
Making friends in the Wild West: Singaporean public relations practitioners' perceptions of working in social media

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of social media on public relations by analysing Singapore-based practitioners' perceptions and attitudes to their work in public relations agencies in an online environment.

Social media offers additional communication channels and the capacity to influence stakeholders outside of more traditional media structures. The research suggests that practitioners, in seeking to promote clients' interests through the monitoring of online activity and the increasing engagement of social media users, are struggling to develop appropriate practices in an environment where traditional public relations techniques and concepts do not apply.

This research finds that the constant negotiation of conventions and rules, and the determination of what comprises appropriate social media activity and behaviour, results in a blurring of boundaries between public relations and marketing. Significantly, the discourse of friendship, which is increasingly fundamental to social media, conceals the promotional and commercial nature of public relations activity. Relying on online friends and influential bloggers to disseminate information, and producing content and activity designed to engage users, suggests that relationships or 'friendships' are not understood in the conventional sense of reciprocity.

The implications for public relations are that working with social media exposes the difficulty of developing strategic campaigns aimed at managing communication between stakeholders where concepts such as friends, and the online personas of influential

bloggers, are increasingly credible and alternative sources of information. This analysis suggests public relations is struggling to negotiate the ethical parameters of social media practice and the limitations of traditional understandings of public relations in a social media context.¹

Introduction

The introduction of social media platforms, characterised by interactivity and dialogue, has profound implications for public relations. The increasingly complex communication environment, with its rapid technological development and networked relationships outside traditional media structures, has ramifications for how we practise public relations and comprehend the ways social media and digital technology are transforming the industry. Whether the greater potential for participation, interaction and dialogue promotes a more ethical and democratic public relations as Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested a decade ago remains to be seen.

Much public relations scholarship is framed by the dominant paradigm, which developed out of U.S. practice-led studies (Piecicka, 2006). In their attempt to gain professional status and academic legitimacy, public relations scholars have—until recently—favoured empirical quantitative research to describe existing practices. Consequently, there is an absence of critical scholarship and an assumption that public relations theory is universal (L'Etang, 2008). This study uses qualitative research “to

¹ Thanks to the three anonymous interviewees who willingly shared their passion for social media, and their experience of using social media in public relations, as part of this research.

theorize communication in its contextualized and multilayered landscape of meanings and experiences” (Wackwitz & Rakow, 2007, p. 260) and to develop a better understanding of the processes of interpretation and meaning-making, which empirical research cannot achieve (L’Etang, 2008).

The aim of this research is to critically analyse public relations practitioners’ perceptions of working in social media, as a way of understanding this emerging field and revealing changes in public relations practice. It draws on interviews with three Singapore-based public relations practitioners. Their perceptions are useful for understanding the ideas and consequences of online public relations activity that more experienced and senior practitioners are struggling with (Fitch, 2009a; James, 2007; Chia, 2002; Dougall, Fox & Burton, 2001).

This new communication environment requires us to reconsider inherent assumptions in existing theoretical approaches to public relations, and to reconceptualise the nature of public relations activity within particular social, political and cultural contexts, in an increasingly globalised and networked world. This research questions what ethical public relations practice is when working in social media.

It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate the range of social and political factors influencing public relations practices, or to investigate the public relations industry in Singapore generally. Nevertheless, the interviewees occasionally acknowledged the opportunities social media provide for expressing ideas in an environment where the traditional news media is tightly controlled.

Literature review

Social media and public relations

Most definitions of social media identify themes relevant to the use of new media platforms, which promote interactivity and develop conversations. The Chartered Institute of Public Relations in the UK defines social media as: “websites and online tools which allow users to interact with each other

in some way – by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests...social media involves the building of communities or networks, encouraging participation and engagement” (CIPR, 2007, n.p.). Similarly, Cook and Hopkins (2008) define social media as the internet tools, which “allow for far greater levels of two-way interaction, discussion and conversation” and which facilitate “the conversational web” (pp. 1, 2). Many of these platforms have been launched in the last few years; for instance, social network sites such as YouTube and Bebo were launched in 2005 and Twitter and Facebook (for all users) in 2006 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The rapid technological developments and diverse ways users adapt social media platforms make it difficult to predict which platforms will remain popular even for six months.

