

The SAGE Handbook of  
**Public Relations**  
Second Edition

Edited by  
**Robert L. Heath**  
*University of Houston*



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC

Copyright © 2010 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

*For information:*



SAGE Publications, Inc.  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320  
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.  
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044  
India

SAGE Publications Ltd.  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP  
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.  
33 Pekin Street #02-01  
Far East Square  
Singapore 048763

Printed in the United States of America

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

The SAGE handbook of public relations / editor Robert L. Heath.

p. cm.

Rev. ed. of: Hand book of public relations. c2001.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4129-7780-7 (cloth)

ISBN 978-1-4129-7781-4 (pbk.)

1. Public relations. 2. Public relations—Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Heath, Robert L. (Robert Lawrence), 1941- II. Handbook of public relations.

HD59.H267 2010

659.2—dc22

2010010659

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

10 11 12 13 14 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

---

<i>Acquisitions Editor:</i>	Todd R. Armstrong
<i>Editorial Assistant:</i>	Nathan Davidson
<i>Production Editor:</i>	Eric Garner
<i>Copy Editor:</i>	QuADS Prepress (P) Ltd.
<i>Typesetter:</i>	C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
<i>Proofreader:</i>	Scott Oney
<i>Indexer:</i>	Michael Ferreira
<i>Cover Designer:</i>	Candice Harman
<i>Marketing Manager:</i>	Helen Salmon

# Directions in Social Media for Professionals and Scholars

*Michael L. Kent*

**A**nyone who has been teaching public relations for 5 to 10 years knows about the influence of technology. Indeed, if you have not taught one of the foundational courses like Introduction or Writing in a while you might have missed the changes. Incremental changes are easy to miss, and technology moves fast. When you look critically at your course notes from only a few years ago, you realize “Wow, news releases have completely changed,” “the research process has changed,” and “the skills that students are expected to have when they graduate have changed.” Few journalists want printed news releases anymore (only about 2% still do), and more than 90% of journalists want to receive news releases via e-mail, organizational Web sites, or news wires (Bulldog Reporter, 2008). Layoffs and budget cuts in journalism have led to increased demand for free content from blogs, twitters, and organizational Web sites. Undergraduates are being asked what technology skills they have when they apply for internships and jobs because many of them will be required to watch, read, and write social media content.

When I recently turned to my own notes for Introduction to Public Relations from only 5 or 6 years ago, I ran across a list of “sample media channels” that included the following:

- Television
- Radio
- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Circulars
- Direct mail
- Point-of-purchase displays
- Posters
- Transit signs
- Public service announcements
- Advertisements
- Movie trailers
- Advertising specialties
- Pamphlets and booklets
- Meeting
- Speeches
- And computers (e-mail, www, Internet, electronic bulletin boards, etc.)

Ironically, computers were at the bottom of the list, “handheld devices” and blogs did not make the list, and Twitter had not been invented.

Over the past 20 years, technology has steadily advanced from Listservs in the late 1980s and early 1990s to modern technologies such as the World Wide Web, social media, and social networking in the past 15 years. But as McLuhan (1964/1999) pointed out in 1964, and Levinson in 1997, new technologies do not simply replace old ones. Old technologies persist, and new technologies fundamentally alter our relationship to the old ones. This chapter tries to avoid the mistake many researchers make when examining “new technologies” of assuming they are *new*.

Speaking of the Internet, which is more than 40 years old, or “social networking,” which has been around for decades, as “new” is a mistake. Social media, for example, are often held up as a tool for social connectivity. However, Granovetter (1973), writing decades ago about the value of having large social networks among business professionals, argued that the success of individual messages and campaigns often depends on the experience and connections of the communicator constructing the messages. The current technology offers nothing genuinely new, only a new way to accomplish an old task.

To explain the complexities of social media, this chapter will be divided into five sections: The first section of the chapter will provide some definitions of key social media concepts as well as clarifying what is meant by social media from a public relations standpoint. The second section of the chapter will highlight important social media literature and issues. The third section of the chapter will discuss the direction of social media for public relations scholars. The fourth section of the chapter will describe the possible future of social media for communication professionals. And the fifth section of the chapter will conclude with some observations about new technology.

The chapter will define and analyze social media and highlight important issues for scholars and communication professionals. Topics such as moderation, interactivity, interchangeability, propinquity, responsiveness, spontaneity,

and dialogue are examined, and theoretical and practical suggestions are made for improving our understanding of social media, how professionals use it, and how academics might study it.

## Definitions

As suggested earlier, speaking about technology in public relations as “new technology” is a misnomer. Most of the “new” technologies that we now regularly use in public relations are well established as communication technologies, with the Internet introduced in the 1960s, e-mail in the 1970s, hypertext in the 1980s, the World Wide Web in 1993, and blogs in 1999. Even *concepts* such as “social media” are not new. Google now owns the Usenet archive (and still hosts thousands of groups), one of the first “social media.” Usenet was started in 1981 and contains 500 million back-and-forth posts by tens of millions of people from more than 3.5 million groups.

Electronic mailing lists like the National Communication Association’s list CRTNET (Communication, Research, and Theory Network), started in 1989 by Tom Benson at the Pennsylvania State University, have been hosting member dialogue for more than two decades. Internet Relay Chat (IRC), started in the early 1990s, is also still going strong, as are the infamous “chat rooms” where we occasionally hear about adolescents getting into trouble. Thus, calling our Internet communication technologies “new” makes people think that we do not already know a lot about them, which we do. Indeed, many of the early critiques of the Internet, of which we see very few in most literature reviews, were critical (cf. Elmer, 1997; Kent, 2001; Mitra, 1997; Warnick, 1998) and focused on understanding the medium rather than working out technical details.

