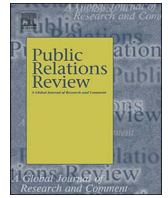




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Public relations in an online environment: Discourse description of social media in Kuwaiti organizations

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ABSTRACT

Public relations (PR) practitioners strongly believe that social media are changing the way PR is practiced. While it is premature to confirm the change, previous research has found that PR practitioners remain trialing with social media for purposes related to organizational communication. By conducting in-depth interviews with 19 practitioners from corporate, governmental and non-profit organizations in Kuwait, this qualitative study aims to understand how Kuwaiti organizations use social media to achieve PR objectives, the advantages and barriers PR practitioners face when using them as well as the extent whether or not social media have changed PR. Kuwaiti organizations were found to use *Twitter* and *Instagram* the most for promotion and information dissemination, but the use is generally occasional and reactive. Extending the organizations' reach and popularity of social media among Kuwaitis were the main advantages for using this type of media, while lack of social media strategy, lack of technical skills, and confusion of the two-way communication approach were the main barriers. A new finding can be added to the literature where insufficient educational background was found to contribute to the practitioners' reluctance to adopt and adapt to using social media. As to any causing change to PR, the respondents believe that social media have broadened the field and have made organizations look less official and more mainstream in the popular culture. The implications of the findings suggest the need for a strategic approach in terms of purpose, roles, responsibilities, policies and guidelines toward the management of social media between higher management and PR practitioners. Improvements to PR curriculum and practicum are also needed to integrate communication technologies into PR practice.

1. Introduction

The use of social media is increasingly becoming a vital part of organizational communication.¹ The field of public relations in particular (PR hereafter) has been influenced by the advent of this type of media. There has been a tremendous growth in the perceived importance of social media where corporate and public organizations are increasingly utilizing them for PR objectives (McCorkindale, 2010; Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, Moreno & Vercic, 2011). PR practitioners strongly believe that social media are changing the way PR is practiced (Wright & Hinson, 2014) where their use is positively correlated to the perceived strategic impact of

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¹ While different disciplines have provided overlapping definitions of organizational communication, corporate communication, public relations, and strategic communication, this study utilizes the terms “organizational communication” and “organizational social media communication” as used in the fields of mass communication and public relations to refer to how organizations use communication tools to interact with their publics and present their organizations to society (Grünig, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Robson & James, 2013).

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PR in organizations (Verhoeven, Tench, Zerfass, Moreno, & Vercic, 2012). Therefore, social media are significant tools for organizations because they provide various communication platforms with publics² and can increase their online presence. They provide the perfect environment to achieve PR objectives such as disseminating information, becoming interactive with publics by employing the two-way communication approach, having online presence and relationship building with various publics, among other objectives (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Grunig, 2009).

With the opportunities social media provide for organizations, PR practitioners are forced to consider using them. However, how have social media changed the discourse of PR? As Grunig (2009) addressed, are PR practitioners using social media the same way they are using traditional media? Are they using social media to complement traditional media? The recent body of literature has addressed some of these issues, yet research toward online PR in general and PR in social networking websites in particular remains in its infancy. Robson and James (2013) indicated that the last five years have witnessed an explosion of studies but they are predominantly US-based, quantitative, and conducted in large corporations with sizeable communication departments. These overarching research questions and concerns are investigated in Kuwait, a Middle Eastern country that is increasingly employing PR in its organizational communication and generally considered one of the highest social media users in the region (*Arab Social Media Report*, 2015).

This study employs in-depth interviews with PR practitioners to gain a better understanding of PR in a social media environment. The aim is to provide a discourse description of PR as it is practiced in social media in Kuwaiti organizations. It attempts to identify usage patterns, advantages, barriers and changes social media have brought to the field of PR. Wright and Hinson (2014) indicated that social media have a tremendous impact on the practice of PR but there are few studies investigating PR and social media. The research also aims to serve as a theoretical and practical benchmark for future researchers since the literature greatly lacks data and research on social media and PR, both in Kuwait and the Middle East. As the findings will show, Kuwait is a fertile ground for further research and for the application of theories and approaches in studying PR and its relation to social media.

1.1. PR and social media – a new venue for research

Few studies show how organizations utilize social media as part of organizational communication. Since PR practitioners need to reach their target audiences offline and online, it is not surprising that *Facebook* has been the most frequently used medium for PR activities for several years (Wright & Hinson, 2014). It was replaced by *Twitter* in 2014 (Wright & Hinson, 2014). *LinkedIn* is increasingly used for PR and it is currently ranked third after *Twitter* and *Facebook*, with *YouTube* in fourth place (Wright & Hinson, 2014). Wright and Hinson (2014) found PR practitioners spend more time on social media each year for the last six years. These scholars point out that one of the measures for the growth of social media in PR is the level of social media activity currently displayed by professional organizations such as Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), International Public Relations Association (IPRA) and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). The majority of the *Fortune 2000* companies (69%) also use social networking websites as part of their online strategy to communicate with publics (McCorkindale, 2010).

McCorkindale and DiStaso (2014) noted that social media research is the fastest growing area in the history of PR. This is so because social media have created new ways for organizations to communicate with their publics (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014). The integration of social media into the discourse of PR resulted in PR 2.0, a term developed in the late 1990s by Brian Solis. Solis and Breakenridge (2009) noted that with the shift from PR to PR 2.0 “monologue has given way to dialogue” (as cited in Macnamara, 2010, p. 3). Grunig (2009) believes social media have changed PR but the essence of building relationships remains the same. Practitioners did not wait long to start using new and social media platforms (Grunig, 2009). However, they use them the same way they used traditional media – “as an information dump” (Grunig, 2009). In many instances social media are used simply as channels to disseminate information. Many nonprofit organizations, for example, were found to use *Facebook* as a platform for one-way communication (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009) while others found that organizations rarely engaged on *Twitter* and used it as more of a megaphone (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012). McAllister (2012) found that PR practitioners from the world’s top 100 universities believe they have applied dialogic principles on social media to encourage communication with students but found weak support in doing so. This was similar to Hether (2014) who found Kaiser Permanente, an American health care organization, to use social media as a two-way communication tool but only reflected a one-way approach.

Although PR practitioners believe social media offer various benefits to PR (Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; DiStaso & Bortree, 2012; Verhoeven et al., 2012), the literature sheds more light on the barriers practitioners encounter when using them. Macnamara (2010) noted that PR practitioners fail to make efficient use of social media mainly because of lack of a strategic approach (Robson & James, 2013; Robson & Sutherland, 2012). In a similar vein, social media provide a two-way and interactive communication, but PR practitioners remain using them as a one-way tool in message dissemination, promotion of events and announcements (Grunig, 2009; Robson & James, 2013). Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) and Robson and James (2013) found PR practitioners use social media on an ad hoc basis, and blamed higher management for not using the full potential of social media. Lack of knowledge, familiarity, policies, guidelines and training for social media were among the main barriers (Lariscy, Avery, & Sweeter, 2009; Macnamara, 2010, 2011; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Robson & James, 2013). According to Wright and Hinson (2014), 77% of PR practitioners recommend

² The Pew Internet Research Center defined social media as “an umbrella term that is used to refer to a new era of Web-enabled applications that are built around user-generated or user-manipulated content, such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, and social networking sites” (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2010). This study uses the term “social media” but only refers to social networking websites such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *LinkedIn*, *Twitter* and *Snapchat*.

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