The State of Social Media Research: Where Are We Now,

Where We Were and What It Means for Public Relations

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Abstract: No area in the history of public relations has grown and spread as fast as social media. With that growth has come a proliferation of social media research that has had an impact on the profession. Some of the most important areas of social media research in public relations include theories (transparency, authenticity, influence, engagement, and dialogue), ethics, measurement, standards, and benchmarking. This article reviews research in those areas, and explores where we were, where we are now, and the impact of social media research on public relations. While this paper is not exhaustive, it does serve as an overview to help chart the course of social media research in public relations and generate conversations about its future path.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research about social media has grown tremendously over the past couple years. What used to be a trickle of research has turned into a fire hose that reflects the changing landscape of public relations. Broadly speaking, the most important areas of social media research in public relations include theories (transparency, authenticity, influence, engagement, and dialogue), ethics, measurement, standards, and benchmarking. This article discusses the various tenets of social media, and looks at where we have been and where we are today.

Evolution of Social Media

Research has found that most online adults use social networking sites, with Facebook as the most popular, followed by LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter, and Instagram. Thanks to the popularity of multiple platforms across a wide range of audiences, social media has become one of the most popular topics in public relations research as organizations are increasingly integrating it into their strategy in an effort to engage with a variety of stakeholders.

Social Media Theories and Research

Theories are important to help understand, predict, and guide behavior. In social media many theoretical studies focus on engagement and dialogue, transparency, authenticity, and influence.

Engagement has never been as important as it is today, as companies are communicating with and providing content to stakeholders to build and maintain relationships. Through dialogue and connecting with stakeholders, companies can build relationships. Many of the early studies about social media found low levels of engagement or efforts to encourage dialogue, but things have changed dramatically in the past few years as more organizations are putting social media to the forefront of their communication strategy, and engaging in dialogue with various stakeholders.

Transparency is most often associated with three tenets: Being open and honest; reporting the bad with the good; and providing information in a timely manner. Social media provides another medium for companies to meet their goals of transparency. Research has found that one area companies still struggle is with reporting the good *and* the bad at a rate the public expects.

Authenticity is typically described as something that is real, original, genuine, sincere, and not fake. Authenticity in social media is less popular in research, but the common suggestion is for companies to provide content using a human voice as opposed to a faceless, institutional voice.

There is no denying the importance of *influencers* in social media or public relations overall, and how they spread the message of the organization, both positively and negatively. Research in this area typically pertains to specific audiences such as: sports, politics, women, teens, etc.

Ethics & Social Media

As more and more companies become comfortable with social media, more risks are taken. Research has found that some of the biggest ethical challenges pertain to the company's integrity, advertising and marketing practices, recruitment procedures, and negligence.

Social Media Measurement and Standards

As the use of social media increases, so does the importance of creating standards and understanding that measurement is required to be truly effective. Ultimately, research supports the efforts to move beyond the simple counts such as "Likes," followers, and comments, to more outcome measures such as the level of audience engagement, share of voice, and sentiment.

Social Media Benchmarking

Each year research is conducted to identify what tools are used by companies, and how they are using them. These studies along with more specific studies that look at certain actions in industries provide an understanding of current practices and can help companies identify where they are ahead or behind.

Finally, research in social media has grown drastically in both academia and the practice. Understanding where we have been, where we are, and where we may go is important to help organizations anticipate the social media evolution of tomorrow.

The State of Social Media Research:

Where Are We Now, Where We Were and What It Means for Public Relations

Introduction

Social media has never been more prolific than it is today. Companies are investing millions of dollars into technologies and strategies to help guide their social media engagement in an effort to improve relationships and build their reputation, among other outcomes. Social media poses a challenge with a multitude of evolving platforms. As the tastes of stakeholders change or the platforms evolve to "better" serve stakeholder needs, organizations must constantly adapt. With considerations of paid, earned, and owned media, organizations must understand how the integration of social media fits within their organization's strategy.

