A review of the impact of new media on public relations: Challenges for terrain, practice and education.

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Abstract

This review paper brings together key findings from across the recent literature to enhance overall understanding of current and future challenges posed by new media to public relations. It remains unclear whether current theoretical frameworks can fully accommodate new media and evidence suggests that many public relations practitioners are struggling with the impact of new media, and especially the Internet, on their practice. Public relations educators may need to review course curricula in light of new media developments and industry responses. Possible threats and opportunities presented by new media for public relations are explored and directions for further research in this area are suggested.

Key words: public relations, new media, internet

Introduction

Although corporate websites, chat-rooms, email customer response facilities and electronic news release distribution are now viewed as standard aspects of public relations practice (Galloway, 2005) many public relations practitioners are struggling with the impact of new media, and especially the Internet. Research has shown that practitioners are not fully embracing new media, are ill-equipped to do so and have a fear of the technology (Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006).

The terrain of public relations practice is also shifting with new media bringing about substantial increases in stakeholder strength through facilitating communication within stakeholder groups and between different stakeholder groups (Van der Merwe, Pitt & Abratt, 2005). Information 'pours out of digital spigots [sic]' (Stephens 2007, p. 35) and news now arrives 'astoundingly fast from an astounding number of directions' (Stephens 2007, p. 35) and it is often

free. Anyone with a computer linked to the Internet has the ability to publish information for potential global consumption and it is clear that the internet 'is revolutionising many aspects of public relations research and practice' (Taylor & Kent 2006, p. 145).

The Internet gives public relations practitioners a unique opportunity to collect information, monitor public opinion on issues, and engage in direct dialogue with their publics about a variety of issues. (McAllister & Taylor, 2007) However, much of the academic literature has an overall tone of lament that practitioners were simply transferring traditional approaches and models of public relations practice to the web and were not evolving their practice. With past evidence suggesting that public relations practitioners were open to using new technology (Porter & Sallot, 2003), it seems incongruous that even a traditional mainstay of public relations practice like media relations is not taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the web (Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006).

A recent study of 120 corporate websites from six European countries, the US and Singapore (Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006) found that the 'use of Internet tools to build strong and solid relationships with the media is far from ideal' (p. 274). The significant weaknesses detected highlighted that these companies may neither have comprehensive, well-designed public relations strategies nor sufficient resources to execute them and, further, that any shortcomings in an organisation's public relations practices were more evident due to the power of the Internet. (Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006). In another study, Jo and Jung (2005) examined key elements of the website homepages of top companies in the USA and South Korea and found that there was little that could categorized as examples of symmetrical two-way communications with the majority of South Korean elements being those of press agentry and the majority of US website elements being public information. The findings supported what other studies in the area have shown in that 'public relations practitioners do not yet use the internet to increase interaction between organisations and their publics' (Jo & Jung 2005, p. 27).

Defining new and emerging media

New media is becoming the preferred term for a range of media practices that employ digital technologies and the computer in some way or another (Dewdney & Ride, 2006). It is used as a term in educational settings as the title of university departments and courses and also as a title of certain artistic practices, making new media both an academic and intellectual subject, and a practice (Dewdney & Ride, 2006). New media definitions remain fluid and are evolving, with some definitions of new media focusing exclusively upon computer technologies and digital content production whilst others stress the cultural forms and contexts in which technologies are used (Dewdney & Ride, 2006). One key feature of new and emerging media technologies is that they are often portable and facilitate

mobility in communications. New media has a wider reach that anything before it (Lindgren cited in Galloway, 2005). Wireless and digital technological improvements to media have lifted previous restrictions that required connecting to a static, physical network or machine.

A recent report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005) put forward that digital content and applications in the twenty-first century will be as significant and as embedded in economic well-being as was electronic power in the twentieth century. The report states that like information and communications technology generally, digital content and applications have the characteristics of a 'general purpose technology' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005, p.3). When examining cultural forms and contexts in which these new technologies are used, what is striking is the fact that new media potentially makes people technically more accessible for more of the time: in the car, out shopping, in the office, at work, at home and when socializing.

