

# **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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Bachelor of Communication in Public Relations with Honours

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

Edmund Heng Wei-Loong

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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.

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## INTRODUCTION

On December 15, 2011, Singapore's metro train system, operated by the Singapore Mass Rapid Transit (SMRT) Corporation, suffered its worst series of breakdowns in history. The first disruption lasted a mere five hours, with an official statement notifying the public issued two hours after the incident began (Ee, 2011). There were no fatalities, nor was it remotely considered a national disaster (Ng & Poon, 2011). Yet, by the time it was resolved, the disruption had moved from a logistic fault, to a full-blown account of incompetency, poor management and widespread criticism of the organisation and transport authority. A month later, bombarded by overwhelming negativity, the Chief Executive Officer of SMRT resigned (Channel NewsAsia, 2012).

Such public transport delays, even ones as lengthy, rarely develop into reputational crises. In this instance, the catalyst was the combined presence of mobile media technology and the use of social media platforms. Affected commuters reported the situation as it progressed, through the use of smartphones and social-networking websites. Through their empowered participation, SMRT notoriously became one of the top trending Singapore topics on Twitter, even before the incident was over (Ng & Poon, 2011).

The outcomes and reactions from this incident have been made more significant by its cultural context. Singapore is a nation of paradox. While possessing impressive communicative infrastructures that has allowed social media to flourish, the same



pluralism has not been extended to its domestic media, which remains under strict authoritative control by the ruling government to this day (Rodan, 2003, p.503-504).

The case of the SMRT crisis is therefore pivotal and one of several in Singapore's recent history that has indicated the strategic and professional value that social media can bring to public relations (PR) theory and practice, particularly within the context of crisis communication. It demonstrates how social media has forged an environment in which media, the ability to "transmit information and entertainment across time and space" (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2008, p.3), can now transcend traditional gatekeepers and state control in ways never before anticipated, even for government-owned organisations such as the SMRT (Temasek Holdings, 2012).

In this thesis, I will examine how the growth of social media has impacted upon PR practice in a non-liberal society such as Singapore, where the adoption of communicative technology is high (ITU, 2012), but PR is undervalued (Lim, Goh & Sriramesh, 2005, p.323). I will analyse Singapore's PR landscape, in particular the paradoxical relationship it has with social media and the ways in which the industry is changing in response. Crisis communication has emerged as the topic of focus, due to its sensitivity to minute changes in information flows (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.152), which can now be easily influenced by social media's outreach. The body of this thesis will contain four chapters, which aim to build upon existing research, to develop a better understanding of the communicative extent of social media, and to determine what lasting impacts this new facet of PR can have on stakeholders, society, and the very profession of PR itself especially within

developed authoritarian societies. Such a study has never been more important as communication channels become increasingly diverse and more easily accessible.

Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, based on qualitative research methodologies, this thesis is ultimately an observational time-based study, examining social media's impact on PR. Academic literature and texts will be textually analysed in order to form the theoretical base necessary for this thesis (Weerakkody, 2009, p.249). This investigation's focus on Singapore is aligned with the epistemological principle of constructionism, where "reality is socially constructed" (Weerakkody, 2009, p.10) and interpretations of meaning are based on culture, history and personal experiences (Weerakkody, 2009, p.11). In accordance, the findings are discussed within an interpretative paradigm, where knowledge is obtained "through interpretation or understanding of human action by examining how people [Singaporeans] make meaning of them" (Weerakkody, 2009, p.27). To lend credence to the theoretical concepts explored in this thesis, it includes an idiographic explanation in the form of a crisis communication case study analysis (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p.55; Weerakkody, 2009, p.229).

In the first chapter, I will examine the role and communicative capabilities of social media in PR. The rise of new media technologies has forged a communication model in today's Internet-based environment that closely emulates that of two-way symmetrical communication: Grunig and Hunt's most ideal model of PR practice (Weaver, Motion & Roper, 2006, p.13). The recent proliferation of the subject has resulted in literature attempting to capture the progress of such technological development. Various studies have focused on different points of view: the positive

and negative implications of social media (Fitch, 2009a, p.337-338); the divided opinions and concerns that the PR industry has towards it (DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011, p.326; Fitch, 2009a, p.430); and the empowerment of the once passive audience (Fitch, 2009a, p.337). Considering that crisis communication is reliant on the pace in which information can be transferred, I will discuss how the capacity of social media to efficiently transmit data with a speed akin to “real time” reinforces its importance to the PR communication process (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.325; Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p.159). It is able to escalate an issue into a crisis, even contain or worsen a crisis, through the ease by which it can communicate with different publics across social media’s many-to-many paradigm (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.152). The aim of this chapter is to demystify the confusion surrounding social media’s role in PR in order to formulate a comprehensive, unbiased overview of how social media has impacted upon the framework of PR theory.

In Chapter Two, I will examine the PR industry in Singapore in conjunction with its paradoxical relationship with social media. It is not possible to fully understand the cultural context in which PR operates in the nation without a grasp of its political, economical and ethnographic distinctness. In particular, the Singapore government enforces an authoritarian regime on the media, a major factor which affects the PR industry (Rodan, 2003, p.503). It is therefore uncomfortable with social media’s emphasis on the active audience and two-way symmetrical communication (Fitch, 2009a, p.337), though this situation is constantly changing. Research conducted by Fitch in 2006 and later revisited in 2009 indicated a positive inclination amongst practitioners towards social media tools (Fitch, 2009b, p. 3). This state of flux will

be included within the scope of the thesis to illustrate the context in which Singapore's PR industry operates, and its ongoing response to social media. The outcome of this analysis will directly impact upon the study and practice of crisis communication in Singapore.

Chapter Three and Four will report and discuss the findings from interviews I had conducted with PR practitioners in Singapore. These chapters aim to link theoretical PR approaches to practical application. Chapter Three outlines and justifies the methodology and research design of using semi-structured interviews to gain insight into social media's impacts on the PR discipline in Singapore. It provides an overview of the data-gathering processes undertaken and cross-references the literature examined in previous chapters, by probing their opinions of social media in Singapore's PR industry. In Chapter Four, I will analyse how crisis communication is polarised between social media's two-way communication model and Singapore's authoritarian context. Backed by practitioner interviews, this chapter involves a case study analysis of the SMRT crisis, where social media proved to be a driving force in crisis communication.

## **CHAPTER ONE: WHEN PR AND SOCIAL MEDIA COLLIDE**

Social media has induced a paradigm shift in PR. In today's Internet-based communication environment, the need for organisations to connect with increasingly fragmented, technologically-savvy publics has seemingly propelled the importance of a framework involving two-way symmetrical communication (Weaver et al., 2006, p.13). Social media has only come into prominence in the last decade. Despite that, it has been overwhelmingly popular, with wide-reaching effects as enabled by digital communication. It therefore needs to be taken seriously, and critically analysed by PR practitioners (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.325). However, existing literature and the ongoing evolutionary state of the tools themselves have led to confusing and shallow perceptions of social media and its communicative significance to the relationship-building rudiments of PR (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326; Fitch, 2009a, p.337-430).

This chapter aims not to add to, but to organise the discussion. It begins by reviewing the digital environment and communication paradigm that has allowed for the existence and development of social media; analyses the scope of social media itself; and its defining characteristics and position in today's mobile media world. It goes on to clarify the potential roles that social media occupies within existing PR theory, particularly within the framework of two-way symmetrical communication. The empowered audience is discussed, as a major reason behind social media's overwhelming popularity and power, as well as the way the industry regards social media in practice. In outlining the strategic use of social media, this chapter ends

with a statistical outline of the sheer outreach that social media platforms can have, providing a quantifiable stance of social media's importance to PR.

### ***The Communication Revolution: Web 2.0***

Social media can only exist because of the innovations on the Internet. The invention and expansion of the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1990 and its subsequent conceptual evolution to Web 2.0 pioneered much of today's digital communication technologies (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p.156-157). In 2004, technical refinements to the WWW enabled Internet users with little technical knowledge to "construct and share their own media and information products" (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p.157). Harnessing "collective intelligence", (O'Reilly, 2010, p.37) this intersection of peer-to-peer application capabilities, linking multiple users to multiple sources of content, became known as Web 2.0, leading to a paradigm shift in communication models (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p.157; O'Reilly, 2010, p.37). Web 1.0 involved a one-way flow of information in which users were merely receivers. Under this "one-to-many" broadcasting paradigm (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.144), the traditional media outlets determined what constituted newsworthy information, with no opportunity for audiences to respond, before or after it was published. Web 2.0 has since replaced that with group discussions (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.144), becoming popular as it allowed users to form their own communities and participate in dialogues rather than endure monologues (Macnamara, 2010, p.33, 37), characteristics employed in social media. Web 2.0's popularity is evident in the rates of Internet adoption over the years. In 2007, there were over a billion Internet users around the world (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.143). By 2011, there were

over two billion, making up 32.7 percent of the world's population (Internet World Stats, 2012a), setting the stage for social media to perform. The Internet is therefore considered the “first medium that promotes a new kind of interactive communication, sharing and collaboration” (Bridgeman, 2008, p.170).

### *Demystifying Social Media*

Social media is a muddled concept both easy and difficult to comprehend at the same time. This paradox is evident in a survey conducted by Safko (2010) on the significance of social media. Despite the majority of respondents being unable to define social media, nearly all were instinctually aware of its ability to have a “significant impact on them personally and their businesses” (Safko, 2010, p.4). Safko attributes this to the difficulty in defining the “social” in social media. While media can be easily understood as communicative technologies, “social” refers to the way in which connections are made. The need to be social is inbuilt, a fundamental human need that so intrinsically familiar that it is overlooked. The construction of communities and groups have now shifted from the physical to the virtual, eliminating the concern of location or face-to-face contact, instead allowing communities to fully thrive on social importance: that of shared interest and practices (Siapera, 2012, p.194).

As such, social media is essentially “the media we use to be social” (Safko, 2010, p.3). It is not a new communication model, but one whose tools have only recently come into prominence due to the proliferation of new media technologies (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p.157). Integrating aspects of social and media has resulted in a

technologically-advanced medium with the “ability to link” users regardless of traditional logistic restrictions (Siapera, 2012, p.4). Such explanations may clarify the reasons behind social media’s innate trust by audiences despite difficulties in conceptualising the term itself. However, the same proliferation of new media technologies has also resulted in the superficial understanding of social media and its treatment as a foreign, almost alien technology.