Research about social media has grown tremendously the past couple years. The Institute for Public Relations Social Science for Social Media Research Center is one such repository of research that showcases how social media benefits and impacts the profession. What used to be a trickle of research has turned into a fire hose that reflects the changing landscape of public relations. Broadly speaking, research has focused on topics such as ethics; theories such as transparency, authenticity, engagement, and dialogue; and, how to best measure social media.

In this article, we will explore various components of social media research indicating where we are now, where we were, and what it means for public relations. By no means is this an exhaustive review of research. Instead, this should serve as an overview of some of the more prolific areas of research, and generate conversation about where we are and where we will go. While social media changes every day, some of the tried-and-true components of public relations have remained the same (emphasis on writing, research, problem-solving, etc.). Understanding the field and changes to social media is important for the profession to help us evolve.

Evolution of Social Media

Social media has evolved a great deal, and more consumers are using it to communicate and engage than ever before. According to the Pew Research Internet Project (2014), 74% of

online adults use social networking sites, which includes a wide range of ages, education levels, and socioeconomic statuses. The researchers found that Facebook is one of the most popular sites (71% of online adults in the U.S. use this site); fewer respondents used LinkedIn (22%), Pinterest (21%), Twitter (19%), and Instagram (17%). Thanks to the popularity of multiple platforms across a wide range of audiences, social media has become one of the most popular topics in public relations.

An Altimeter survey released at the end of 2013 found social media is extending deeper into organizations, and "what was previously a series of initiatives driven by PR is now evolving into a social business movement that looks to scale and integrate social across the organization (p. 2)." As how organizations approach social has evolved, so too has the research in the field of social media and public relations.

In 2009, Argenti and Barnes released a book about how the "new digital world" has had profound changes in ways organizations interact stakeholders, and redefined the role of public relations and corporate communications. Additionally, the authors contended companies must work across disciplines and in tandem with other internal departments. Other books have been written about the changing world of social media in public relations so much so that a search on Amazon will generate hundreds of books from trade presses. Li and Bernoff's "Groundswell," last updated in 2011, is often noted as one of the best books to address the change brought on by communities defining and redefining organizational efforts through the groundswell. Today, many of the social technologies and insights "Groundswell" defined have now become commonplace in many organizations.

Gartner (2012) released a Pace-layered application strategy, and discussed how these models can help organizations accelerate and develop a modern strategy for social. With this model, organizations go through the phase of evolving their social practices through testing and learning. Then, they move into social through systems of differentiation and integration across the enterprise. After this period of time which may take several years, systems of record are well-established, which will drive social to the forefront of an organization's capabilities.

Social media has also changed such aspects as media relations and the journalist-public relations professional relationship. Waters, Tindall, and Morton (2010) said social media has opened the door for journalists to start making public relations professionals compete with others for the attention of journalists. Plus, with crowdsourcing and the tremendous growth of citizen journalism, the relationship and interaction with journalists has somewhat changed.

Employees and internal communication have progressed to the forefront of social media. Thanks to policies and training programs, employees are successfully advocating for their organizations on social media. In a mixed-methods study, Li and Terpening (2013) from Altimeter found that 43% of companies identified internal social media education as a top priority, and with proper steps, can help reduce risk and activate employees for engagement.

Having an active CEO in social media has also been found to be beneficial as the overall number of online CEOs has increased. BRANDFog (2013) in a survey of U.K. and U.S. employees found more than three-quarters believed social media was an important communication channel for CEOs to engage with customers and investors. Also, many respondents believed leveraging social media makes CEOs more effective. Weber Shandwick's

study (2012) found the "social CEO" has increased by 30 percentage points, from 36% to 66%, in a two-year time period. The study indicated that employees want their CEO to be social, and their involvement also helps with reputation and crisis management.

