



Is using social media “good” for the public relations profession? A critical reflection



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ABSTRACT

Scholarship in public relations seems to be overly positive about social media. The dominant discourse in public relations is that using social media is “good”, because social media can help organizations in developing dialogs and relationships with publics and in engaging with them. Yet empirical evidence in public relations is mostly case-dependent and limited to the realm of understanding current organizational practices, with limited understanding of the concrete value for organizations or for publics. In this paper I question the utility of social media for publics, organizations and public relations, and I argue that the positive view of social media held by the majority of public relations scholars is grounded on the profession’s need to reconcile the two sides of public relations identity—the rhetorical and the relational. A discussion of whether current public relations practices in social media reflect these two main identities is offered, as well as a discussion of the implications of uncritical use of social media for the public relations profession.

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1. Introduction

There is a commonly accepted assumption that the information and communication technologies (ICTs) that have emerged in the past twenty years have contributed to the development of societies (Castells, 1996, 2004). These technologies have been welcomed for their interactive and dialogic nature and for the possibilities they seem to offer for connecting people to one another (Benkler, 2007; Lessig, 2004). Judging by the volume of publications devoted to research in this field, the literature across the various communication disciplines, including public relations, tends to be rather enthusiastic about digital technologies (van Osch & Coursaris, 2014). Social media in particular are considered to be fast, cheap and interactive channels for reaching targeted audiences. In public relations, social media—those conversational platforms that allow for asynchronous conversations and the sharing of user-generated material using the Web 2.0 environment (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2012)—have been warmly welcomed because they make it possible to communicate directly with public groups, bypassing the filtering processes of journalists and other gatekeepers (Kent, 2013).

Along with the increasing professional use, scholarly interest in social media has also grown exponentially in the past ten years (Ye & Ki, 2012). Yet public relations research seems—with the exception of a few scholars (c.f. Kent, 2008, 2013, 2014; Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2015)—to be rather dominated by a positive assessment of social media use in and for public relations. A number of merits and opportunities in the use of social media for public relations have been asserted, yet the empirical evidence is mostly case-dependent and limited to the realm of understanding current practice. So why is public

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relations research so enthusiastic about social media? Does the prominence of social media really offer concrete benefits to the public relations profession as well as the organizations and publics that it serves? To answer these questions, this paper explores three major themes: (1) the perceived value of social media for public relations; (2) the alleged benefits of social media for publics and for organizations; and (3) the possible implications of current social media use for public relations.

The subject is approached through critical analysis of the existing studies in the field, accompanied by examples of uses, misuses and abuses of digital technologies. The overarching argument proposed in the paper is that digital technologies and specifically social media do not always represent opportunities for individuals and organizations, but can sometimes pose risks and contribute to failures in social relations. The argument is built upon existing research on the use of social media by publics and organizations. If the public relations function is to serve both organizations and publics, and if public relations scholarship is to “become even more intellectually expansive” (Heath, 2006, p. 95), social media should not be embraced uncritically. In what follows, I have tried to emphasize that the use of social media, though relevant, may be problematic, and that rather than being “good” or “bad” in themselves, it is their use and the purpose of their use that connotes social media as positive, negative or simply neutral. Based on this discussion, I provide a different explanation for the positivist view of social media held by a large group of public relations scholars—an explanation grounded on the profession’s need to reconcile two different sides of the public relations identity, the rhetorical and the relational. I then conclude with a discussion of whether current public relations practice in social media reflects these two main identities, and of the implications of an uncritical use of social media for the public relations profession.

2. “Using social media is good” as the dominant public relations discourse

Among the various digital technologies, social media have gained a particular relevance in the field of public relations as the “new” channels, not only for communicating to and with publics and stakeholders, but for nourishing relationships with them (Verhoeven, Tench, Zeffass, Moreno, & Verčič, 2012). At a time of professional identity crisis (Edwards, 2012; Smith, 2012), the advent of social media was warmly welcomed by the profession. Solis and Breckenridge (2009) are among those public relations professionals who argue that social media have brought increased legitimacy to the public relations profession, since many professionals are today tasked with handling several digital platforms on behalf of a company or individual (Macnamara & Zeffass, 2012; Taylor & Kent, 2010; Wright & Hinson, 2014). Research on social media in public relations has emerged as one of the most important areas of inquiry of the last ten years (Duhé, 2012; Kent, 2013; Ye & Ki, 2012). The dominant discourse is that using social media is “good” for the public relations profession because social media allow organizations to achieve a number of valuable objectives, for example: to communicate directly with their stakeholders and publics by circumventing the gatekeeping role of news media (Kent, 2013; Linke & Zeffass, 2013; Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2014); to develop dialogs and relationships with stakeholders and publics (Kelleher, 2009; Macnamara & Zeffass, 2012); to increase organizational visibility and image (Gilpin, 2010; Yang & Kent, 2014); and to influence customer opinion on brands (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Men & Tsai, 2013). Social media have been praised for their capacity to enable more symmetrical, two-way communications between organizations and their publics (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Kelleher, 2009; Macnamara & Zeffass, 2012), and symmetrical, two-way communications are seen as essential to building mutual and beneficial relationships. Yet in the online environment, two-way communications exist only if there is a flow of conversations between organizations—not as abstract entities, but as assemblages of recognizable individuals—and publics. Neither conversations, nor two-way communications, can take place if individuals do not create and share contents, or do not respond to already created contents with comments. The act of posting contents on an online digital platform is not a sufficient ground to argue that such a platform has dialogic outcomes that matter for building or maintaining organization–public relationships. When organizations use social media to post contents with the purpose of enhancing dialogs and conversations with their publics, this does not mean that those contents created conversations among the followers of organizations’ social media, or that organizations have a dialog or, still less, a relationship with their followers. What differentiates social media from other digital media is, indeed, the presence of interactions and conversations between and by individuals (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Collaborations are possible if individuals recognize and accept others. In social media, meeting others is a virtual activity, enabled through the exchange of communications. That is why dialog in social media requires the presence of interactions among social media users and the exchange of two-way communications (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Particularly in the last five years, the social media environment has been increasingly populated by organizations seeking their own direct access to communicate to, rather than with, publics (Wright & Hinson, 2014). Research indicates that organizations, and the public relations professionals who deploy social media on their behalf, employ them as additional channels for disseminating corporate information, rather than collaborative platforms for fostering dialogs and collaborations and contributing to relationship building (Avidar, Ariel, Malka, & Levy, 2013; DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; McCorkindale, 2010; Verhoeven et al., 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2014). Public relations research on the contribution of social media use for achieving organizational objectives is inadequate, and there are still too many gaps between professional social media use and the normative use recommended by scholars (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Wright & Hinson, 2014).

Empirical findings in the public relations literature give scant confirmation of positive social media effects. Too often research studies show only organizations’ perceived, rather than real, benefits of social media use (DiStaso et al., 2011; Verhoeven et al., 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2014). Very little is known about whether publics perceive organizational social media use as beneficial (Friedl & Verčič, 2011; Men & Tsai, 2013; Verčič & Verčič, 2013), and some scholars, such as Kent

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