

An 12-Year Longitudinal Analysis Tracking Social and Digital Media Use in Public Relations Practice

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Summary of Major Findings

- Amount of time PR people spend working with digital media continues to increase each year.
- The PR or Communications function is primarily responsible for monitoring and managing digital media communication.
- Facebook has been the most frequently used site each year except 2014. Twitter is second, LinkedIn third, YouTube fourth and Instagram fifth.
- Fewer than half the PR people we surveyed are measuring what members of various strategic publics have communicated about their organizations or their clients on digital media.
- Of the research being conducted most measures outputs rather than outcomes.

My Digital Media Experience

- One of the first communication scholars to conduct research exploring how the Internet and other emerging technologies are impacting public relations.
 - 1998 – Corporate Communications Policy Concerning the Internet: A Survey of the Nation's Senior Level, Corporate Public Relations Officers.
 - 2001 – *The Magic Communication Machine: Examining the Internet's Impact on Public Relations, Journalism and the Public.*
- Since 2001 have authored more than 30 scholarly articles or juried academic convention papers on some aspect of the use of social communication media in public relations practice.
- This includes a large, annual, international trend survey of PR practitioners conducted each year since 2006.
 - My co-author on these studies is Michelle Hinson



Why This Is Important for PR

- People are changing the way they receive news and information.
- Death of daily newspapers in major cities and/or newspapers once published seven days per week now reduced to three issues per week.
- www.newspaperdeathwatch.com
- The arrival of online merchandising has dramatically changed the way people buy items and otherwise conduct business.

Death of Major Daily Newspapers

- Cincinnati Post
- Tampa Tribune
- Baltimore Examiner
- Honolulu Advertiser
- Denver's Rocky Mountain News
- Oakland Tribune
- Sacramento Union
- Indianapolis News
- San Juan Star
- Pittsburgh Tribune Review
- Birmingham Post-Herald
- Anchorage Times
- Los Angeles Herald-Examiner
- Des Moines Tribune
- Tulsa Tribune

Once Daily Now 3 Times Per Week

- Cleveland Plain Dealer
- Seattle Post-Intelligencer
- Portland Oregonian
- Ann Arbor News
- Birmingham News
- Mobile Press-Register
- Harrisburg Patriot-News
- Detroit News/Free Press
- Christian Science Monitor
- Syracuse Post-Standard
- Flint Journal
- (Madison) Capital Times
- Saginaw News

The Retail Apocalypse

- Thousands of stores are shutting down in perhaps the biggest wave of retail closings ever.
- *Business Insider* magazine claims more than 3,500 stores will close in next few months.
- Major department stores are closing:
 - JCPenny
 - Macy's
 - Sears
 - Kmart
- Middle-of-the-Mall chains also closing stores:
 - Crocs, Abercrombie & Fitch, Guess, BCBG

The Retail Apocalypse

- **Sears is closing 150 stores (about 10% of Sears and Kmart locations).**
- **JCPenny is shutting down 138 stores (about 14% of its locations).**
- **The USA has the largest amount of retail space per person in the world (23.5 sq. ft. of retail space per person).**
 - **Canada has 16.4 sq. ft. and Australia has 11.1 sq. ft.**
- **Real estate research shows visits to shopping malls have been declining for years with the rise of e-commerce and huge shifts in how shoppers spend their money.**
- **Visits to malls in the USA declined by 50% between 2010 and 2013 according to real-estate research firm Cushman & Wakefield.**



The Rules of Business Have Changed

- **Uber is the largest company in the world providing taxi services but it owns no vehicles.**
- **Facebook, the world's most popular media, creates no content.**
- **AirBnB, the world's largest accommodation provider, owns no buildings.**
- **Neither Amazon nor eBay, the nation's most valuable retailers, has any stores.**
- **The same thing is true for Alibaba, China's biggest e-commerce group (Alibaba handles more transactions each year than Amazon and eBay combined).**

Literature Review

- Acknowledge the efforts of Prof. Sandra Duhé.
- Chester Berger (1981) predicted “new communication technologies would change corporate America in fundamental ways” including:
 - Lower communication costs
 - Vanishing paper trails
 - Streamlined communications networks
 - Reduction in the frequency of face-to-face communication
 - Newfound ability to direct messages to specific audiences
- Betsy Ann Plank (1983) warned PR practitioners to “brace yourself for the mixed blessing of immediate reaction to our messages in regard to the instant, sometimes thought-lacking, feedback (the new) technology would allow.”