A decade ago public relations practitioners and scholars recognised the internet’s potentially dramatic impact on the industry. However, research suggests most practitioners use the internet as an additional channel for communication rather than as a platform for meaningfully engaging publics (Fitch, 2009b; James, 2007; Chia, 2002). Although practitioners are increasingly monitoring social media sites—including blogs—as part of their regular activities, many struggle to incorporate social media into public relations practice. This is partly because traditional public relations techniques are not appropriate in a new media environment (Galloway, 2005).

A survey of European public relations practitioners found that the lack of appropriate methods for evaluating the return on investment (ROI) and a lack of appropriately skilled employees were barriers to working with social media (Sandhu, Young & Zeffass, 2007). The authors of that survey concluded that: “Social Media offers a tremendous opportunity for a new generation of PR professionals who are savvy with the application of new communication tools and can also provide convincing arguments that legitimise the usage of this technology” (Euprera, 2007, n.p.).

By exploring the new generation of public relations practitioners’ perceptions of social

media, I investigate how this emerging field of practice is transforming public relations.

Singapore: Globalisation and internet use

The Globalization Index produced by international management consultancy A.T. Kearney (2007) ranks Singapore the most globalised country in the world. The ranking draws on 12 variables, including technological connectivity (number of internet users, hosts and secure servers), economic integration, and political engagement. However, other research suggests that despite Singapore's network readiness and relatively high levels of internet use, its use of e-government to engage citizens in dialogue or policy making is relatively limited (Sriramesh & Rivera-Sanchez, 2006).

According to Statistics Singapore, in 2005 the top-five reasons for internet use in Singapore were sending and receiving emails, sourcing or requesting information, submitting forms online, and internet banking, none of which is particularly interactive (Lee, 2006). Lee and Kan (2008) agree with this assessment but suggest there is a generational divide operating with an interactive, younger generation using gadgets and a range of multimedia applications, including music, movies and graphic downloads.

Public relations in Singapore

Historically, public relations in Singapore was dominated by first colonial, and then government, campaigns to promote nation-building and social cohesion (Freitag & Stokes, 2009) with relative limits on press freedom and high levels of complicity between the media and government (Cenite, Chong, Han, Lim & Tan, 2008). Today, public relations in Singapore focuses on media relations and publicity, with a blurring of boundaries between public relations, marketing and advertising (Freitag & Stokes, 2009).

The dominant paradigm has influenced research into Singaporean public relations, with local practices being measured against

those of Western, liberal-democratic, market economies (Fitch & Surma, 2007). Critical scholars (see, for example, Motion & Weaver, 2005) and researchers working within the dominant paradigm who are concerned with the ethnocentrism and U.S./Western European bias of public relations theory (see, for example, Sriramesh, 2004) identify the need for research that considers the specific social and political contexts in which public relations is practised.

In research conducted in Southeast Asia in June 2006, a range of senior public relations practitioners were interviewed regarding their attitudes towards new media. Some expressed anxiety about new media's impact on the public relations industry and themselves. They were "scared"; one even claimed that older practitioners were leaving the industry because of technological changes (Fitch, 2009b).

In three years, the industry has changed. Several international public relations agencies in Singapore have appointed new media specialists to their staff. At the time of writing, estimates of the number of public relations practitioners working exclusively in social media in Singapore ranged from eight to 10. Most of these practitioners are relatively new to the public relations industry and are well known in social media spheres. Whereas earlier research focused on established public relations practitioners' attitudes towards new media, this research investigates the perceptions of these young guns, these new practitioners working in an online environment.

