

Information Subsidies and Social Media:

The effect of news value presence on social media
conversation

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Abstract

As social media becomes increasingly ubiquitous, organizations are looking for the best way to use these new communication tools. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter present numerous opportunities to organizations for sharing information, engaging with the public, and monitoring discussion. This article examines the relationship between news values, press releases, and social media. Specifically, the researcher looks at six months of press releases from a Fortune 500 company and relevant posts from the public on Twitter to ascertain whether the number of news values and presence of particular news values in a press release affect the volume and sentiment of conversation on Twitter. The researcher found that certain news values do predict greater conversation and better sentiment on social media, and that a higher number of news values present in a release also predicts a higher volume of conversation on Twitter.

Key Words: News Values; Information subsidies; Press Releases; Social Media; Twitter

Introduction

In October 2012, Facebook reached one billion active monthly users (Ortutay, 2012). YouTube currently boasts one billion unique monthly visitors, and reaches more adults 18-34 than any cable network (Bullas, 2013). As of September 2013 approximately 500 million tweets are sent out every day on Twitter (Jones, 2013). As social media grows in both prominence and prevalence, organizations and individuals are working to establish and strengthen their social media presence in order to take advantage of the wide audience and relatively inexpensive medium. Mangold and Faulds (2009) argue that “The 21st century is witnessing an explosion of Internet-based messages transmitted through these media. They have become a major factor in influencing various aspects of consumer behavior including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behavior, and post-purchase communication and evaluation” (p.358). Given this growing impact of social media on organizations, the last five years has seen a widespread industry push to understand the role that social media plays in public relations. Many PR professions have embraced different social media tools and have called for and conducted research to better understand them. However, research is still limited when it comes to understanding how organizations can achieve high conversation volume and positive sentiment on Twitter.

Information subsidies like press releases have long been valued communication tools for organizations. However, little research has been done on the impact they have on social media conversation, despite the fact that these information subsidies are more readily available to the public than ever. They are often studied in regards to traditional media (Semir et. al., 1998; Stryker, 2002), but today it’s possible to skip the analysis of the gatekeepers and look directly at

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

the reactions of consumers, all thanks to social media. However, it is necessary to identify what specific characteristics of press releases correlate with changes in social media conversation.

Literature surrounding the news values model provides an excellent framework to examine press release characteristics and relevant social media conversation. News values have long been discussed in relation to the media (Lippman, 1922; Galtung and Ruge, 1965) as a way to understand what makes certain events newsworthy and others not. However, little research exists about how press releases can emphasize those same values to make their subject matter more newsworthy. There is also a gap in existing literature about whether or not those same values are what makes an event or topic newsworthy in the realm of social media. Examining news values in press releases and the topic-relevant conversation on social media (specifically Twitter) allows for a much better understanding of how news values can play out in press releases, and how those values and releases translate (or don't) into conversation and sentiment on Twitter.

This study fills the gaps in the existing literature and aims to contribute to the overall body of knowledge regarding social media, information subsidies, and news values. It makes a practical contribution to the field of public relations by highlighting press release characteristics that can lead to changes in volume and sentiment of conversation on Twitter. As new communication technologies like social media continue to change and develop, the research in this study looks to take more traditional models (news values) and approaches (press releases) and gain a better understanding of the role they play in social media.

Literature Review

News Values

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Walter Lippman (1922) was one of the first to argue for set of news values. Lippman argued the importance of professionalism in journalism, and believed that journalists had a duty to the public to help shape the public's view of the world (Schautd & Carpenter, 2009; Sallot et. al.; 1998). Historically, part of shaping that view has included using a general set of news values or factors to determine what stories ought to receive coverage and which ones shouldn't.

While news values have been explored extensively in regards to the media, only a handful of scholars have looked at it from the perspective of public relations practitioners. Even fewer researchers have examined the role of news values on social media. Galtung and Ruge (1965) were among the first scholars to suggest the concept of news values, arguing that journalists relied on a set of twelve news values to determine the newsworthiness of an event. These values were meant to explain why some events made it into the news and others didn't. The more values an event had, the more likely it was to be covered by the news (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). While Galtung and Ruge were particularly interested in why some foreign events were reported in Norway and others were not, the values they suggested have become recognized as a basic model for newsworthiness for most Western media and events.

