grabbing the opportunity to approach social media from an integrated, management and corporate communication perspective. As previously mentioned, organizational leaders must consider social media as part of a larger, well-defined organizational communication channel strategy. Social media have value as communication tools for building and maintaining relationships with a wide range of stakeholders. Thus, public relations scholars can help managers leverage social media's potential for reaching internal and external constituents, such as employees, the media, government, shareholders, as well as customers. In turn, my course will examine the promise, pitfalls, and best practices of social media as new channels for communicating with various audiences.

In this background, I propose a course Public Relations and Social Media, not as a prescription but as a starting point of a discussion among the scholars in this field. Public Relations by its very nature, is practical and skills-oriented. The proposed new course seeks to fill the pedagogical gap of a lack of interactive, experiential learning in public relations through social media.

A snapshot of the course “public relations and social media”

This course will explore social media as a communication tool for an integrated corporate communication strategy. Doorley and Garcia (2007) define corporate communication as the centralized management of communication on behalf of the organization’s reputation—and thereby its competitiveness, productivity, and financial success. This definition provides useful grounding for the proposed course. “Public Relations and Social Media” will examine how managers can/are using social media for shaping an organization’s reputation.

Course objectives

The course will address the following objectives:

- How can/are managers using social media to speak to various stakeholders?
- How and when should social media be used for communicating in organizations?
- How are companies planning and managing social media platforms?
- What are managerial considerations associated with the transparency and openness that social media creates?

The course content will cover topics related to the rise of social media, the integrated nature of public relations, charting of social communication channels, maintaining equilibrium between organizational transparency and social media practices, developing authentic social media messages, creating a credible corporate voice, use of social media with regard to specific audiences such as employees or situations such as crisis management.

Pedagogical approach

As Barker and Stowers (2005) note, communication professors must prepare to learn from, as well as teach, their students. Today’s high-caliber students are often engaged in real-world applications of the topics we are teaching. Thus, students can offer validation and insight into our course materials and discussions.

In the case of social media, students’ savvy is a real advantage. Professors need to play the role of facilitators rather than teachers and in turn, they have the opportunity to engage and share their own knowledge and experiences with social

media. As a result, the teacher's expertise in communication will drive the course supplemented by the students' advanced understanding of a specific technology and/or platform.

The course content will be delivered through simulated exercises set in business organisations wherein students will learn by operating from the shoes of senior PR practitioners and handle different public relations problems in real time and under substantial time pressure. Pennell and Miles (2009) have advocated problem-based learning (PBL) for business communication courses, a pedagogy where students learn by tackling real, complex problems. The course pedagogy will adopt these techniques in achieving the learning outcomes by involving the students in individual and group projects.

Student learning outcomes

Students will develop strategic plans for the use of social media as a communication channel, examine the best practices of businesses using social media, and create strategic recommendations for an *actual client* implementing social media into an organizational communication strategy. The main learning outcomes of the course are:

1. Recognise the relative strengths and weaknesses of the different social media tools
2. Study and understand from best practices of social media utilization by business organisations to communicate with internal and external stakeholders
3. Track, appraise, and respond to social media messages in various social media platforms
4. Design reliable, genuine, lucid, and effective messages targeted to specific audiences
5. Develop effective internal and external social media action plans for organisations.

Student assignments

Student assignments include both individual and group projects.

Individual project

Students will function in the role of a newly hired social media director for a self-selected Fortune 500 company. In the first part of the project, students will design a case study analyzing the company's use of social media. This case study will include a discussion by the student of any initiatives under way by the company in social media and completion of a company competitor analysis. Students will also develop a communication channel map, a visual representation of the company's use of communication channels to reach various stakeholders.

In the second part of the individual project, students will follow, analyze, and respond to messages generated daily about the company on social media platforms over a 3-week period. Using free social media-monitoring tools, such as Social Mention, students will follow and identify company message trends. After they compile 3 weeks of data, they will develop recommendations to improve the company's social media efforts, including digging deeper into existing platforms and/or suggesting movement into new platforms.

Group project

In this practical project, students will work in teams as consultants for an actual client, any company that is already aggressively using social media. Students will recommend new campaigns and ways of expanding the use of social media as communication tools. They will also develop and deliver a plan book intended to shape the future of the company's communication strategy for using social media.

Conclusion

Social media offer an exciting way for business communication to align itself with a cutting-edge business trend. Social media platforms provide a means of relationship building through communication. Businesses adopt social media and related digital technologies for a wide variety of corporate communication functions, including marketing, media relations, internal communications, investor relations, corporate social responsibility, public affairs, and crisis communication (Argenti & Barnes, 2009). In this context, the public relations discipline can provide the much needed integrated communication approach to social media research, training, and pedagogy.

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