In spite of the fact that there are decades of research, thousands of scholarly articles about “new communication technologies,” and hundreds of articles just from communication and public relations sources, some scholars of new technology are actually turning to online (nonrefereed)

sources like Wikipedia for definitions and proof for claims (cf. Terilli, Driscoll, & Stacks, 2008; Wright & Hinson, 2009a, 2009b). More important, when many scholars talk about new communication technologies, they take an implicit ontological stance about technology that assumes that dialogue, rhetoric, and persuasion are present, but completely ignore the actual use of the technology by public relations professionals, focusing on self-report data and content analyses.

## What Are Social Media and Social Networking?

On the most basic level, any interactive communication channel that allows for two-way interaction and feedback could be called a social medium (Listservs, e-mail, radio call-in programs, etc.). Shortwave radio, Citizen's Band (CB) radio, and the telephone are probably the oldest broadcast media that allow for social interaction and networking.

Modern social networks are characterized by the potential for *real-time interaction*, *reduced anonymity* (with Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, etc., but not with blogs and lists), a sense of *propinquity* (brought on by the use of avatars, graphical interfaces, automated messages, etc.), *short response times* (often because of the number of users/members participating), and the ability to "time shift," or engage the social network whenever it suits each particular member. Thus, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace are considered social media because of the responsiveness of participants and the vastness of networks, as are interactive Listservs, newsgroups, Usenet, and real-time chats like IRC.

More traditional forms of social media (personal letters, letters to the editor, videoconferencing, etc.) are not thought of the same way because they are often not capable of supporting interactions by people in vast social networks, because they do not take place in "real time," and, perhaps most important, because they do not allow time shifting. As few as five people would have difficulty holding a coherent, shared conversation

via postal mail, while hundreds, sometimes thousands, regularly contribute to online blog posts or Facebook messages using "threaded dialogue." Social media have several other defining features: moderation, interactivity, interchangeability, propinquity, responsiveness, spontaneity, and dialogue.

**Moderation.** Moderation refers to editorial oversight rather than conservativeness. For example, successfully posting a message to the NCA's CRT-NET Listserv requires that your message be read by the list moderator, who decides if the post is appropriate for distribution to the list. The same is true of many blogs. Other Listservs and blogs are completely open, allowing anyone (or anyone with an account) to upload posts responding to specific blog content or messages from fellow readers. Unmoderated blogs are uncommon because they are often flooded with advertisements for drugs, porn, and other inappropriate messages from bots and spammers.

However, not all social media sites are moderated in the same way. The blog SlashDot (SlashDot.org) enlists the help of its members to moderate the site, selecting hundreds of members each week and assigning them "moderator points" enabling them to raise or lower the score for particular posts. Because moderators have limited points, only inappropriate posts are scored down, and exceptional posts scored up. Subscribers to the blog are also allowed to select their threshold of content quality, reading only four- and five-star posts and ignoring the rest, reading everything, and so on. Many blog moderators filter only inappropriate content but allow all other posts through.

Moderation is a part of all social media, whether it is employed or not. Facebook, LinkedIn, and other social networking sites, for example, allow the site owner (moderator) to decide who will be granted access. Facebook and LinkedIn require the "moderator" to grant permission to others to join (when they receive a "friend request," etc.).

Ironically, moderating social media is *antisocial*. Social media create the illusion of knowing

what someone is doing by seeing the posts by others on their social networking pages and reading the comments to their own posts. However, social media are not “social” in the sense of having your close friends over for drinks or tea. Rather, social media are like a party. Because “everyone” is there, few people pay much attention to anyone, even close friends. Everyone knows that their conversations might be overheard, so they do not really disclose too much, except if they are standing off in a corner (or sending a private message on a social networking site). As a result, being truly social cannot be done on a social networking site. Their public nature precludes intimacy, self-disclosure, and genuine sociality. Intimacy requires privacy.

Stories abound in the media of young people posting inappropriate content on their Facebook pages or not understanding the difference between public and private information and conversations (Bahney, 2006). Government employees, graduate students, business professionals, job applicants, interns, and high school and college students have gotten into trouble with social media.

Social media give the illusion of allowing people to pick their friends and colleagues and create an environment of freedom and democracy. In practice, however, professionals often feel pressured to grant entry to supervisors and colleagues for fear of suffering sometimes serious consequences. Thousands of people have been fired for blogging and posting comments about their employers, and people with active social networking sites need to spend a great deal of time posting and reading comments. As a result, many active social networkers maintain alternative social media sites for their “real friends.” Thus, all social media require some level of maintenance and moderation.

**Interactivity.** Interactivity has long been a feature of social media going back to the early Listservs and professional “hotlines” (cf. CIOS: Communication Institute for Online Scholarship). However, the vast majority of people read blogs or monitor twitters, rather than post to them. In the early days of the Internet, these people were called “lurkers.”

Twenty years ago, active participants to lists would complain about people who just read the posts by others and never participated in the dialogue.