Schautd and Carpenter (2009) looked at news values as they appeared online. The researchers conducted a content analysis of the ten most-viewed stories on each of the top ten community home pages for *The Arizona Republic* website. The news values they measured were conflict, human interest, magnitude, prominence, proximity, tragedy, and timeliness (Schautd and Carpenter, 2009). These values were based on ones outlined by Garrison (1990) and Gibbs and Warhover (2002), who drew from sources that included Galtung and Ruge (1965, 1970). Results were primarily descriptive, showing things like the most commonly occurring news

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

value (proximity), the amount of soft news readers would look at compared with hard news (63%), and how many stories with the news of value of human interest were clicked on (20%). However, the values identified in this article provide an excellent foundation for identifying news values in other sources, including the online press releases examined in this paper.

It should be noted that news values, while theoretically used to measure the newsworthiness of an event, in practice are studied just by looking at the news article covering that particular event (Weimann & Brosius, 1991). This makes it difficult to tell if news values are the causes of reporting or the consequences of reporting (Staab, 1990; Weimann & Brosius, 1991). This study aims to help mitigate this problem by looking at the news values of the press release, not the values of any news articles related to that press release. While the concept of news values in a press release is a relatively new one, the researcher believes it is comparable with analyzing news values of an event, regardless of subsequent media coverage.

Information Subsidies

Organizational communication tools like press releases have been tools of public relations practitioners for decades. They allow for the sharing of everything from product launches to financial statements to research studies. Company websites often make things like press releases, speeches, and statements readily available for both journalists and the public (Tedesco, 2008). These types of message make up what are known as “information subsidies” (Gandy, 1982; Turk and Franklin, 1988; Tedesco, 2008). Tedesco (2008) references Berkowitz and Adams’ 1990 definition of information subsidies, who define them as “efforts of news sources to intentionally shape the news agenda by reducing journalists’ costs of gathering information” (p. 723). In other words, companies and organizations use information subsidies

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

like press releases to help set the news agenda by making information more readily accessible to journalists. However, as more and more companies put these subsidies on their websites, the information becomes more readily accessible to the public as well.

Several studies over the years have examined the link between information subsidies and news coverage (Caldiero *et. al.*, 2009; Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Ragas, 2013). However, results have been mixed at best. Alcoceba-Hernando (2010) cites a 2007 report from Spanish-language institute Demometrica claiming that journalists only report/publish 12% of the press releases they receive. However, Semir, Ribas, and Rivuelta (1998) found that science journal articles described in press releases are associated with subsequent news publication of stories on the same topic. Stryker (2002) found similar results, showing that medical journal articles with accompanying press releases were more likely to receive news coverage. However Stryker also argued that this correlation was mainly because the articles with press releases were more newsworthy in general, and not because the press release itself was influential.

Information subsidies have been studied more extensively in political communication literature. Walters, Walters, and Gray (1996), as cited in Tedesco (2008), state that the money campaigns spend on information subsidies leads to invaluable earned media coverage. This coverage helps to legitimize campaign messages. Other studies assert that information subsidies are key parts of agenda building/setting during a political campaign (Tedesco, 2001; Kiouisis *et. al.* 2009)

Sallot and Johnson (2006) shed light onto the complicated relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners in general. According to the authors, research examining more than 400 interviews with journalists over a period of 13 years showed that journalists continually describe a “love/hate” relationship with public relations, with several

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

using the term “necessary evil.” However, a sample of journalists estimated that on average 44% of news media content in the U.S. involves some sort of contact with public relations practitioners (Sallot & Johnson, 2006, p. 154).

This paper aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on this subject by examining the correlation between information subsidies and social media coverage for a financial service company. Over the years it has become increasingly clear that traditional media sources like newspapers and broadcast news are no longer the sole sources of organizational news. Online news continues to grow in prevalence and many people include blogs and social media as regular news sources for them (O’Dell, 2011; Laird, 2012; Sonderman, 2012). Social media and networks in particular present both unique opportunities and challenges for public relations practitioners. The following section delves further into the idea of “social media” as well as how its relationships with planned organizational communication and with traditional media.

