Social Media Communication in Organizations: The Challenges of Balancing Openness, Strategy, and Management

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Organizations from government departments and corporations to small businesses are increasingly adopting social media for strategic corporate and organizational communication and public relations. This is seen by many as a positive development because the openness of the Web 2.0 environment potentially democratizes voice and affords participation, dialogue, and community-building. However, optimistic views of the benefits of organizational social media communication fail to adequately take account of potential conflict between the philosophy of openness that characterizes Web 2.0 and organizational strategy and management processes. Based on two international surveys from Australasia and Europe, this paper shows how social media are being deployed by organizations in a number of countries. These findings were further explored through depth interviews with a selection of social media specialists to examine how the tensions between the open, uncontrolled practices of social media and organizational strategy and management might be resolved or balanced, particularly in relation to objectives, control, and governance. The findings identify future directions in strategic communication that mediate the interests of organizations and online communities.

Social media are being widely cited as enabling of, if not transformative for, democratic societies. They are seen as sites for expansion and invigoration of the public sphere conceptualized by Habermas (1989, 2006) as a place where citizens come together and confer freely about matters of general interest, which he described as “part of the bedrock of liberal democracies” (2006, p. 412). The widely cited 2008 U.S. presidential election showed that social media are increasingly used to engage youth and marginalized groups, with many Americans voting for the first time and 46% of all Americans using the Web to access news about the campaign, share their views and mobilize others (Smith & Rainie, 2008, p. i). In a special volume focused on youth titled Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth, W. Lance Bennett (2008) concluded that “digital media provide . . . young people who have access to it an important set of tools to build social
and personal identity and to create an on and offline environment” (p. 8). Social media use is also increasingly spread across demographics, according to other studies. Health researcher Joan Kiel (2005) says “the myth that the elderly shy away from innovations is just that, a myth” and cites benefits in “slowing intellectual decline” and in giving the elderly a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem (p. 21).

Because of the widely perceived benefits, private and public sector organizations are increasingly using social media for corporate and organizational communication and public relations (PR). McCorkindale (2009) found that 69% of Fortune 500 companies are using social networking sites. A Towers Watson (2010) study of 328 organizations representing 5,000,000 employees worldwide found that 65% planned to increase their use of social media to engage and build relationships with employees and other stakeholders. Similarly, in the European Communication Monitor 2011, Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, et al. (2011) reported “tremendous growth in the perceived importance of online channels” (p. 90).

Within PR and corporate communication (used here in the sense of corpora meaning bodies or organizations, not only corporations), the use of social media is similarly hailed as transformative, as it enables two-way and more symmetrical interaction between organizations and their publics which is identified as ‘Best Practice’ in Excellence theory (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Social media are also seen as facilitating relational and dialogic models of communication (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Ledingham, 2006). In New Media and Public Relations edited by Duhé (2008), one of the first academic texts focused on social media in the field, Hazelton, Harrison-Rexrode, and Kennan (2008) for claimed that public relations is “undergoing a revolution” (p. 91).

In the foreword to Breakenridge’s (2008) book on ‘PR 2.0’, social media advocate Brian Solis effused: “Welcome to what just may be the greatest evolution in the history of PR” (Solis, 2008, p. xvii). He claimed that with the shift to social media “monologue has given way to dialogue” (p. xviii). In the title of another book, Solis and Breakenridge (2009) claim that Web 2.0 is “putting the public back in public relations.” Similarly, in the latest edition of Corporate Communication: A Guide to Theory and Practice, Cornelissen (2011) states that social media “create new ways of reaching and engaging with stakeholders.” He adds that the development of new media “provides an organization with the opportunity to engage in conversations and to tell and elaborate its story or key message to stakeholders or the general public in an interactive way” which he claims is a “real advance” compared with traditional media relations (p. 154).

However, some scholars are more cautious in their assessment of the impact of social media and point to lack of research in this still-emerging field. For instance, in analyzing the use of blogs in public relations, Kent (2008) noted that there is “very little scholarly research in communication or public relations” (p. 34). In his seminal chapter on social media in the Handbook of Public Relations edited by Heath (2010), the same author criticized hype in relation to social media and argued that we “need more criticism and more theory” (Kent, 2010, p. 653). A 2009 study by Wright and Hinson in the United States and many other studies suggest that public relations is at an early stage in adopting interactive Web 2.0-based media. Wright and Hinson concluded that “meaningful gaps exist when measuring differences between what is happening and what should be happening in terms of . . . social media” (p. 19).

