



# Acquisition and preservation of authentic information in a digital age



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## ABSTRACT

Rapid technological development has shifted our society into a digital age, where social media tools are indispensable for our daily life. Public relations practitioners have recognized the power of these tools and have adopted them. Through social media they instantly post information to the public and the possibility of accessing to this information anytime they need and ability to prove authenticity of this information is very important for any of them. This paper discusses the value of information posted by public relations practitioners on social media and the need for the short and long-term preservation of such information. Based on our research, which was conducted across 24 national archives within the European Union, we collected important information on how to prepare organizations and their public relations practitioners for various issues surrounding the preservation of important information and allowing for its acquisition when necessary. The conclusion provides recommendations and guidelines for the preservation and acquisition of authentic public relations records transmitted to the public via social media.

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary web technologies (Web 2.0) and the abundance of social media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, LinkedIn, Instagram etc.) have paved the way for new forms of social connections and intercommunication, and by doing so, have become the driving force for social and economic development. When an organization starts using social media for its public relations, it usually deploys computer-supported solutions and selects the social media it wants to be present in. In a short period of time, a huge amount of information is posted to this new media, usually in different forms (short texts, pictures, links to documents and other resources, video clips, etc.). The information on social media changes with great frequency and can be manipulated (e.g., deleted comments for posts). In public relations it is crucial that there be an easy way to access authentic information whenever necessary. The lack of control over public relations records in social media and the uncontrolled loss of such records present a serious challenge for the daily work of public relations practitioners. To find a solution to these challenges, we need to think about which public relations social media records we should preserve,

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how we should preserve them, and for how long. For example, sometimes public relations must react to records posted on social media, and in some cases, these records are used in legal proceedings or are evaluated as potential archive material.

This paper provides an insight into the value of public relations records on social media and discusses the need for their long-term preservation, an analysis of different possibilities for its preservation and suggests steps for their retrieval. Although at first glance, digital storage does not present a major issue, the problem arises when we start to view digital storage from the perspective of the long-term preservation of stored records and their accessibility. If we also add requirements, such as the integrity of records, their usability at some later point in time, public faith (authenticity) in such information etc. we come to realize that the storage of digital records is very complex. The starting point of the research was the following: we reviewed existing literature and best practices because we were interested in the key challenges involved in managing records that public relations practitioners post on social media. In addition, we also analyzed the value of these records, the need and responsibility for preserving them, as well as the possibility of acquiring authentic records whenever required. To obtain the empirical data, we used some of the results of the survey that were carried out among the national archives of EU member states, as well as Norway and Switzerland. In this way, the analyzed theoretical and empirical data served as guidelines for preparing internal rules for managing digital records, including public relations social media records.

## 2. Literature review and best practices

### 2.1. Key challenges for managing public relations records on social media

Social media are becoming key tools for public relations in companies (Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Verhoeven, Tench, Zeffass, Moreno, & Verčič, 2012), government institutions (Parliament on social media, 2014; Hall, 2014) as well as individuals (Košir, 2014). The European Communication Monitor (ECM) 2014 shows that 86% of European communication professionals consider online communication channels as being the most relevant for strategic communication (Zeffass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven, & Moreno, 2014). They cited LinkedIn, Xiang, Viadeo (72.7%), Twitter (44.3%), Blogs (33.5%), Facebook (29.5%) and Google+ (10.6%) as important social media platforms for professional networking while also believing that the importance of using social media will rise from 63.2% in 2014 to 89.1% in the next three years. Consequently, this means that in the future more and more public relations records are going to be created digitally and published only on social media. Developments in web technology and the expansion of social media have considerably changed the political scene (Auvinen, n.d.) and have a direct effect on changes that take place in societies – one such example is the so-called “Arab Spring” (Kassim, 2012). They also help to form and express expert opinions (Sermo Stories, 2014), of individuals in certain groups (Obama, 2014), offer a variety of ways for students to become involved with their universities (Tkalac Verčič & Verčič, 2013) or just provide information on a certain subject (Petrol Slovenija, 2014). Technology enables the easy and rapid posting of information on various web sites where information can frequently change (the frequency of change can be less than 10 min); new information replaces the old, until the old finally disappears. The average life expectancy of a website is 44–75 days (Kahle, 1997; Day, 2003), and almost 11% of the information is lost a year after it is first published, with a further 0.02% daily increase in information loss (SalahEldeen & Nelson, 2012). Thus, it is very difficult to foresee which record in a number of records that are posted by organizations or government institutions is going to be relevant as evidence in legal proceedings or for future generations as part of their cultural heritage.

The technological dilemmas surrounding the preservation of public relations social media records mostly include issues of how and in what form to preserve digital information, given the fact that it was created in different and constantly changing technological environments (both hardware/software and record format). And if we do reach a decision on how to preserve public relations social media records, there comes the question of how often to save them given their rapidly changing nature. It all points to the fact that the use of social media requires a completely new direction and method of preservation.

Legal challenges in preserving public relations digital information mostly include copyright, intellectual property issues and the right to access and use such information later on. For example, the Slovenian Mass Media Act (The National Assembly, 2006a) presents an interesting legal challenge. According to the act, editors are expected to retain their program at least 15 days from its publication (Article 29), but on the other hand the act also grants the right to any individual to demand the publishing of a correction within 30 days of the publishing of the report (Article 26). Since the editor can remove the information in 15 days after the information has first been published, the concerned citizen or the public relations practitioner, who generally on behalf of their employers or clients require the publication of corrections or responses, cannot obtain the information and issue a request for a correction. Even if they have printed the home page of the website along with screen shots or records kept in the form of backups, in court proceedings, the authenticity of the stored records can be disputed (proving that the record is always faithful to the original). But this is hardly feasible if we have not stored audit trails that we could use to prove either which changes the records contain (if there are changes) or that there are no changes in the records.

The given examples lead to the conclusion that there is still a lack of any supervision on social media, their rules of behavior, and usage. Key challenges for managing public relations records on social media, apart from their extensiveness, frequent changes, interconnection and multiplication, are primarily: rapid technological development, the problem of how

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