New media are enabling content delivery on demand by consumers, the so-called pull media. Examples of this media include Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds that allow favourite news and information updates to be delivered to a consumer as soon as they are posted online without consumers having to search for the content. Only nine percent of major companies surveyed by Alfonso and de Valbuena Miguel (2006) had RSS feeds. Pull media also include: email news and information subscriptions that enable consumers to sign-up for regular updates of news or subjects of interest; podcasting that allows for online delivery of audio programs, VODcasting that allows for online delivery of visual programming, and digital television that allows consumers to customise their viewing.

These new and emerging media are facilitating person-to-person or person-to-persons communications through the availability of email, text messaging through SMS, multimedia messaging through MMS, instant messaging and chat online, online forums and blogging. New media are enabling electronic commerce related to media through pay per view, pay by time spent and pay by subscription, where one can pay by credit card, direct deposit or even SMS credits. New media are changing service provision in areas as diverse as dating, delivery of higher education courses and how people do their banking.

Advertising is becoming increasingly sophisticated with the advent of new media and it is not uncommon for mainstream advertisers to have their new ads on a website like *YouTube*, for example, the Australian big beer advertisement produced for Carlton Draft beer. There are often spoof responses to the mainstream advertisements which, it could be argued, augment the impact or reach of the original campaign. There are now online games designed to promote products and services, in what has been called 'advergaming' (Bradshaw, cited in Galloway, 2005). Hiebert (2005) stated that we could be witnessing a revitalization of civil society through a return to participation in the public sphere. But as Hiebert (2005) also notes, much effort is being put into making

emerging communication technologies even greater tools of propaganda, mind control, and hegemony than anything before.

New media and public relations theory

The academic literature has been dominated by attempts to apply Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model of communication to examine the potential of new media to build constructive relationships between organisations and their publics. Alfonso and de Valbuena Miguel (2006) concluded that new media do offer a way to increase two way symmetrical communication but that current practice, at least in terms of online press rooms, did not achieve this. Pursuing the theme of two-way symmetrical communication, McAllister and Taylor (2007) researched community college websites to determine whether the websites fostered dialogic relationships. They found an overall lack of interactive features that could solicit feedback or input from key stakeholders and stated that the weaknesses were limiting opportunities for public relations practitioners to collect information and monitor public opinion from individuals, as well as regional, state and federal entities.

They evaluated the website offerings as examples of essentially one-way asymmetrical communication, performing a similar role to that of a brochure, and that were focused on the sender-receiver transmission model of communication. The authors concluded that those websites studied were not facilitating relationship building with key publics (Allister & Taylor, 2007). Hassink, Bollen and Stegginck (2007) cite several studies where symmetrical two-way communications is considered to be an important element in excellent corporate communication. They applied this approach to their own study of online investor relations and concluded that the presence of mechanisms on corporations' websites for investor inquiries by email did not equate with symmetrical communication. It was determined that it was whether the corporation responded at all, or the timeliness and quality of a received response that determined whether symmetrical communication was present. The study found that overall, corporations did not do well in this area and that organising a symmetrical dialogue with investors could require a structure that is quite different from the traditional supply-driven asymmetrical communications process (Hassink, Bollen & Stegginck, 2007).

Another theoretical theme is that of cross-cultural analysis, particularly looking at Asian public relations practice when compared to US practice, but to a lesser extent European and Middle Eastern practices. Beckerman's (2007) description of Middle Eastern blogging sheds valuable light on the role of the blog both as diary and also as 'a personal op-ed page' (p. 19) that exposes 'a hidden trove of multiple perspectives in a world that the West often imagines as having only one perspective' (p. 18).

Although beyond the scope of this paper, to those engaged with organisational communication, Galushkin's (2003) theoretical argument for

challenging aspects of media richness theory and social presence theory will be of interest. Hermann (2007) explores Weick's process of sensemaking as a way of investigating online communications in the context of investor online discussion boards and suggests several theoretical approaches for future research, including comparing interaction analysis typologies, applying network analysis or exploring strategic ambiguity.