Literature Review

- **Esrock & Leichty (1998) examined how corporate social responsibility (CSR) was conveyed on websites.**
 - Found the predominant corporate model was “top-down/information push communications”
- **White & Raman (1999) reported a “trial and error approach” to website development was more commonly found than one based on research, planning and evaluation.**
- **Heath (1998) said “new media: offer both opportunities and threats to relationship building.**
- **Coombs (1998) described the Internet not only as a “new weapon” for CSR but also as a “potential equalizer” that would embrace the power of activists and significantly affect issues management and corporate social performance.**

Literature Review

- Taylor, Kent & White (2001) examined how activist organizations were using the Internet to build relationships with strategic target publics.
 - Reported that activists did not fully engage publics in two-way communication.
- Naudé, Froneman & Atwood (2004) as well as Bortree & Seltzer (2009) reported that activist organizations, including NGOs and advocacy groups, were good at providing information but lacked online interactivity with their publics.
- Yang & Taylor (2010) found social movements were doing little to activate offline participation.
- Zoch, Collins, Sisco & Supa (2008) argued that activists were underutilizing the potential of framing techniques on their websites.

Literature Review

- Kent (2008) also acknowledged the potential of blogs but mainly for research, framing, persuasion, issue monitoring and environmental scanning.
- Xifra & Huertas (2008) found that although most PR blogs were written by PR practitioners, they lacked development in interactive resources and rarely addressed research.
- Xifra & Grau (2010) observed that Twitter discourse related to PR contributed more to practice than to theory.
- Yang & Lim (2009) encouraged bloggers to focus more on mutual understanding rather than persuasion.

Literature Review

- Other studies have highlighted successful use of digital media in public relations campaigns. These include:
- Sweetser & Metzgar (2007) showing how emotional support was sought in blogs during a pet food recall.
- Stephens & Malone (2009) comparing blogs with newspapers in crisis communication coverage.
- Greer & Moreland (2007) discussing how companies used the Web in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.
- McCorkindale's (2010) research showing how organizations effectively used Facebook.
- The Levenshus (2010) study of how the 2008 Obama presidential campaign fully leveraged the Internet's potential.
- Plus many more.

Literature Review

- **Jo & Kim (2003)** said the interactive participatory nature of the web distinguishes it from traditional media.
 - Especially because its “intrinsic interactivity . . . Can enhance the mutual relationship and collaboration between message center (the organization) and the receiver (the public).”
- **Seltzer & Mitrook (2007)** suggested blogs were potentially more effective for relationship building than websites because of their inherently responsive design.
- In spite of these potential advantages, studies by **McKeown & Plowman (1999)**, **Curtin & Gaither (2004)**, **Kirat (2007)** and others find PR communication within the emerging media to be primarily asymmetrical in nature and lacking in dialogic features.

Literature Review - Grunig

- James E. Grunig (2009) has admonished PR for using digital media in the same way traditional media have been used for “dumping messages on the general population.”
- Grunig also says: “For public relations to fully use digital media, practitioners and scholars must re-institutionalize public relations as a behavioral, strategic management paradigm rather than as a symbolic, interpretive paradigm.”
- Grunig also says “these new media have the potential to make the profession more global, strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical and socially responsible.”
- However, many practitioners are using emerging media in the same ways they used traditional media, as a means of simply disseminating information rather than as a strategic means of interacting with publics.

Literature Review

- In addition to studies about social and emerging media in the literature of academic fields such as public relations and communication, research about these topics have been published in scholarly journals in many different academic fields including:
 - Anthropology
 - History
 - Mathematics
 - Philosophy
 - Political Science
 - Psychology
 - Social Work
 - Sociology
 - Tourism & Leisure Services



Wright & Hinson Trend Analysis

- Every year since 2006; now in 12th year; large number of public relations practitioner respondents each year. We had 556 responses in 2017 (412 in 2016; 329 in 2015; 393 in 2014; 378 in 2013; 622 in 2012; 479 in 2011; 563 in 2010; 574 in 2009).
- Subjects have been members of professional organizations such as PRSA, IPRA, etc., and donors to the Institute for Public Relations.
- Increasing annual agreement suggesting social and digital media have enhanced public relations practice.
- Results suggest this particularly is the case with social media (e.g., Facebook) and micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter).