Social Media

“Social media” is a term that is often used but rarely defined. While it’s often discussed among communication scholars and public relations practitioners, there seems to be some confusion regarding which sites should be considered to be social media and which should not. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” Several different types of social media fall within this broad definition, including blogs, collaborative projects (i.e. Wikipedia), social networking sites, content communities, virtual social works, and virtual game worlds. However, for the purposes of this paper only social networking sites like Facebook, content communities

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

like YouTube, and blogs/microblogs are included when referencing social media or social networking.

Given the relative newness of social media, research regarding social media and organizations is somewhat limited. While social media research as a whole continues to rise, the diversity of potential research subjects makes it harder to find research that's specific to companies and organizations. Nonetheless, there is still literature that lends some insight into how organizations use these new communication tools. Understanding how organizations use social media can be an important aspect of understanding how social media users react to organizations, another area where limited research exists.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) outline what social media is, what differentiates the different types of social media, and how organizations can use these new sites. According to the authors, "Social Media represent a revolutionary new trend that should be of interest to companies operating in online space – or any space, for that matter" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 59). The authors also give ten points on how to establish your organization on social media and how to use the tools effectively. While the article is three years old (which, in the world of social media, may make it somewhat dated), the very fact that this article is essentially a brief guide to social media shows that many organizations are still struggling to find the best ways to use these new tools.

Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011) also explore how companies use social media. They take a much more marketing perspective, discussing how things like marketing budgets and return on investment do or do not pertain to social media. They argue that there are two basic approaches to managing social media: traditional and experimental. The traditional approach treats social media like any other marketing channel, using "tried and true metrics with a focus on deriving a

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

predictable response (from an associated social-media related action) on established critical ends in marketing” (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011, p. 276). The other approach involves attempting to discover what the critical factors are that are associated with social media, including items like conversation and engagement. Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011) emphasize the business goals that underline organizational activity on social media, explaining many of the existing social media tools in terms of how they pertain to different organizational goals.

Other researchers have attempted to take a more empirical (rather than descriptive) approach to understanding how organizations use social media. Waters *et. al.* (2009) conducted a content analysis of how nonprofit organizations use Facebook. They found that while nonprofits often embraced the opportunity for greater disclosure and transparency on Facebook, they generally failed to take advantage of the interactive nature of the site. Although many of the organizations posted links to external news stories, they rarely shared their own press releases or campaign summaries. The authors argued that while the nonprofits were open and transparent with their Facebook profiles, they weren’t using the sites to their “full potential (Waters *et. al.*, 2009, p. 106). Based on their research Waters *et. al.* (2009) also proposed a new classification system for social media engagement focusing on three new dimensions of communication: information dissemination, disclosure, and interactivity.

Curtis *et. al.* (2010) also looked at nonprofits, using the Unified Theory of Acceptance and use of Technology (UTAUT) to understand adoption and organizational use of social media. The authors found that “social media tools are becoming beneficial methods of communication for public relations practitioners in the nonprofit sector” (Curtis *et. al.*, 2010, p. 92). Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) looked at how nonprofits made use of microblogging sites like Twitter. Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011, p. 2170) describe microblogging as a “new form of communication in which

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

users can describe things of interest and express attitudes that they are willing to share with others in short posts.” According to Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), there are three key functions of microblogging updates: information, community, and action. These functions differ somewhat from the traditional focus of dialogue in social media. “Nonprofit researchers and stakeholder advocates may want, and have explicitly noted *dialogue* as the apex; however, for many (if not most) organizations, the apex may be promotion, marketing, and mobilization (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012, p. 22). The authors believe that these basic functions may hold true for for-profit organizations as well, although this has yet to be tested.

Twitter. Perhaps the most well-known microblogging site is Twitter, first launched in 2006. Its 2007 appearance at the famed South by Southwest Interactive conference helped jumpstart its popularity. The site is estimated to have around 200 million regular users, with 400-500 million tweets per day (Holt, 2013). In January 2013 Forbes wrote that it was the fastest growing social platform in the world (McCue, 2013) According to a 2012 study by Barnes, Lescault, and Andonian, almost 75% of Fortune 500 companies have a corporate Twitter account with at least one tweet within the last month. Corporations and organizations around the world are incorporating Twitter into their social media strategies, emphasizing the importance of understanding social media in general and Twitter specifically.

Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) examined the dialogic communication of Fortune 500 companies on Twitter. The authors looked at the different dialogic principles and their presence in these corporate tweets, finding that conservation of visitors was one of the key dialogic principles while the usefulness of information was the least frequently used. However the study primarily looked at what corporations were saying, paying little attention to audience reactions.

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

An understanding of what other people are saying about them can be invaluable to an organization or company.

Jansen *et. al.* (2009) looked at electronic word of mouth on Twitter, claiming that organizations have different social media priorities than consumers. The authors found that 19% of tweets contained mention of a brand, nearly 20% of which contained some expression of brand sentiments. The study found that, in general, microblogs like Twitter are tools for word of mouth communication regarding brands, something brands may need to monitor. However, it should be noted that this study primarily looked at tweets/posts in general about brands, rather than looking at microblog reactions to corporate communication efforts. This study aims to fill that gap in research.

Twitter, of course, is not the only social media site that consumers use to express opinions on brands and organizations. However, its design does make it particularly well-suited for organizations wishing to monitor consumer comments and word of mouth. Kietzmann *et. al.* (2011) outline the basic building blocks of social media, claiming that different social media sites have different orientations. For example, social media building blocks include sharing, relationships, conversation, and identity, among others. Facebook is an example of a social media site that emphasizes identity, encouraging its users to set up profiles and share information about themselves. Twitter, on the other hand, is conversation-oriented. The site is “centered around exchanging short messages that are mostly real-time status updates, so as to create an ‘ambient awareness’ of issues [Kaplan & Haenlein, in press],” (Kietzmann *et. al.* 2011, p. 244). This emphasis on conversation makes it easier for organizations (and others) to monitor those conversations that pertain to them. Additionally, strict privacy settings on sites like Facebook make it difficult to monitor individuals’ posts and conversations regarding a specific

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

organization. Twitter posts are much more visible to the public, one of the many reasons this study uses Twitter to better understand the relationships between planned organizational communication, social media, and traditional media.

Given the above information, the following **research questions** have been identified:

RQ1: What is the relationship between traditional news values and volume on social media for a press release?

RQ2: What is the relationship between traditional news values and sentiment on social media for a press release?

RQ3: Do press releases lead to a higher than average volume of conversation on social media?

RQ4: Do press releases lead to a more favorable sentiment on social media than average?

Methodology

In order to answer the aforementioned research questions, it was necessary to take more of a “case study” approach, limiting analysis to one major financial services company. Social media analysis can yield hundreds of thousands of units for analysis, so limiting the sample to only one company makes an in-depth analysis possible. This particular company was chosen in part because of the volume of traditional and social media coverage/activity surrounding it. The Grunig PRIME Research Fellowship under whose auspices this study was conducted provided the researcher with extraordinary human, methodological and technological resources. PRIME Research is an international research-based consulting firm specializing in traditional and social media content analysis. Among its portfolio of services, PRIME Research conducts a Top

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Companies Benchmark Study which tracks corporate reputation in opinion-leading traditional and social channels across the world's largest companies. The examined company is an international Fortune 500 company that is well known in both the U.S. and abroad. Because this study uses Top Companies data from PRIME, companies available for selection were also limited to those that are analyzed within the scope of the current benchmark study. For the purposes of this study, the brand will be referred to as Company A.

The researcher selected a sample period of six months, from April 1, 2012 to September 30, 2012. A sample period of six months was chosen in order to get an adequate and varied number of company press releases while still limiting the scope enough to make in-depth analysis possible. In order to identify press releases from that time period, the researcher looked at the newsroom/media section of each company's website and looked at press releases identified by the company. The researcher chose to focus on U.S. and Canadian social media, and therefore only included items that were released in the U.S. and Canada. These items were identified by choosing press releases that were categorized as "U.S.," "Canada," or "Worldwide" releases on the company's online newsroom. All identified press releases in these categories occurring during the sample period were included for analysis.