Modern social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn have actually institutionalized participation. For example, on Facebook, “friends” can give a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” rating to the posts of others with very little effort. Little substantive discussion actually takes place publicly. Most people just post pictures of their outing with their kids at the lake or the results of their latest online IQ test or achievement in FarmVille. On most social networking sites, symbolic participation, or faux interaction, takes the place of genuine interaction (Kent, Harrison, & Taylor, 2006).

More conversational back-and-forth discussion takes place on blogs than on personal and professional social networking sites. On the one hand, substantive blog conversations make sense; blogs bring to readers and subscribers new information and topics of discussion. After all, how much can someone say about pictures of your nephew’s picnic at the Jersey shore?—“Dude, that looked like it rocked!” However, a blog posting about a new health or technological innovation, or a political decision by the president, can spur heated commentary. Still, anyone who belongs to several social networking sites knows that most members are lurkers, and most sites receive the majority of their postings from a handful of active participants.

That most people are lurkers rather than discussants has a lot of implications. Again, as suggested above, social media turn out to be not all that social. Many, perhaps most, people use social networking sites to satisfy their socio-emotional needs of inclusion and acknowledgment. As Rogers (1957) suggested, humans have an innate need to be acknowledged and included. We are social beings. Although not everyone needs to be the center of attention as some bloggers do, everyone wants to feel a part of a social network. Interactivity both affords an opportunity to respond to others (sometimes anonymously, as a random blog poster, etc.) and initiates contact,

giving a “shout out” to your “peeps” or uploading your own content or messages on Facebook, YouTube, or another social media site.

**Interchangeability.** Social networking participants are more or less interchangeable. Going back to the early days of social media, the IRCs and AOL chat rooms, we know that many people disguise their identities. Gender experimentation, where men pretend to be women and women pretend to be men, was (and still is) common on these lean, text-based, networks. Additionally, early social media were characterized by interaction among total strangers.

Many of the modern social media networks share this feature of linking anonymous strangers together. If I accept a friend’s request on Facebook, for example, I am then offered the opportunity to select from among *his or her* friends, shopping for “friends” that both participants might have in common. Similarly, I am often sent requests by total strangers to join my own LinkedIn network. When I follow up on the background of the person sending me the request, I often discover that the stranger and I have absolutely nothing in common (bankers, real estate agents, etc.). The opportunity to create a network of anonymous friends and follow the antics of total strangers exists to a greater extent with Twitter, where I have lists of “followers” (people or organizations who are following me), and “following” (people and organizations who I am following). The opportunity to keep on top of Ashton Kutcher’s dining habits or “Lindsay Lohan’s Twitter trainwreck” is very compelling.

The point here is people on many social media sites are interchangeable. Sites are designed to build wide networks by sharing information among members. Apart from social networking with one’s actual family and genuine “friends,” everyone else is interchangeable. If Richard Edelman stopped blogging, I could follow some other blog. If I was interested in reaching key publics through an organizational blog, I could affiliate with new colleagues and professionals who share similar interests. With the exception of people whom we actually know and see regularly,

everyone else might be computer generated. My Twitter “followers” are not necessarily who they say they are, and it is not necessary to blog, twitter, or Facebook to be professionally successful. Moreover, the time spent “social networking” (social media qua entertainment), rather than simply using social media like blogs for professional purposes (social media qua research) (cf. Kent, 2008a), is unlikely to result in any big professional dividends (Regan, 2007).

Finally, going back to an earlier point mentioned in “moderation,” because people’s “social networks” include friends, family, coworkers, colleagues, supervisors, and professionals from other organizations and industries, no candid or substantive advice or counsel is possible. An employee who negatively blogs about his or her employer is likely to be fired; thus, the blog needs to be “anonymous,” diminishing its credibility and veracity. The same risk entails from posting to industry blogs, as well as posting candid comments on one’s own social media sites. Thus, any “dialogue” that ensues—on order with pabulum and frequently just self-serving rants—in no way resembles what Granovetter (1973) described in “The Strength of Weak Ties”:

The overall social structural picture suggested by this argument can be seen by considering the situation of some arbitrarily selected individual—call him Ego. Ego will have a collection of close friends, most of whom are in touch with one another—a densely knit clump of social structure. Moreover, Ego will have a collection of acquaintances, few of whom know one another. Each of these acquaintances, however, is likely to have close friends in his own right and therefore to be enmeshed in a closely knit clump of social structure, but one different from Ego’s. The weak tie between Ego and his acquaintance, therefore, becomes not merely a trivial acquaintance tie but rather a crucial bridge between the two densely knit clumps of close friends. To the extent that the assertion of the previous paragraph is correct, these clumps would not, in fact, be connected to one another at all were it not for the existence of weak ties. (p. 1363)

Social networking sites are not about “professional networking,” as takes place at a conference, or with one’s colleagues in the hall, but about “sociability.” The friends, colleagues, blog, and Twitter sites followed are largely arbitrary, and an individual’s participation in the network is as interchangeable as watching the nightly news on one channel rather than another.

**Propinquity.** Propinquity is often talked about as a feature of dialogue. Propinquity means closeness or proximity—nearness. We have the strongest relationships with those with whom we share physical space. As we know from the interpersonal communication literature, relationships are built over time and through shared interactions. Relationships are also built through self-disclosure and genuine contact. Being a member of the same professional association or social media site does not equate with friendship. As has been argued by Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002), Web sites, and by extension, social media sites, have the *potential* to function dialogically, as relationship building tools; however, actual intellectual contact is required for this to happen. Wikipedia, for example, has a lot of information on it, but it fosters no sense of closeness, since it is little more than a dictionary. Social media, on the other hand, have the “potential” to build relationships because of the shared sense of connection engendered by the media. But without devoting time and energy to interaction, social media fail.