For the sake of today’s digital framework, social media is now used to define any Internet-related tool that is able to “integrate technology, social interaction and user-generated content” (Siapera, 2012, p.202), incorporating the properties of Web 2.0 and user-to-user interaction (Safko, 2010, p.3). Scott (2010) defines it as:

“The way people share ideas, content, thoughts, and relationships online. Social media differ[s] from so-called ‘mainstream media’ in that anyone can create, comment on, and add to social media content. Social media can take the form of text, audio, video, images and communities.” (Scott, 2010, p.38)

The most popular social media tools are, social network Facebook; micro-blogging platform Twitter; and video-sharing website YouTube (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.325). While Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have become synonymous with the term social media, they are but part of the greater social media picture which includes blogs, chat rooms, Wikis and social bookmarking sites (Scott, 2010, p.37). The most visible subset of social media is social networks. Social networks employ three main two-way communicative characteristics in their definition. It firstly allows users to create, download and share content. Secondly, users are able to publish their profile and personal details on a specified platform. Finally, users are able to establish connections with other users (Siapera, 2012, p.202). As such, publics are now



considered “producers”, producing and using content at the same time (Fitch, 2009a, p.337; Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p.162).

### ***From Stationary to Mobile: Social Networking***

Mobile media technologies have gained visual importance in the digital landscape. Examples include digital cameras, mobile game consoles and portable media players (Livingstone, 1999, p.63; Siapera, 2012, p.147). Such technologies have significant implications for social media, though none more so than the mobile phone.

The mobile phone has become the most widely used technology in the world, representing two key characteristics of mobile media technology: portability and convergence (Safko, 2010, p.397). The device is now a plethora of mobile technologies, equipped with cameras, capable of multimedia playback and harnessing several different functions all within the same gadget (Safko, 2010, p.393; Siapera, 2012, p.151).

In the years since its development in 1973, the mobile phone has advanced through first generation or 1G analogue technology to today’s current third generation of 3G mobile phones (Siapera, 2012, p.147-150). Released in the early 2000s, 3G phones were part of the move in which telecom companies provided the infrastructure to “ensure more efficient and quicker data transfer” (Siapera, 2012, p.151). Today, it is estimated that over 800 million people access the Internet using their mobile phones (Siapera, 2012, p.151). Such advancements towards wireless connectivity have had significant impacts on social media interaction, which were furthered by the

introduction of a yet another mobile phone generation in 2010. The fourth generation or 4G telephony network was designed to provide “quick and wireless access to the Internet services” for all mobile phone users. Such services include video streaming and as a matter of interest, social media networking (Siapera, 2012, p.151). While 4G systems are still currently being rolled out to replace the 3G systems, the fact that it will soon exist presents an immense potential for social media platforms and tools (Siapera, 2012, p.151).

It is important to consider that mobile phones and their technological successor, the smartphone, may very well be the future in social networking, taking its current popularity and convergence of communicative functions into account. Akin to miniature personal computers, smartphones, such as the iconic iPhone launched by Apple Inc. in 2008, combine the functions of mobile phones with advanced operating systems, internet telephony, and customizable entertainment programs, known as apps (Barnes, 2012; Goggin, 2009, p.235-6). In the space of thirty-odd years, the phone has transformed from a business tool to a ubiquitous everyday device that people cannot function without (Siapera, 2012, p.147, 151). In certain locations, mobile phone adoption has risen beyond saturation point, with people owning more than one mobile phone (Siapera, 2012, p.152). In 2008, the average subscription rate was at 60 percent of the world, with Europe at 118 percent, the United States at 88.5 and Asia with 45 percent (Siapera, 2012, p.152). In the third quarter of 2012 alone, a grand total of 157 million smartphones handsets were shipped worldwide (Juniper Research, 2012). This illustrates the established and yet ever-growing importance of the mobile phone and its services.

The technological development of mobile phones and smartphones have allowed users to communicate on many-to-many platforms regardless of logistics, through functions such as text messaging, blogging, wireless Internet coverage, emails and social-networking platforms (Safko, 2010, p.396; Siapera, 2012, p.147-148). Real-time transmissions and events can now be shared amongst communities as they are unfolding (Safko, 2010, p.402), to the point that anyone with a mobile phone can be called a “new citizen journalist” (Bridgeman, 2008, p.169). It has been noted that the mobile phone has opened up avenues for the creation and exchange of information, with users wielding incredibly vast democratic potential in favour of “horizontal social networks” that are critical of central authority (Siapera, 2012, p.161). This has implications not only for social media, but for PR practitioners and by extension, their organisations in their choice of which communication model to adopt. This is taking into consideration social media’s emphasis on two-way symmetrical communication, a model that has been highlighted in PR theory, but rarely employed until the advent of social media platforms and tools.

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

Two-way symmetrical communication was first identified in 1984 by Grunig and Hunt as the most ideal model of PR. Described as a “level of equality of communication”, it envisioned participants as being open to dialogue and willing to exchange dissimilar views (Theaker, 2004, p.15). Under the model, power is wielded equally by both parties (Theaker, 2004, p.16). Not only are organisations open to feedback, they are willing to change behaviours and attitudes in response to the

information received, an exceedingly rare practice in PR (Theaker, 2004, p.15; Weaver et al., 2006, p14).

In today's complex Internet-based environment, the "social dynamics of the online world requires greater openness and a more human voice" (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.146) Drawing its characteristics from Web 2.0, social media affords transparent, two-way and intimate dialogue between the organisations, stakeholders and publics. The channel allows strategic communication avenues for organisations to know the needs and wants of their publics, while simultaneously informing the public of their own position and desires (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p.55; Theaker, 2004, p.259). Social media is therefore aiding the portrayal of organisations, as being thoughtful, forward-looking and caring (Macnamara, 2010, p.317). At the point of time when Grunig constructed the two-way symmetrical model, he admitted the unlikelihood of it becoming the practice or norm (Macnamara, 2010, p.311), even though PR practitioners considered it their most ideal choice of practice if "they had the expertise to do so and if their organisations were receptive to that practice" (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p.55). Hence, the development of social media offers a mutually beneficial framework to all participants: practitioners are empowered to exercise a PR model they find most rewarding, while relationships between the organisation and its stakeholders are maintained, encouraged and fulfilled.

However, it was also recognised that the mutually beneficial framework could not always lead to mutually beneficial outcomes. In 2002, shifting communicative technologies and factors prompted Grunig to revise the two-way symmetrical model into one of "integrated contingency" (Macnamara, 2010, p.312). Within the original

two-way symmetrical communication model, Grunig admits that outcome of mutual benefit is far too idealistic, as not all situations can be resolved amicably. Under the new model, either the organisation or the public would obtain the more legitimate view, depending on the situation (Macnamara, 2010, p.312). The decision-making process remains the same, but the outcomes, though democratic, may not be fully equal (Macnamara, 2010, p.312). Regardless, most contemporary PR theorists such as Broom, Grunig and Macnamara still “emphasize a two-way communication approach in public relations and the importance of acting ethically in the public as well as the organization’s interest” (Macnamara, 2010, p.313).

### ***Empowered Publics: Dangerous and Armed***

The advent of Web 2.0 and social media had made the environment that PR operates in extremely complex. The same platforms that have led to social media’s proliferation have also led to its empowered publics. Audiences have become highly fragmented, preferring to subscribe to information rather than filtering through mainstream media (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.144). Organisations must be proactive, able to communicate to a “diverse and rapidly expand[ing] array of constituents while remaining relevant to all” (Argenti, Howell & Beck, 2005, p.2005, p.86), or risk far-reaching and instantaneous consequences (Fitch, 2009a, p.337). Politics have become particularly tricky, with social media placing all participants on equal footing, regardless of political position as it “allows for deliberation and actual communal thinking about issues” (Siapera, 2012, p.95). Hence, there needs to be a framework in which “communication practices contribute directly to corporate strategic implementation” (Argenti et al., 2005, p.83). Practitioners need to engage

online publics in a way that encourages genuine dialogue and debate without manipulating or dominating through institutional voices (Fitch, 2009a, p.337). The worst would be to “ignore social media and allow conversation[s] to happen without awareness or participation” (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326). The strategic communication avenues afforded by social media are therefore essential to the success of organisations (Argenti et al., 2005, p.89).

Social media is undoubtedly powerful and equally popular. It is a channel for swifter information transference, one which is “realigning the role and influence of the media, institutions and corporations” in relation to audiences (Bridgeman, 2008, p.169). In 2009, social media was recorded as the fourth most popular activity on the Internet, ahead of emails, with at least ten percent of the time spent online being devoted to social networking (Siapera, 2012, p.202). Social media’s popularity and significance is largely attributed to the way society consumes news and information (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326). Since social media is primarily a tool for the public, it is customer, not producer, driven. This is the very reason for social media’s proliferation as power is retained by the audience instead of being distributed according to the organisation’s whim, giving rise to the empowered audience who now demand to be seen and heard (Theaker, 2004, p.259).

Web 2.0 and the accessibility of social media allows publics to connect with each other and publish their own content (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326; González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.143) without the imposition of organisational politics (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p.161). Such transparency does not often exist in traditional communities, which are seen as being more guarded and hierarchical compared to

the virtual space (Siapera, 2012, p.194). This sense of open, multi-directional communication has also been noted as a direct contrast to the broadcast paradigm favoured by organisations that are of a one-way communication approach (Theaker, 2004, p.273).

However, the motivations behind such creative and collaborative activities are still unclear (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p.157). One suggestion is that the openness of Web 2.0 acts as a safe, comfortable medium, allowing users who might otherwise feel powerless to express themselves (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p.172). The anonymous nature of online resources is considered a main factor in which users are willing to voice things that they would generally refrain from doing in person (Theaker, 2004, p.273). Views of the public are also believed to be more reliable, as unlike organisations, they do not have any underlying agenda (Argenti et al., 2005, p.86; Fitch, 2009a, p.337).

Another key factor to consider for the rise and use of social media is in the profile of audiences themselves. Today's audience primarily consists of Generation X, those born between 1960 and 1980; and Generation Y, those born from 1980 onwards. Both generations have been noted to be more "media savvy and cynical" (Macnamara, 2010, p.236). These generations mainly trust friends, family, peers and interestingly enough, consumer opinions posted online. As such, there is a need for organisations to engage in two-way communication, to display transparency, trustworthiness and sincerity to these potential consumers and eventual stakeholders (Macnamara, 2010, p.236). These displays are particularly poignant in the fast-paced

world of today where unfavourable situations, such as crises, can be devastatingly easy to escalate through social media.

