



Looking for digital in public relations



Dejan Verčič^{a,*}, Ana Tkalac Verčič^b, Krishnamurthy Sriramesh^c

^a University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

^b University of Zagreb, Croatia

^c Purdue University, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 November 2014

Accepted 8 December 2014

Keywords:

Public relations
Digital communication
Mobile media
Social media
Millennials
Systematic

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to review the growth of the body of knowledge on the nexus between public relations and ICTs, and digital, social and mobile (DSM) media. We also sought to assess whether these “new” media had induced the body of knowledge to redefine the term public and whether these media had induced us to think differently with regard to the rules of engagement with these publics. Our review of over 35 years of articles in the Public Relations Review that discussed ICTs and DSM media revealed a lop-sided growth of the field. But the focus has almost exclusively been on using these media as “tools” for purposes of media relations with negligent study of DSM media stakeholders and publics. Issues of the Digital Divide and Privacy are absent, while amalgamation of public relations, advertising and journalism in DSM media is overlooked.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Public relations, as an applied management and communication discipline, finds itself greatly affected by information and communication technologies (ICT), especially in the past decade. Dealing with digital/social/mobile media is among the top three concerns in practice (Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven, & Moreno, 2014) and positions in jobs related to these media will be among the drivers of new employment in public relations in the US at least until 2022 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). These new realities are also reflected in the growing attention from public relations scholars to themes and problems of digital, mobile, social communication and media. These technologies are evolving so fast that research about them is always playing catch-up. But we need to stop and think about these tools and device appropriate strategies for harnessing them for relationship management by organizations. At the outset, it is far from clear what this domain is all about. A review of scholarship about the link between digital media and public relations gives us various nomenclatures for the relationship: *digital public relations* (Yaxley, 2012), *interactive online communication* (Kelleher, 2009), *world wide web* (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001), *the Internet* as a medium (Morris & Ogan, 1996), from 2000s *mobile* as the 7th of the mass media (after print from 1500s, recordings from 1900s, cinema from 1910s, radio from 1920s, TV from 1950s, the Internet from 1990s; Ahonen, 2008), *social media* (Freberg, 2013), *social and emerging media* (Wright & Drifka Hinson, 2013), *social media as public relations tactics* (Taylor & Kent, 2010), *website public relations* (Sommerfeldt, Kent, & Taylor, 2012), *online public relations* (Hallahan, 2013), and *onlinement* (Heinderyckx, 2014). We contend that none of these terms covers the relationship adequately, which prompted us to conduct a review of studies that have addressed the relationship between public relations and digital, social, mobile (DSM) media.

* Corresponding author at: University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kardeljeva pl. 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia. Tel.: +386 41688146.
E-mail address: dejan.vercic@fdv.uni-lj.si (D. Verčič).

Public relations has been interested in the uses of, and consequences from, ICTs for a long time with scholars studying the phenomenon and its transformations as these evolved. In 1994, in the first of what became the annual international public relations research symposium popularly named BledCom – John V. Pavlik presented a paper on *New media technologies and public relations: Considering the consequences of the information highway*. Two years later, in 1996, the third BledCom addressed the theme: *Taking public relations in the electronic age*. Ten years ago, BledCom again addressed this medium with the theme: *New concepts and technologies for public relations, public affairs and corporate communication*. The relevance of this medium prompted BledCom to address it again in 2014 with the theme: *Digital Public Relations: New Rules, New Publics*.

The opportunities ICTs offer public relations was best presented in 1999 as the 95 Theses of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* (Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2000), a text published as a website (www.cluetrain.com) starting with the thesis: “Markets are conversations.” Other theses directly relevant to public relations are:

6: “The Internet is enabling conversations among human beings that were simply not possible in the era of mass media.”

7: “Hyperlinks subvert hierarchy.”

12: “There are no secrets. The networked market knows more than companies do about their own products. And whether the news is good or bad, they tell everyone.”

19: “Companies can now communicate with their markets directly. If they blow it, it could be their last chance.”

26: “Public Relations does not relate to the public. Companies are deeply afraid of their markets.”

To public relations scholars, *The Cluetrain Manifesto* reads like a manifesto for the two-way symmetrical model of public relations first proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984). It promises the transformation of our society into a non-hierarchical and transparent discursive community. Its theses resonate with meliorist tendencies of the Excellence theory of public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 2008), the cultivation of relationships theory (Hung, 2007; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000) and co-orientation (Verčič, 2008). It is therefore expected that the Internet and all other technologies it enabled would have a profound effect on the development of public relations research and theory. Therefore we are interested in seeing how the impact of the ICT revolution was perceived by public relations scholars. We decided to conduct a systematic review of articles on this subject published in the oldest peer-reviewed journal in our field – *Public Relations Review* to address the following research questions:

RQ1. What problems are public relations researchers studying in the nexus between public relations and digital, social, mobile media?

RQ2. Is the terminology used in analyzed studies consistent and clear? Which terms are used most often?

RQ3. Who are the prime users of these technologies? Corporations, governments, agencies, NGOs?

RQ4. What are the prime technologies studied among the Internet, social media, and mobile?

RQ5. Who is on the other side of these attempts? That is, which stakeholders and publics are the objects of this communication?

RQ6. How much research is there in publics, “new” and “old” in this context?

RQ7. Is the almost singular focus on digital media, which are after all instruments of the elite, healthy to the field of public relations? Is such a focus affecting how we communicate with publics who do not have access to the digital media who constitute the majority of the world population?

RQ8. Are we paying enough attention to the blurring of boundaries between public relations and digital journalism, advertising, and marketing?

RQ9. What are some of the issues that digital media spawn for public relations and how have we addressed those (e.g. Freedom of information and privacy issues)?

2. Methodology

There is a growing number of studies exploring the application of new communication technologies in public relations but there is no guiding theory, framework, or even unified terminology. Since systematic reviews have a potential to delineate an area for both the practice and academic research (Briner & Denyer, 2012) our method of reviewing all articles in the oldest journal seemed appropriate. A systematic review addresses a specific question (or a set of questions), applies clear and replicable methods and through this accomplishes an exhaustive literature review as well as a critical assessment of specific studies. By approaching a body of literature this way it is possible to draw conclusions on what is known and what is not known on a particular topic. Systematic means “...reviewers follow an appropriate (but not standardized or rigid) design and that they communicate what they have done.” (Briner & Denyer, 2012, pp 329).

According to Victor (2008) there are three alternative approaches to systematic reviews. The one chosen for our particular purpose, the integrative approach, is aimed at building theory based on the review. The integrative review analyses emerging

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/138889>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/138889>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)