Although the sense of propinquity fostered by social media sites is illusory, they do provide the ground for creating stronger professional relationships. Relationships, however, need to be nurtured. A professional interested in building a strong relationship with a fellow professional is likely to have more success and develop a stronger bond by spending time with the other person at a local event, a professional conference, or over lunch than via e-mail or a social networking site. Since strong relationships are premised on shared experience and understanding, social media provide an opportunity to

create a sense of identification by unawareness (Burke, 1973) that is part of all true relationships.

**Responsiveness.** Responsiveness is a feature of most social media. As noted above, some social media sites like blogs do not allow all visitors to post comments, and many sites only allow comments by members (something that has been true since the early days of social media). Responsiveness gets played out in a number of ways. Probably, the most common way is through threaded dialogue. Threaded dialogue is conversation that emerges in response to news or conversational posts (or “threads”). Other forms of social media allow for responses to be posted by members and participants but are not threaded.

For example, recently on CRTNET (NAT-COM.org), Richard Vatz posted a comment about whether NCA should be providing minority grants to graduate students. The original comment sparked substantial controversy, with dozens of members of the list posting lengthy comments over the course of several weeks. However, because NCA’s list is moderated and has a time delay that varies from hours to a day or more, depending on when the list moderator is able to vet and upload member posts, having threaded conversations that refer to other posts and move back and forth between the comments of others is more difficult. Some of the content that someone might reference in a threaded context is being uploaded at the same time as yours, with the other five comments that came in between 5 p.m. and 8 a.m. A genuinely threaded context such as what is found on many blogs (e.g., SlashDot.org) has the potential to be more like genuine dialogue, with comments appearing in reverse chronological order, in real time, and with the ability to reference, incorporate, and interrogate the comments and insights of others. Completely open social media often attract “vandals” who use foul language, post inappropriate comments, insult members, and occasionally upload links to competing content. Thus, most social media sites for professionals are moderated. Responsiveness, then, is a feature of social



media, but its implementation and value vary tremendously and affect the nature of the social experience.

**Dialogue.** Public relations and many other communication-oriented professions have been moving back toward rhetorical, relational, and dialogic communication models. Marketers are increasingly interested in “relationship building” (currently reified as brand loyalty, but increasingly more focused on building more tangible relationships of trust and commitment). Politicians have been showcasing their involvement in their communities by hosting “town halls” and providing online content. Public relations professionals have long recognized the power of relationships to foster trust and loyalty.

The principles of dialogue were first outlined by a number of interpersonal and relational scholars, professionals, and philosophers. Martin Buber (1923/1970) is generally considered the father of dialogue, but others, including Bakhtin (1981), Laing (1969), and Rogers (1957), have contributed. In public relations, Ron Pearson (1989) as well as Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) have also contributed.

Social media revolve around what is essentially a central tenet of dialogue: the value of the individual. One of the problems with the way that social media and dialogue interact, however, is that social media, as has been explained above, are not very social. When Martin Buber (1923/1970) wrote about dialogue almost a century ago, in 1923, he envisioned face-to-face interactions of genuineness, empathy, and compassion: There were no superstores, there were no cable TV networks, there were no cellular telephones, and there were no social networks that did not involve human beings interacting with each other face-to-face.

Some public relations professionals have argued that sometimes “we do not want a genuine interaction, we just want to get our groceries and go home.” However, Buber’s (1923/1970) dream and the dream of most dialogic scholars is a world where people have time, and a desire, to

interact with their fellow human beings. Dialogue is an activity of patience and understanding. Thus, for social media to live up to the dialogic promise suggested by Buber (1923/1970) and Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002), they need to actually be capable of dealing with people, all people, as valued and trusted companions.

Many of the definitions of social media that are advanced by scholars limit themselves to description, never examining the assumptions behind their research or the appropriateness of their methodology for the phenomenon in question. There exists very little critical analysis of social media for scholars to draw on. For example, Waters, Burnett, Lamm, and Lucas (2009) wrote, “Relationships are the foundation for social networking sites” (p. 102) and “The purpose of this study is to examine how nonprofit organizations use Facebook to engage their stakeholders and foster relationship growth” (p. 103). Although the article provides some useful findings, there is a disconnect between what social networking sites are for “relationships,” and what the authors study. The authors do not actually look at “how nonprofit organizations use Facebook to engage their stakeholders.” They sent no messages to the nonprofits to see if they responded (responsiveness is something that previous researchers have shown to be very low among all types of organizations), posted no messages to their walls to see how the organization engaged them, nor content analyzed the quality and quantity of the comments that were posted. Yet Waters et al. concluded that nonprofit organizations “rarely provide information in forms other than external links to news stories, photographs, and discussion board posts” (p. 105).

Because this was a study of “social networking,” and assumed that “relationships are the foundation,” the authors really discovered that these types of organizations are not really doing *any* social networking. The conclusion seems to be that the organizations might be using social networking sites for marketing purposes, or to offer another Web presence, but not to actually engage people “socially.” The problem with

Waters et al.'s study is not methodological or that their findings are flawed; the problem is that there is a contradiction between how we define and how we study social media.

