THE VALUE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PUSHING ACTIVIST ORGANIZATIONS SOCIAL AGENDAS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PR THEORY AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

New social media tools emerge regularly linking people to people, people to organizations, and organizations to organizations. Today, there are hundreds of social media tools and apps. The fields of advertising, marketing and public relations all make claims about social media as tools to further their field's strategic objectives. While corporate uses of social media for advertising, marketing, and public relations, are quite common, we know very little about how social cause groups use social media to interact with publics, media, donors, government officials, and corporations. Can the traditional models of social media in strategic communication, initially employed by profit seeking firms, be applicable or even desirable for activist groups? This essay explores a new model of social media that sells ideas rather than products or services.

Keywords: Activists, Social Media, Corporate Communication, Projek Dialog, Sina Weibo, Wechat, Public Relations.

INTRODUCTION

For many communication professionals, social media are "must have" communication tools. Social media, social networking platforms, and apps now number in the thousands and new ones emerge regularly linking people to others who share the same interests or views. Many organizations use social networking platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to communicate with stakeholders and publics but many other tools, apps and networking sites exist for smaller niche groups to interact.

Corporate uses of social media for advertising, marketing, and public relations help to support the bottom line and build economic value. However, economic value (capital) is not the only possible outcome for social media strategies. Social cause groups have started to use social media and social networking sites to reach publics, the mass media, donors, government officials, and corporations. These organizations, like firms, also seek a return on their investment but the desired return is not an economic one. Social cause groups seek a *social capital* return. Social capital is a resource that creates shared norms or values. Social capital is an outcome of the relationships in both the business sector and social cause sector (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Social media can facilitate the relationships that build social capital.

The first section of the paper briefly summarizes the use of social media in corporate communications. It compares how public relations, marketing and advertising approach social media. The second section of the paper explores the applicability of the corporate model of social media for the social cause sector. This section asks whether social media, often part of the communication mix for profit seeking firms, is applicable or even desirable for activist groups. Can social media tools that sell products also be used to sell pro social ideas, or as Wiebe (1951–1952) suggested, to sell brotherhood? The final section of the paper provides case studies of two social cause group's use of social media. The case studies show that new opportunities are made possible by the diffusion of social media into the social cause sphere. Social media can fill in gaps in societies and provide a space for relationship building and information sharing.

This essay explores social media as a communication tool. Additionally, it explores how social cause organizations are adapting social media practices developed in the corporate sector to create new communication models that sell ideas, not products or services. We view this alternative use of social media as one way to facilitate a "fully functioning society." Heath (2006) identified a series of premises of how organizations can contribute to a fully functioning society (FFS). Heath called on management teams to use their power responsibly, and be committed to making decisions that bring order and control to uncertainty. For Heath, an organization's legitimacy is tied to its capacity to meet or exceed the normative expectations of stakeholders. While all organizations pursue self-interest, Heath noted that an organization's interests are best served when it attempts to coordinate and manage risk. Communication plays a key role in FFS theory: two-way communication between parties creates trust, cooperation, and aligned interests. Ethical organizations need to have internal communication processes that allow for coordination of external effort. Finally, organizations should advocate for their interests because the wrangle of the marketplace of ideas benefits everyone in society.

That the Internet and social media have social and educational value beyond serving corporate interests has been a fundamental assumption of the World Wide Web since its inception. Kent (2001), in one of the earliest essays critical of the early corporate or managerial use of the Internet to advance business interests, pointed out the value of the Internet as a tool of education, to equalize power among the subaltern, to connect people with limited resources to information, to help maintain relationships among diaspora, etc. (p. 360). The use of social media by activists, then, represents a natural extension of a powerful communication tool. Although many of the marketing, advertising, and public relations uses of the Internet were developed to sell products rather than ideology, the application of such communication tools to building social capital and foster a fully functioning society need to be explored.

SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH BY PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATORS

Many fields of academic study and professional practice make a claim about social media being a valuable communication tool to their field. Kent, a public relations scholar, defined social media as "any interactive communication channel that allows for two-way interaction and feedback" (2010, p. 645). The two major features of social media are that they are relational and involve some kind of feedback or interaction. But as we examine the way that social media are used in more detail we find very different perspectives on what interaction and feedback mean to business communicators from different disciplinary fields.

Advertising Through Social Media

In advertising, the use of social media supports the bottom line. Advertising is commonly understood as paid, one-way, print or mediated communication, intended to encourage or per-suade consumers to purchase an organization's products or services. Historically, advertising services were provided to clients and revenue was generated based on sales and media buys.

Firms and advertising agencies use social media tools like Facebook and Twitter to call attention to a product or service. Digital and social media have become part of advertisers' strat-egies for influencing and encouraging purchasing decisions (Powers, Advincula, Austin, Graiko, & Snyder, 2012). As Powers et al. explained there are seven features of social media that are rel-evant to selling "products to consumers at all stages in the purchase process: . . . Being Always On, Everywhere, The Role of Emotion; Trust Networks; Mobile Devices in the Purchase Pro-cess; The Role of Brands; The Evolving Path to Purchase" (p. 480).

For advertisers, social media are a communication vehicle to carry ads. Using social me-dia is not much different than using television, radio, or print for bringing a product to the con-sumer. Being "Always On," or always exposed to social media content through web sites and social media, computers, cellular telephones, etc. makes social media an obvious tool for influ-encing purchasing decisions. Since digital technology means that shopping can take place from anywhere and "Everywhere," consumers receive messages that seek to influence their purchase decisions. Advertisers are interested in incorporating emotions so the "Role of Emotion" is to make consumers feel relaxed and empowered in their shopping. One of the ways that advertising is able to influence purchase decisions has been through an evolution of "Trust Networks." So-cial networking enables people to interact with a wider network of friends and acquaintances than would be possible through actual interpersonal interactions (Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton, 2011). As Powers et al. (2012) explain,

Social media are expanding the range of people we trust. It is not just about family, friends, and colleagues now (i.e., the relationships that have formed the basis for word-of-mouth recommendations for years). It's about a wider circle of people who already are—and still can be—connected via social media. (p. 481)

The influence of "Mobile Devices in the Purchase Process" and awareness process has increased, making social media tools increasingly important to advertisers who want the best venue to reach their audience. Synergistically, social media have influenced how brands interact with consumers. Consumers expect brands to be entertaining and interactive. Consumers now expect that they can interact with brands via their mobile devices and through online interactions. Today, consumers expect more from brands. "The Role of Brands" now includes providing in-formation, commentary, and encouraging "dialogue" or conversations about brands and consum-ers' individual and collective brand identities. Finally, "The Evolving Path to Purchase" that has been enabled via new technology and social media has altered the traditional awareness–purchases funnel. Today, consumers often come to, and interact with, brands in a different fash-ion than before the diffusion of the Internet and social media.

Hence, the goal of social media in advertising is primarily to sell products. The techniques used include persuasive strategies like storytelling, identification, word of mouth and other techniques, but the process of advertising does not allow for the development of individualized relationships with each consumer. Instead, advertising creates a belief that consumers will gain value from a purchase. Public relations, described next, takes a different approach to the use of social media based on its assumptions about stakeholders and publics.

Public Relations Aspirations for Social Media

The field of public relations has also claimed social media as a communication tool since the mid '90s. Research has suggested that organizations are using social media to build meaningful relationships with publics (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Trammell, & Keshelashvili, 2005). A review of the literature suggests that since 2010, the *Journal of Public Relations Research, Public Relations Journal,* and *Public Relations Review* have published nearly 50 articles about social media.