Social Media Theories and Research

Theories are important for professionals to help understand, predict, and guide behavior. Social media has changed what theories are applicable and some that have stood the test of time are now being considered in different ways. In fact, Luoma-aho (2010) considered the question "Is social media killing our theories?" (p. 1). It is likely that theories will not die, but amend and adapt to this new communications environment.

In a study of social media in 17 academic journals, Khang, Ki, and Ye (2012) found about 40% of social media research employed explicit theoretical frameworks compared to past studies that found only 15% of Internet-related articles and 8% of general articles were based on theoretical approaches. This has helped achieve a certain level of "rigor" to studies, according to the authors. Kent (2014) emphasized the importance of theory to public relations and social media research. In an article in *Public Relations Review*, he offered the following recommendations to guide technology-related submissions to peer-reviewed journals:

> "New technology and social media articles should position themselves within the abundant public relations literature. Articles that fail to acknowledge the guiding theories and principles of public relations, position themselves within core areas of the field, or draw primarily on scholarship from another discipline will be rejected" (p. 2).

While there are multiple theories that are critical to the study of social media in public relations, this section will cover the most frequently used theories.

Engagement and Dialogue

Engagement has never been as important as it is today, as companies are communicating with and providing content to stakeholders to build and maintain relationships. A McKinsey survey in August 2013 of C-level executives found customer engagement was at least a top-ten company priority, and companies "have made big gains in their use of digital to position material" across channels and stakeholders (Brown, Sikes, & Willmott, 2013). Brian Solis (2011) devoted an entire book titled, "Engage! The Complete Guide for Brands and Businesses to Build, Cultivate, and Measure Success in the New Web" To the value of engagement. His book mandated that organizations must "engage or die" as monologue has given way to dialogue (p. 2).

Engagement is a relatively new focus in the field of public relations, but it has progressed through various stages. The Social Media Measurement Standards Conclave, a broad coalition of companies, agencies, independent practitioners, and industry associations, defined the term as "some action beyond exposure, and implies an interaction between two or more parties. Social media engagement is an action that typically occurs in response to content on an owned channel" (2013, p. 6).

Dialogue, which scholars Kent and Taylor discussed in a frequently cited piece from 1998, was defined as having five tenets: Mutuality, or the recognition of organization–public

relationships; propinquity, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; empathy, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; risk, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and commitment, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics (Kent & Taylor, 2002; McAllister-Spooner, 2008).

Conversation is a frequently used term, which some have used interchangeably with "dialogue." The Conclave (2013) defines conversation as "some form of online or offline discussion by customers, citizens, stakeholders, influencers, or other third parties. Social media conversations includes online discussion about your organization, brand or relevant issues, whether via your channel or third party channels" (p. 6).

Some of the earliest studies exploring dialogic communication in platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were published in 2009. The frontier of social media was fairly new, and organizations were hesitant to put information online for public consumption due in part to fear of risk. Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas (2009) found nonprofit organizations on Facebook were typically using the platform to engage in one-way communication, rather than dialogic communication. McCorkindale (2010) found few organizations publicly responded to individuals who tried to contact the company on Facebook. It should be noted that even in 2009, member or fan pages, which is what they were at the time, were organized by employees and fans rather than by organizations.

In 2009, Bortree and Seltzer published one of the first studies of the relationship between the creation of an online space for dialogue and six dialogic outcomes measured on Facebook profiles of environmental advocacy groups. The authors found dialogic outcomes were correlated with three dialogic strategies—conservation of members, generation of return visits, and organization engagement. In the past five years, since the data were collected for these studies, things have changed drastically in the field of social media, and some of these "older" studies should be used more as a benchmark rather than an indication of where we are today.