Even more substantive essays on social networking such as Wright and Hinson's (2008), published in the *Public Relations Journal*, often proceed from flawed assumptions. Setting aside the fact that the article contains only two references to public relations books or articles (*Public Relations Tactics* and *PR Week*) and two references to conference papers (both by the authors), the remainder of the citations are to blogs, Web sites, business and marketing journals, and so on. No public relations body of literature is invoked in the essay to support the assumptions made by the authors or the conclusions drawn in the essay. Wright and Hinson (2008) wrote,

David Meerman Scott, an online thought leadership and viral marketing strategist, says, "one of the coolest things about the Web is that when an idea takes off it can propel a brand or a company to seemingly instant fame and fortune".

Scott also pointed out that although communicating via the Web usually is free—as opposed to purchasing space through traditional advertising—only a small number of public relations practitioners are effectively using blogs and other social media when communicating with their strategic publics. Scott claimed the challenge to public relations and marketing people "is to harness the amazing power of whatever you call it—viral, buzz, word-of-mouth, or word-of-blog—having other people tell your story drives action." (p. 1)

Wright and Hinson's (2008) article illustrates an important point because what they offer in their essay, "How Blogs and Social Media Are Changing Public Relations and the Way It Is Practiced," does not focus on public relations at all. Later in the essay the authors, under the heading "Blogging and Public Relations," wrote,

Many aspects of technology recently have challenged how public relations is practiced. As Robert J. Key (2005) explains, "Public relations in the digital age requires understanding how your key constituents are gathering and sharing information and then influencing them at key points. Doing so requires strategies that embrace the digital age." (p. 3)

In spite of the title, there is no sense that the authors are interested in "social media" as a tool of relationship building, interactivity, dialogue, or sociality at all. Rather, social media are examined as just another tool for organizational marketing initiatives and exploiting publics. Even Wikipedia's definition of social media (the grade school of scholarly thought) adequately describes social media as discussed here, suggesting social media are

designed to be disseminated through social interaction. Social media supports the human need for social interaction, using Internet- and Web-based technologies to transform broadcast media monologues (one to many) into social media dialogues (many to many). It supports the democratization of knowledge and information, transforming people from content consumers into content producers. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\_media)

Public relations professionals need to decide whether social media are useful *public relations tools* (and I believe that they are), or whether they are mere marketing tools. If the latter is true, that work should be published in another place and our focus should be on understanding how this new technology can be used to further public relations goals.

The question that we need to begin asking is "What exactly is being assumed when blogs and Twitters are examined?" Are we examining interpersonal influence, persuasion, pure information, social intercourse, professional discourse, power, ontological expressions of culture, postmodern conversations, psychic chatter, invitations to say more, what? All these and more are possibilities,

depending on the nature of the interlocutors (or those just lurking from the sidelines). Which assumption scholars or professionals make about the technology will have a profound impact on how they view messages, how they interact with others, and the value that they place on the social network.

## Important Social Media Issues and Literature

Although there are many articles on social media that are really more focused on marketing, advertising, promotion, or other activities than on public relations activities, a number of excellent articles have been written. Rather than try to review every article here, I will instead highlight several that treat social media in ways of value to public relations professionals and help focus discussion on what public relations professionals need to know to understand and use social media effectively.

Han and Zhang's (2009) essay "Starbucks Is Forbidden in the Forbidden City: Blog, Circuit of Culture and Informal Public Relations Campaign in China" poses a strategic question about how social media might be used by activist groups and organizations:

Adopting the circuit of culture model, this study illustrates the intricate role of culture in international public relations within an Internet-based media context, as well as the tension surrounding the conflicting identities between Starbucks' global presence and the local sensitivity attached to the cultural heritage—the Forbidden City. (Abstract)

Han and Zhang's (2009) essay, although only a "research in brief" essay, deals with a real-world issue, examines how social media content was introduced into the mainstream media, subsequently resulting in a successful grassroots campaign, and most important, includes abundant scholarly support invoking public

relations scholars and thinkers like Bourdieu, Curtin and Gaither, Hall, Heath, and others. The essay offers a valuable glimpse into the study of social media.

Other issues that have not received enough attention among scholars have been ethical issues related to social media. There have been a number of high-profile cases of social media being used unethically, including issues such as corporations unlawfully taking images from social media pages and using them in marketing and advertising campaigns without obtaining permission or paying for the use of the images (cf. Lyons, 2009; [techdirt.com/articles/20070429/221551.shtml](http://techdirt.com/articles/20070429/221551.shtml); [www.wiredstrategies.com/lawsuit/release1.pdf](http://www.wiredstrategies.com/lawsuit/release1.pdf); [www.PDNPulse.com/2009/06/how-did-this-family-facebook-picture-end-up-on-a-czech-poster.html](http://www.PDNPulse.com/2009/06/how-did-this-family-facebook-picture-end-up-on-a-czech-poster.html)). Another issue for several years now has been the use of social media pages by for-profit organizations and educational institutions (cf. Clark, 2006; Rubin, 2008; [www.techdirt.com/articles/20060118/1056224.shtml](http://www.techdirt.com/articles/20060118/1056224.shtml)) as a screening tool for job applicants or students.