Methodology

The researcher conducted interviews with three public relations practitioners working exclusively in social media in Singapore in June 2009. Five potential candidates were approached via email. Of the three who agreed to be interviewed, all were enthusiastic about sharing their passion for social media. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, and the digital files were subsequently forwarded to the interviewees for approval. The researcher's university granted ethics approval for the project.

Semi-structured interviews were used because they offered the opportunity to elicit

the “participants’ interpretation of their experiences...expressed in their own words, using the jargon and speech styles that are meaningful to them” (Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p. 167). This suited the aim of this research. Extracts from the interviews were transcribed, and coded to identify themes. The researcher used memoing to reflect on and analyse the data, and review emerging hypotheses and frames in relation to the relevant scholarly literature (Holland, 2002).

Qualitative research, which reveals how participants view their activity, allows the researcher to interrogate the assumptions implicit in those practices and thereby provide a critical approach to industry practice. Various scholars have called for more qualitative research into public relations. For instance, Jahansoozi (2006) argues it is required for understanding the relationship and construction of meaning between organisations and their publics. Sriramesh, Kim and Takasaki (1999, p. 6) argue that qualitative research offers an understanding of “multifaceted meaning systems,” addressing the cultural implications of Western theories in non-Western settings. L’Etang (2008) maintains that qualitative research addresses the technocratic and functionalist approaches of much public relations research.

It is important to critically reflect on the ‘outsider’ status of the researcher, who is not Singaporean. However, as an Australian academic who teaches public relations to Singaporean students in both Australia and Singapore, I have developed a strong research interest in the Singaporean public relations industry, fostered through frequent visits for teaching and industry liaison.

Results and discussion

Social media in public relations

Each interviewee identifies mid-2006 to early 2007 as the period when the Singaporean public relations industry made its first forays into more interactive social media. This date is significant when linked to earlier research conducted in mid-2006 when senior

practitioners in Southeast Asia expressed anxiety around the impact of new media on public relations practices (Fitch, 2009b), and when considering the introduction of common social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. At that time, public relations practitioners feared the impact of new technology. Interviewee 1 says of his recruitment to an international public relations consultancy: “In 2006, I was hired...because they were afraid of everything that was new with regard to technology.” Interviewee 2 explained that early forays into digital public relations involved technological wizardry: “you could download widgets, or it drew on games technology.” It was not concerned with the potential for interaction offered by social media: “It was a one-way street. It was the brand talking to the consumers and not the other way round” (Interviewee 2). She cites the appointment of Interviewee 3 in 2007 as a significant shift in Singaporean public relations towards a more interactive use of technology; until then “not a lot of people knew what do with their blogs” (Interviewee 2).

The pioneers in Singapore

The three interviewees were selected for this research because of their relatively unique position as public relations practitioners employed by the Singaporean offices of multinational public relations agencies to work in social media. Their backgrounds prior to joining public relations agencies are somewhat diverse, with a degree and career in journalism (Interviewee 1), a diploma in marketing and a career in advertising (Interviewee 2), and a degree in public relations (Interviewee 3).

Interviewee 1 explained “I was the first person to ever be employed by a PR agency in Singapore for such a purpose,” that is to work in digital (rather than social) media. He previously worked as a technology journalist and was recruited primarily to work with technology clients and to start developing agency expertise in digital media:

They didn’t even know what to call it back then and nor did I. The term social media was not used often. A lot of people used the term new media without

any definition to it. They asked me what can I do about it...can you build us technology? And I thought about it and I realised that this was not the correct approach to turn a PR shop into an IT shop...I had to be a regular public relations consultant and I had to explore this new space that no one else wanted to explore.

Similarly, Interviewee 3, recruited early in 2007 after graduating from university on the strength of his blogging activity, felt he was entering uncharted territory:

At that time, no one called it new media...but I was blogging about how communication was changing. I started blogging in 03, my friend told me about this job in the first quarter of 07... maybe March...they were just looking for someone who did social media. I was hired as an experiment. I was the first in Singapore...I wrote the first blogger release and made the first cold calls to bloggers.