### ***Crisis Communication and Social Media***

A crisis has been defined as a “major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organisation, company or industry, as well as its publics, products, services or good name”. They are sensitive to minute changes in information flows, reliant on the pace in which information can be transferred. (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.325; González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.152). It interrupts the normal flow of business and transactions, to the point that even the existence of the organisation is in jeopardy if the situation is not contained (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p.8).

Crisis communication is typically “the dialogue between the organisation and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence”. Such dialogue involves the detailing of appropriate strategies and tactics in order to minimise damage to the organisation (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p.9). The role of crisis communication “is to affect the public opinion process and to be instrumental in establishing and communicating proof” of the organisation’s commitment in managing the crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p.15). Crisis communication is a component of crisis management, which is the strategic planning and implantation of the process to contain the crisis and bring it back to a state of normalcy (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p.9).

In today’s fast-paced digital world, a crisis can now be transmitted instantly through social media, faster than any other medium, putting crises at the forefront of any



situation (Bridgeman, 2008, p.172). As such, social media's capacity to efficiently transmit data with a speed akin to "real time" reinforces its importance to the crisis communication process (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.325; Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p.159). It is able to escalate or control a crisis, through the ease in which it can communicate with different publics across the many-to-many platforms that social media offers (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.152).

What must be understood is that "social media exposes companies to internal and external crises" (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326). The wide accessibility of the platforms has made issues such as intellectual property leakages, attacks by activists on the company and poor employee behaviour more common (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326). It has been noted that the Internet can either be a facilitator or a trigger of crises.

As a facilitator of crisis, the Internet simply "accelerates the crisis news cycle" acting as an additional channel for the discussion of events already taking place (Bridgeman, 2008, p.169-170; González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.145). Without the immediacy of the Internet, the crisis might still occur, just at a slower pace (Bridgeman, 2008, p.170; González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.145). As a trigger, the Internet can "cause a problem important enough to be considered a crisis if not handled appropriately" (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.145).

On the Internet, traditional legal issues such as authority and credibility are not scrutinised as thoroughly, which may facilitate the ease of false information to be transmitted and accepted by audiences, thus creating a crisis out of a rumour (Bridgeman, 2008, p.171). Classic cases of these involve the email rumour and the

rogue website, though they have diminished since the advent of social media. Organisations could have once taken proactive action to prevent consumer complaints on rogue websites, such as purchasing domain names similar to their own (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p.53-55; Theaker, 2004, p.276). The crisis characteristics have carried over to social media, again leading to easily transmitted false information, with the original culprits being relatively secure of not being discovered, such as the rogue tweet, more accessible and transmittable than ever before (Bridgeman, 2008, p.171; Pozzi, 2010).

Social media has perpetuated an expectation of accountability. Audiences now expect organisations to be responsive, open and transparent, especially during crises where organisations are often forced to practice two-way symmetrical communication with adversarial publics, be it within social media or otherwise (Bridgeman, 2008, p.174; Fearn-Banks, 2007, p.55). The Internet and its users are merciless when addressing the failure of organisations, especially when they have chosen the route of downplaying situations, pushing the blame, or providing misleading information (Bridgeman, 2008, p.175).

While organisations are more focused on the negative impacts that social media can have on them during a crisis, it is also important to note that the same medium is offering new opportunities. Whereas organisations might have required days in order to communicate a crisis, the Internet and social media platforms have made such communication instant (Bridgeman, 2008, p.170). Preliminary information leading up to a crisis can also be detected quickly through the Internet and effective media monitoring (Bridgeman, 2008, p.173).

### ***PR Versus Social Media***

The PR industry regards social media with mixed feelings. The potential for strategic dialogue is countered by the loss of control that is generated (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326; Fitch, 2009a, p.430). In addition, critical understanding and strategic use of social media to promote meaningful two-way communication amongst practitioners is lacking (Fitch, 2009a, p.337; Macnamara, 2010, p.316).

A study by Wright and Hinson in 2009, later revisited in 2010, indicated a realisation of the growing importance of social media tools to PR (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.325). The many-to-many approach of social media tools allows practitioners, and by extension, their organisations, to interact with a wide range of stakeholders, developing relationships and building communities. Spreading a message through social media tools is a “cost effective way to receive reach for research and timely targeted dialogue” with stakeholders. Businesses are able to “harness collective intelligence by facilitating user-generated content”, gaining feedback and data for use in business operations to drive profits (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p.159).

However, there are also negative implications to social media. The information overload makes it difficult to be heard amongst competing voices. User-generated content can lead to the promotion of false information about organisations, potentially crippling them. (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326). Top management experiences a similar dilemma, as revealed by DiStaso, McCorkindale and Wright on the opinions of corporate executives towards social media (2011). While recognising social media’s importance, they are sceptical of its value. There is a tendency to “link[] social media to sales” (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326), with management feeling

that social media involvement does not drive business results. Their perception of social media is not a “quantum” shift in communication models, but of the existence of new communication tools (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326). Such a perception exists within the scope of PR as well. Because communication cannot be quantified, managements are less inclined to take it seriously (Lim et al., 2005, p.328).

Research conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan School of Management noted that companies whose top management had an intrinsic understanding of communication acted as “a differentiator for a business and thus can drive strategy” (Argenti et al., 2005, p.84). In addition, research on social media tends to focus on lower-level employees utilising social media tools in their daily operations. However, they are not equipped with the power to make corporate decisions (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.325-326). Lower management cannot be expected to incorporate social media strategically if top management themselves have no clear understanding of the tools.

DiStaso’s study also highlighted the unanswered questions faced by practitioners regarding social media tools. Executives wanted practical examples of best practices, credibility and meaningful dialogue, to name a few. They also focused on difficult aspects of social media measurement, with a participant commenting that it at least required a basic understanding of differentiating noise on commentary, or what has the “potential to emerge as a substantive issue”. While Macnamara (2010) noted that it was possible to monitor social media quickly at little to no cost, he drew a distinction between data collection and data analysis, cautioning that monitoring services and applications were only data collection, while data analysis required “a

systematic way...to interpret its likely meanings and potential impact” (Macnamara, 2010, p.320). It is noted that organisations have either attempted to utilise social media to enhance relationships with stakeholders, or control it by putting social media policies into place. It is suggested that social media training in organisations is necessary for business continuity (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.327).

The main challenge with social media is its rapid evolution and relative newness. The immediacy is difficult to manage, as practitioners are unable to “stay current with rapidly changing social media environment” (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326). Older employees are unable to keep up, while practitioners are often learning on the go (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326). There is no proper instruction as to what is the proper tactic, which is the more appropriate tool, or how much resource to dedicate to implementing both tactic and tool (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.325). Social media is also not universal. Certain organisations are restricted in their interactions, either through legality or in businesses such as healthcare and pharmaceuticals (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326).

### ***Maximising the Social Media Approach***

In conceptualising effective use of social media for business and communication purposes, Safko (2010) proposes a “social media trinity” comprising of the three most important social media tools necessary for effective stakeholder engagement. These tools involve blogging, microblogging and social networks (Safko, 2010, p.687). Though seemingly outdated with the onset of more compact and flashier social media tools, blogs continue to thrive.

In 2008, 133 million blogs were being tracked by blog search engine Technorati (Macnamara, 2010, p.240). By 2010, that number had dipped to 112.8 million (Safko, 2010, p.47). Although blogs have lost popularity, they remain important due to their format, where articles can contain more information and consequently, more data. Blog pages also receive higher rankings in search engine results compared to standard webpages, resulting in greater visibility (Safko, 2010, p.689). The use of blogs, either through independent bloggers or organisational corporate blogs, could aid in breaking down barriers and establishing relationships between the organisation and their publics (Macnamara, 2010, p.322).

Microblogging is important due to its more succinct approach. Twitter allows for brief messages, up to a 140 characters each, to be sent and received (Safko, 2010, p.258, Macnamara, 2010, p.45). Its popularity lies in its interactive, yet organised format. Posts can be grouped under the same topic as “trending topic[s]” or be quoted and repeated by others as a “retweet” (Siapera, 2012, p.98). Over 340 million messages are uploaded daily onto Twitter, by over 140 million active users (Twitter, 2012). This indicates the extensive scope of connectivity that the platform possesses, one which organisations can tap into.

As a social network, Facebook is one example whose visibility and connectivity is as evident as Twitter. By the end of 2011, Facebook had over 845 million active monthly users (Facebook, 2012a) despite its disappointing Initial Public Offering in May 2012 and reports of “Facebook Fatigue” in which existing users have begun to tire of the social network (The Economist, 2012, p.60). The significance of social-

networking platforms can be understood through their interconnectivity. On average, a Facebook user is calculated to have 120 friends. While the user may not contact each and everyone, there nonetheless exists the option to do so (Siapera, 2012, p.191).

Though not specified as part of the Social Media Trinity, YouTube is equally important. For the video-sharing site, an hour of video is uploaded onto the website every single second. In terms of consumption, four billion videos are viewed daily, by a total of 800 million users every month (YouTube, 2012a). This becomes even more significant when mobile media technologies are included. With its collaborative, user-to-user interaction, YouTube is embedded onto Facebook's application, while Twitter allows YouTube links to be shared. In 2011, over 600 million YouTube videos were being watched daily on mobile media platforms. Over 500 years of videos are viewed each day on Facebook, while social interaction such as sharing the video, commenting or "liking" it, accounted for over 100 million people a week. On average, it has been calculated that sharing a YouTube on Twitter resulted in a six additional views, a snowball effect (YouTube, 2012a). It is important to note that these three platforms could only be established after the innovation of Web 2.0. Facebook was founded in 2004 (Facebook, 2012a), YouTube in 2005 (YouTube, 2012b), and Twitter in 2006 (Twitter, 2012). As such, it would be prudent to take video-sharing sites into account when implementing effective communication strategies.

In this chapter, I explored and provided an overview into social media's role in both PR theory and practice. I have discussed how social media was only able to come

about as a result of digital improvements to the WWW, which then brought about a paradigm shift of new media, where audiences wield more media power than in traditional broadcasting paradigms. From there, I have discussed exactly what social media means as first a concept and then by the tools that define it in today's digital environment. By highlighting the development of the mobile phone, I have outlined how mobile media technologies have influenced and are continuing to influence social media networking. I have demonstrated how social media's existence is linked to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) model of two-way symmetrical communication and how it has then given rise to both opportunities and pitfalls for the field of PR. By focusing on the specialisation of crisis communication, I have given an indication of the impacts of social media that not only exist within theoretical frameworks, but more importantly for practical applications. In the next chapter, I will examine the PR industry in Singapore, and significance of social media in this context.