Dewdney and Ride (2006) have also proposed another way of theorising new media through 'cultural concept' which refers to 'an active and shaping set of ideas, and the underlying theories or wider discourses to which they belong, that informs what the practitioner does' (p.8). In one of the most interesting approaches to theorising public relations and new media, Galloway (2005) calls for professional communicators to develop a new form of cultural literacy and says that 'negotiating meaning systems in the mobile communications context demands use of a new language—'txt'—and a knowledge of the protocols of this environment' (p. 572). This does not just mean having the technical know-how but also refers to know-how about the conventions of 'swift, abbreviated, direct responses that capture communicative moments rather than extended discussion' (Galloway, 2005, p. 572). Galloway (2005) sees these moments as 'spontaneous rather than structured, used more to co-ordinate and sustain social relationships, and to meet emotional needs such as feelings of belonging rather than simply to achieve task related outcomes' (p. 572). One possible conceptualization for all this is put forward, that of 'dynamic communicative touch' (Galloway, 2005, p. 573). If Galloway is correct, and new media communication is fluid and spontaneous and about instilling feelings, public relations management paradigms centred on strategic planning and evaluation may need some major reconsideration.

New media and public relations practice

Consideration will be given to both the impact on skills, knowledge and work practices of current and future practitioners and the way new media is consumed and used, including the impact that related expectations and behaviour of consumers is having on public relations practice. New technologies are being developed and updated continuously and in themselves pose challenges for public relations professionals in terms of keeping abreast of not only what is available but also of what is being planned for release in the future. Many large scale public relations projects such as national public information campaigns or major international events have long lead times, and plans made a couple of years out from an event may need to be revisited several times to accommodate trends in usage of new technologies among key publics.

Galloway (2005) puts forward that conventional techniques of public relations are being undermined by the mobile nature of new media and that this requires public relations practitioners to rethink how they relate to publics. Internet news services are not just relying on the news wire services but turning

increasingly to other places for raw materials. Public relations practitioners would be aware that 'transcripts, reports and budgets are regularly being placed on the Web, either by organizations themselves or by citizens trying to hold those organizations to account' (Stephens 2007, p. 35). Consumers expect instant updates in their inboxes when something happens. Public relations practitioners may be under more pressure to produce this instant content.

The implications for public relations practitioners of needing to prepare material faster than ever before include being able to produce what is required almost instantaneously and with the required level of accuracy; having processes in place that can get required priority clearances for materials to be released; and, having the technology at hand to directly distribute or upload what is being disseminated. These factors may put pressure on the public relations practitioner and the team with which they work but may also pressure the relationships they have with colleagues or more senior staff, in particular the CEO, and his or her minders. It can also add pressure to the relationship with the Information Technology (IT) team if direct upload to the corporate website is not available to the public relations practitioners. In-house public relations practitioners may need to form stronger alliances with IT departments and may have to engage with the organisation's legal advisers in order to refine content clearance procedures when content is demanded instantaneously.

Another area of practice that new media has changed in the past decade is that of events. People attending events are being exposed to more and more 'bells and whistles' as new media technology gives the wherewithal to create spectacle to an ever increasing number of people. The ubiquitous digital projector and PowerPoint presentation have become baseline requirements for the most basic events, and access to the Internet to enable presenters to integrate online elements is now almost essential. Practitioners working on events may need to manage expectations from their employing organisations, their consumers and stakeholders, including sponsors, that the level of spectacle and gadgetry provided at one event will be replicated or augmented.

If new media are to be embraced, public relations practitioners will need more technical skills in areas such as web publishing, new software operation, online security, search engine optimisation, web analytics and web trend analysis software operation. They will need enhanced online information architecture skills and skills related to managing an increasing amount of complex information digitally. Writing for cross-media delivery will continue as a major component of practice but the demands for multimedia elements will bring even more challenges in this area. Since late 2006 there have been several trade press articles on how the media release is beginning to evolve to include multimedia elements. The past several years has seen an increased use of multimedia and interactive content in news releases and leading newswire services are fully equipped to distribute such material (Nowland, 2006).

With the trend towards multimedia news releases, the demands to have multimedia elements available for inclusion in such releases will grow. Public relations practitioners will be responsible for either coordinating production, or actually producing this material, and the budgets and skills bases of public relations units may need to be reviewed to accommodate these new demands. This trend may be setting up new expectations for content provision that smaller or non-profit organisations may not be able to easily meet and this has the potential to diminish the share of voice that less well-funded organisations receive.