Interviewee 3 is now part of a small social media team employed at the agency. In addition to his own work, he educates other public relations consultants at the agency about social media, although "it's out of their comfort zone."

Interviewee 2 was recruited from advertising, primarily on the strength of her influential blog and her interest in social media, which she felt unable to pursue professionally in the advertising sector. Interviewee 2 says:

I had a blog. I grew my blog...the job came about and here I am. I was always interested in social media ...and quite frankly the only place that offers social media as a service and a solution, would be that of PR. For some reason it's still not within the advertising world.

Interviewee 2 struggles to see herself as a public relations practitioner, saying she is not "qualified in any way" for public relations: "I am a digital influence person. I can't do traditional PR." Similarly, Interviewee 3

plays down his expertise in public relations: "I'm not an expert. I'm just a bloke who does social media." It is interesting that two of the interviewees express discomfort about their qualifications for working in public relations; Interviewee 3 even suggests participating in social media is not necessarily a professional activity.

The Wild West

For each interviewee, their recruitment to work in an online public relations environment was a venture into the unknown in which they had to negotiate the rules of engagement in a field that lacked rules for working online. Interviewee 1 said: "The internet is the Wild West, right, anything goes. There are no rules".² For Interviewee 3, it was "on-the-job learning" rather than "on-the-job training": "We're really writing the rule book as it is. There are no rule books, no textbooks to learn from." Interviewee 2 agrees there are no rules, saying simply: "there aren't any."

Interviewee 2 acknowledged that with one exception the usual public relations rules or ethical codes of behaviour either lack relevance or do not apply to public relations practice in social media:

[Company name] has a bible. I have not read it [laughter]. If we have to follow the rules for social media, we have nothing. We have one big rule that everyone follows. We do not pay bloggers in any context...like we don't pay journalists.

She justifies the need for flexibility of practice as "we have to be creative" in "how we get them to talk." This suggests there is a struggle to find new ways of working in this frontier space.

Despite the apparent lack of rules, however, there are clearly social media conventions. The

² The Singaporean Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, drew a similar analogy in an interview with a journalist: "And the new media - some of it are Wild West and anything goes and people can say anything they want, and tomorrow take a completely contrary view. And well, that is just the way the medium is" (Saad, 2009, n.p.).

interviewees acknowledge that they have made mistakes:

When I first started, I didn't know anyone and I was just leaving messages on people's blogs...I got it wrong a few times. When you do a cold call without any [relevance], you are just trying to sell, you are just trying to pitch and you just get shot back in the face. (Interviewee 3)

There are 'rules', or at least unwritten codes of behaviour or conventions about what is appropriate in cyberspace, and it is the negotiation of these rules which challenge many practitioners. Breaching the codes—for instance, "hijack[ing] the conversation—can result in "disengag[ing]" or "disconnect[ing] the audience" (Interviewee 2).

Public relations activity in social media

The primary public relations activities in social media include, according to Interviewee 1, monitoring and engagement. Monitoring is generally for research purposes, such as determining perceptions of a client or product. Engagement occurs when a blogger is approached as a "springboard to engagement" and campaign development. The interviewee distinguished between the sources for monitoring and engagement. He explained that: "a lot of the chatter" which was useful for purposes of monitoring and/or research "comes from the discussion forums," whereas "a lot of engagement occurs in blogs" (Interviewee 1).

Similarly, the other interviewees acknowledged the usefulness of social media for research and understanding perceptions and opinions towards an issue or organisation. For example, Interviewee 2 sees this as a marvellous opportunity for the organisation to respond to feedback:

If the negative comments are true, I tell my client you know what, you need to talk to your R& D people. It's customer feedback...all of us are enabled with immediate alert, so if anyone talks about our brand, we know immediately.

