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Reconsidering the public relations professional–blogger relationship: A coorientation study

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ABSTRACT

Although considerable attention has been placed on the journalist/public relations professional relationship, scholars have yet to fully investigate the blogger/public relations professional relationship. This coorientation study compares bloggers' attitudes toward the quality of their relationship with public relations professionals with the public relations professionals' attitudes about this relationship. Findings indicate that public relations professionals and bloggers have markedly different views on the relationship, most notably when it comes to trust in and satisfaction with each other. In order to reduce any confusion that may arise between these parties, it is argued that additional dialog about each party's respective intentions is needed and added transparency in this communication may give the relationship a stronger ethical grounding.

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1. Introduction

Although organizations have embraced social media to communicate directly with audiences, it is highly unlikely that blogs and other social networking sites will ever enable organizations to completely bypass third-party media filters (Avery, Lariscy, & Sweetser, 2010). Public relations professionals still seek coverage from journalists and, now bloggers, to draw attention to the issues that organizations deem critical and to deliver important company messages to the general public. Bloggers play an influential role in society by breaking news, discussing news, and being cited in the traditional media, which makes this a critical stakeholder group for public relations professionals to work with (Messner & DiStaso, 2008). Blogs also typically appear at the top of search results and can drive discussion across many corners of the Internet.

The first blogs appeared in the late 1990s, and since then, blogging has become a popular online communication activity (Wortham, 2007). A widely-cited report indicated that there were more than 181 million blogs around the world at the end of 2011, up from 36 million in 2006 (Nielsen, 2012). This number has no doubt grown since then. In light of these developments, considerable commentary has appeared in the professional literature about how organizations should manage relationships with third-party bloggers (e.g., Cherenson, 2009; Kim, 2012; Solis, 2008). Yet despite this professional interest, the scholarly literature currently lacks a relational or behavioral approach that fully addresses the intricacies of interactions between public relations professionals and bloggers (Smith, 2011). Furthermore, the professional and scholarly literatures remain muddled about the specific roles that external bloggers can play in corporate message building in today's digital age and how public relations professionals should interact with bloggers.

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One way to solve this general gap in the literature is to look at both parties in the organization–blogger relationship and how they view relationships with each other. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the organization–blogger relationship (OPR) using the coorientation framework. This perspective considers the shared perceptions and the gaps in perceptions between an organization and its stakeholders. Understanding these multiple perspectives about relationships through the lens of coorientation theory facilitates a thorough diagnosis of the OPR and can help experts prescribe actions to improve the quality of that relationship from the perspective of both parties (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2009). Such a coorientation study is also important because scholars have done little to explicate how both parties perceive the relationship between bloggers and public relations professionals.

2. Literature review

Blogs or "web logs" have five primary qualities: They appear in reverse chronological order, are frequently updated, include personal journal material or a conversational voice, offer the ability for readers to add comments, and include hyperlinks (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Questions about personalizing pitches to bloggers, using appropriate social media channels, and packaging information in small, digestible forms for bloggers tend to dominate conversations on blogger relations (Solis, 2008). The professional literature also shows interest in identifying important bloggers for organizations to work with, establishing relationships with these bloggers, and how to maintain these relationships in an ethical manner over time.

2.1. Coorientation theory

Well-established in the interpersonal communication literature, the coorientational model for interpersonal communication suggests that parties in a relationship continuously influence each other through information exchange and interaction (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973). This model is premised upon the idea that an individual acting in a small social system will base their behavior on their own construction and perceptions of the world and how they perceive others to think (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973). Furthermore, these social systems function based on inter-cognitive relations, occasionally without people actually being aware of these relations. When disagreement exists between what someone perceives about his or her relationship with another person, this creates a tension that may cause the person to take corrective action. The public relations literature derives its coorientational view on various publics in a consensual framework from McLeod and Chaffee's model (Avery et al., 2010; Broom, 1977).

In the public relations context, if an organization perceives problems or disagreement about its relationship with key stakeholders (such as the news media or bloggers), then the agency or organization will seek to remedy this. Put another way, "coorientation means that two or more . . . parties have an awareness of how they are actually perceived by others [and] not just a guess about how what they think the other group or public thinks about them" (Taylor & Kent, 2006, p. 353). Measuring gaps in the perceptions of the relationship between an organization and its stakeholders can be used in planning communication activities that may correct organization–public relationship problems (Broom, 1977). Coorientation research in public relations is traditionally asymmetrical and often focused on a single party in organization–public relationships (Kelly, Thompson, & Waters, 2006; Waters, 2009). Like Seltzer and Mitrook (2009) and Kelly et al. (2006), this study advances coorientation theory by moving beyond a single stakeholder group's perspective of the relationship. In particular, we extend the literature by looking at a group that scholars have typically overlooked in the coorientation literature, third-party bloggers.

Broom (1977) and Broom and Dozier (1990) adapted the coorientation model and included three basic variables to describe the nature of the relationship between parties: Agreement (the extent to which two parties have the same views on a given topic); accuracy (the extent to which one party's estimate of a given topic matches what the other party actually thinks about the topic), and understanding (the extent to which both parties hold similar definitions or perceptions of a topic). However, according to Kelly et al. (2006) the coorientation model consists of four elements: The organization's views on an issue, the public's views on an issue, the organization's estimate of the public's perspective, and the public's estimate of the organization's views.

Similarly, four important perspectives need to be considered when examining OPR quality via the coorientation approach (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2009). These perspectives include the organization's views on the relationship, the public's view on the relationship, the organization's "meta-perspective" on the relationship, and the public's meta-perspective on the relationship. This coorientation model captures how each party views the relationship and how each party perceives the other's views. By considering each of these four perspectives, scholars are able to see more of the whole picture of the organization–public relationship (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2009). To assess these perspectives, difference scores or "D-scores" may be used to calculate the differences between two parties' ratings for agreement and perceived agreement (Broom & Dozier, 1990). This measurement system has been employed and validated by Kelly et al. (2006), Seltzer and Mitrook (2009), and Waters (2009).

Coorientation frames several studies that are relevant to this discussion. A multi-condition online experiment conducted by Meyer, Marchionni and Thorson (2010) found that a lack of coorientation agreement in news/blog stories weakened a reporter's relationship with their audience. The study authors also indicated that coorientation predicted perceived expertise of online stories. In another context, college students who hold views that differed from their professors may self-censor and