Twitter as a platform has generated studies investigating the concept of engagement. Engagement is critical, or otherwise the organization is perceived as having a purpose of only disseminating one-way information without taking the time to listen and respond to the needs of stakeholders (McCorkindale, 2012). In 2009, researchers found organizations rarely engaged on Twitter, and used the platform as more of a megaphone (Lovejoy, Waters, Saxton, 2012). Companies in the past several years have been trying to engage more on Twitter. One study found that highly engaged companies received less negative mentions in Tweets, but only if the company also practiced dialogic, or two-way, communication (Wigley & Lewis, 2012). It should be noted that the study only looked at the Tweets of four companies, but the results suggested two-way communication and engagement with stakeholders is critical.

Fröhlich and Schöller (2012) recommended online brand communities as a way to engage and build relationships online through various stakeholders, which may help identify the highlights and pain points for stakeholders. The authors noted that organizations must respond and act quickly to any issues that evolve on online communities.

Mobile technologies has not been studied as much in the field of public relations in terms of dialogic communication, but due to the ubiquity of cell phones, this area of research is

growing. Weberling, Waters, and Tindall (2012) found that those who actively donated to the Text Haiti campaign through their mobile devices scored higher in terms of involvement than those who were simply aware. As expected, proximity to the disaster also made a difference. McCorkindale and Morgoch (2013) studied mobile-ready vs. non-mobile ready sites, and found non-mobile ready websites were more likely to follow the five tenets of dialogic communication due to the lack of offerings and depth of mobile sites. However, non-mobile ready sites led to frustration with mobile users.

Transparency

Transparency is a topic that regularly appears in both trade and academic publications relating to social media. Rawlins (2009) defined transparency as:

> The deliberate attempt to make all legally releasable information—whether positive or negative in nature—in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies, and practices. (p. 75)

Rawlins contended that simply disclosing information does not constitute transparency, because it requires stakeholder participation as well as organizational accountability. Transparency was most often associated with three tenets: Being open and honest; reporting the bad with the good; and providing information in a timely manner.

Rawlins (2009)'s seminal work on transparency has been applied in social media. Sisco and McCorkindale (2013) applied the scale in an analysis of breast cancer nonprofits on social media sites. The study found a strong relationship between the transparency and credibility of the organization. In a content analysis of award winning social media campaigns, DiStaso and Bortree (2012) found the form of transparency most commonly included was providing information that is useful for others to make informed decisions. Suggestions for how organizations can be more transparent on social media included disclosing the individual(s) responsible for managing the account (McCorkindale, 2012), posting accurate and balanced information in a timely manner (Rawlins, 2009), and openly resolving stakeholder issues (Jahansoozi, 2006).

Authenticity

Even though authenticity is often considered interchangeable with transparency, it is important to investigate these concepts independently. In fact, Wakefield and Walton (2010) argued that authenticity may be more important than transparency. Authenticity is typically described as something that is real, original, genuine, sincere, and not fake (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). An individual's authenticity as defined by a survey of Twitter users included revealing private information and was reported to be in direct opposition to strategic self-promotion (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Branding research has found one of the challenges relating to authenticity is that a commercial focus may not be the best strategy for brand managers (Beverland, 2005).

Trust has been closely linked to both transparency and authenticity (Gustafsson, 2006). Even though the concept of authenticity has been explored in detail, little research has applied authenticity as it is represented on social media. Authenticity on social media sites may include ensuring the brand is represented accurately and using a human voice as opposed to a faceless, institutional voice. Using a human voice on social media has been found to promote more positive relationships with stakeholders as well as positive word-of-mouth communication (Park & Lee, 2011).

Influence

Influencers are important to many organizations as they help give credibility to the message. One study about influencers defined them as an "independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, p. 90). The authors suggested public relations professionals need to understand what personality attributes make these individuals credible among other key publics. Studies have also investigated how organizations are using brand ambassadors to convey their message in such arenas as sports, and how professionals must consider the broader impacts of ambassadors (Holton & Coddington, 2012).

In 2013, Weber-Shandwick released a digital women influencer study to identify segments of women who are influential in social media, and provided insights about the female market. Some of the findings included that women of social media enjoy online networks as much as they enjoy live social activities, and this segment is highly influential both online and offline.