As part of monitoring, the practitioners ensure that the organisation profile is up to date online. Interviewee 1 describes writing a Wikipedia entry for one client without actually acknowledging their professional interest:

We have gone as far as creating a Wikipedia entry for a client...The Wikipedia [is] an encyclopedia. All you need, it's like academic writing, all you need is citations. So that's it...The Wikipedia is factual. It's supposed to be factual.

From my interpretation of the social media codes from professional public relations associations such as the CIPR (2007) in the UK, disclosure of one's professional interests is paramount. The Institute of Public Relations in Singapore (n.d.) has a Code of Ethics which, although it does not refer specifically to social media, includes the following: "A member shall not engage in any practice, which tends to corrupt the integrity of channels of public communication" (n.p.). According to Wikipedia's (n.d.) own guidelines: "You are strongly discouraged from writing articles about yourself or organisations in which you hold a vested interest" as this is deemed to potentially contravene their "neutral point of view" and "conflict of interest" policies (n.p.).

One interviewee saw his role as advisory, acknowledging that it was daunting for a client to begin to participate in social media. Part of the challenge for clients, according to Interviewee 3, is understanding the nature of online interactions, and he advises them:

Just start engaging with someone who has a blog. You don't have to sell him anything. Think about it...it's just about sharing opinions. It's not about splashing money around but it's about engaging on an intellectual level, or for some people, on an emotional level.

He produces social media content on behalf of clients for bloggers to share with other bloggers. He gave an example of a short video he researched and produced for a charitable organisation seeking computer time from individuals to aid humanitarian causes; allowing people to dedicate the donated

computer time to friends resulted in many forwarding the link to others.

Engagement: engaging bloggers

The challenge for public relations practitioners is knowing how to insert themselves in the space, to start ‘engaging’ bloggers. Interviewee 2’s advice is to identify influential bloggers as: “the blogger’s readers are your target audience. You have to find the right blogs.” Once an appropriate blogger is identified:

Most of us have a digital footprint. You google them. You might find a personal name...so then you write them a private note...you might say we have a product we want you to try. You try that first, the private note. (Interviewee 2)

Although Interviewee 2 acknowledges that this is a “tedious” process, it is not “one-on-one” marketing; rather, the aim is to find the right person: “their blog might have 50,000 visits a month. That’s a circulation of 50,000.” Interviewee 2 thought it was not unlike media relations in targeting a particular publication because the audience demographics match a target public. However, the similarity with media relations ends there. Whereas with media relations, you might pitch a story idea to a journalist through a media release or a phone call, such an approach to an influential blogger would be inappropriate. She describes approaching one influential blogger on behalf of a client:

All I said to them in an email to him was ‘Yo, check this out.’ I wrote about it and I sent them a link [to a research project by a client]. That’s all I did. I didn’t ask him to do anything about it. He twittered about it and, quite ridiculously, in one hour we had 10,000 hits.

Interviewee 3 saw the online engagement as akin to other kinds of social occasions, in that the practitioner should avoid a straight pitch:

It’s a certain sell that you need but it’s a certain respect as well. Hopefully

whatever you are offering the blogger, it’s relevant to them...it’s very personal, very targeted. I say if you are at a party, don’t be a salesman. If you’re going to be a salesman, what’s the point? It’s just push, push, push.

In contrast, Interviewee 1 likened attempts at engagement by approaching influential bloggers with interesting links, invitations and promotions as “closer to what sales people do...you bring them out for fancy dinners, you entertain them. You have that kind of social engagement and that is what is happening here.”

However, Interviewee 2 complained about the increasing “arrogance” of celebrity bloggers, referring to them as “the Royal Bloggers of Singapore, the ‘A’ listers who get 20,000 hits a day.” She blamed other public relations agencies saying:

We have cases where bloggers are treated like VIPs...like the media really...your 22 year old blogger...suddenly gets popular, gets a limo ride to an event, gets showered with free products [by] this other agency I won’t mention.

Engaging users and developing friends

All three interviewees discussed the importance of developing relationships with online users. Interviewee 2 identified this as a shortcoming in public relations practitioners’ skills: public relations practitioners “are the experts who know how to build relationships” but although they “claim to know digital influence...how many actually do it?”