The public relations social media scholarship has focused primarily on uses of social media tools by professionals and key publics, rather than on using the tools to achieve agreed upon public relations ends. "Relationship building" is more amorphous than "selling more widgets," and more difficult to measure. As a result, two methods tend to dominate the research: content analysis of the social media tools and practitioner perceptions of social media. Content analysis research has examined the messages produced by practitioners (Muralidhara, Rasmussen, Patterson, & Shin, 2011; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Smith, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Xifra & Grau, 2010). Studies have also asked practitioners about their impressions of social media (Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011; Wright & Hinson, 2008, 2010). Wigley and Lewis (2012) reported that two social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook, have been studied the most by public relations scholars and professionals.

The research is not yet clear on how social media creates relationships. Scholars have generally agreed that organizations have failed to fully maximize the relational possibilities of online communication (McAllister-Spooner, 2009). Indeed, Waters and Jamal (2011) found that organizations are using Twitter as a one-way communication tool to broadcast one-way messages to publics. Little relationship building is created by these one-way communication messages.

Public relations practitioners also view social media as an inexpensive, direct way to reach publics. In theory, organizational members and consumers are believed to co-create social media content and reality, but in practice, one-way messaging has resulted in the use of social media tools in a similar fashion as advertising.

As a strategic messaging tool, Trammell (2006) noted that social media are valuable because they provide another avenue to reach the public. "Practitioners need no longer rely on media for transmitting those messages and reaching their public" (p. 402). There is also a belief public relations tactics "such as electronic pitching, podcasting, and blogging, [will] prevail over traditional news releases and media kits" (Turk, 2006, p. 31). Nevertheless, the historical use of social media by public relations professionals has been primarily one-way communication sharing many of the same assumptions as advertising.

Marketing Applications of Social Media

The field of marketing also has emphasized social media as a tool. Social media marketing is an extension of traditional online marketing but it focuses on people rather than products. In other words, instead of an organization sending out messages about a product, social media encourages individuals to distribute, repost, or even develop their own messages about products, services, or organizations. Social media marketing attempts to persuade consumers that product, brands and organizations share their own values and exist to make individual's lives better (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

There are many benefits of using social media to communicate about products, brands, and organizations. First, organizations can reduce the cost of interacting with consumers. When people voluntarily distribute an organization's messages to their friends, an amplifier effect is created. Thus, this type of direct marketing communication decreases the cost to reach consumers and the amount of staff time that would have been needed to reach so many people.

Second, social media allow organizations to capitalize on the already homogenous and established social networks of customers and target audiences. When messages and endorsements are shared via social media, the product, brand, or organization benefits from the credibility of the source of the message. However, at the same time, when organizations make mistakes or are responsible for poor behavior or harm, networks of friends, family, and colleagues share their complaints and concerns about the focal organization creating a greater awareness and perhaps even collective outrage about the firm. When stakeholders and publics share their complaints, concerns, and criticism via social media, people listen.

Major themes in the literature also suggest that like the advertising field, word of mouth, is an important topic of research (www.womma.org) and organizations like WOMMA (Word of Mouth Marketing Association) have emerged to help teach skills and advance marketing interests. Other marketing themes include analysis of different social media platforms, brand-consumer interactions, SMS and mobile phones, user generated content and audience segmentation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

There is a common optimistic theme in the three disciplines' treatment of social media's potential economic value. Although advertising, marketing and public relations researchers have yet to fully unlock the economic value of social media, there is still great hope that social media can contribute to an organization's bottom line.