Wright & Hinson Trend Analysis

- 91% of PR practitioners tell us emerging media have changed the way their organizations communicate.
 - Mean scores were 3.38 in 2007; 3.44 in 2008; 3.81 in 2009; 4.02 in 2010; 4.10 in 2011; 4.24 in 2012; 4.14 in 2013; 4.27 in 2014; 4.35 in 2015; 4.37 in 2016 & 4.44 in 2017.
- Impact remains more pronounced with external rather than internal communications.
- Strong agreement (increasing each year) suggesting blogs, micro-blogs, social media and other digital communication media compliment traditional news media (newspapers, magazines, radio, TV).



Wright & Hinson Trend Analysis

- **Strong support indicating digital media have made communications more instantaneous thus forcing organizations to respond more quickly to criticism.**
- **Strong opinions indicating digital media have a long distance to go before they will be equal to traditional news media in terms of accuracy, credibility, truth, ethics and so forth.**
- **Blogs and social media do not receive very high scores in terms of truth telling or advocating transparent and ethical cultures.**
- **However, respondents give new media high marks for offering organizations low-cost ways to develop relationships with members of various strategic publics.**

Wright & Hinson Trend Analysis

- The time PR practitioners spend working with emerging media (blogs, social media, etc.) has increased each year and considerably within the past year.
 - In 2015, 29% spent more than 25% of their working hours with social and digital media. That percentage increased to 38% in 2016 and was 36% in 2017.
 - Only 1% of the PR practitioners we surveyed don't spend any of their working time with digital media (in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 & 2017). This is down from 3% in 2011 & 2012; 4% in 2010 and 7% in 2009).



Organizational Governance

- **Our results show the Public Relations or Communications function is now responsible for monitoring and managing emerging media communication (including blogs, micro-blogs and social media) in 63% of the organizations we surveyed (similar results in 2013, 2014, 2015 & 2016).**
- **75% of our 2017 respondents think PR or Communications should have this responsibility. (The creation of digital and social media departments has lowered this percentage over the years.)**

Digital Media Use in PR

- In our 2009 survey of PR people, Search Engine Marketing was considered to be the most important of seven emerging media options.
- That changed dramatically over the past six years with the increased importance of Social Networks (e.g., Facebook), Micro-Blogging sites (e.g., Twitter) and Video Sharing options (e.g., YouTube).
- Social Networks are now considered to be the most important emerging media tools in PR practice followed by Micro-Blogs and Video Sharing.

Digital Media Use in PR

- In terms of specific digital media use, Facebook ranked as the most frequently used of these sites again in 2016 with a 4.36 mean score a slight increase over 2016 (Mean = 4.32) and considerably up from 2015 (mean= 4.15).
- Twitter was second at 4.26 with LinkedIn third at 3.60. Instagram (3.39) was fourth and YouTube (3.25) fifth.

Social Media Measurement

- Since research is such an integral part of PR, all of our annual trend studies have asked questions about social and emerging media measurement.
- Even though PR practitioners say research, measurement and evaluation are important, few of our annual subjects have claimed to actually be conducting this research.
- Although the numbers are still embarrassingly small, the percentage of those conducting emerging media measurement has been increasing each year.
 - In 2016, 49% of these organizations claimed to be measuring what members of other strategic publics have communicated about their organization via blogs or other social media.
 - These figures are fairly constant over the past few years.

Social Media Measurement

- Although fewer than half of our respondents actually are measuring the impact of emerging communication media, almost all (more than 90% each year since 2009) of our respondents tell us they think they should be conducting this research.
- Subjects in our research studies also strongly recommend the use of **OUTCOMES** measures as opposed to **OUTPUT** measures when conducting new communications media measurement.
- Unfortunately, there is a considerable gap between the kinds of research and measurement this study's subjects agree should be taking place and what's actually going on.
- Most of our respondents whose organizations are involved in digital media measurement tell us more measurement is taking place in terms of outputs communicated than about the impact information being disseminated about their organizations through blocs and other new media was having on influentials, opinion leaders and members of other strategic audiences.