All interviewees had difficulty articulating concepts of friendship (in terms of online friends) and relating them to the traditional public relations concept of publics. For example, Interviewee 1 said:

what social media does is that it gives you that chance to connect...I wouldn’t say it’s a more intimate...it’s a more loose connection, it’s just that, I don’t know how to describe it, there is no word for it. For example if I meet you and I give you a business card, then we

can go away and never meet again. But under social media, when you make that acquaintance, you are stuck there forever. I make you a friend on Facebook and it's always there...But whether it's more effective, I don't know. I don't think you can prove that.

He describes the need to "start to engage differently" and "it's not just that I know you as a professional contact." The extended network of 'friends' created through such media was "more trusted" than a public forum because "you already know these people" (Interviewee 1).

Interviewee 2 expressed the friendship in terms of meeting business objectives and using the example of a website she had linked to one blog promotion, suggested it fostered the development of these connections: "We created a website especially. We build a community that way." It is not uncommon to use metaphors of friendship and community when discussing social media; however, in this discussion, it is significant as it substitutes for other discourses of promotion or marketing. This needs further critical research.

Personal and professional voices

The dynamic nature of the boundaries between the personal and the professional domains is a theme which emerged from the interviews. Arguably such boundaries are eroding with the advent of social media, but as Interviewee 2's comment suggests, bloggers do maintain some distinctions:

I swear a lot with my blogging, with my followers...and [government] ministers follow me knowing that I swear a lot...The moment I blog on the [company] blog, I say things differently...so if a corporate brand wants to go into a digital space, it's a personal thing, to penetrate a social media space as opposed to a brand doing that because as a brand, you have to keep your distance, as a brand, you should.

This suggests the traditional "corporate voice" or brand is problematic in a social media environment, as an online "relationship is formed on a personal basis" (Interviewee 2). This interviewee suggests it helps if employees blog as it allows a client company "to speak with the voice of an individual."

This connects to Interviewee 3's comments about the importance of "personality" to the development of "a candid online relationship":

For once, you are not at the mercy of the journalist...and you are not sending overt strong messages through a \$3 million ad...you can relate more credibly...Social media works when there is a lot of personality behind the channel...personality and passion, they kind of work together.

It also mirrors comments from social media commentators who argue that social media is effective because of its authenticity and connections with "real people" (Young, 2006). However, Interviewee 2 was candid about the development of online relationships from a public relations perspective: "It's about building that friendship in order to influence the way you want."

Evaluating social media activity

There is limited evaluation of social media activity. Interviewee 3 said that the influence of social media platforms such as blogs could be evaluated using simple web metrics, but acknowledged that such metrics were dynamic and evolving:

I would say it's changing every single day. It could be a numerical value...it could be how much time people spend on your site...and where do they go on your site? Do they just go to your landing page and do they stop there?...if you really want to think about it, there are so many impressions today but do they really count for anything? There could be one million hits for your video on YouTube, did they watch it all the way through? Sometimes you have to track multiple sources...and those sources keep growing and growing.

All the interviewees found the evaluation of their activity somewhat challenging:

How do you track conversations?...
How do you put a hard number on it?
It's a blog post, so it gets 10 comments. We track how many we invite to an event...we pin it down to negative, positive and neutral. But so what? What do you want to do with that data? (Interviewee 2)

The use of web metrics such as "a blog has 50,000 hits, that's a circulation of 50,000" (Interviewee 2) is problematic as it measures opportunities to see, rather than the level of engagement. It also fails to evaluate the success of meeting specific public relations objectives. This difficulty is a recurring theme in each interview. Interviewee 2 explained: "What's really lacking in digital influence is not wanting to track...and we need that. That's what's lacking in blogs."