## **CHAPTER TWO: WHEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND PR COLLIDE IN SINGAPORE**

In the previous chapter, I explored how the core PR discipline can potentially change as a result of social media and provided a broad theoretical overview into social media and its impacts on the study of PR, particularly on crisis communication. This chapter aims to discuss those theories and concepts in more specific detail, by addressing them within the cultural and societal context of Singapore. It begins by discussing the environment of Singapore itself, where communication, media and politics often pool together into a sticky, self-failing mix. Such an account is necessary to understand how the PR industry operates in Singapore.

### *Singapore at a Global Glance*

Bordered between Peninsular Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore is one of the world's smallest but most affluent societies. Its small landmass in relation to its 5.18 million population has made urbanisation and development a necessity, making it one of just three sovereign city-states in the world (CIA, 2012; Department of Statistics Singapore, 2012a). Its citizens comprise of a diverse ethnic and religious array, with the largest communities being Chinese, Malay and Indian (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2012b). The nation upholds a policy of bilingualism and recognises four official languages: English, Malay, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil. English is the *lingua franca*, the dominant working language of the nation, while the different racial communities receive education in their respective native languages, thus preserving cultural ethnicity with the convenience of a globalised bridging

language amongst citizens and other nations (Lee, T., 2010, p.5; Thussu, 2006, p.163).

Globalisation is a key aspect of Singapore, considering that the term “globalisation” itself refers to the growing integration of economies, politics and culture (Steger, 2002, p.19). In 2012, the nation was declared the most globalised nation, and eleventh most globalised city in the world (A.T. Kearney, 2012). Lacking natural resources, the nation sought sustainability through the global economy and succeeded. Trade, and the later establishment of a knowledge-based economy, made it popular for foreign transnational investment, especially in the high-tech sector (Lim et al., 2005, p.318-9; Thussu, 2006, p.61). Since 2010, Singapore has been the world’s busiest bunkering port and the second busiest in terms of volume (Lee, C., 2010). It is one of Asia’s leading financial hubs, with the fifth highest Gross Domestic Product in the world (CIA, 2012).

Singaporean politics is a notoriously sticky subject. Since independence in 1965, the People’s Action Party (PAP) has been continually elected into power. This remarkable political stability has been recognised as the main impetus for Singapore’s overall national development, as the unchanged single-party rule ensured that the government was able to continually support the changing needs of its citizens (Lee, T., 2010, pp.2, 4). In that regard, the PAP has been credited and criticised in equal measure. While acknowledging that the party has propelled Singapore to the level of a cosmopolitan society, “governed by its own constitution, legislation and will” (Lee, T., 2010, p.2), it has also been rebuked for promoting a paternalistic political structure that superficially mimics democracy (Lee, T., 2010,

p.14). The basis of this is the advocating of a pragmatic ideology, in which economic sustainability against global powerhouse nations takes precedence over the relatively benign issue of civil liberty (Lee, T., 2010, pp.12, 18). This ideology is still endorsed by the government today. It is visible in the way the domestic media operates and consequently influences the related fields of professional communication and PR.

### ***Media Control in Singapore***

Despite aspirations to be seen as a global media city, the government does not endorse a liberal domestic media. The common observation is that greater political pluralism, press freedom and information flows have not accompanied the nation's impressive mass communication networks (Loh & Chong, 2005, p.9). Under the Press Freedom Index of 2012, Singapore ranked as the worst globalised nation in terms of media transparency and press freedom. It scored a position of 135 out of 179 nations, a key demonstration of the authoritarian regime enforced upon the media (Reporters Without Borders, 2012).

The Singaporean government openly denounces the premise of a Fourth Estate (Mahizhnan, 2010, p.1). The argument made is that the media industry cannot be afforded such rights on the basis that members of its workforce have not been nominated to their roles by the public, and therefore, are unworthy of carrying a societal voice separate from the government's (Lee, T., 2010, p.14). According to the government, the role of the media is not to provide discourse, but to inform and educate. Ultimately, it must contribute to the betterment of the nation, and such aims

can only be achieved through the right leadership, which the government claims is itself, having been elected into position by the citizens (Lee, T., 2010, p.15, 65).

However, such proclamations are observed to mask a political agenda. The PAP has a deep-seated fear of being ousted. Media muzzling is therefore seen as the most effective means to avoid far-reaching political criticism while reinforcing control (Lee, T., 2010, p.4, 15). Such a regime serves a dual purpose: dissonant views regarding the PAP are muted, while the media outlets function as a mouthpiece for the ruling government (Atkins, 2002, p.117; Loh & Chong, 2005, p.9). From a media societal perspective, Singapore is a well-behaved, well-disciplined community whose economically-productive citizens avoid speaking out of context through government-controlled mass media in order to avoid repercussions (Lee, T., 2010, p.17).

Singapore's media primarily operates on a duopolistic system, consisting of broadcaster MediaCorp and print organisation, the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). MediaCorp is Singapore's largest media broadcaster and provider network, a national media conglomerate that operates across five main business ventures: television, radio, print, interactive media, productions and other diversifications. The organisation holds a monopoly over domestic broadcasting, owning all seven of the nation's licensed television channels, including its flagship news channel, Channel NewsAsia (MediaCorp, 2012b). MediaCorp's interactive media primary consists of maintaining online versions of its news channels, though it has also formulated a partnership with Microsoft's Internet network to create xinmsn, a bilingual Internet search provider (MediaCorp, 2012a).

Similarly, the SPH holds a print monopoly in the nation, publishing 18 different newspaper titles, in the four official languages (Lee, T., 2010, p.130; SPH, 2012). It is the publisher of the nation's flagship news publication, *The Straits Times* (SPH, 2012b). The organisation publishes over 100 different magazine titles in Singapore (SPH, 2012), and operates two radio channels (SPH, 2012).

Both media organisations are very much under key governmental control. Although MediaCorp may appear to be a private media organisation, it is still owned by Temasek Holdings, the nation's sovereign wealth and investment arm, which in turn, is controlled by the government (Lee, T., 2010, p.130). Similarly, operating constraints, media control and governmental regulations, as previously discussed, have wrought SPH under state control, despite being a public listed company. Taking into account the limited market share in Singapore, such a situation cannot be avoided (Lee, T., 2010, p.130).

Evidence of the authoritarian media regime can be observed from the case of satellite television. In the early 1990s, Transnational Corporations (TNC) began attempts to penetrate the Asian market with satellite television. Compared to its fellow Southeast Asian nations, which scrambled to improve their own domestic satellite television networks to prevent economic loss and cultural imperialism, Singapore instead chose to ban satellite television ownership (Atkins, 2002, p.116). Particularly in Singapore's case, there was little choice but for TNC to abide by the government's information filtration systems, regulations and censorship laws in order to tap into the nation's considerable market value (Atkins, 2002, p.118). Certainly, this could

not happen if Singapore did not enjoy a “special status” (Atkins, 2002, p.134) as a regional production, distribution and uplink hub, where every household was connected to an island-wide cable network. This status allowed the government to dispense “a strong hand in negotiations with the transnational media corporations.” (Atkins, 2002, p.134). As such, it can be seen that Singapore’s media control was not something to be taken lightly, even by international players.

### ***The Internet, the Mobile and the Government***

Singapore is one of the highest embracers of the Internet in Southeast Asia, pioneering several digital milestones. It was the first nation in the world to launch a national website, as early as 1995 (Lee, T., 2010, p.107). By 1999, it has become the first country in the world to have all households and businesses connected to a hybrid fibre-optic cable network, though this was mainly achievable due to the nation’s small size and high urban density (Atkins, 2002, p.132; Lee, T., 2010, p.107). In 2011, Singapore’s rate of Internet users was at 77.2 percent penetration, with over 3.6 million Internet users, the highest in Southeast Asia and one of the highest throughout Asia (Internet World Stats, 2012b; Nielsen, 2012, p.3). Of that number, over 54.9 percent or 2.6 million were Facebook users (Internet World Stats, 2012b), thus illustrating the nation’s high rate of Internet adoption. Amongst Southeast Asian nations, that number jumped to 77 percent as the most popular social media activity, followed by YouTube and Microsoft’s MSN network, though that might be in part due to the xinmsn partnership that MediaCorp has with Microsoft (Nielsen, 2012, p.14).

It has been noted that Singapore is a rare exception in Asia in which the Internet possesses enough capability to be mobilised for mass consumption (Sen & Lee, 2008, p.2). Against other Southeast Asian nations, Singaporeans had the highest demographic of Internet users across all age groups, with Generation Y users ranking the highest (Nielsen, 2012, p.4). Singapore is also the only nation in the region to have reached mobile phone subscription saturation (Nielsen, 2012, p.6), while a collated data analysis by Ahonen (2011) ranked Singapore first amongst 42 nations in terms of smartphone penetration, at 90 percent (Hou, 2011). It was outlined that Singapore's market, taking into consideration its extensive digital communication framework, was mature enough to support "mass-market smartphone app" and may soon reach 100 percent penetration as well. However, the research by Nielsen (2012) found Singaporeans shy in terms of discussing or voicing their own reviews about brands or services, with the majority of their Internet usage spent on reading comments or watching online videos on the product or service they were interested in, which may be a possible lingering effect of the media muzzling that Singaporeans have had thus far (Nielsen, 2012, p.15).

Despite the overwhelming digital media prevalence in Singapore, the government's view on the Internet is paradoxical and confusing. Although fully embracing it for commercial importance, they are also uncomfortable with the Internet's ability to foster a civil society capable of challenging the government or the government-controlled media sources, so much so that it even willingly limits its use of e-governance (Rodan, 2003, p.509; Srisamesh & Rivera-Sanchez, 2006, p.707). In 1996, the Singapore Broadcasting Authority established the most restrictive set of regulations and prohibitions on the use of the Internet anywhere in the world at that

time (Rodan, 2003, p.511). Yet, in direct contradiction, the government also hinted that overregulation would not occur. The main basis of this was for the sake of economic gain.

Recognising that the full financial benefits of the Internet could not be reaped with overly-authoritarian measures, the government chose to relax their policies (Lee, T., 2010, p.112). This paradox was again evident in the Personal Data Protection Bill passed in September 2012. Recognising that no information is sacred, the Bill restricts how organisations collect and disclose personal data online, but of course, exempts the government and statutory bodies from this stipulation (Ho, 2012). Regardless, such relaxation has provided an avenue for citizens to express themselves in ways never before allowed. It has been acknowledged that the “Internet has provided fertile ground for radical journalists and activists in recent years” (Sen & Lee, 2008, p.142), heavily impacting on the PR industry in Singapore.