There is also the need to consider whether target publics have access to new media technologies such as the Internet which becomes an issue when communication strategies target publics without such access due to geographic or socio-economic factors (Badaracco, 2007). All public relations practitioners will need to keep abreast of emerging media and many may already be undertaking public relations planning, implementation and evaluation in unfamiliar media areas. *PR News Online* started their *PR Digital Report* earlier this year and is now regularly covering stories on issues such as blogging, online communities and podcasting. Only a few years back it would have seemed unlikely to many practitioners to have to plan campaign components to embrace website possibilities such as *YouTube* and *My Space* but it is evident that many organisations and now, even election campaigns, are doing just that. In 2003, Galushkin suggested that SMS text messaging should be considered by organisations as a means to enhance internal communications given that spatial and temporal constraints had been weakened or removed, and new communication structures and forms had developed. Less than three years later, during the 2006 Australian Census of Population and Housing, SMS was used extensively by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for communicating with tens of thousands of census employees. (C. Verey, Media and Public Affairs Unit, Australian Bureau of Statistics, personal communication, 26 April 2007)

The academic literature indicates a range of challenges ahead for public relations practitioners. They may need to design virtual experiences that stimulate feelings as connectedness, involvement, appreciation and meaningfulness (Galloway 2005). Serious consideration must be given to whether blogs are part of campaigns as there are indications that they could be effective at establishing and maintaining organisation-public relationships (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). Already the cautionary tales related to blogging are evident in the trade literature. A public relations firm was discovered to be ghost-writing a blog on behalf of Walmart customers in the USA causing embarrassment to the company (Holmes, 2006). Sony was also caught out by faking a blog which was supposed to have been written by a boy wanting a Playstation 2 for Christmas; this is known as 'flogging'—a term coined in the information technology media for fake blogging (Laycock, 2006).

Practitioners will need to be able to analyse how new technologies can aide or hinder traditional public relations roles like public information dissemination, media relations, reputation management, stakeholder relations, marketing communications, investor relations, and issues and crisis management. Practitioners can draw on research to inform their practice. An excellent example of this is Taylor and Kent's (2007) work in articulating six best practices of mediated crisis communications.

Taylor and Kent (2007) state that the use of the internet in crisis communications is a logical one in that websites are one controlled channel through which organisations can communicate directly with the media and the public. Through the website an organisation can tell its 'side of the story, reduce the uncertainty of consumers, address multiple stakeholder needs, and work with government agencies that specialise in public safety.' (Taylor & Kent 2007, p. 146) Public relations practitioners, as the in-house experts on communication, are likely to be advising senior management on these issues and, in some cases, actively engaging in implementing new media initiatives. The practitioner will need to manage the organisation's expectation that all traditional media will be fully serviced, as has been the case in the past, as well as integrating many aspects of new media. Additional work generated by these expectations may need to be undertaken without additional personnel or budget allocations. Finding time, funds and support for upgrading skills and engaging in professional development experiences may continue to be challenging. Turf wars may develop with other work areas in the organisation such as IT, marketing and sales, customer relations, call centres and others.

This is due to these areas seeing a range of advantages, including the advancement of careers and the control of information and technology, in managing communication activities in a new media age. Turf wars can also arise from public relations asserting management responsibility for areas of practice that traditionally may have resided within other areas such as IT. These internal relationships need to be carefully managed as encroachment from management information systems departments can lead public relations practitioners having a lack of control in managing Web sites (Pavlik & Dozier, cited in Porter & Sallott, 2003).

Research has shown that public relations practitioners who embrace new technologies such as blogging are perceived within organisations as having more power, in that they are willing to be leaders in the industry and use new tools to better reach target publics (Porter, Sweetser Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007).

Some practitioners may find themselves working with key organisational decision-makers who are not abreast of emerging media or, at the other end of the continuum, are working with decision-makers who are very aware of the new media developments and want to embrace every new one without considering the full implications of doing so.