In two of very few qualitative studies of social media use in public relations, Fitch interviewed 10 practitioners in Singapore and Malaysia in 2006 (Fitch, 2009a) and undertook a follow-up
study in 2009 based on interviews with three social media practitioners employed by multinational public relations consultancy firms in Singapore (Fitch, 2009b). In her first study, Fitch reported one practitioner saying that “the internet is the Wild West, right, anything goes. There are no rules.” Emphasizing the unregulated and largely unmanaged practices of social media use, another said “we’re really writing the rule book as it is. There are no rule books, no textbooks to learn from” (2009a, p. 5).

As recently as mid-2011, international consultancy firm KPMG drew a similar conclusion from a study of social media use by business, saying “the bottom line is that it’s just new for everybody . . . there are no rules, there’s a lot of trial and error, there’s a lot of testing, a lot of learning, and then applying it” (KPMG, 2011, p. 4).

It is clear that significant gaps remain in knowledge of how organizations are using social media and how these important new channels of communication can and should be utilized in the context of public relations and corporate communication. This paper reports international quantitative and qualitative research that examines the growing use of social media in and by organizations to provide further insights into how organizations are using social media, opportunities that are being identified, as well as some significant gaps, risks and challenges that need to be addressed. The findings inform future directions in organizational social media communication in several ways.

This study was undertaken within and informed by two major theoretical frameworks: first, the literature on strategic communication, communication management, and public relations, which are overlapping and largely synonymous fields as discussed in the following and, second, emerging understandings of social media (also referred to as new media, Web 2.0 and generally understood as encompassing social networks).

UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIC ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Corporate communication and public relations are theorized and practiced predominantly within a framework of strategic communication and communication management (Dozier & Broom, 2006; J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Dozier, 2002).

In their third and seminal text on Excellence theory, identified as a dominant framework of public relations worldwide by Pieczka (2006), L’Etang (2008), and others, L. Grunig et al. (2002) list the first of 17 characteristics of excellent public relations as being “managed strategically” (p. 9). L. Grunig et al. (2002) also title their first chapter ‘Excellence in public relations and communication management’ (p. 1). The focus on strategy and management is more recently emphasized in J. Grunig, L. Grunig, and Dozier’s (2006) updated summary of Excellence theory in which they state that PR must be a “strategic managerial function” and that:

The senior public relations executive is involved with the strategic management processes of the organization, and communication programs are developed for strategic publics identified as a part of this strategic management process. (p. 38) [italics added for emphasis]

No fewer than three uses of the term “strategic” and two uses of “management” appear in this 32-word sentence. Hallahan et al. (2007) noted that “strategic communication has been used synonymously for public relations” in much of the literature (p. 9). Similarly, the major edited

In Europe, where the practices referred to as public relations in Anglo-American terms are widely used (Bentele, 2004), but “rarely under that name” (van Ruler & Verčič, 2004, p. 1), the dominant models of public communication by organizations are directly referred to as strategic communication (Aarts, 2009; Aarts & Van Woerkum, 2008), communication management (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005), and corporate communication (Cornelissen, 2011; Van Riel, 1995; Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007; Zerfass, 2008).

In a recent analysis, Torp (2011) concluded that within organizations “we now have a situation where everything is viewed as strategic communication” (p. 1) and framed within a management context.

However, PR and corporate communication encompass significantly differing understandings of strategic communication and communication management. Drawing on Deetz’s (1992) identification of the twin purposes of communication—participation and effectiveness—Torp (2011) noted “a historical oscillation” in the field between seeing communication as an interactive process of contributing to public opinion and engaging with others versus “communication viewed primarily as a means of achieving certain goals and exercising control” (p. 1).

In their widely used PR text that outlined four models of practice and led to Excellence theory, J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) explicitly stated that public relations is an “organizational sub-system” operating within organizations understood as systems (pp. 8–9). To be fair, L. Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2006) emphasized that “the systems approach recognizes the . . . interdependence of organizations with their environments” (p. 33). J. Grunig and others have argued that, among five types of sub-systems in organizations (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, pp. 8–9; Broom, 2009, p. 173), PR and corporate communication are part of the adaptive subsystem responsible for monitoring the environment and helping the organization adapt to its environment, as well as adapt the environment to suit the needs of the organization. Similarly, Cornelissen (2011) has stated that in corporate communication “strategy is about the organization and its environment.” He says strategy involves:

balancing the mission and vision of the organization—what it is, what it wants to be, and what it wants to do—with what the environment will allow or encourage it to do. Strategy is therefore often adaptive. (p. 83)

Nevertheless, Murphy (2007) has argued that, even though PR Excellence theory has moved beyond basic systems theory to incorporate elements of relational and dialogic theory and recognize complexity theory, the problematic concept of control remains central to all systems-based theories. Like a number of others, Murphy (2011) notes that “control has long been a troublesome issue in strategic communication” (p. 3).