At the same time, there is also awareness that the interactivity of social media and the power of social networks will create other opportunities and challenges for firms. Whelan, Moon, and Grant (2013) demonstrated how social media contribute to recent changes in corporate–society relations. They argued:

(i)   social media contribute to significant changes within corporate arenas of citizenship; (ii) social media contribute to significant changes within public arenas of citizenship; and that (iii) ICT [information and communication technology] corpora-

tions possess significant capacities with which to enable individual citizens to participate within public arenas of citizenship. (p. 785)

Whelan et al. (2013) point to the concept of a public sphere where citizens are more vocal, empowered and active. Firms need to understand that a new model of corporate-citizen relationships is emerging. This new public sphere places both the citizen and the organization on equal footing when it comes to speaking out about issues. Indeed, one implicit outcome of the recent changes in corporate–society relations is the growth of social cause groups. Whelan et al. (2013) are correct: Social media will contribute to significant changes within public arenas of citizenship (p. 785). Additionally, social media have the potential to create the relationships that create social capital. The next section explores how social cause groups can build on and extend corporate models of social media to better achieve their goals.

APPLYING AND EXTENDING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

The literature cited above suggests that there is a clear rationale for corporations to use social media in their different communication strategies of advertising, marketing and public relations. The corporate model suggests that there are tangible economic benefits for incorporating social media into a corporation's communication strategy. Yet, corporations are not alone in seeing the value of social media. Social activists also see great potential in social media for advocacy. Social cause groups, also known as "not-for-profit" and "third sector" groups are now using social media to reach publics, media, donors, government officials, and corporations. Can tools developed to sell products be used to sell brotherhood (Weibe, 1951–1952) or contribute to what Heath (2006) termed, a fully functioning society? The answer appears to be yes. There are four different ways that social activists are using social media that reflect and extend corporate use of the tools to help improve society. Social media can be used to build awareness of social issues, amplify pro social messages, create relationships, and motivate pro social behaviors that ultimately benefit society.

Build Awareness

Advertising, marketing and public relations practitioners recognize the value of social media in building awareness. Increasing how many people know about an organization, its product or services, and its reputation is a dominant use of social media in the corporate sector. Social activists also need to build awareness about an issue, problem, or situation. They have limited organizational resources devoted to the three communication areas (advertising, marketing and public relations) and thus look for cost effective ways to build awareness. Facebook groups, Facebook Walls, Twitter, and YouTube can build awareness of an issue or an organization. Other social media such as Linkedin, RSS feeds, and blogs can also build awareness about topics of interest to social cause groups.

Amplify Messages

Social media are used by firms to amplify key messages. Communicating through traditional media such as print, television, and radio incurs costs. Even public relations communication, a form of earned media, incurs some costs as salaries and materials need to be created be-

fore dissemination. Social media, on the other hand, reduce the cost of disseminating messages for several reasons. First, social media are generally low cost platforms for disseminating messages. Firms do not have to buy space. Content can be easily repurposed. Information from a news release can be reformatted quickly for a Facebook page or shortened to a tweet. Second, social media is about user generated content. Audiences can take social media tactics and modify them in ways that make them more interesting or personalized for a social group. Firms can create contests for creative use of brands and messages. Finally, social media messages are exponential in reach because of social networks. When one person forwards or comments on something, others join in. This amplifies the reach of the communication.

Social cause groups also need to amplify the reach of their messages from the current true believers to larger sections of the public. When a person personally shares information about an important social cause such as animal welfare or climate change, the message carries more credibility. Social media messages can be constructed in a way that encourages people to share them with others in their social network. Indeed, many social media platforms and apps have multiple options for users to share content via email, twitter, Facebook or other social media platforms.

Create Relationships

Corporate advertising, marketing and public relations practitioners all claim that their communication tactics build relationships with the target public. Social cause activists also seek to build relationships with publics including citizens, media, politicians, and firms. Typical corporate relationship building tactics in advertising, marketing and public relations might include economic incentives such as loyalty programs, discounts or coupons. Social cause groups do not have economic relationships with publics, so instead must build relationships on other terms.

Social cause groups create relationships through identification and a sense of shared meaning and purpose. For instance, social cause groups create identification and a sense of belonging to members through shared purpose. Social cause groups devote communication resources to articulating shared goals. They also build relationships through creating a sense of interdependence with members or the public in general. Communications from social cause groups often explain that they cannot achieve their higher purpose goals without support from their members. For profit organizations rarely openly acknowledge their dependency on publics. Finally, social cause groups use social media to show progress toward a goal. People like to know that they are contributing to something larger than themselves. Informational graphics in the form of thermometers and piggy banks are used to show progress and motivate behaviors.