With social media, demand for evaluation or quantifying the return on investment is client- rather than agency-driven. Evaluations for clients often consist of describing the social media activity. The government clients want an online presence and:

care least about a dollar-based evaluation. So long as there is impact and they can reach the grassroots, they are happy—they are simply keen to get their messages out there. In terms of impact and influence, no one knows how to measure it. (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 3 used an example of an online fight he unwittingly started on Twitter involving his boss and a third party. When he apologised to his boss, his boss replied "it's all good. I mean not many people can start interesting conversations like you just did". It is the ability to start and sustain conversations that makes social media activity valuable for public relations practitioners.

However, Interviewee 3 recognises the need for more evaluation, particularly in terms of meeting business objectives.

When we get really sophisticated, it will be about how many conversations drive to business leads and clinch

deals and sell products...It is not happening now but that's the future, to finally talk about the ROI of communicating online or offline and how it reaches back to business.

In summary, having a presence online, engaging users and having conversations are increasingly important public relations activities, whether they are linked to a particular communication campaign or not. Although, web metrics can provide some data, this data does not measure changing perceptions towards an organisation or issue, track the diversity and complexity of public opinion, or identify levels of engagement. In terms of disseminating information, Interviewee 1 believes traditional forms of media are more effective: "traditional media is still the best media...you get a message out there and it gets there quicker."

Challenges and control: Uncontrolled communication

While the interviewees suggested earlier that developing online friendships and offering interesting and relevant links to an influential blogger are more appropriate than a straight pitch or a cold call, this is clearly a case of uncontrolled communication in the sense the blogger may or may not choose to share the information with others. Interviewee 2 advises clients not to use social media if they wish to control the communication:

If you want control, don't get into it... get into it by putting your ear to the ground but that is all you can do. But don't participate. You can't tell the bloggers what to say or what to do.

Security is also a challenge. Interviewee 2 cites one example of an online competition she ran for a client where users could vote for their top blogger. The competition had to be abandoned after the site was hacked. The way the practitioner dealt with the situation is revealing: "we called them [the leading bloggers] and engaged them personally and they were very understanding. We got a personal email from them thanking me for being transparent." It is significant that the

communication around an online problem occurred offline to protect the reputation of her client and her employer. Certainly, the effort to contact the bloggers by telephone allows a very personal apology, but importantly, it prevents an email or blog post being circulated too easily.

The impact of social media on public relations

In response to a question about whether technological advances were transforming public relations, Interviewee 1 said that most practitioners view social media as “another avenue, just another place to do a campaign.” Interviewee 3 offered the same response, but considered the potential for citizens, adding this additional channel was especially important in Singapore where traditional media is controlled: “we are loading up what we are thinking and what we feel.” However, he did not think that social media, or the capacity to freely express opinions, was fundamentally changing public relations:

It has not really changed...The role of listening as a PR professional hasn't changed as you've always had to listen. But how you listen has changed dramatically with blogs, bulletin boards, forums, etc. That's the shift I think. (Interviewee 3)

Similarly, Interviewee 2 said that social media has made public relations practitioners “more attentive,” but that it did not really change public relations:

In every single government pitch, I say people do talk. Taxi drivers have been round for ages. They have always been the premier social network channels. People will talk whether you like it or not. So what do you want to do? Do you want to engage or not?

At the same time, the interviewees acknowledge that social media is transformative, albeit in limited ways. Interviewee 3 said: “it's a new way of communicating, it's a lot different to corporate speak.” Interviewee 1

acknowledged “the need to engage differently” and “to approach it with a very...different point of view.” Similarly, Interviewee 1 thought that technological advances, and in particular, real time media such as Twitter and Facebook, were changing the dynamics of communication.

Social media is therefore not merely a channel for disseminating messages. If public relations is being transformed by online interaction, then it is being transformed in ways which work against theoretical approaches advocating public relations as a strategic, managed, linear communication activity. Rather, it suggests that the future role for public relations as a socially responsible practice is to facilitate dialogue between organisations and their publics. The emphasis is less on controlling and managing communication and more on facilitating dialogue and ensuring organisations are responsible and responsive participants in those conversations.