More substantive issues that have been excluded include Edelman's flaunting of the ethical marketing guidelines of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) that he helped write. Ironically, few public relations scholars have been willing to discuss the issue, instead accepting Edelman's weak apology. As Craig (2007) explained,

The blog noted that it was sponsored by an organization called Working Families for Wal-Mart. But several other things were not disclosed:

- Working Families for Wal-Mart was created by Edelman, the public relations firm, for Wal-Mart, in response to criticism of the company by union-supported groups such as Wal-Mart Watch. Nothing on the sponsor's "About Us" section on its Web site mentioned the organization's connection to Wal-Mart or Edelman.

- Working Families for Wal-Mart, which is funded by the company, paid for the trip—flying Laura and Jim to Las Vegas to start out, providing them an RV, paying for gas, setting up the blog, and paying Laura (freelance writer Laura St. Claire) for her blog entries.
- Jim Thresher, who shot photographs for the blog during his travels with Laura, was a staff photographer for *The Washington Post*.

Richard Edelman, after several days of silence about the matter on his blog, wrote on October 16:

I want to acknowledge our error in failing to be transparent about the identity of the two bloggers from the outset. This is 100% our responsibility and our error, not the client's. . . . [in a later interview] Because we have people who are insufficiently experienced in this . . . I have to make sure people have the training in basics of PR and also in the morals of new media and that's what I'm totally focused on. (Craig, 2007, pp. 215–216)

The number of ethical lapses described by Craig (2007) here are numerous. Ironically, only journalists have paid much attention to the ethical issues here; public relations professionals have largely ignored the issue. Craig's commentary, along with others that appear in the same issue of the journal, explores a number of ethical lapses that have yet to be explored in the public relations literature. Through "the use of a front group, corrupting the channels of information, not acting with honesty and integrity, not serving the public interest, not identifying clients publicly," and so on, Edelman violated half of the PRSA's code of ethics clauses. To suggest that this was a lapse by inexperienced people who did not yet understand WOMMA's intent is unlikely.

Social media scholars need to *begin* by dealing with the ethical and definitional issues of the media before they move to studies of organizations' use of social media. "What *should* we be

examining?" needs to be answered before random studies of social media.

A second essay is Kent's (2008a) "Critical Analysis of Blogging in Public Relations," which laid out a number of considerations about blogs and suggested that as professionals we should be aware that there are a number of different types of blogs and that how individuals think about blogs varies, depending on whether they are thinking about news blogs or a personal blog. Also, there are several types of blogs:

The traditional or historic blog is written like a diary entry, or an op-ed page. By contrast, . . . the "news-blog," has emerged. News blogs are essentially clearinghouses of news headlines or abstracts that usually link readers to an actual news story. (p. 33)

Essays like Kent's (2008a), exploring the features of the various social media, are needed in every area of new technology. In the hands of public relations professionals, social media are much more than tools for marketers. When we allow our skills to be reduced to mere marketing assistance, our value as counselors disappears. Public relations professionals, as *communication* professionals, have insight into influence and persuasion, designing effective dialogic networks, responding to crises, apologizing for corporate misdeeds, and so on. Our value will diminish as long as we allow ourselves to be mere technical experts.

Using social media for "reaching publics" is not the same as "developing and maintaining the viability of corporate narratives," "strengthening organization-public relationships through identification and persuasion," and "adapting communication technologies to serve organizational goals rather than as replacements for more expensive broadcast media." That social media are inexpensive misses the point. News releases are inexpensive, but they are no replacement for advertising when it comes to publicity or promotion. But news releases are still a valuable tool in the professional communicator's box. Social

media are also just a tool. When used effectively, social media have great potential and serve specific needs. When used simply as less costly replacements for advertising and marketing expenses, the other unique skills that public relations professionals bring are unnecessary. Let us send our students out to get marketing degrees if we have nothing to teach them.

## Directions in Social Media for Scholars

As suggested above, social media are much more complex than we are giving credit for, and much of our research has naively studied “perceived” effects (how a technology makes you feel) rather than actual effects (how useful each technology is in distributing organizational messages and building and maintaining relationships with stakeholders). Several suggestions will help guide practitioners.

1. Rather than asking people whether they *feel* more powerful or connected after adopting social media tools, let us find out whether they actually are. Network analysis (Doerfel & Taylor, 2004; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003, 2005) is an excellent and underused research methodology in public relations and has the potential to reveal *more* than just whether people think social media tools are playing a major role in their success. Network analysis can reveal who the central players really are in a professional network and guide professionals to the people who likely have the best understanding of a professional milieu.

2. Marketers and advertisers have embraced analytical software like Google Analytics as a means of “driving sales” and increasing stickiness on Web sites; however, virtually no public relations professional has used the Web monitoring software to its fullest potential. Since social media are about dialogic goals, knowing how to bring visitors to Web sites into a discussion, as well as understanding their potential to actually engage, is crucial. In the parlance of blog posters,

RTFA (Read the Fu Article) is used to mean, “If you haven’t read the story, keep your mouth shut.” The acronym is usually used to stifle debate; however, the underlying message is something that professional communicators should understand: Most people do not RTFA. Neither do they read long blog postings, background readings, and so on. Analytical and Web monitoring software has huge potential as a research tool to guide the development of effective networks, to focus professionals on issues of genuine interest, and to help professionals better understand the logic of Web navigation and maximize dialogic features on Web sites.