Motivate Behaviors

The final way that social media can be used by social cause groups is to find innovative tactics to change or modify behaviors. Behavior change is generally the goal of advertising, marketing and public relations communication. In the social cause sector, behavior change or maintenance is also a goal. Social cause groups need people to activate to support their organization's goals. Social cause groups need people to make lifestyle changes, donate money, contact their elected representatives, attend meetings, share information and motivate others to join the cause. In the social cause sector, sometimes the desired behavior change is a personal change

such as committing to recycling, refraining from eating meat, being kind to others, or conserving fuel. Giving money or time is also a personal component of social activists. In other situations, social activist groups seek to accomplish a larger societal goal that involves members engaging in more public behaviors such as attending rallies or contacting an elected official.

Overall, there is a lot of overlap in how firms and social activists use social media. Both sectors seek to build awareness, amplify messages, build relationships and motivate behaviors. Yet, social cause activists have a greater imperative to use social media to build relationships because of its reach, cost effectiveness, and high involvement of users. They can be creative in their use of social media because they do not have the same bottom line issues.

CASE STUDIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN ACTIVISM

This section provides two case studies of how social cause activists are using social media to accomplish goals that contribute to society. The examples below show how social media can contribute to a fully functioning society (Heath, 2006). Each case study shows innovative use of common social media and then shows how the groups have built on the foundation of the social media for greater societal impact. In both cases, social media is filling a gap in society.

Projek Dialog: Building Inter-ethnic and Intra-ethnic Relations in Malaysia

Malaysia is considered by many to be a model Southeast Asian democratic Muslim-majority country. Yet, there are significant rifts in the ethnic and, more recently, the religious make-up of the country. The ethnic rifts date to colonial days, but had their modern expression in the 1969 Malay-Chinese race riots and subsequent government policies such as the New Economic Policy that positively discriminated in favor of the Malay majority and restricted Chinese, Indian and other ethnic groups' access to higher education, government jobs and business opportunities. While more than 40 years have passed since the 1969 race riots, the fear of riots is frequently noted as a likely consequence of "hot-headed" Malaysians discussing such a sensitive issue. This lack of discussion has entrenched policies that favor Malays. The affirmative action policies for the majority ethnic Malays—known as bumiputera—are now considered a right that should never be questioned, much less discussed, by other ethnic groups.

If Malaysia had a vibrant media sector or the civil society sector, then the actions of the conservative groups to cut-off any religious debate would be less significant or even less successful. However, Malaysia has neither. The mainstream print, radio and TV media is largely compliant with government messages that implicitly state that these issues should not be discussed, one key reason being that most of the media is directly or indirectly operated by the parties that make up the ruling coalition. The government closely controls access to licenses for media organizations to ensure that no independent voices emerge in the traditional media space.

The consequence of government action against independent media and civil society groups is a lack of moderate voices that can counter-balance the growing and largely unrestrained conservative voices. Online platforms and social media hold great promise to create spaces for moderate voices to emerge. The Projek Dialog (PD) platform was launched in May 2012 (www.projekdialog.com). It provides thoughtful, respectful discussions of interfaith issues

in Malaysia. The social media platform includes articles written by well-respected social leaders and it fills a void in the country. People can read about religious issues, post comments, and engage in dialogue with others. The site posts most of its stories in Bahasa, the local language, so that Malays can be exposed to messages that are not in the local language media.

Social media platforms require constant attention, updating and innovation. Projek Dialog has a Facebook page that attracts young people to its content. PD buys ads to drive traffic to the site and it uses Twitter and YouTube to share content. Over the course of the project, Projek Dialog continued its consistent growth by adding new aspects to its outreach: short video tutorials, podcasts focused on topics discussing religion. There was also an amplifier effect to Projek Dialog, as the media reported stories and invited contributors to talk about Malaysian religious issues.