### ***Singapore’s PR Industry at a Glance***

Singapore’s PR industry has been significant over the years. In 2001, there were 116 local and multinational PR agencies, generating an estimated revenue of \$63.9 million (Lim et al., 2005, p.319). The nation’s knowledge-based economy encouraged the development of the PR industry as organisations began needing alternative solutions to effectively communicate with their respective internal and external publics (Lim et al., 2005, p.319).



In 1970, the Institute of Public Relations Singapore (IPRS) was established and remains Singapore's only accrediting body for PR till today. From 30 members, it has since attracted over 500 active PR professionals (IPRS, 2012a). Last verified in October 2012, IPRS had 466 members on its Facebook group, which was created in 2007 (Facebook, 2012b). Even for the IPRS, governmental control is not readily relinquished: the vice president is the Managing Director of Corporate Affairs for Temasek Holdings (IPRS, 2012b).

In 2005, the IPRS conducted a study which indicated that around one out of every three organisations had at least one to three PR professionals in their staff (Low & Kwa, 2005, p.1, 7). In addition, the professionals reported their next line of contact to be either the chief executive officer or the managing director (Low & Kwa, 2005, p.10). However, as the statistics were gathered through quantitative surveys, it cannot be taken at face value when considering the possibility of positive self-representation. It was also observed that the authoritative media regime heavily influences the way in which PR is practised (Rodan, 2003, p.503). Business and the previously discussed pragmatic ideology were considered more important than the concerns of media organisations. This induced "widespread self-censorship to ensure official sensitivities are not aroused" (Rodan, 2003, p.504).

In recent years, the dismissive view of Singapore's PR industry has changed as a result of the Internet and social media. Though not exhaustive, my research highlights two important pieces of literature in outlining Singapore's PR industry and social media's emerging role.

As late as 2005, Selina Lim, June Goh and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh (2005) observed that the PR industry in Singapore was undervalued and of a lower standard compared to its Western counterparts. Of Grunig's four models of PR, the public information model was the most predominant in government agencies (Lim et al., 2005, p.330), where communication was one-way, from sender to receiver, with a predisposition to manipulation and persuasion. PR practitioners in the government sector were often unable to challenge the decision of senior management (Lim et al., 2005, p.324) and were rarely involved in strategic management, such as investor relations or internal and external communications. They were usually redelegated to technical functions and routine tasks, such as writing press releases, event management and generating publicity for the organisation. (Lim et al., 2005, p.323, 329). It was remarked that organisations in Singapore did not empower PR to be part of the "dominant coalition" (Lim et al., 2005, p.326). The focus was usually on revenue, with greater emphasis being given to marketing and advertising departments. Rather, PR was utilised as a support function, in areas such as crisis or reputation management. Even then, their role was limited (Lim et al., 2005, p.328). There were many PR practitioners who said that their organisations "did not have a current crisis management plan or crisis response manual" (Lim et al., 2005, p.323).

In 2009, Fitch revisited research first conducted in 2006, in regards to the impact of new media on the Southeast Asian PR industry. Her discussion was a chronological observation and qualitative account of how quickly social media had impacted upon the Singapore PR industry. Her methodology involved qualitative interviews with three PR practitioners in Singapore who dealt solely in social media as their PR focus (Fitch, 2009b, p.3). It must be noted that her investigation was neither a

validation nor a dismissal of the role of social media in PR, but merely a firsthand account of how the practitioners felt about social media.

In 2006, PR practitioners in the nation were wary of the then coined “new media”, its impacts on PR, the industry and themselves as practitioners (Fitch, 2009b, p.3). This period of change coincided with the development of social media platforms, especially that of Facebook’s international release (Facebook, 2012; Fitch, 2009b, p.4). Mid 2006 to early 2007 marked the timeframe when new media entered the foray of PR practice, before interactive social media and digital communicative technologies gained sufficient recognition and involvement in Singapore’s PR industry. It could be considered a turning point in the nation’s PR industry where practitioners were navigating a new and unexplored area of PR where no set rules or prescribed manual of practice existed, causing an upheaval of the PR profession (Fitch, 2009b, p.4-5). By 2009, the focus of new media in PR had shifted to the specifics of social media. The position of new media specialists had become common in most PR agencies, with an estimated eight to ten practitioners in the industry who dealt only with social media (Fitch, 2009b, p.3).

The interviewees viewed social media as a vastly different tool for the use of PR, but still a tool nonetheless. In their opinions, social media was not transforming PR, but was merely a new extension for current PR practice (Fitch, 2009b, p.10). They did, however, feel that PR was now a complicated arena where “traditional public relations concepts do not apply” (Fitch, 2009b, p.10) and that social media was further muddling the confused field of PR, “particularly in traditional terms such as strategic communication, which demands a linear and rational approach to managing

communication to serve organisational aims—make[ing] it apparent that practitioners struggle in a social media context” (Fitch, 2009b, p.10).

In particular, the interviewees indicated challenges in terms of monitoring and evaluating their social media outreach. While there are web metrics that allow for calculation, it is lamented that they are not dynamic enough for in-depth analysis (Fitch, 2009b, p.8). With clients demanding a dollar or numerical-based evaluation, this becomes a key problem for practitioners (Fitch, 2009b, p.9).

In this chapter, I have summarised the global context in which Singapore, its digital environment and PR industry exists. I have outlined the PAP political party’s paternalistic stance and how it has shaped the economy and resulted in a tightly-regulated duopolistic domestic media that is ultimately operated by the government. From there, I have analysed the paradoxical relationship the authorities have with the Internet and mobile technology, outlining its high rates of Internet, mobile phones and social media use in direct contrast to its continued open disapproval of pluralism and freedom of speech. Through this analysis of Singapore, I have been able to explain the reasons for Singapore’s revenue-rich, but professionally undervalued PR industry. However, drawing on recent literature, I have been able to demonstrate that social media has indeed impacted on the PR scene in Singapore, causing new and unexpected results. In the next chapter, I will outline the research mythology and discuss the interviews conducted to support the literature in this thesis.

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & INTERVIEW FINDINGS**

Due to the limited data regarding social media's impact on Singapore, it was realised that existing literature, though prolific, would not be able to accurately depict the cultural and professional situation at work, thus prompting the decision to include primary research in this study. In previous chapters, I have introduced social media's impact on PR and crisis communication. From existing data, I have illustrated the standards of Singapore's PR industry and provided the context in which this research is placed. Across the next two chapters, backed by practitioner interviews, I aim to clarify and conclusively analyse the role of social media in Singapore's PR industry and crisis communication. This chapter outlines the research design and methodology used to gain insight into the PR industry of Singapore, justifying the use and value of semi-structured interviews in this research and detailing the interview process. It analyses the perceptions and professional opinions that practitioners in Singapore have towards social media in PR. In Chapter Four, I will continue to draw upon their input on crisis communication, to support the case study analysis on the SMRT crisis. This research was granted ethics approval by the Murdoch University Research Ethics Office (Project No. 2012/088)

### *Selecting Semi-Structured Interviews*

Fitch's research (2009) was the only empirical piece of evidence that this researcher could find that directly related to the premise of this research. Drawing inspiration from her approach, I applied the semi-structured, primary research approach, though not without consideration. Qualitative research methods were considered over

quantitative research methods because of their advantages in garnering “understanding that is [was] as detailed a manner” (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p.62) and analysing communication practices (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p.25). Qualitative research methods such as focus groups and field studies, while beneficial, were also discarded due to logistic factors. In terms of choosing between the three interview formats, the structured and unstructured formats were ruled out, the former for its rigidity that often “reflect[ed] the researcher’s point of view rather than the view of the informant” (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p.330), and the latter for its unpredictability and overwhelming lack of uniformity (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p.330). Semi-structured interviews were the most ideal, combining flexibility, a standardised structure, and the freedom to modify questions beyond the prescribed while capitalising on the interpretations drawn from the informant (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p.329-330; Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p.167; Weerakkody, 2009, p.167). Retaining uniformity while maximising interview freedom and responses, allowed for a more comprehensive insight into social media’s impact on PR in Singapore.

### ***Interview Process***

The interview participants were selected through purposive sampling methods<sup>1</sup>, either through established contacts that I had already known prior or through snowball sampling<sup>2</sup>. A total of 16 potential participants were contacted. However, only six consented to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted in Singapore between June and July 2012. Five of the six interviews were conducted face-to-face

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<sup>1</sup> Purposive sampling only targets people who serves the purpose of the study, in this case, people related to the PR industry in Singapore (Weerakkody, 2009, p.99).

<sup>2</sup> Snowball sampling is commonly referred to as “referrals”, a strategy of seeking the help of respondents identifying other suitable subjects. Since this study was seeking like-minded people involved in PR, it was beneficial (Weerakkody, 2009, p.101).

at the participants' workplace and the last through Skype. Four participants were contacted through email while the other two participants, interestingly enough, were contacted through Facebook. All communication channels were eventually delegated through emails, in which the information letter, consent forms and interview questions were attached for the participants' knowledge. The participants were all involved in communication roles and possessed tertiary qualifications in the area of media and PR. All were aware of the premise of the study and gave their consent for the interview to be audio-recorded and for their gender, level of position and type of organisation to be identified in this thesis.

The nine prescribed open-ended questions (See Appendix 1) were repeated across all participants except one, whose lack of interaction with social media on both a professional and personal level necessitated a change in several questions, which could only be done because of the semi-structured format chosen. However, the information gained was no less informative and equally beneficial to this study since the other participants were very much pro-social media.

Each interview averaged an hour and was personally transcribed by this researcher, which meant an intimate understanding of the information, jargon and speech styles used and that the data collected was accurate. Details of the research participants are as follows in Table 1.

**Table 1: Semi-structured Interview Research Participants**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Job Title</b>	<b>Organisation Type</b>
Participant 1	Lecturer / Director	Offshore tertiary educational campus / PR Consultancy
Participant 2	Events and Marketing Manager	Lifestyle Destination Park
Participant 3	Media Lecturer	Polytechnic
Participant 4	Newscaster	Domestic Media
Participant 5	Corporate Social Responsibility Manager	Agribusiness
Participant 6	Director	Social Media Measurability Organisation

***Interview Findings: Social Media is not the Holy Grail of PR***

In 2009, Fitch asked participants if technological advances were transforming PR. In 2012, I asked the same of mine and received the same answer: social media is not the new phase of PR. Several participants qualified that social media has not changed the fundamental principles of PR (Participant 1), but instead greatly complements existing practice (Participant 3). As in Fitch’s research, participants felt that social media’s visibility was in new tools and mediums to the field. The fact that opinions of social media have not changed in the three years since Fitch’s research may be partially due to the very nature of social media itself. While acknowledging that it did have strategic communicative value, participants felt that it was still too early to determine or even identify what route social media might take, because of its fluid nature and recent existence (Participant 6).

