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Use of social media for corporate communications by research-funding organisations in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This research sought to explore the implications of social media for organisations' business functions, to help inform organisational approaches to challenges presented by social media. UK-based research-funding bodies provided the focus of this study, and a literature review, quantitative survey and focus groups involving relevant communications professionals were undertaken. Findings show that most UK-based research-funding organisations have adopted social media channels for corporate communications, drawing chiefly on microblogging, video-sharing and social networking sites. Building a dialogue with stakeholders is a prime reason for using social channels, yet one-way 'broadcasting' of information is widespread. Web, media or communications/marketing teams generally manage social media channels. A minority of organisations have policies governing social media use by staff. Social media performance is mainly measured using quantitative metrics.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Justification and aims

Social media allow public relations practitioners – whose discipline is based on building relationships – to engage their publics in conversation. Indeed, the speed and ubiquity of social media have rendered public relations 'a constant dialogue between an organisation and its audience' (Evans, Twomey, & Talan, 2011). Public relations professionals have largely embraced social media: 93% of them spend part of their average working day on aspects of social media (Wright & Hinson, 2009). However, the proliferation of social media platforms places increasing strain on organisational communications resources.

Considerable research into corporate social media use has focused on a single platform (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010) or on its use to meet a specific business aim (Howe, 2010). Minimal research could be identified that investigated: the variety of organisational issues that communications professionals must address in order to make the most effective use of social channels; how these issues are handled; or the use of social media specifically by research-funding organisations. The aim of this research, therefore, was to investigate how research-funding organisations use social media to enhance communications, encompassing the extent and nature of use, motivations, resource allocation, performance measurement, and governance.

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2. Methodology

A literature review was conducted, and a survey of 111 communications professionals employed by research-funding organisations was undertaken. 41% of respondents hailed from charitable trusts or foundations, while other types of charity or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) represented 18% of responses. Research councils produced 15% and other government-funded bodies fielded 13% of responses. The remainder were spread largely between corporations or corporate foundations and unspecified organisations. 85% were from the UK and 7% from the US. The remainder came from a total of five European countries. Nearly half of all respondents worked in large organisations (250+ employees). One-fifth each were based in medium-sized and small organisations (50–249 and 10–49 employees respectively), and 13% were based in micro-organisations (1–9 employees). Media relations staff provided 32% of responses. 22% of respondents were based in a marketing or external communications team, while web teams and grants teams each fielded 12% of respondents. The remainder, where specified, were spread between events, policy, IT, internal communications, research, public engagement and campaigns teams. Over half of all respondents were members of a team, one-third had managerial responsibility and 9% of respondents were senior management. The remaining 5% included a person in a team of one, a volunteer and a trustee. Further context to survey responses was provided by two focus groups, involving a selection of survey respondents.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Extent of use of social media

Three-quarters of respondents worked in organisations using social media for corporate purposes. This high level of adoption is in line with the practices and attitudes of European public relations professionals: 97% use social media professionally (EACD and the University of St. Gallen, 2011). Government organisations led in using social media for communications purposes (all government-funded bodies and 82% of research councils). This is largely explained by the previous UK administration's advocacy of social media to increase transparency and facilitate dialogue with stakeholders. Government use of technology has developed in tandem with technology itself, resulting in social media guidance for government departments (Williams, 2009).

Charities and NGOs were heavy users of social media, at 95%, and ran accounts on several channels. This reflects Muralidharan, Rasmussen, Patterson, and Shin (2011) and Barnes (2010) respectively. The attractiveness of social media to charities, which generally operate on tight budgets, is unsurprising given that most platforms are free to use. Social media also support the increasing professionalism of the charitable economy, in which donors expect information to connect them with beneficiaries and demonstrate 'impact'. Indeed the only full-time position dedicated to social media in this survey was within a charity. Large organisations also exploited social media heavily (94%), which supports Curtis et al. (2010).

3.2. Motivation for using social media

Three principal reasons were expressed for venturing into social media: general promotion (87%); to create a dialogue or sense of community (86%); and to reach a larger audience (81%). Social media was used less for 'listening': the most popular means of monitoring organisational mentions in social channels–Twitter–was used by fewer than two-thirds (63%) of respondents, blogs by 49%, social networking sites by 33%, comments on third-party websites by 26% and video-sharing platforms by 25%. Only 18% used social media for internal communications, and only 4% had become active in social media as a result of a negative incident in this arena.

Despite the widespread desire to create a dialogue, several respondents noted that their organisations – particularly those funded by the government – 'broadcast' information instead of conversing. This corroborates findings about European Fortune 100 companies' Twitter behaviour (Burson-Marsteller, 2010). However, the charity sector represented in this study actively sought two-way interaction through social media. One of the factors potentially at play here is gender difference in communication behaviour: women – who represented 74% of respondents to this survey – tend to use the internet to interact, whereas men tend to use it more to broadcast information (Naaman, Boase, & Lai, 2010; Warwick, in press).

The charity sector used social media prolifically: charitable trusts (95%) and other types of charity or NGO (92%) used social media the most for general promotion. Small organisations also made generous use of social media: for general promotion; to reach a larger organisation; and to create a dialogue or sense of community (91% in each case). Government-funded and large organisations made particular use of social channels for faster paced communications (71% and 63% respectively) and to change their image (43% and 46% respectively).

Over one-fifth of survey respondents did not use social media for communications purposes. The most common reasons by far were lack of time, perceived irrelevance to the organisation's audience(s) and lack of skills. This dearth of knowledge and confidence has been recognised by the profession: organisations are increasingly offering staff social media training (Handley, 2010).