Using fans and brand advocates to drive attention to a campaign has also been explored in terms of influence. Social@Ogilvy (2013) released a brand advocacy study that reported brands still have an enormous social advocacy gap. The authors suggested to effectively drive passionate advocacy, organizations must know and focus on its fans' true advocacy, which may be specific to the brand, and not just consumer satisfaction.

Ethics & Social Media

Navigating social media ethically can be especially challenging since the tools keep changing as companies strive to stay current, entertaining, and engaged. Considering the multiple stakeholders of an organization, many ethical dilemmas naturally occur. The 2013 National Business Ethics Survey (NBES) found that more than 10% of employees spend at least 30% of their workday connected to social media. While use of social media in the workplace can be a challenge, this is largely due to productivity and compliance concerns.

Furthermore, the NBES found that 55% of social media users believed that companies can use social networking to build trust in managers and 54% felt it could be effectively used to inform and educate employees on work-related ethical issues. Unfortunately, they also found only 42% of companies use social networking to help senior leadership communicate company values, only 36% use it to build trust in managers; and 36% use it to inform and educate employees on ethics issues.

The Institute of Business Ethics conducted interviews with senior business leaders and employees from large organizations in the UK in 2011. They found the top ethical challenges of

social media were: integrity risk (such as when the social media manager for the American Red Cross accidentally posted "Ryan found two more 4 bottle packs of Dogfish Head's Midas Touch beer…when we drink we do it right #gettingslizzered"); advertising and marketing practices (such as ghost blogging, a topic of great concern and consensus against deception (Gallicano, Brett, & Hopp, 2013; Gallicano, Bivins, & Cho, 2014)); recruitment practices (such as considering social media use as a part of new hire assessment practices); and duty of care (such as identifying company requirements in cases of personal opinions expressed over social media).

In the 2014 book *Ethical Practice of Social Media in Public Relations,* DiStaso and Bortree complied a variety of research based studies to address issues of social media and ethics. Brian Solis set the stage for the book with an overview of the importance of ethics and how one can use a "Social Compass" to help define strategies, initiatives and engagement. The book also addresses challenging ethical topics such as: handling negative comments (DiStaso, 2014; McCorkindale, 2014; Messner, 2014); communicating corporate social responsibility (Berg & Sheehan, 2014; Bortree, 2014); handling openness and disclosure (Waters, 2014); remaining authentic and equitable (Lee, Gil de Zuñiga, Coleman, & Johnson, 2014); crisis (Coombs, 2014; Sisco, 2014); stakeholder communication (Johnson & Gillis, 2014; Sweetser, 2014; Logan & Tindall, 2014; Tirkkonen & Luoma-aho, 2014); and measurement of social media (Bowen & Stacks).

In 2013, Bowen used a case study approach to identify a set of ethical guidelines to include: "Be fair and prudent," "Avoid deception," "maintain dignity and respect," and "eschew secrecy." These overarching guidelines provide a solid ethical framework for users of both social media and traditional media, indicating that the rules have not really changed instead; it is the actions along the way have changed.

Social Media Measurement and Standards

A focus on social media measurement has increasingly become more important to the profession. Collaborations among industry associations and professionals have made strides contributing to the body of knowledge by developing measurement standards in social media. AMEC (International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication), an international association for the measurement and evaluation of communication, released the Barcelona Principles in 2010. One of the principal tenets says social media can and should be measured with a preferred focus on outcomes (AMEC, 2012). Stacks and Bowen (2013) included social media terms in their most recent edition of the *Dictionary of Public Relations Measurement and Research.*

Organizations have also been working together to help set standards for measuring social media in the profession. The Conclave (2013) developed a set of standards for how to measure such social media practices as conversation and engagement. With best practices for engagement, they suggested it must be tied to overall goals and objectives; must be integrated both online and offline; and should be unique to each platform, but can be aggregated. These counts includes actions such as "likes, comments, shares, votes, +1s, links, retweets, video views, content embeds, etc.," and should be measured by "the total number of interactions within and/or across channels; the percentage of your audience engaged by day/week/month; and the percentage of engagement for each item of content your organization publishes."

