Research in Brief

Social media and organizational visibility: A sample of Fortune 500 corporations

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 19 October 2013
Received in revised form 4 April 2014
Accepted 15 April 2014

Keywords:
Social media visibility
Corporate social responsibility
Intermedia agenda-setting
Organizational social media use

A B S T R A C T

This study explores the factors that drive organizational social media visibility. Using a sample of Fortune 500 companies and influential non-profit organizations, findings reveal that mainstream media coverage significantly affects social media visibility whereas organizations’ social media use patterns have limited impact on overall organizational visibility. Implications for both the practice of public relations and further theorizing about social media studies are discussed.

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1. The role of social media in organizational visibility: a sample of the Fortune 500

Scholars have heralded the Internet, and more recently social media, as presenting nearly limitless opportunities for organizations to build relationships with their publics (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008). Nevertheless, studies of new technology in public relations continue to replicate previous studies and primarily draw conclusions or make recommendations based on content analyses and usability studies.

There is also a growing sense among many communication professionals that the Internet is unpredictable and unknowable, lacking any defining features that allow practitioners to do more with the tools. However, issues management and technology scholars from the past show us that well-informed professionals and scholars are able to see years, often decades, into the future (cf., Brand, 1988).

Some in public relations have called for more sophisticated technology studies that do more than simply examine social media sites and organizational websites, or survey journalists and practitioners on their use of social media. This study is an attempt to move in that direction, combining multiple methods and comprehensively assessing the impact of factors related to organizational visibility on social media.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.04.006
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2. What is visibility?

Visibility refers to the public presence of an individual or organization in the media, and has an influence on organizational perceptions in times of crisis, buying preferences, and trust. Social media visibility refers to how frequently social media users discuss an individual, organization, or related issue. Those organizations with strong media or brand presence are more on the mind of individuals and publics, as are the organizations that individuals interact with on a daily basis, leading to higher levels of organizational trust, greater brand or product loyalty, increased sales, etc. A fairly common assumption in public relations is that social media are inherently useful and that everyone should be using them. Scholars and practitioners also tend to offer general social media use tips, disregarding the unique mission and goals of individual organizations or businesses.

Public relations scholars have mainly examined organizations’ use of social media from a dialogic relationship building perspective (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011). However, given the fact that two-thirds of the world’s Internet population reported having visited a social media site, and the time spent on sites has continued to grow (cf., pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Technology-and-social-networks.aspx), Social media visibility is a valuable concept for public relations professionals to understand.

Additionally, studies have found that social media visibility is valuable for enhancing an organization’s overall media visibility. As organizations become more visible among social media users and journalists, public relations practitioners are contacted more by journalists, who follow organizations’ social media sites (Taylor, 2009). Consequently, a new kind of media engagement has emerged that is different from the traditional model of practitioners seeking out journalists.

This article explores the factors that influence organizations’ social media visibility. Unlike the traditional media where powerful organizations and media gatekeepers often set the agenda of public discourse, social media are seen as a tool to allow organizations of all sizes to engage stakeholders and publics directly and involve citizens and journalists on topics of organizational importance. However, given the enormous number of organizations using social media, little is known about how organizations can emerge from the crowd and obtain high levels of visibility.

3. Methods

The study examined traditional forms of organizational visibility in the mass media by industry type (corporate vs. nonprofit), measured using scores from media visibility rating services, as well as internal and external factors related to organizational visibility such as coverage of organizational Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities. The study also compared organizational traditional (mass media) visibility to organizational social media visibility.

The original study contained one research question and five hypotheses. However, given the limited space, we report only the results of two hypotheses. H1: The amount of mainstream media coverage involving an organization significantly correlates with the organization’s social media visibility. And H2: Organizations that provide feedback to publics on social media enjoy a higher level of social media visibility. The dependent variable was social media visibility, and the independent variables included the amount of mainstream media coverage and organizations’ social media use patterns.

One hundred organizations mainstream media coverage and organizational social media use were examined. Fifty organizations were selected at random from Fortune Magazine’s list of Fortune 500 organizations, and fifty nonprofit organizations were selected at random from Craig VanKorlaar’s Top Nonprofits websites (Topnonprofits.com/Lists/Best-Nonprofits-On-The-Web). Data were also gathered from Lexis/Nexis, ranking information from How Sociable (a data mining service that tracks the visibility of brands in 32 different social media), and content analysis data of organizations’ social media use.

4. Results

Given the ubiquitous assumption among public relations professionals and scholars that social media are inherently valuable to organizations, the results are instructive: H1 (the amount of mainstream media coverage involving an organization significantly correlates with the organization’s social media visibility) was supported while H2 (organizations that provide feedback to publics on social media enjoy a higher level of social media visibility) was rejected.

Mainstream media coverage is a powerful predictor of organizations’ social media visibility. However, providing feedback to customers/members and stakeholders/stakeholders via social media does not have a significant influence on organizational visibility. In other words, what raises an organization’s profile or visibility in cyberspace is not its level of responsiveness to its social media publics. In general, among sampled organizations, social media are used as one-way messaging tools, rather than as relationship building tools.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Many scholars make the assumption that social media are both necessary and valuable (cf., Taylor & Kent, 2010). This study actually shows that social media can play a role in raising organizational visibility, but play a much smaller role than assumed by many. This study also shows that achieving high levels of organizational visibility involves more than just copious social media use. The popularity of organizations in social media is also related to the overall popularity of an organization in the mainstream media. Organization that want to achieve high levels of social media visibility need to also
direct their attention to achieving recognition or visibility in the mainstream mass media, as well as focusing their messaging on activities related to core organizational activities and CSR (corporate social responsibility).

Perhaps the take-way message from this study is that the traditional media are not dead. Mainstream media coverage is still a powerful predictor of organizational social media visibility and public relations professionals still need to boost, hone, and refine their media relations skills. The regular news release sent to print and broadcast journalists is still a vital tool for attracting media attention and raising organizational visibility – and giving people on social media something to talk about. Indeed, topics of discussion among visitors to organizational social media sites are often related to events reported or talked about in the mainstream media, or because of strategic CSR initiatives enacted by organizations.

A final point worth noting is that among the organizations examined here (Fortune 500 corporations and large activist organizations), most barely use their social media to engage publics. The dominant mode of social media use is still a one-way, sender to receiver model, or an asymmetrical, “information provider,” role that uses social media simply for sales or marketing purposes. Although the “dialogic potential” of social media has been a consistent theme in public relations scholarship for more than a decade, no major organization has yet embraced the possibilities of a truly relational approach in social media.

References