There may be recruitment issues for public relations which may also impact on journalists looking to 'jump the fence' into a public relations role. Academic literature in journalism indicates a high level of debate as to the future of journalism practice, journalism outputs and the education of journalists, to name but a few. The outcomes of these debates may have unexpected outcomes for public relations both in terms of how media relations are practiced but also for recruitment planning.

Although not evident in the academic literature, through blogs, trade press and industry websites, one can glean a trend towards some public relations agencies and in-house units looking to employ staff with broader tertiary qualifications and career backgrounds than public relations. These agencies may instead be considering people with technological know-how to work alongside the traditional public relations practitioners. There are also anecdotal reports that mature practitioners are being overlooked in some cases in favour of young, relatively inexperienced (but technically-savvy) public relations practitioners who can take a leading role in projects that require technical know-how or first hand knowledge of the consumption habits related to new media. Some public relations agencies or in-house units are being amalgamated into multidisciplinary strategic communication agencies encompassing public relations, marketing, advertising, media, website development and graphic design. There are agencies forming strategic alliances with different companies in order to deliver cross-discipline multimedia services.

Impact on public relations education

Alexander's (2004) comprehensive exploration of the challenges for the public relations curricula remains in large part the state of play in the field in 2007. Identifying the need for educators to provide a thorough grounding in how technology can facilitate relationship management, he stated that there is 'an urgent need for academics and practitioners to review current course and subject content and work towards ensuring future practitioners are capable of working in the new public relations environment' (2004, p. 4). There is a perception among students that their undergraduate courses may not be adequately preparing them for practice in the areas of new technologies and electronic communication. A recent study found that about one-third of students felt either not very prepared or under prepared to work in these areas (Gower & Reber, 2006).

One of the main challenges for educators centres on the fact that many of the vocationally-oriented areas covered in current public relations curricula are still deemed to be highly relevant to current professional practice requirements. This raises the question of what should be let go from the existing public relations curriculum to accommodate new and emerging areas. Public relations however, is not alone is trying to address these issues. Journalism education is also facing challenges associated with new media. One study showed that although journalism students reported receiving their news online, they still

expected to work in traditional areas of print and broadcast journalism with only a few anticipating working in online journalism (Heider, 2006).

The situation for journalism academics has been equated with being like Alice in Wonderland down a hole trying to make decisions and forge programs in a fluid environment and that 'it seems like the technology, options, and opportunities change faster than a single course can wind its way through the university approval bureaucracy' (Wickham, 2006, p.91). This could also be applicable to public relations courses.

Deuze's (2006) discussion of journalism educational challenges, perhaps, shows a way forward. If Deuze's (2006) concepts (p. 23) are applied to a public relations context the challenge is not about working out how to 'to adapt our already overloaded curricula to the convergent future' but is about having a debate on why we should still educate public relations practitioners, what set of ideas about public relations and its role in society guides this education, and what our definition of graduates is as they go out into the world.

Conclusion

The full ramifications of new media for public relations and its continuing evolution are far beyond the scope of this paper. Responding to the demands of emerging media in an environment where traditional media demands on public relations practice are not reducing significantly will be a major area of concern in coming years. Evaluation challenges that have been articulated in the public relations literature over the past two decades will be further complicated by the seeming fluidity of both the new media technologies themselves and the conventions of their use.

Generally, studies included in this review paper that found practices somewhat lacking did not deeply investigate why the situation was as they found. Further research is needed to ascertain whether it was lack of technological know-how, reluctance on the part of the public relations practitioners to integrate new media into their practice, or whs communication management role. Indications are that if public relations practitioners do not step up to the mark, then others will do so.

There is a clear threat in some quarters to the domain of public relations from other specialist areas within organisations as new media technologies cut across disciplines. The public relations terrain may seem more attractive, and be more prone to invasion from those outside the profession, if a perception develops that the area is now more technology-driven and less about 'touchy-feely' communication or traditional media.

Evidence indicates that it is imperative that public relations practitioners and educators embrace the full potential of new media if they are to overcome such a threat. The author trusts that this review paper has provided an overview of some of the recent literature and offered some insights into how new and emerging media is impacting on public relations.

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