The social media platform includes short video tutorials that summarize complex issues such as Islamic feminism, the secular predisposition of the Malaysian constitution, the importance of interfaith dialogue, human rights and liberation theology. There are also podcasts, Dialog Jalanan (or *Street Dialog*), that tackle sensitive topics. The podcasts are popular because they demonstrated a level of critical and open discussion about sensitive topics. Topics included the decline of Malay folk culture, demonization of Shia Muslims, importance of dialogue, and the rising fear of Christians in Malaysia. A recent contest encouraged Malaysian youth to create a game to build interethnic awareness. In this case study, we see that social media are facilitating information sharing and interactive relationships that can help build understanding in Malaysia. Social media provide a platform for information sharing and interaction that are missing from society. Projek Dialog fills a gap in Malaysian society for communicating about religious topics. The next case study also shows how social media can further communication in a society.

Sina Weibo and WeChat: Creating Spaces for Public Discussions

In China, the government controls all traditional media outlets including newspapers, television and radio stations. Independent media are not yet possible and citizens have limited information options for learning about their community, the nation, and the world. The Chinese government also tightly controls freedom of expression, especially public discussions about topics of the environment, corruption, health, the legal system, and the economy. In the past, there were very few options for Chinese citizens to share information and share opinions.

Social media like Facebook emerged as a path to create more conversations in China; however the Chinese government started blocking Facebook in spring 2009. That same year, SINA Corporation launched Sina Weibo, a Chinese microblogging (weibo) website. Sina Weibo incorporates aspects of both Twitter and Facebook allowing users to send and receive information, music, links to videos, and photos. Messages take on a public dimension with people choosing to follow others. Posters may not know all of the people who receive their messages so people are generally cautious about what they say on the platform. Sina Weibo does have some censorship including blacklisted words and a manual checking system that deletes posts that are considered inappropriate (usually charges of corruption against government, information that is considered national security, and anything that challenges the government's authority). However,

in a country where discussions about the topics of the day are generally not allowed, Sina Weibo provides a venue for people to share public information and opinion.

Another Chinese social media platform, WeChat, is a mobile text and voice messaging communication service. Tencent released WeChat in January 2011. The service is more of a private way for people to chat with those they have identified as friends. There are many more personal settings for chats through WeChat. While there is also the possibility of censorship or deleting, reports suggest that WeChat does not have the same level of surveillance as Sina Weibo. Initially, Chinese social activists had used Sina Weibo for pushing out information and stimulating debate. However, since 2014, it appears that activists have begun moving their advocacy to WeChat. The Chinese public appears to agree. Data from 2013 suggest that WeChat is growing while SinaWebo is declining. Despite these limitations, Sina Weibo and WeChat provide some of the only platforms for Chinese citizens to learn about events and participate in conversations about topics that affect their lives, and provide a space for discussion that is missing in Chinese society.

CONCLUSIONS

As noted previously, the discussions about social media among for profit organizations in marketing, advertising, and public relations typically revolve around using the tools to promote corporate interests, rather than serving the needs of a fully functioning society. Forgotten in many of the discussions about social media are the tens of thousands of civil society organizations that work to make the world a better place.

This article examined social media as both a business communication tool and a pro social tool to help build better societies. The case studies show that social cause groups are adapting social media practices developed in the corporate sector. We believe that a new model of social media is emerging. This new model creates relationships and those relationships have the potential to create social capital. In the two case studies presented here, social media sell ideas, not products or services. Social cause groups are indeed using social media to create awareness, amplify messages, build relationships, and motivate behaviors. Researchers should also be cautious, however, of groups that seek to break down social capital and use social media to achieve their own ends. Future research should study the effectiveness of social cause group's use of social media and build a conceptual model of social media use to build social capital.

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