Questioning if social media has succeeded in moving PR towards the two-way symmetrical model, participants felt that most Singaporean organisations were simply not prepared to do so. As exemplified by their previous statements,



participants observed that organisations were choosing to use social media to forge agendas and manage “two-way asymmetrical, rather than a symmetrical kind of approach” (Participant 1), or as a “vehicle for one-way of downloading information or uploading information for the users to just receive” (Participant 1). Participant 6 also highlighted that such “real-time” communication might not be applicable to all organisations, as an approval process would still be needed in communication and the end result would likely be less symmetrical than in personal communication.

Citing organisational culture as the main barrier (Participant 1; Participant 3), Participant 5 also identified a certain “Asian” quality in Singaporean organisations, explaining that “Asian companies are just not communication-savvy”, and therefore do not know how to react objectively to criticism. This is the very same issue analysed in Chapter Two, of the authoritative media control and restrictions that the government has placed in order to avoid the perceived repercussions of negative feedback, a perception that has influenced even non-governmental organisations and professional communication as a result.

Despite such observations, participants acknowledged that social media has indeed influenced PR communication in Singapore to be more open, though hardly symmetrical. Remarking on his heavy and sometimes cheeky use of social media in both his personal and professional life, Participant 4 felt that he was allowed to do so only because he was a public person with a voice related to, but not synonymous with the organisation, the domestic media. As educators, Participant 1 and Participant 3 observed their engagement with students to be two-way, but stressed that such a situation could only happen because they personally knew their students

and “not just via Facebook...but [also] in the same physical space” (Participant 3). As Participant 6 noted earlier, the situation is likely to be different for corporate organisations. This difference proves just how dynamic the audiences are on social media.

### ***Interview Findings: Fallacies with Successful Social Media Adoption***

Participants cited the main challenges of successful social media adoption to do with a lack of strategic understanding by management; a lack of human resources; and a lack of how to conduct proper social media measuring.

In discussing their observations of social media compared to its high rate of adoption amongst organisations, participants used the words “bandwagon” and “trend” to describe the situation. Participant 1 commented that social media’s popularity exerts a form of peer pressure, a “fear of losing out”. Participant 2 admitted that this was sole reason for her organisation’s Facebook page, because it was “known to be the common tool amongst everyone”. Participant 4 noted that in the process of figuring out the appropriate action to take with social media, organisations tend to adopt it unthinkingly without a strategic goal in mind, similar to what Argenti (2005) observed, of top management not understanding the value of strategic communication. Participant 6 noted that this was the fallacy of not having conducted proper research, particularly into which platforms are most frequented by their stakeholders.

The discussions with participants have brought up the important point of audiences not being equal or universal. Participant 5 was particularly adamant about the strategic use of social media, stressing the need to understand where one's audience and stakeholders converse. When questioned on her opinions of social media in PR, she made a marked distinction between a business-to-business and a business-to-consumer paradigm. In her opinion, she notes that social media is more appropriate for a business-to-consumer communication model, since the stakeholders of such organisations would be "men in the street" that requires such outreach. In comparison, her organisation operates on a business-to-business communication model. Stressing that her stakeholders are primarily business-related organisations, she outlines that communication with them exists on a more personal level. Adopting social media would add no business or communicative value to the organisation. She noted having seen other organisations similar to her own employing social media platforms, but receiving little traffic. In such regard, she viewed it simply as "setting up for the sake of setting up".

Participant 1 cited the expectations of management as an issue, that they simply did not understand that social media required constantly generating content for audiences to consume. She explained that management tend to expect it was possible to "just launch it [the social media platform], leave it there, and somehow, the content would come", not understanding that generating content for social media is as resource-consuming, if not more so, as other traditional forms of communication. This lack of time and resources was also highlighted by Participant 3, who felt that she could not utilise social media at the level she desired because of the sheer amount of labour it took.

In Chapter One, I highlighted DiStaso's (2011) study of the difficulties in measuring social media involvement. Questioning participants, most agreed that till today, "no one in the PR industry had yet to find what is the best way forward, or which... tool to use" (Participant 1). Participant 6 noted that the "evolution [of social media] and the sheer amount of data" would require considerable effort to cut through the information overload. In particular, most participants came to the consensus that a dedicated person, not a tool, would be the best option in measuring an organisation's social media efforts, taking into account that exchanges on social media are qualitative and conversational, making it difficult to capture by most tools. Even Participant 6 noted that the measurability software designed by his organisation would not be able to perfectly capture or organise the information at the level that a person could. For example, due to her role of updating the organisation's Facebook page, Participant 2 coincided that amongst her colleagues, she was far more aware of the responses and speech style needed in order to effectively address the audiences on social media.

Certain organisations did not even realise the importance of measuring their social media engagement through appropriate tools. The numerical data that can be collected from comments and posts on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter sometimes lead to complacency. Participant 3 remarked that in the instance of the "Like" option on Facebook, that there was "no scaling to it", meaning that in-depth analysis cannot be conducted. Clues cannot be extracted, even devastatingly crucial ones, such as having read, versus having seen, a post (Participant 4). In particular, Participant 6 remarked that "measurement is actually something that's often played

down because it's hard to measure the impact of PR". He stated that before measurement can begin, there must first be a willingness to listen, in order to rediscover what is being said. Taking into account the sensitivities that organisations could have to negative responses as explored previously in this chapter, this might be a key reason as to why organisations choose not to employ proper measurement tools.

### ***Interview Findings: The Internet, Social Media and the Government***

In Chapter Two, I discussed Singapore's knowledge-based economy and its reliance on the global economy that has led to the high Internet capabilities in the nation. Participants acknowledged that economic pragmatism has certainly been the major factor for the government's grudging openness towards the Internet, since regulating it would have "detrimental effects...because that is one of the key areas that we will attract foreign investors" (Participant 1). A relaxed Internet policy is therefore considered the lesser of two evils for the government.

Participant 4 felt that a strict Internet policy would simply "keep it quiet and you don't really want people to be quiet", echoing the discussion in Chapter Two that regardless of organisations listening, that the chatter about them is already occurring. A political agenda was also hinted at, with several participants referring to the dismal election results of the PAP in recent years as the reason for their careful approach towards the Internet (Loudon, 2011). Participants felt that if the Internet and consequently, social media were to be shut down, that the PAP's tenacious hold on power would falter even quicker (Participant 2; Participant 5).

The concern for the government has now shifted from one of control, to one of management. Participant 4 and 6 felt that social media has offered the government opportunities to improve its conduct. Outlining his use of social media, Participant 4 explained that it was for the sake of “letting them [the public] know that you’re not just that person on TV [television]”. Similarly, he felt that the Singaporean government should “use this platform to communicate on a personal level”. Social media is therefore educating the government, informing its members on the importance of evolving their communication, particularly in terms of transparency and accountability, since social media can easily transmit any information, be it good or bad. Participants cited the key example of the Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong in creating a Facebook page in April 2012, in order to appear approachable and to connect with the Singaporean public on social media (Facebook, 2012c). Though commending on the initiative, Participant 1 and Participant 3 remarked such that such action would have occurred soon or later, taking into account the demands of today’s empowered audiences.

### ***Interview Findings: Empowered Audiences***

The empowered audiences emerged in the interviews as the key momentum for the changes outlined so far in this chapter. Social media by itself does nothing; it is the users that shape its impacts. Participant 1 emphasised that for organisations, “how the social media works is that netizens tend to want to find the opportunity to slam you just because they can”. In part, participants agreed that some of the volatile immaturity faced on social media platforms is attributed to the government. Having restricted pluralism for so long, netizens are now at an early stage “of toying around

with the possibilities that we can do on social media and also trying to push the boundaries to see when the buttons will be pushed, when the government will react” (Participant 1).

However, participants were critical not of the agenda that social media users attempt to push, but in the way they attempt to do so. Observing the poor etiquette and lack of decorum amongst Singaporean users, participants felt that on a whole netizens were simply not mature. Participant 3 felt that many were being “vocal for the very fact that they are anonymous” which might result in them saying things that they might later regret. A prime example of this occurred in October 2012, when Amy Cheong was fired over offensive racist posts made on her personal Facebook page. Her account appeared to contain details and links to her organisation, the The National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and its Facebook page, which resulted in massive backlash by Facebook users. Even though she later made multiple attempts to apologize across different social media networks, the damage was already done. A day later, she was fired (Tan, 2012).

This blending of personal and professional life was discussed with participants. Participant 2 candidly stated, “I use Facebook every day, perhaps even every minute of my life”. In Chapter One and Chapter Two, I stated the ubiquitous nature of mobile and smartphones and their high penetration rates in Singapore (Barnes, 2012). Participant 2 noted that the lines between personal and professional blurs when the device is used for both purposes, readily admitting that “we are all guilty of using Facebook during work”. While Participant 6 indicated his preference for blending both his personal and professional social media platforms to create a “better social

effect”, he also stated that if one places information on a public space, one must then be prepared for whatever consequences that might occur, good or bad.

In Chapter One and Chapter Two, I have shown how social media is primarily comprised of Generation Y and to a lesser extent, Generation X. Participant Two noted that even as a Generation Y herself, that she differs from the youths of today, who are “so much more communicative and outspoken as compared to maybe five or ten years ago”. She asserted this to technological culture where mobile media technology is easily accessible to all and has particularly strong influence on those growing up surrounded by such devices. Participant 1 and 3 noted that as educators whose stakeholders are young adults, that social media becomes “a necessary tool because it relates to their lifestyle”. Remarking on their empowerment, Participant 3 cited the example of her Twitter account which was created as a test and yet was quickly found by her students. In this day and age, no information is sacred. In Chapter One, I discussed ways which organisations can tap onto social media in order to connect with the empowered audiences. Regardless of the platforms, Participant 3 felt that what audiences tend to want is sincerity and trust, and that social media is simply accelerating that process. Especially for the government, Participant 5 commented on the delicacy of the situation, in that they are “dealing with a different generation these days, who are more open, more communication-savvy”, in an environment with ever widening communicative avenues.