Impact on Communication Theory

- The emerging media are having a huge impact on the science beneath the art of public relations.
- They have completely empowered and dramatically changed the role of the Receiver in many of the traditional communication models.
- They have had a huge impact on altering Agenda Setting Theory.
- They've also dramatically altered some interpretations of Cognitive Dissonance Theory.
- The instantaneous nature of micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter) and social media (e.g., Facebook) is changing the relationships between public relations practitioners and attorneys.
- Social and emerging media are having a huge impact on the “arena of public opinion.”

Demographics

- **17% worked with PR firms; 16% in corporate; 13% university non-teaching; 13% government; 20% non-profit; 5% health care; 7% no response; 9% “other.”**
- **Gender: 68% female; 32% male.**
- **Age: 13% younger than 30 years old; 25% between 30 & 39; 20% between 40 & 49; 23% between 50 & 59; 10% 60 or older. (9% no response)**

Criticism via Social Media

- Consumers have effectively used social media to criticize business and the way it operates.
- Donald J. Trump has used Twitter to complain about more than 60 different organizations.
 - 2017 GM for making cars in Mexico.
 - 2016 Boeing for cost overruns on new Air Force 1 planes.
 - 2015 Apple for making “dumb decisions.”
 - 2014 T-Mobile for having “terrible” signal strength.
- Trump made effective use of social media getting elected in 2016.
- Just as Barack Obama did during elections of 2008 and 2012.

The Good . . . The Bad . . .
And The Ugly

A Brief Look at
Six Case Studies

McDonald's
Volvo
Domino's Pizza
Hershey
Adobe Photoshop
United Air Lines

Case Study: McDonald's

- **McDonald's and Golin – The All-Day-Breakfast Launch.**
- **McDonald's sales were at an all-time low. The business needed a major turnaround.**
- **Research identified breakfast as one of McDonald's bright spots but modern customers didn't like fact McDonald's stopped serving breakfast at 10:30 a.m.**
- **McDonald's tested all-day breakfast service in select markets.**
- **Golin research pointed out more than 300,000 people had mentioned all-day breakfast on Twitter (since 2007).**
- **Golin staff reached out to every tweeter who mentioned all-day breakfast on Twitter. This resulted in more than 4,000 individualized Twitter responses.**

Case Study: McDonald's

- **McDonald's announcement about going to All Day Breakfast trended on Twitter and Facebook for more than five hours.**
- **At its peak there were 340 tweets per minute about McDonald's All Day Breakfast.**
- **The announcement generated 245 media placements, 1,100 influencer brand engagements and 48 mentions in earned media stories about the launch strategy.**
- **On the financial side, McDonald's stock rose 25% in one quarter and store sales recorded the strongest quarter in four years.**

Case Study: Volvo

- The Volvo “Interception” campaign – Volvo North America, WE Communications, Grey New York and Mindshare.
- In 2015 Volvo was faced with declining sales ahead of launching the new Volvo XC60.
- Research pointed to a potential match between Volvo’s expressed values (safety, a focus on people and social responsibility) and those of a highly desired audience (affluent millennials).
- Super Bowl Sunday provided a terrific opportunity to reach that demographic but the Volvo budget would only buy about one-third of one second of a Super Bowl advertisement.
- Other automakers (Chevrolet, Toyota, BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Lexus and Nissan) already had bought multimillion dollar ads.

Case Study: Volvo

- Volvo conceptualized the “Interception” campaign to tap into the millions of dollars being spent by other automakers.
- Every time an ad was broadcast for a competitor automaker during the Super Bowl viewers were encouraged to use the Twitter hashtag #VolvoContest to nominate an acquaintance to win a Volvo XC60.
- The “Interception” campaign was responsible for a 70% year-over-year sales increase for the XC60 providing the highest ever February boot in the car’s history.
- #VolvoContest was tweeted 55,000-plus times during the game, more than any other car-related hashtag.
- Estimated media pickups were valued at \$44 million.