3. Social networking research has largely focused on studying outcomes and not strategies. On “What do visitors think?,” “What do professionals believe?,” “Do people like doing it?,” and so on, rather than on how to improve on each strategy, how to gauge the effectiveness of social networking tools, and how to integrate the tools into more traditional media mixes. Scholars need to shift their focus from studying outcomes and effects—we already know enough about traditional media from prior technological revolutions to make fairly accurate predictions—and instead focus our attention on understanding how social networking technologies can best serve public relations professionals. Our assumption should not be that all technologies are beneficial; indeed, many technologies have not been. E-mail, for example, has not improved the quality of our communication with others, only the speed and convenience (Regan, 2007). Our assumptions need to be that each technology is likely to interact with the other technologies in predictable ways and that we should focus on understanding the nature of those interactions rather than simply what isolated effects each technology has.

4. We need more criticism and more theory. Criticism *extends, refines, and clarifies theory and practice*. Much of the research in our journals focuses on quantitative approaches to examining media, and not enough of our time is

spent considering the strengths, limitations, and directions of our media and our discipline. Kent and Taylor (2007) called for more emphasis on theory and research in “Beyond ‘Excellence’ in International Public Relations. . . .” The same move is called for with social media. The idea that there is one right way to do anything in public relations is absurd and ignores the needs of most public relations professionals to solve their own *unique* problems in their own *unique* organizational environment. So many other mediated tools exist for reaching publics—electronic portfolios, interactive Web sites, real-time chats, Web cameras, journalists-only sites, and knowledge networks—that the obsessive focus on social media ignores their place in the overall practice of public relations.

## Directions in Social Media for Professionals

On the one hand, public relations professionals who have not embraced social media technologies wholeheartedly should understand that they are fine without them. Not every field needs a social media presence to succeed. On the other hand, the push for corporate social responsibility, sustainability, and dialogue (Kent, 2008b) is putting pressure on organizations to communicate more, and more openly. Nevertheless, “good organizations” are still capable of succeeding without constant communication with stakeholders and stake seekers.

The difference here, between embracing social media completely and understanding the role of social media, is a question of media literacy. Professionals need to understand the strengths and limitations of the media so that, when appropriate, they can use it.

However, when faced with a barrage of messages from professional associations about how professionals need to be twittering, blogging, and “embracing social media,” remaining a technological agnostic becomes very difficult (Taylor & Kent, 2009). All professionals need to understand new media and social media so that they

can make good decisions, but not all professionals actually need to *use* social media.

As suggested of scholars, they need to learn to ask better questions that will flesh out the boundaries of our new technologies rather than embracing them outright. As for the individuals who run our professional associations and practitioner journals, just because social media might be fun does not mean that they are essential. Consider these headlines from the front page of *PRSA Tactics* (February 2009): “Tweet and Low: Making the Most of 140 Characters,” “Direct and Accurate: Increasing Social Media Success,” as well as this recent advertisement from the PRSA and Ragan Communications e-mailed to members of the PRSA:

You’ve heard all the buzzwords. Twitter, Facebook, blogs and podcasting. You’ve also heard how these tools will transform the way you do your job. But did you know that social media could save your organization time and money? That’s because Web 2.0 tools are cheaper and easier than ever to use, and they can make your communications department run more efficiently and effectively. (February 9, 2009)

This sort of uncritical hype is inappropriate for our professional associations and part of the reason that many new practitioners see social media as essential.

A more important issue for public relations professionals is to appreciate the technician/manager split. Public relations professionals have historically started out as technicians, writing news releases, conducting research, and learning their craft from more experienced professionals. Once a professional has some experience, she or he will begin to look for more sophisticated work and try to move into a management position. Allowing the profession of public relations to be reduced to social media is an outgrowth of encroachment (Lauzen, 1991). By making the purview of public relations that of a toastmaster or cheerleader whose job is simply to talk up the

organization and chat up its stakeholders, public relations professionals grow increasingly impatient and they require a smaller skill set. Far from helping the profession, social media are turning back the clock to a time when we were mere “journalists in residence,” not strategic thinkers.

## Conclusion

Some will argue that this chapter was not sufficiently objective, straying too far into editorializing and criticism and not simply describing the boundaries of the social media phenomenon. However, as someone who used the previous handbook to teach both undergraduate and graduate public relations classes, and someone who read almost every chapter in the book, I believe that the most valuable chapters were those that offered a new perspective and provided direction to readers. Social media have an important role to play in public relations, but not the only role. Students, professionals, and scholars also need to appreciate the role of rhetoric, including narrative, identification, and persuasion research, the importance of understanding crisis and issues management, and the importance of strategic planning and thinking.

Public relations academics and professionals need to spend some time coming to terms with the role of technology in public relations. We can no longer sit back passively and let our profession be defined as hospitality. The dream of dialogic public relations and of convivial technologies (Christians, 1990; Pearson, 1989) like social media was for public relations professionals to be actively involved in setting the organizational agenda, researching, understanding, and building relationships with key stakeholders and publics. Ten years ago, no one believed that public relations would eventually become “being responsible for updating the organization’s Facebook page,” or “tweeting about the latest product.” Although this may sound trivial, social media *are* trivial. There are no research results or anecdotes about how an organization used social

media to engage its publics and develop new mission or vision statements; neither are there articles about how to use social media to create a place of genuine dialogue and peace. We currently study “tweets” and not publics. We count blog posts and not solutions to problems. The future of social media and public relations is a future of stepping past the technologies as marketing and advertising tools and embracing them as tools capable of solving problems and engaging publics in real-world issues.