Social media posts were identified and coded by expert news analysts at PRIME Research. The coding unit of analysis was any presentation of the company within PRIME's media list during the sample period. A presentation is any individual unit of a new item in which the company is characterized or evaluated (explicitly or implicitly) in a specific way. Each presentation was coded for medium, date, topic of message, PR event, country, number of user friends/followers, user profession, and tone, along with others items that were not relevant to this study. While coder reliability was not specifically tested due to logistical constraints, every news

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

analyst at PRIME receives extensive training to ensure that all coding is accurate. Additionally, a 2012 research study using PRIME Research news analysts found that agreement reliability was .96 for tonality (Lee, 2012). Although the news analysts from this 2012 study are not necessarily the same ones who coded the articles referenced in this study, these coders are believed to be representative of all coding at PRIME.

The researcher, along with an additional coder, also coded for news values present in each press release. Seven news values were coded for: conflict, human interest, magnitude, prominence, timeliness, unusualness, and currency. These news values were based off of the aforementioned literature. The researcher created a codebook based in part on the definitions mentioned in Schaudt and Carpenter's 2009 article on online news values, tailoring those definitions to fit the organization and press releases at hand. Inter-coder reliability for the different news values ranged from .617 to 1.0, with an average of .833. Because releases were selected by region, the traditional news value of "proximity" was not included since all releases related to the country at hand in some way. Also, it was not possible to identify Twitter users' locations beyond country, so proximity to the user could not be established beyond country.

Results

In order to test the relationship between news value presence and social media, several one-way ANOVA tests were run to better understand how different news values in a release affect volume and sentiment, as well as how the overall number of news values present affects volume and sentiment. In each case the effect of country (Canada or the US) was also factored in. The researcher found that certain news values do predict greater conversation and better

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

sentiment on social media, and that a higher number of news values present in a release also predicts a higher volume of conversation on Twitter

Volume

When looking at different news values compared with volume, $F(1,53)= 21.38, p<.001$, the only one found to have a significant effect on volume was conflict ($M=488.323, SE=92.159$). While currency ($M= 344.02, SE= 85.895$) seemed to trend in the right direction, $F(1,53)= 2.332, p=.133$, additional samples would be needed to establish significance. However, when looking at the sum of news values, there is a significant difference when compared to volume. Overall, when comparing the total number of news values present in an article with volume, $F(1,55)=3.87, p=.008$, the presence of four news values (the highest number of values coded in a release) also corresponded with the highest overall mean volume ($M= 547.724, SE= 152.625$). The absence of any identifiable news values led to the lowest mean volume ($M= 2.818, SE= 57.272$).

Tone

There were also significant interactions between news values and tone. Not surprisingly, conflict, $F(1,41)= 4.506, p= 0.04$, was correlated with an overall lower average tone for related Twitter posts ($M= 0.378, SE= 0.199$). Posts relating to releases that had the conflict news value exhibited a negative tone, while releases without the conflict news value had posts with a slightly positive tone on average ($M= 0.79, SE=.1$). On the other hand, releases with the human interest news value $F(1,41)= 11.837, p=.001$, had a higher average tone on social media ($M= 0.789, SE= 0.147$). In other words, human interest leads to posts with a slightly positive tone, while posts

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

without any human interest have a slightly negative to negative tone ($M= 0.38$, $SE=.126$). The prominence news value, $F(1,41)= 3.383$, $p= 0.073$, also trended in the direction of having a more positive tone ($M= 0.672$, $SE=.126$) than when compared with releases that didn't contain the news value of prominence ($M= 0.496$, $SE=.139$).

The overall sum of news values, $F(1,43)= 2.595$, $p=.05$, was also correlated with a more positive tone. The presence of four news values (again, the highest number of values coded in a release) was correlated with the highest mean tone ($M=1.214$, $SE=.356$), which was definitely positive. On the other hand, the absence of any news values corresponded with the lowest average tone ($M= 0.383$, $SE=.184$), which was slightly negative to negative.

