Public Relations in Singapore:
The Love-Hate Relationship With Social Media

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Bachelor of Communication (Public Relations)

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Communication in Public Relations with Honours at Murdoch University, 2012.
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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November 16, 2012
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ABSTRACT

The growth of social media has undoubtedly impacted upon public relations practice even in non-liberal societies. In December 2011, operators of Singapore’s metro train system, the Singapore Mass Rapid Transit (SMRT) Corporation, suffered a reputational crisis that led to the eventual resignation of its Chief Executive Officer as a result of social media. A series of logistic faults were reported on social media platforms by affected commuters through the use of mobile media technologies as the situations unfolded. This case is pivotal, as one of several in Singapore’s recent history that has conclusively indicated a strategic and professional value to social media in public relations in a society typically known for its restrictive, non-liberal stance.

This dissertation is a multidisciplinary investigation that relates to Grunig and Hunt’s oft-unattainable, two-way symmetrical communication model. The impact of new media technologies will be analysed through crisis communication, a facet of public relations where social media can potentially be the most influential driving force.

Acknowledging that existing data is not substantial enough to accurately support this thesis, it employs a qualitative research design backed by practitioner interviews in order to extract relevant and insightful accounts of industry perceptions regarding the practical utilisation of social media tools amongst professionals. As a result, this study represents the ongoing changes and evolutions being made to public relations as social media continues to evolve.

In this thesis, I propose that social media has influenced the scope of public relations and organisational frameworks currently in Singapore, giving rise to a generation of empowered audiences, who need to be treated with far more caution and respect than ever before. Within this, I also highlight how the rise of the digital era has actually resulted in increased attention to the field of public relations. The SMRT crisis will be used as a key case study to illustrate the ongoing changes. The ultimate aim of this thesis is to examine how social media has impacted on public relations and crisis communication in an authoritarian context.
CONTENTS

Declaration i

Copyright License ii

ABSTRACT iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS vi

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER ONE: WHEN PR AND SOCIAL MEDIA COLLIDE 6

The Communication Revolution: Web 2.0 7

Demystifying Social Media 8

From Stationary to Mobile: Social Networking 10

Social Media & PR: Crossroads at Two-Way Symmetrical Communication 12

Empowered Publics: Dangerous and Armed 14

Crisis Communication and Social Media 17

PR Versus Social Media 20

Maximising the Social Media Approach 22

CHAPTER TWO: WHEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND PR COLLIDE IN SINGAPORE 26

Singapore at a Global Glance 26

Media Control in Singapore 28

The Internet, the Mobile and the Government 31

Singapore’s PR Industry at a Glance 33
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Selecting Semi-Structured Interviews 38
Interview Process 39

Interview Findings
Social Media is not the Holy Grail of PR 41
Fallacies with Successful Social Media Adoption 43
The Internet, Social Media and the Government 46
Empowered Audiences 47

CHAPTER FOUR: ANATOMY OF A CRISIS IN WEB 2.0

The SMRT Train Breakdown 51
Netizen Responses on Social Media 52
No One Waits For an Official Statement 53
A Facilitator or a Trigger 55
It Will Never Happen to Us 57
Forcing Accountability 57
Aftermath 59

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION 61

APPENDIX ONE 64
APPENDIX TWO 66
APPENDIX THREE 67
REFERENCES 68
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