Conclusion

Increased opportunities for the development of relationships and dialogue with publics, and increased interactivity and communication between stakeholders (without any organisational involvement), poses challenges for public relations because much communication and meaning-making occurs without the organisations/public relations practitioners being able to manage the process. The lack of clarity about what constitutes public relations activity – particularly in traditional terms such as strategic communication, which demands a linear and rational approach to managing communication to serve organisational aims – makes it apparent that practitioners struggle in a social media context.

The three interviewees acknowledge the space in which they work is ‘frontier-like.’ Traditional public relations concepts do not apply, as was apparent by each practitioner's difficulty in trying to articulate ideas such as publics. There was frequent slippage between consumers and (online) users, which could be indicative of the nature of public relations in Singapore where a clear distinction between public relations and marketing does not exist.

This is the case with activities such as promotional competitions, exclusive invitations to events, and free product samples, all aimed at engaging influential bloggers. Little of this activity can rightfully be called public relations in the sense of professionally managed communication. Some of the more creative activities, particularly content production, developed specifically to engage users and encourage the sharing of that content, could possibly be conceived as public relations activity or alternatively as viral marketing, as ultimately the aim is to encourage a dissemination of an organisation's or client's information through extended networks of 'friends.'

While ethical public relations, drawing on the dominant paradigm, is frequently framed as symmetrical communication, this analysis reveals that although social media appears to offer more democratic opportunities for communication in that everyone can, potentially, publish online, the reality is somewhat different. According to Interviewee 1, "some people are more influential than others." The fêting of the celebrity blogger is problematic, as suggested by one of the interviewees, in that the relationship between some of the high-profile and highly influential bloggers and public relations practitioners is increasingly fraught. The attempts to influence the influencers and claims that 'other' agencies pay bloggers for comments suggest that public relations is struggling to negotiate the ethical parameters of social media practice. Without the parameters of journalistic codes of ethics, influential bloggers are not bound by professional conventions as other media professionals might be.

There is a discursive tension between promotion on behalf of a client and the development of online relationships. Frequently, practitioners use metaphors and analogies of friends and communities. This is particularly interesting as these either sit uneasily alongside, or suppress, the discourses of marketing and consumption. The analogy of friendship, although endemic in social media, is problematic if it is

primarily used to influence and promote interests on behalf of a client. In this case, the public relations activity is arguably distorting the friendship, particularly when the role of the public relations practitioner is not declared or transparent.

A challenge which emerges from the interviews is the need to evaluate social interaction, engagement and online conversations, and indeed the degree of influence such social activity may have. While web metrics are increasingly sophisticated and can offer a range of tools to track the number of hits, how long a user stays on a site, and so on, they do little to evaluate the perceptions and emotional dimensions in terms of engagement, support or opposition for an issue or organisation. At this stage, it is the ability or capacity to 'start conversations', engage users and participate in social media, ensuring an online presence for an organisation or client, that is valued.

The lack of clear rules and guidelines and the constant negotiation of codes of behaviour by public relations practitioners suggest that practitioners are struggling to negotiate the social media environment. Even social media guidelines such as those produced by the CIPR (2007) in the UK do not offer explicit guidelines, other than the need to acknowledge professional interests. However, it is clear from these interviews that professional interests and the degree of public relations influence are not always acknowledged. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address fully the ethical implications of some of the activity taking place under the name of public relations, other than to suggest that it is problematic and warrants further research.

Significantly, if public relations wants to participate in social media, and resists the pressure to promote and sell, it cannot sustain a managerialist approach to such activity. It needs to accept that the social networks and interactions offer organisations an opportunity to participate in an ongoing conversation with publics. However, such conversations may not constitute strategic communication in the sense of developing communication objectives to support organisational goals and evaluating the

effectiveness of public relations in meeting those objectives. Rather the role of public relations may be to facilitate dialogue in a social media environment and to find transparent and socially responsible ways to achieve this.

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