Issuing a Press Release

The study also examined how issuing a press release affects volume and tone in general on social media, regardless of news value. In order to assess this the researcher looked at volume and tone on the day the press release was issued, and compared it with the average for the month as well as the average for the most recent preceding three-day period without a press release (typically the three days immediately prior to the issuance of the release). There were several instances where more than one release was issued on the same day, so when this happened only one release was counted. When comparing volume, a paired samples T-test showed there was a significant difference between the day a press release was issued ($M=67.22$, $SD= 51.28$) and the preceding three days ($M= 35.92$, $SD=32.92$); $t(48)= 5.961$, $p<.0001$. Even when removing the release about the litigation (which accounted for much of the volume), there were still significant differences between the two. The same held true when comparing day-of-volume with average monthly volume.

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

When comparing tone, the results trend in the same direction but are not quite significant. The average tone for the day a press release is issued ($M=.60$, $SD=.31$) is higher than the average tone for the three days prior ($M=.498$, $SD=.32$); $t(48)= 1.577$, $p=.121$. However, the removal of the litigation story kept it from being truly significant. It may be that additional samples are needed to better understand the interaction between social media sentiment/tone and the issuance of a press release.

Discussion

These results lend some interesting insights into how organizational press releases and news values affect conversation on social media. The news value of conflict was a significant predictor of increased volume, while the value of currency trended in the right direction. This may give practitioners better insight into the types of stories that may have greater pick up on social media, and how they can possibly emphasize certain values to improve the volume of social media conversation. Also, it appears that a higher number of news values overall leads to higher volume, something practitioners should also consider when creating releases. Trying to incorporate additional news values in a release (or making sure a press release is issued for topics with multiple values) may then lead to higher conversation on social media.

The values of conflict, human interest and prominence were significant predictors of tone, with conflict correlating with a more negative tone and the other two correlating with a more positive tone. Again, this may give PR practitioners better insight into how they can emphasize or de-emphasize certain news values to achieve more positive sentiment on social media. For example, including human interest elements in an otherwise straightforward release could lead to more positive discussion about the company than would otherwise take place. A

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

higher sum of news values present in a release also correlates with more positive tone – again, something to consider when crafting a press release.

It's important to note that the presence of certain news values or even just the number of news values does seem to affect social media conversation. News values are typically discussed from the point of a journalist rather than a PR practitioner, and are often only discussed in regards to traditional media. Those who work in communications and public relations need to consider how they too can use the traditional ideas of news values to their advantage. A thorough understanding of news values can help PR professionals to craft press releases that drive more conversation with a more positive tone. This further emphasizes that theory need not be confined to academia. Even a theory that seems to relate more to journalism can be very valuable for those working in public relations and organizational communication.

The very issuance of a news release also appears to impact the volume of organization-related conversation on social media. On average volume on the day a press release was issued was significantly higher than the average for the three days prior without a release, as well as the average for that month. Tone also may be impacted by the issuance of a press release, although the results were not quite significant. This indicates that issuing a press release does impact social media conversation in some way compared with not issuing a press release. This is regardless of news values present.

The finding that news releases do generally impact Twitter conversation is significant in that it shows that press releases can be effective beyond just generating traditional media coverage. Conversation spikes on days that press releases are issued, which means communicators may be able to use Twitter as a way to monitor discussion related to the release. Communicators should consider how their press releases can not only affect traditional media,

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

but also affect social media. It may be that social media provides them with a more direct line to clients and consumers, allowing them to gauge consumer feedback and perhaps better tailor the messages to consumers on social media. As PR practitioners continue to learn what earns higher volume and more positive sentiment on social media versus traditional media, they may be able to better tailor press release content and where they push that release.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations include the scope of this project, which was limited to one company in a single industry. It is possible that other organizations in other industries/sectors would see different results. For example, a nonprofit or retailer may see very different results from the Fortune 500 financial services company that was used. Future research should attempt to expand and replicate this study for other organizations and industries.

This study would also benefit from additional samples to help establish significance for several items. A longer time period or additional regions would help strengthen the sample size. Attempting to replicate results with a larger organization may also yield more press releases to increase the sample size.

Future research should also look at other social media sites. While Twitter is one of the most popular sites, there are dozens out there. Though the researcher believes Twitter to be representative, replicating the study using Facebook or another site would help strengthen the results.

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INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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