Case Study: Domino's Pizza

- In 2009, two Domino's Pizza employees made a disgusting video while spitting in sandwiches and performing other unsanitary acts defacing food they were making in a Domino's store.
- The video was shared on social media where it went viral.
- Domino's responded immediately with Patrick Doyle, President of Domino's USA making his own YouTube video to counter and sincerely apologize for the nasty and inappropriate actions of these soon-to-be-fired employees.
- This prompt and appropriate response was highly successful.



Case Study: The Hershey Company

- **Hershey and Ketchum – The Leaked Photo**
- **A leaked photo of an unreleased product disrupted a Hershey launch and dealt a blow to customer anticipation.**
- **Ketchum’s social media team was able to take a situation that had slipped out of control and use humor to sustain speculation and enhance product hype.**
- **The official announcement on Facebook generated almost 750,000 views in one day.**
- **The news reached more than 1.1 billion people within a few days.**
- **Since #Cupfusion’s launch volume expectations have increased more than 200%.**



Case Study: Adobe Photoshop

- The Adobe “Honorable Mention” campaign with Edelman.
- A year after Adobe said it would discontinue its physical software and move to a fully cloud-based product line, consumers remained unhappy.
- With Edelman’s help, two actionable points emerged.
- (a) Photoshop users gravitate toward the macabre and like to share their work on social channels.
- (b) This insight became the catalyst for a Halloween-themed murder mystery contest that encouraged Photoshoppers to search for clues hidden within an image distributed on social media and to share their work online.
- Positive brand sentiment rose from 15% to 76%.

Case Study: United Airlines

- Perfect example of a company that's paid a huge price for not effectively managing and/or responding to what's being said about it in social media.
- “United Breaks Guitars” in 2008. Canadian musician Dave Carroll had his guitar broken by United baggage handlers as he changed planes at Chicago O’ Hare.
- When UAL showed complete indifference towards Carroll, he wrote and recorded the song “United Breaks Guitars.”
 - The song received 150,000 YouTube views within one day; 500,000 views within one month, and 5 Million views within two months.
- Instead of replacing a \$3,500 guitar United lost millions in reputation and business.

Case Study: United Airlines

- Examples from recent months make it apparent United continues to have huge problems with social media.
- In March UAL had a problem involving non-revenue passengers who were wearing leggings that initiated a wave of online criticism when many called the airline's dress code "outdated."
- In April, United faced social media criticism again when it forcibly removed a passenger from a flight to make room for a United employee.
- *PR Week* names United CEO Oscar Munoz "Communicator of the Year."

Who Wants to be a Flight Attendant?

- “They’re stuck between corporations trying to extract maximum profits from each flight and passengers who can broadcast their frustration on social media.”
- “It’s easy to blame airline employees when something goes wrong with a flight.” (“Who else is there to scream at?”)
- Following 9/11 airlines were losing money and to help on the financial ledger they cut the number of crew members per plane in order to add seats to coach, shrinking legroom and cutting amenities for passengers.
- Recent mergers have led to consolidation so today four airlines account for 80% of all domestic seats sold in the USA.
- Bottom-Line: We now have fewer airlines to compete on the key metric of customer comfort and satisfaction.
 - From: Derek Thompson, “How Flight Attendants are Set Up to Fail,” *The Atlantic*, April 25, 2017.

Who Wants to be a Flight Attendant?

- Flight attendants now must deal with tighter schedules, overcrowded planes, shrinking seats and limited overhead bin space. Flight attendants are caught in the middle.
- Meanwhile, major airlines posted record profits in 2016.
- This profit has come, in large part, from squeezing both customers and employees.
- Seat width has declined at least 5% and as much as 10% on USA domestic airlines since the mid-1980s. Meanwhile, pitch has shrunk between three and six inches.
- . . . Less leg room, smaller crew, higher profits, angrier passengers and flight attendants are caught in the middle.
- So, customers turn to the one basic weapon to wield against this injustice: the camera function on their phones.

- From: Derek Thompson, "How Flight Attendants are Set Up to Fail," *The Atlantic*, April 25, 2017.

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