In this chapter, I have outlined the interview process and justified the reasons for the use of semi-structured interviews. Through my analysis of PR practitioners’



perceptions and experiences, I have provided a deeper understanding into social media's impact on PR in Singapore and related it back to the literature organised in previous chapters. Fitch's research on PR in Singapore has outlined its progression in 2006 and 2009. My research comes at another three year interval after Fitch's. Through these interviews, I have shown that social media has certainly opened up communication channels in the nation, and outlined the barriers towards its successful adoptions in organisations. From there, I have discussed social media's love-hate relationship with the government and how even they are being forced to move towards a more symmetrical communication model. In the next chapter, backed by the same interviews, I will examine the SMRT breakdowns and social media's role in the crisis.

## **CHAPTER 4: ANATOMY OF A CRISIS IN WEB 2.0**

Through practitioner interviews in the last chapter, I have provided an in-depth analysis of social media's impact on PR in Singapore. In this chapter, I aim to do the same, linking the theoretical concepts explored in previous chapters with the practical applications of social media within a crisis communication context. This chapter will examine the case of the SMRT Corporation through the explanatory case study model to "provide cause-and-effect relationships between variables and explain why events happen" (Weerakkody, 2009, p.231). This scenario is one of the most poignant examples of how social media and the empowered audience have been able to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and forced accountability from even a government-owned organisation. This case study has been backed up by responses from the interview participants in order to gain a more comprehensive overview.

### ***The SMRT Train Breakdown***

On December 15 and December 17, 2011, Singapore's metro train system (MRT) suffered the worst series of breakdowns in its history, affecting a total of 220,000 commuters (Sim, 2012). The initial logistic faults of misaligned train rails rapidly deteriorated into a reputational crisis, brought about by the SMRT's poor crisis communication response and significant exposure through audience participation on social media platforms (Ee, 2011; Sim, 2012).

The first incident occurred at 6.47pm, December 15 and was resolved only by 11.40pm. Over 127,000 commuters were affected. 4,000 people were left stranded for more than an hour inside the stalled train carriages, without ventilation or lighting (Ee, 2011). By the time an official statement was released to the public, two hours has passed. Their silence contrasted with that of the commuters, who took to social media on their mobile and smartphones to report the situation. By the time the situation was resolved, thousands of messages across social media platforms had been exchanged, with audience participation rendering the situation uncontrollable and unsalvageable (Ng & Poon, 2011; Sim, 2011a).

Although the logistic faults were supposedly resolved, the same situation occurred on December 17, also due to the same misaligned train rails. Beginning at 6.50am, the incident was resolved only at 1.48pm, with over 94,000 commuters affected this time (Sim, 2011b). This second incident sealed the fate of the SMRT.

### ***Netizen Responses on Social Media***

During the first incident, commuters captured two distinct photos that have now been recognised as the main reason for the acceleration of the crisis. Using their mobile phones to take the photos, they were then uploaded onto various social networks (Ng & Poon, 2011). The rapid exchange of the photos across different social media platforms was viral, which dealt a severe blow to the SMRT. Participant 1 felt that commuters were basically “updating each other, uncovering things before the official platforms” could, and acknowledged such an act was somewhat attributed to ego, with netizens being thrilled by their newfound empowered status.

The first photo<sup>3</sup> displayed a broken train door window. Titillated by such damage of public property, the photo was not only circulated amongst netizens, but also modified to feature several different parodies<sup>4</sup>. Although attempts have been made to determine the original source of these photos, the fact that they had been circulated so rapidly has made it impossible.

The second photo<sup>5</sup> involved a message sent out to taxi drivers informing them of an “income opportunity” (Ng & Poon, 2011). The photo sparked outrage from netizens who accused the SMRT Corporation of attempting to profit from an already disastrous situation (Lim, P., 2011). It was this photo that led to a further tarnishing of the SMRT’s reputation.

In the wake of the incidents, several Facebook pages parodying the SMRT surfaced, including a Twitter channel titled “SMRTRuinsLives” (Ng & Poon, 2011). Last verified in October 2012, only one SMRT parody Facebook page still exists, entitled SMRT Ltd (Feedback), with over 17,000 Likes (Facebook, 2012d). On YouTube, a song parodying the SMRT crisis was uploaded. Since its upload on December 17, the parody has been viewed over 51,000 times (FiqoNansMusic, 2011). Outlining all these different factors indicate that social media has significant impact for crisis communication.

### ***No One Waits For an Official Statement***

The SMRT was heavily criticised during the first disruption for their lack of communication and the speed in which they took to issue an official statement. It has

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix Two

<sup>4</sup> Several spoof photos could be found here. <http://blogs.todayonline.com/behindtheheadlines/>

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix Three

been noted that organisations in Singapore, especially government-related ones, tend to be extremely corporatist, emphasising on a top-down hierarchical approach (Hooi, 2011; Lim, K, 2011). Participants noted that this was a major reason as to why the crisis was communicated and managed so poorly.

A day before the SMRT crisis occurred, the Circle Line of the MRT also suffered a logistic fault. Having seen a tweet about it, radio deejay Hossan Leong mentioned it and drew disapproval from the SMRT for speaking out of bounds. Their reason was that Leong did not have the authority to talk about the breakdown solely because an official statement had yet to be released, even though the situation was true (Yong, 2011). Participant 3 indicated this reign of control as being representative of the government, but felt that SMRT behaved childishly, simply because Leong described a situation that did not have their stamp of approval. She disapproved of the way the SMRT handled things, because “at the end of the day, you must have the welfare of your commuters as priority, not about who sent out first.”

For the crisis that occurred the next day, participants felt that communication was “not a privilege or the prerogative of the organisation or the mainstream media institution” (Participant 1). Participant 3 concurred, questioning “why should it be the right of formal news agencies or so-called broadcasters to have an exclusive right to report anything?” Participant 2 cited her own experience during the crisis, stating that without social media and their users, she would not have known to make contingency travelling plans. She even went so far as to comment that for such a breakdown that required timely transmission of information, the official statement released by the SMRT or traditional media platforms would have been all but useless.

Participant 4 viewed the SMRT crisis as an important lesson for organisations in Singapore, that in today's age of digital communication, "nobody waits for an official statement". He drew on the fact that with social media, evidence of photos or videos can accompany the content made by users. The two photos released with the SMRT crisis were proof of that. In describing the accountability factor, he felt that organisations would need to learn how to adapt towards a more dynamic communication model.

### ***A Facilitator or a Trigger***

Presented with the SMRT crisis, all the participants identified social media as a facilitator, causing a bad situation to become worse. Participant 1 recounted students in her classes commenting, "If there was no social media, this crisis would have been so much easier to contain".

In fact, nearly all the participants expressed doubts that social media could ever act as a crisis trigger. Having dealt with several social media crisis situations in his organisation, Participant 6 explained:

"The only thing it [social media] helps is accelerates it [crises], it makes it faster. But if there's a crisis, it's still a crisis. It's whether or not it's online...social media just makes it really fast, that's all".

He did, however, note that regardless of how swift SMRT would have reacted, key consensus indicates that "the biggest that's happening right now is that almost surely a crisis will break on the social media first before anywhere else."

Speaking objectively, Participant 2 and Participant 4 emphasised that the affected commuters were “expressing what they were feeling at the moment” (Participant 4), through social media. Clarifying the crisis, Participant 4 felt that SMRT’s unpreparedness for a transport fault did not constitute a crisis, since such undesirable situations are not planned. However, Participant 1 felt that no crisis begins without an issue, but social media may perhaps “expedite[] the spread of crisis and, perhaps worsens [the] crisis than it was already.”

Even Participant 5, whose position on social media differed sharply from the other participants, felt that social media acted as a mild trigger and a major facilitator of the crisis. Viewing the situation objectively from both audience and organisational perspectives, she felt that while the backlash did indeed force corrective responses from the SMRT that might not have otherwise happened, she also felt that the organisation faced no reprieve from social media. Such unrelenting attacks stemming from social media could trigger a “self-fulfilling prophecy”, where the organisation, inundated by such negatively, lose both moral and competence because of the perceived lack of support. Though admitting her limited knowledge of the crisis, from what little she observed, she noted that “SMRT tries to improve, but it’s just that...the netizens of Singapore, they are just unforgiving and not very understanding.” She criticised the unrealistic expectations of Singapore’s public and their unrestrained and sometimes immature and irrational use of social media. In her opinion, whatever positive management of the crisis was overwhelmed by the viral negativity and noise on social media platforms, resulting in the impression of utter failure on the part of SMRT. She remarks that SMRT has improved over time, but “but I don’t know how much people appreciate that.”

### ***It Will Never Happen to Us***

It was observed that the SMRT was woefully unprepared not just for handling the crisis, but for a strategic two-way communication model. Their attempts to adopt social media soon after the crisis occurred drew ridicule. Soon after creating their official Twitter account, they initially described that they would only operate during weekdays and office hours (Oon, 2011). They simply did not understand how social media operated, that “there’s no so-called time off” (Participant 1).

However, participants felt that their poor crisis communication response ran far deeper than just a lack of expertise. Most of them felt that it was due to sheer complacency. Drawing on their experiences with clients, participants note the similarities, the dismissal of adopting certain tools or platforms because “it will never happen to us” (Participant 5). Participant 6 felt that the SMRT was simply not forward thinking enough:

“They should have seen it coming. Part of their crisis communication plan should have involved the nature of which people currently communicate and they just didn’t, so I think that, yes, that’s definitely an oversight on their part.”

### ***Forcing Accountability***

Questioning participants on the role of social media in this crisis, most felt that overall, it had a positive impact on the SMRT crisis. Though the reputation of the organisation was badly affected, as a service organisation catering to the Singapore population and under direct governmental ownership and control, the response brought about by social media forced the SMRT to improve on their



communications and operations. It served as an important lesson for the PR industry and the government.

In terms of accountability, most of the participants felt that the situation “forced transparency” (Participant 1) from the organisation. Participant 2 noted that “even the smallest issue can be blown up” by social media, making it impossible for organisations to hide behind a corporate veil, especially when it was a “public kind of situation where it affect...[ed] the people of the country”.

Participant 1 felt that it was beneficial for the situation to be impacted by social media as much as it did, as it forced the SMRT to recognise their shortcomings, consumers and business model. She was of the opinion that a relationship with social media is now necessary in today’s environment, and that if managed well, would be able to bring the organisation closer to its consumers and public.

Participant 3 mirrored her opinion, feeling that it forced SMRT to “really address the issues that they are confronted with,” noting that people are more inclined to finding out information by themselves. In addressing the fearfulness of the organisation, she noted that corporatist organisations such as the SMRT tend to view social media as a “Pandora’s box” because of how vulnerable the organisation would be once they embrace the two-way communication model.