## References

- Bahktin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bahney, A. (2006, May 25). Interns? No bloggers need apply. *New York Times* (Late Edition—Final), p. G1.
- Buber, M. (1970). *I and thou* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York: Scribner. (Original work published 1923)
- Bulldog Reporter. (2008). *Bulldog Reporter/Tekgroup International 2008 journalist survey on media relations practices: Executive summary*. Retrieved March 20, 2010, from [www.bulldogreporter.com](http://www.bulldogreporter.com) and [www.tekgroup.com](http://www.tekgroup.com)
- Burke, K. (1973). The rhetorical situation. In L. Thayer (Ed.), *Communication: Ethical and moral issues* (pp. 263–275). London: Gordon & Breach.
- Christians, C. G. (1990). Social responsibility: Ethics and new technologies. In R. L. Johannesen (Ed.), *Ethics in human communication* (pp. 265–278). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Clark, A. S. (2006, June 20). *Employers look at Facebook, too: Companies turn to online profiles to see what applicants are really like*. [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/06/20/eveningnews/main1734920.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/06/20/eveningnews/main1734920.shtml)
- Craig, D. A. (2007). Cases and commentaries. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 22(2/3), 215–228.
- Doerfel, M. L., & Taylor, M. (2004). Network dynamics of interorganizational cooperation: The Croatian civil society movement. *Communication Monographs*, 71(4), 373–394.
- Elmer, G. (1997). Spaces of surveillance: Indexicality and solicitation on the Internet. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 14(2), 182–191.

- Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360-1380.
- Han, G., & Zhang, A. (2009). Starbucks is forbidden in the Forbidden City: Blog, circuit of culture and informal public relations campaign in China. *Public Relations Review*, 35(4), 395-401.
- Kent, M. L. (2001). Managerial rhetoric and the metaphor of the World Wide Web. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 18(3), 359-375.
- Kent, M. L. (2008a). Critical analysis of blogging in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 34(1), 32-40.
- Kent, M. L. (2008b, November). *The dialogic turn in public relations: Toward a theory of dialogic practice*. Competitive paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Public Relations Division, San Diego, CA.
- Kent, M. L., Harrison, T. R., & Taylor, M. (2006). A critique of Internet polls as symbolic representation and pseudo-events. *Communication Studies*, 57(3), 299-315.
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (1998). Building dialogic relationships through the World Wide Web. *Public Relations Review*, 24(3), 321-334.
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 28(1), 21-37.
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (2007). Beyond "excellence" in international public relations research: An examination of generic theory in Bosnian public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 33(1), 10-20.
- Laing, R. D. (1969). *Self and others* (2nd ed.). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Lauzen, M. M. (1991). Imperialism and encroachment in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 17(3), 245-255.
- Levinson, P. (1997). *The soft edge: A natural history and future of the information revolution*. New York: Routledge.
- Lyons, C. (2009, July 24). Facebook can use your pictures for ads, no permission required. *Los Angeles Times*. from [opinion.latimes.com/opinionla/2009/07/facebook-can-use-your-pictures-for-ads-no-permission-required.html](http://opinion.latimes.com/opinionla/2009/07/facebook-can-use-your-pictures-for-ads-no-permission-required.html)
- McLuhan, M. (1999/1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Mitra, A. (1997). Diasporic Web sites: Ingroup and outgroup discourse. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 14(2), 158-181.
- Pearson, R. (1989). *A theory of public relations ethics*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio University, Athens.
- Regan, T. (2007, October 17). Maybe e-mail isn't such a great idea, after all. *Christian Science Monitor*. [www.csmonitor.com/2007/1017/p16s01-stct.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1017/p16s01-stct.html)
- Rogers, C. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 21(27), 95-103.
- Rubin, B. M. (2008, September 20). *Social-networking sites viewed by admissions officers: Survey shows some use Facebook, MySpace as another aspect to college application*. [archives.chicagotribune.com/2008/sep/20/local/chi-facebook-college-20-sep20](http://archives.chicagotribune.com/2008/sep/20/local/chi-facebook-college-20-sep20)
- Taylor, M., & Doerfel, M. L. (2003). Building inter-organizational relationships that build nations. *Human Communication Research*, 29(2), 153-181.
- Taylor, M., & Doerfel, M. L. (2005). Another dimension to explicating relationships: Network theory and method to measure inter-organizational linkages. *Public Relations Review*, 31(1), 121-129.
- Taylor, M., & Kent, M. L. (2008). *Anticipatory socialization in the use of social media in public relations: A content analysis of PRSA's public relations tactics*. Competitive paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), Chicago.
- Terilli, S. A., Driscoll, P. D., & Stacks, D. W. (2008). Business blogging in the fog of law: Traditional agency liability principles and less-than-traditional. *Public Relations Journal*, 2(2), 1-22.
- Warnick, B. (1998). Appearance or reality? Political parody on the Web in campaign '96. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 15(3), 306-324.
- Waters, R. D., Burnett, E., Lamm, A., & Lucas, J. (2009). Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How nonprofit organizations are using Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 35, 102-106.
- Wright, D. K., & Hinson, M. D. (2008). How blogs and social media are changing public relations and the way it is practiced. *Public Relations Journal*, 2(2), 1-21.
- Wright, D. K., & Hinson, M. D. (2009a). Examining how public relations practitioners actually are using social media. *Public Relations Journal*, 3(3), 1-33.
- Wright, D. K., & Hinson, M. D. (2009b). An updated look at the impact of social media on public relations practice. *Public Relations Journal*, 3(2), 1-27.