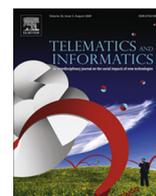




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Leading in the digital age: A study of how social media are transforming the work of communication professionals



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ABSTRACT

This study examined: (1) how communication professionals' understanding of social media's strategic role was associated with their active social media use, and (2) how strategic social media management was related to communication professionals' leadership behaviors. Analysis of an online survey from a national sample of communication professionals ($n = 461$) revealed the following. First, social media use was closely related to participants' leadership behaviors. Second, years of experience, organizational type and size, size of communication staff, and professionals' primary role as managers significantly impacted the social media use in communication-related work. Finally, communication professionals' strategic vision about social media predicted their social media use.

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1. Introduction

Drastically evolving technology has altered how we perceive organizational leadership abilities and behaviors (Avolio et al., 2014). Unfortunately, the impact of the digital technology (e.g., social media) on leadership still remains at a nascent stage (DiStaso et al., 2011; Hoch and Kozlowski, 2014). This deficiency let many scholars stress that organizational leaders must consider the impact of new media adoption on an organization's effectiveness and operation. In the context of communication, an important yet under-examined question lies in how to integrate social media into strategic communication management (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). To bridge these gaps, this study examines communication professionals' perceptions of social media's strategic role, social media use (i.e., different media tools and their use in different components of communication) in their communication-related work, and the link between their social media use and leadership behaviors. This study also investigates how social media use is affected by communication professionals' years of experience, organizational type and size, size of communication staff, and the primary role (managers vs. front-line social media professionals) that communication professionals enact in their work.

2. Literature review

2.1. Strategic management and social media use among professionals

In communication discipline, *strategic communication* often refers to the purposeful communication aimed at advancing the mission of an organization (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 4). Such conceptualization is much applicable to a wide range of

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communication professionals' activities aimed to fulfill organizational objectives (e.g., relationship cultivation, issues management, and reputation management). The extensive use of social media across different industry sectors has given rise to a technically mediated landscape and a “people-driven” economy (Qualman, 2009, p. xvii). In charge of strategic communication management (Hallahan et al., 2007), communication professionals thus encounter a critical challenge of how to strategically use social media and adapt to this “people-driven” economy to help an organization achieve its goals.

Recent research on social media and organizational leadership in business studies has pointed out some promising directions for scholars to address this challenge. A survey of nearly 3500 business executives and managers from around the world¹ found that social media activities can make two distinctive contributions to leadership—“strategic insight and strategic execution” (Kiron et al., 2012, p. 57). Specifically, social media tools sharpened these leaders' vision and helped them formulate strategies to accomplish their organizations' business goals. To extend the impact of social media on leadership behaviors to communication profession, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1. Communication professionals' knowledge about social media's strategic role in communication management is positively related to the likelihood of their use of various social media tools (H1a) and the likelihood of their social media use for various communication components/functions (H1b).

2.2. Social media use and communication leadership

There has been a limited amount of research linking communication leadership to social media. Previous research has primarily studied how organizations and stakeholders used social media (Paek et al., 2013). Communication managers who frequently used blogs had a higher level of expert power and prestige power than those who infrequently managed blogs (Porter et al., 2007). Influential leaders were more likely to acknowledge the value of social media, and social media use enhanced communication professionals' abilities to communicate with various audiences interactively (Levenshus, 2010; Park and Reber, 2008). This line of research has slowly advanced from *outlining the challenges* facing communication professionals to *an emerging focus* on linking their use of social media with strategic management issues. For example, communication leadership scholars (Meng et al., 2012) have stressed the urgency to study the impact of social media use on specific leadership tasks for most communication professionals such as issues management and crisis communication.

2.3. Impact of technology on leadership

The prevalence of digital technologies has prompted organizations to “creating comprehensive strategies in [social media] to support their goals” (Dutta, 2010, p. 2). Dutta (2010) stressed that leaders adopt social media to engage with both internal and external audiences to “strengthen and leverage relationships” (p. 3). Linking social media adoption and leadership contributes to positive organizational outcomes such as increased employee trust, efficiency among virtual teams, higher level of employee participation, efficient knowledge sharing, and improved relationships with external stakeholders (Meng and Berger, 2013; Norris and Porter, 2011).

Leaders in the technologically mediated landscape have been conceptualized as virtual leaders (Avolio et al., 2010). These virtual leaders use digital technologies to induce changes in attitudes and behaviors of individuals, groups, or organizations (Avolio et al., 2010, p. 617). In a global survey of leaders from 115 countries, participating leaders used social media to improve their relationships with customers by monitoring online communities, creating and supporting virtual communities, and facilitating customer engagement (Kiron et al., 2012).

Examining the impact of social media use on communication professionals' leadership behaviors thus provides insight on how they can cast social influence among stakeholders (Ingerson and Bruce, 2013). Applying the concept of virtual leaders who are in charge of social media management (Avolio et al., 2010), strategically managed social media programs can allow communication professionals to develop better relationships with key stakeholders (e.g., consumers, employees, government), foster participation from various stakeholders to creatively solve problems, create strategic visions, and help program execution (Meng and Berger, 2013). We hereby suggest the following hypotheses:

H2. The use of social media platforms is positively associated with communication professionals' perceived leadership behaviors.

H3. Social media use in various communication components is positively associated with communication professionals' perceived leadership behaviors.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection

Data were collected through an online survey of communication professionals at U.S.-based corporations, non-profit organizations, and other organizations (e.g., start-ups). To ensure a representative range of organizations, we used some

¹ MIT Sloan Management Review conducted the survey in collaboration with Deloitte.

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