Participants were asked if this accountability was also forced upon the SMRT due to the fact that it is a state-owned organisation. Most felt that ultimately, a political agenda was present, that it was “it’s still about the government, still about PAP”

(Participant 2). The empowered audiences have then “made use of this bad situation, of the negativity” to do their bashing, by “riding this on top of a very bad situation”

(Participant 2). In particular, Participant 1 notes that,

“That whole idea of being able to report the government, telling them, “look, listen to us,” is a newly-given entitlement and that is why we find that very empowering, interesting and that is why we want to make use of it but I guess that if it had been a corporate crisis instead where the government is not a part of it, perhaps the responses might not have been so loud”.

### *Aftermath*

For their poor management in the crisis, the SMRT was fined the maximum penalty of \$1 million for each incident by the Land Transport Authority (LTA). In total, it was estimated that the crisis incurred almost \$10 million in professional and legal fees for the Committee of Inquiry to investigate the crisis (Sim, 2012).

In the months since, the SMRT crisis is still remembered as the worst transport crisis that the organisation has had to face, not only logistically but in terms of reputation. In September 2012, a survey conducted by the Singapore Management University’s Institute of Service Excellence on 2,300 participants specifically on public transport found that satisfaction with the MRT ranked the poorest amongst participants, and registered the biggest drop in opinions amongst them. (Straits Times, 2012)

The SMRT crisis was more than just a logistic fault. It represented how social media had brought about fundamental changes in communication, even in authoritarian Singapore. It brought to light the communicative capabilities of social media, its empowerment of publics, and the roles it could have on the PR discipline. In this chapter, backed by interviews, I have demonstrated the abilities of the empowered

audiences. I have illustrated that organisations must now be more proactive in their communications with stakeholders, and accountability and transparency is scrutinised more closely than ever before.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Social media has changed the dynamics of communication, especially in Singapore. A fundamental shift in power has occurred, resulting in the rise of the empowered audience, in the accountability of governments and organisations and both opportunities and challenges for the PR body of knowledge.

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate the role of social media in PR conducted in Singapore. Aimed at adding to the PR body of knowledge, it examined the role of social media, and how it would fare when juxtaposed against Singapore's unwavering, non-liberal media and PR stance. Through a qualitative research design and a series of semi-structured interviews, I have organised the existing literature surrounding social media, examined the state of media control and governmental power in Singapore, and discussed how social media has impacted upon PR practice and crisis communication in Singapore.

In discussing social media, I outlined how the development of Web 2.0 then allows platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to rise to the popularity that it has now. For PR, it has meant significant challenges and opportunities. That even Grunig revised the two-way symmetrical communication model into one of integrated contingency indicates that today's digital environment has caused changes to PR that not even theorists could anticipate.

For Singapore, social media has certainly caused far more impact than could have been anticipated. It is with great irony that the same Internet that the nation once

embraced so willingly is now causing the pluralistic changes that the government has resisted for so long. While governmental control over the mass media continues to exist, digital platforms are now allowing for greater pluralism amongst citizens. In examining the state of PR in the nation, my findings have shown that it is the government's reluctance to accept feedback that has resulted in the poor development of the PR industry against its other counterparts.

That the empowered audiences have been allowed to thrive in Singapore is ironic considering the situation. Social media had forced accountability from organisations and even the government. My findings have shown that social media is not the earth-shattering paradigm that other literature claim it to be, as least in Singapore, though it must be noted that much of the literature drawn on is written by academics accustomed to a more liberal Western model of communication. Still, drawing on the crisis of the SMRT, it can be seen that social media has been able to engender change more so than before the creation of Web 2.0.

For crises, social media is a potent double-edged sword. This facet of PR, whose success is wholly dependent on its ability to communicate effectively, has been both aided and hindered by social media. The SMRT crisis and the reactions resulting from it are proof that organisations must be proactive in this age of digital information. Indeed, it is not only for PR's sake that social media must be understood, but for the sake of any situation with vast negative implications that requires the communicative abilities of social media that PR is able to effectively provide.

In constructing this thesis, there were several limitations, one of which was the multidisciplinary aspect of communications. The question upon which this thesis was framed was a cross-analysis of digital communicative technologies, existing and emerging PR theories, stakeholder and audience analysis, analysis of national, legal, cultural and political contexts and issues and crisis communication. While much of the aforementioned literature has been well-established and critically researched from different angles, attempting to tie them all together coherently into a single thesis of a limited length was certainly problematic.

For so long, PR has stood in the shadow of other communication practices such as marketing and advertising, because of its perceived lack of return of investment and monetary value. The rise of the digital age has once again placed the spotlight on PR. For Singapore, citizens are now taking steps to be proactive, pushing at the boundaries of political and media control. Organisations and the government are unused to this newfound accountability, but now have but little choice to engage with audiences on their own level. Marketing and advertising focused on business and persuasion cannot connect with audiences in the way that PR can.

Taking into account the constantly changing environmental framework of the digital landscape, it will be hard to determine what other forms or stages may arise in the future. However, social media may finally be bringing PR back to the very core of its framework: to establish, maintain and develop effective relationships with stakeholders and targeted publics.

## APPENDIX ONE

### *Interview Question Guide.*

1. Social media has only existed since 2004. This year alone, Facebook has had issues with their Initial Public Offering (IPO); while there have been reports on Facebook Fatigue. Given such circumstances, do you think that social media can be called the new phase of PR communication?
  - a. Such as two-way symmetrical communication?
  - b. Can two-way symmetrical communication happen in Singapore?
2. What is your usage of social media? Is it for professional or personal purposes? What are your reasons for either purpose?
3. Do you think that social media will undermine the Singapore government's authoritative control over the media?
4. What is the view on social media tools from the top management in your organisation?
  - a. What and how are the tools used in your organisation?
5. What challenges do you face in incorporating social media tools in your organisation?
6. How does your organisation measure the impacts of their social media involvement, if any?

7. In December 2011, the Singapore Mass Rapid Transit (SMRT) suffered its worst breakdown. By the time official statements were released, passengers had used social media to communicate the situation and the poor crisis response.
  - a. What is your opinion on social media's role during this crisis?
  - b. Do you think Singapore's reliance on the traditional broadcast paradigm affected the communication of this crisis?
  
8. How do you think SMRT could have used social media to their advantage?
  
9. The SARS (Severe acute respiratory syndrome) crisis occurred in 2002, before the social media era. In 2009, there was the H1N1 flu crisis, and in 2011, the SMRT crisis occurred. In conjunction with the changing communications landscape, what is your opinion on the expectations of audiences during crises today compared to pre social media?



## APPENDIX TWO

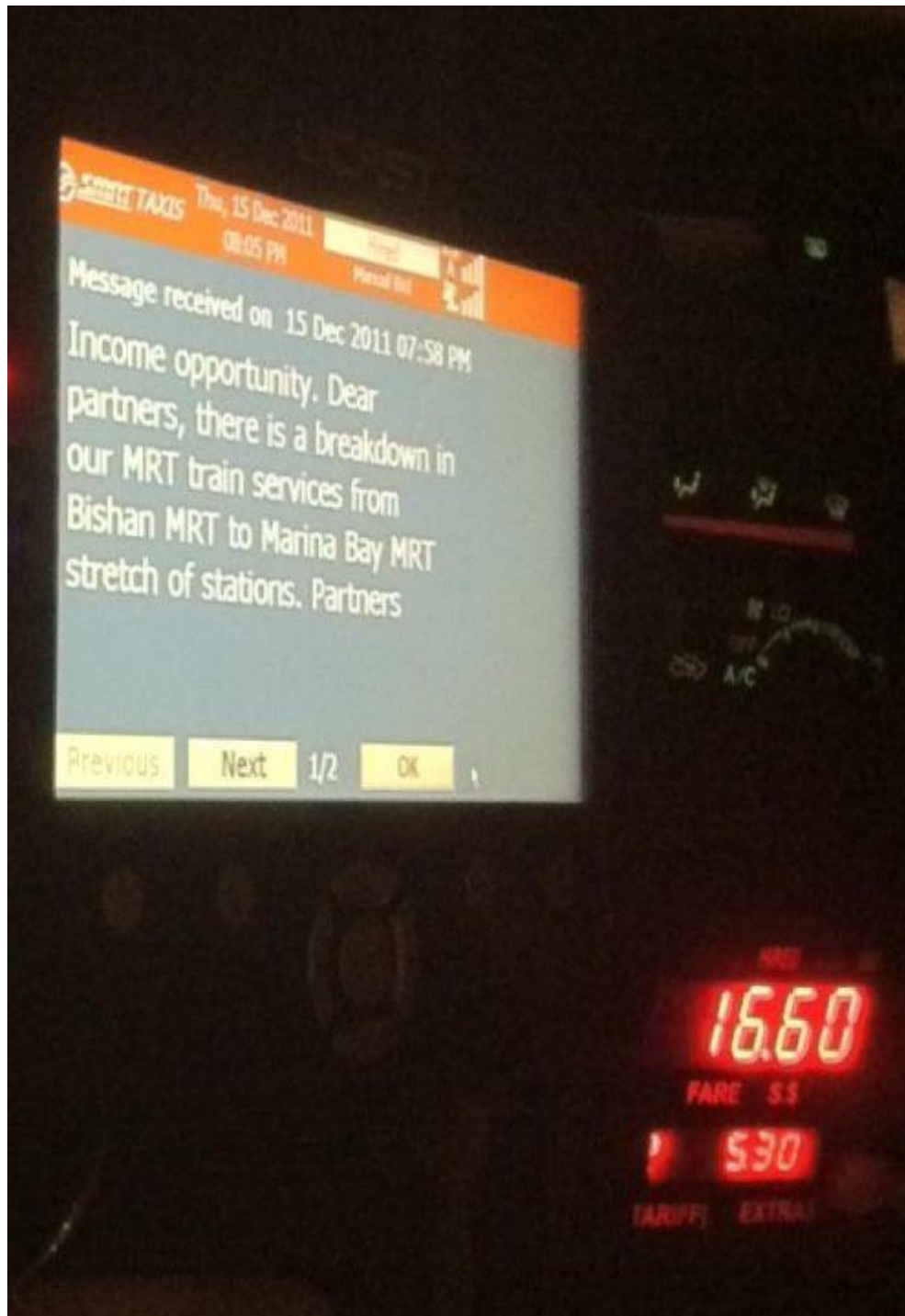
*Broken train door window*



Retrieved from <http://blogs.todayonline.com/behindtheheadlines/>

## APPENDIX THREE

### *Income Opportunity Notice*



Retrieved from

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/alvinology/6516413247/sizes/l/in/photostream/>

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