Concerning conversation, on the other hand, The Conclave (2013) defined conversation counts as "including blog posts, comments, tweets, Facebook posts/comments, video posts replies." Additionally, the Conclave contends conversation should be measured by the total number of "items" that mention the brand, organization, or issue; the number of mentions within each item, and the opportunities to see for each item, calculated by readership at the time of posting." However, one can take issue that conversation should place such a high emphasis on two-way communication and should take into consideration items such as "opportunities to see," which may or may not include a set of eyes reading the content.

In June 2014 at the AMEC International Summit on Measurement, AMEC launched social media measurement valid metrics and framework guides. These guides offer a menu of potential metrics for paid, owned, and earned media, and defined for each the concepts of exposure, engagement, preference, impact, and advocacy. Program metrics, business metrics, and channel metrics are included as well. To highlight the depth of this chart, a metric of advocacy for paid media includes mentions in earned channel, % increase in recommendations, % increase in desirable reviews, and % increase in favorable ratings. This resource is one of the most comprehensive sources for social media measurement.

Even though the topic is not as prominent as others, chapters in books and journal articles have surfaced about how to effectively measure social media. One of the only books entirely devoted to social media measurement is Katie Paine's "Measure what matters: Online tools for understanding customers, social media, engagement, and key relationships." In this book and practical guide about measurement of social media, Paine provides three reasons as to why engagement is critical for organizations. She states that engagement helps build relationships with customers, promotes the brand, and improves products. She offers a chart and description of five hierarchical levels of engagement ranging from the basic click-throughs, unique visitors, and likes to the highest level of trial and purchase advocacy. She indicates how important it is to measure and evaluate the level of engagement of customers to help inform decision-making and strategy in the organization.

Other studies that discuss social media measurement have been found in academic journals, and typically include theory. Yang and Kung (2009) developed a measurement scale of blog engagement that has four components allowing organizations to measure the extent to which their stakeholders are engaged on their organizational blogs. In addition to measurement, other studies have focused on benchmarking to help document and guide social media use as well as strategy.

Social Media Benchmarking

To fully understand how social media is being utilized by organizations and their stakeholders the best place to look is benchmarking studies. Each year, Barnes and her colleagues conduct an analysis to determine what social media tools *Fortune* 500 companies are using. Their 2013 study found that companies continue to increase use of corporate blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Pinterest.

Wright and Hinson (2014) have also studied social media over the years, but they take a deeper look at how social media is used in public relations. Specifically, they provide a

benchmark annually for topics such as the amount of time spent working on social media, what organizational department is responsible for social media, and the importance of the specific tools for public relations efforts. Also, DiStaso and McCorkindale (2013) examined strategy, relationships and engagement on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for *Fortune* companies.

Other benchmarking studies look at specific social media trends. For example, DiStaso (2013) examined perceptions of Wikipedia engagement in public relations and found a steep learning curve and lack of awareness of the rules. Wigley and Zhang (2011) found that few crisis plans included social media, but hopefully that has improved the past few years.

Many industry related benchmarking studies are conducted to best understand each specific environment. For example, there is the J.D. Power Social Media Benchmarking Study that is divided into insights for automotive, banking, wireless, utilities and other industries. Benchmarking provides a powerful assessment of where we are to help us develop strategic goals.

Conclusion

Most social media research has been conducted the past few years, even though it began in the mid-2000s. While having a clear understanding of current tools and processes is extremely valuable, it is also important to recognize how social media began and progressed. Research exploring social media use, best practices, benchmarking, and case studies can help public relations scholars and professionals succeed in this rapidly changing landscape.

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