Social software and internal communicators' gatekeeping sense of self

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ABSTRACT

Social software creates opportunities for internal communication. Public relations literature suggests it affords more two-way internal communication that can meet the ideal of symmetry as promoted in the excellence theory (Grunig, 1992). This study involved in-depth interviews with internal communication professionals at 54 companies. Our findings indicate that these professionals tend to view social software positively, often stimulating its use among employees. Additionally, we found that they appropriate social software in such ways as to maintain and even strengthen their gatekeeping role identity. More specifically, our data reveal that traditional gatekeeping, which characterizes mass media systems based on the centralized production and distribution of information, is complemented with networked forms of gatekeeping in decentralized digital media environments. Furthermore, our data suggest that an underlying management ideology hampers the symmetric potential of social software.

1. Introduction

Some scholars are convinced that "technological progress is going to leave behind some people, perhaps even a lot of people, as it races ahead" (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2011, p. 11). In this paper, we focus on how social software impacts the role of internal communication professionals. More particularly, we want to know how they align a traditional gatekeeping sense of self, developed during a time in which broadcasting was the norm, with the network structure found in social media (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 220). On a more general level, we might say that this research has allowed us to shed light on how professionals (re)negotiate their identity in relation to changes in technology use.

We use the ideal of symmetry, as developed in the excellence theory (Grunig, 1992) and the four models of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), as our main theoretical framework. Based on this framework, we would expect internal communication professionals to use the interactive potential of social media to establish two-way "symmetrical communication" with the organization's internal constituents. However, recent research about external communication via social software has shown that this is seldom the case (Avidar, 2013; Crijns, Hudders, Cauberghe, & Claeys, 2015; DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2012; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; McCorkindale, 2010; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Verhoeven, Tench, Zerfass, Moreno, & Verčič, 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2015). One purpose of this study was to understand whether the unrealized potential of social software for symmetrical external communication was also the case for internal communication.

Given the claim of numerous authors that social software is redefining the communication profession (Kent & Saffer, 2014, p. 569), this study contributes to this important discussion by focusing on the emerging and anticipated use of this software in the

context of internal communication. Furthermore, this study examines the extent to which internal communication professionals' perceptions and use of social software contributes to, or detracts from, the ideal of symmetry as found in public relations theory. Lastly, we also explore how recent advances in gatekeeping theory might be used to explain why internal communication professionals use social software the way they do.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Definitions and public relations' scholarship on social software use

The defining element of Web 2.0 or social software is the simplicity with which everyday users can publish online and as such challenge the traditional gatekeeping role of mass media actors (Meraz, 2009). Web 2.0 applications gained considerable attention with the increasing popularity of public social networks like Facebook and Twitter. It took a substantial part of our global population less than a decade to integrate these new digital platforms into their daily patterns of media consumption (Arora & Predmore, 2013).

Similar to other authors (Alarifi & Sedera, 2013; DiMicco, Geyer, Millen, Dugan, & Brownholtz, 2009; Recker & Lekse, 2016), we distinguish between enterprise social networks (ESNs) and public social networks (PSNs). The latter are platforms that are mainly used in a private context but are increasingly adopted by organizations to communicate with their external stakeholders. In contrast, ESNs are proprietary solutions that mimic the look and feel of their public counterparts but were explicitly designed for use inside an organization. Some popular ESN brand names include *Yammer, SocialCast, IBM Connections, Tibbr*, and *Mumba Cloud*.

Some have described the introduction of social software in the workplace in terms of a shift from "Enterprise 1.0" to "Enterprise 2.0" (Backhouse, 2009, p. 2). In both the professional and academic literature, labels such as *enterprise social network, internal social media, enterprise social media*, and *enterprise social software* are used as synonyms for the same technology. Throughout this article, we consistently use the umbrella term "*social software*" to refer to both ESNs and PSNs as applied to internal communication. In most cases in this study, our references to social software involve ESNs; however, there are some cases of PSNs used for internal communication, and some of the software vendors of PSNs are increasingly trying to modify their products for use within organizations (e.g., "*Workplace*" by *Facebook*). Thus, social software use for internal communications sometimes involves blurry boundaries between PSNs and ESNs.

Because of the increasingly computer-mediated nature of the public relations profession, it is important to understand how practitioners conceptualize information technology. In turn, this will help scholars to assess the impact of technology on the interaction between organizations and their various stakeholders. In fact, Kent (2010, p. 655) argues that "public relations academics and professionals need to spend some time coming to terms with the role of technology in public relations."

It is not the purpose of this article to engage in a detailed discussion of the existing literature on the use of social software in the context of public relations (for recent systematic literature reviews, see Duhé, 2015; Huang, Wu, & Huang, 2017; Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2015; Ye & Ki, 2012). We point out two directions from this increasingly large body of literature that are of significance to our study. First, the literature has generally lacked guiding theory with more recent studies relying on excellence theory or dialogic theory. Verčič et al. (2015, p. 143) concluded that notwithstanding the "growing number of studies exploring the application of new communication technologies in public relations […] there is no guiding theory, framework, or even unified terminology." Huang et al. (2017) found that this situation is improving as research on this topic enters a higher level of maturity. Indeed, these authors (Huang et al., 2017, pp. 7–8) discovered that dialogic theory and excellence theory have seen some popularity in this domain of study.

Second, it appears many PR professionals adopt or are even socialized into a predominantly "positive view" of social software (Valentini, 2015, p. 170). This might not come as a surprise since research has shown that professionals are being "socialized" into seeing those tools as "good" for the profession (Taylor & Kent, 2010). Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) argue that these media are cast in positive terms because of their ability to enable symmetrical interactions, a characteristic of "excellent" public relations.

2.2. Social software and the ideal of symmetry

We build on the ideal of symmetry, which is traced to the excellence theory in public relations. Most literature about the excellence theory has focused on external communication. One contribution of this study is the focus on internal communication. Tkalac Verčič et al. (2012, p. 223) argue internal communication is "among the fastest growing specializations in public relations." However, several scholars have lamented the fact that this rapidly developing field suffers from under-theorization (Mazzei, Kim, & Dell'Oro, 2012; Ruck & Welch, 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007). Testing the viability of public relations models on internal communication issues could be the first step in redressing this gap.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed four models of public relations: press agentry/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetric, and two-way symmetric. Later, James Grunig led a series of studies in which the idea of two-way symmetric communication as a best practice in public relations was further developed. These studies culminated in an edited volume that was published in 1992 and established a normative framework that continues to influence public relations theory today (Kenny, 2016). A decade after the publication of this seminal work, Kent and Taylor (2002, p. 23) argued that "a theoretical shift" had changed the emphasis in public relations from "managing communication" to "communication as a tool for negotiating relationships."

Scholars regularly express high hopes that social software will make the public relations profession more dialogic. Grunig (2009, p. 1) stated, "If the social media are used to their full potential, I believe they will inexorably make public relations practice more global, strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical, and socially responsible." In this context, Theunissen and Wan