Many scholars also point out that ‘strategic’ is associated with power and decision making (Mintzberg, 1979) and being goal or “outcome focused” (Łukaszewski, 2001). The questions asked by critics are: Who has power? Who makes decisions? Whose goals and outcomes are pursued? A decidedly skewed answer is provided in the definition of organizational strategic communication as “purposeful use of communication to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3) [italics added]. Similarly, Perrow (1992) proposed that strategy is about organizational survival and efficiency. In her postmodern analysis of public relations, Ströh (2007) says that
Excellence theory most commonly reflects that “strategic means that public relations messages are aligned with organizational goals already decided by the dominant coalitions” (p. 199).

Even though L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Ehling (1992) claim that strategy is about “thinking ahead or planning rather than manipulation and control” (p. 123), Hallahan et al. (2007) point out that “part of the problem with the term strategic is that it has been strongly associated with a modernist approach to management.” They summarize that “critics of this approach argue [that] strategic communication privileges a management discourse and emphasizes upper management’s goals for the organization as given and legitimate” (p. 11). As a result, Verhoeven, Zerfass, and Tench (2011) observe that strategic communication by organizations has often been criticized as manipulative to true participative debate. Some critics of strategic communication go further and argue that it is, by nature, propagandistic (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

However, in their landmark paper on strategic communication, Hallahan et al. pointed out that “alternative and more positive notions of strategy have . . . emerged” that “reject the use of strategic only in an asymmetrical context” (p. 13). They argued that in the context in which it is used today in public relations “strategic must not be defined narrowly.” Instead, they proposed that “strategic is a rich, multidimensional concept that needs to be examined broadly” (p. 27).

Specifically, Hallahan et al. pointed out that contemporary models of public relations are based on two-way transactional rather one-way transmissive models of communication which recognize and engage audiences in an inclusive ‘win-win’ process. In addition, they cite and support Holtzhausen’s (2005) view that strategic communication management includes recognition that organizational survival means that organizations must adhere to the dominant value systems of the environments in which they operate. Strategic communication counsel can include urging organizations to comply with social expectations and values, which is contrary to notions that being strategic necessarily implies asymmetrical communication, according to Hallahan et al. (2007, p. 14).

Third, the broad meanings of strategic as long-term and focused on the ‘big picture’ suggest that being self-serving is not strategic. Long-term, the interests of key stakeholders as well as the organization need to be served if the organization is to continue to operate successfully. Furthermore, a core element of strategic communication is research which informs and influences an organization in relation to public expectations, concerns, interests, and needs (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Dozier, 1990; L. Grunig et al., 2002; Macnamara, 2011; Watson & Noble, 2007).

Drawing on the work of Mintzberg (1988) on emergent business strategies, King (2010) referred to this interactive construction of strategy as “emergent communication strategies.” While acknowledging that communication strategy is often planned actions by organizations to achieve desired results, she noted that strategies also emerge regardless of writer/speaker intent. She defined emergent communication strategies as “a communicative construct derived from interaction between reader/hearer response, situated context, and discursive patterns” (p. 20).

Alternative understandings of strategic communication as open and participatory were taken up by a number of scholars in papers presented to the 2011 International Communication Association (ICA) pre-conference on strategic communication. These, along with the writings of Hallahan et al. and King, provide a useful body of work to inform thinking about social media communication, as will become clear in the following discussion. For instance, Falkheimer and Heide (2011) called on scholars and practitioners to “break the dominant approach to strategic communication,” which has focused on control, persuasion and organizational effectiveness and adopt a participatory approach (p. 14). Torp (2011) warned against “reductionist understandings
of communication” as either about participation or about effectiveness—and particularly against
tactical use of participation “put into the service of [organizational] effectiveness” (p. 16). In a
pragmatic compromise, he called for what he termed “the strategic turn” to incorporate the duality
that Deetz (1992) identified—openness to participation, while at the same time not abandoning
the organizational imperative to represent and advocate its interests and seek to persuade. Murphy
(2011) proposed that a network view of strategic communication provides a “holistic view of the
opinion arena in which [public] communication takes place” and recognizes the interconnected,
fluid, volatile and participatory nature of this environment. She concluded: “In this environment,
‘management’ means finding a way for strategic communicators to play a continuing role—not
control, but a role—in shaping their messages, so they can at least participate in issue arenas
that determine public opinion” (p. 14). This perspective is particularly relevant in examining
organizational use of social media.

Similarly, beyond the dominant paradigm of communication management in U.S.-developed
Excellence theory, which calls for senior corporate communicators to be part of or have influence
in the ‘dominant coalition’ (senior management team) and for a participative rather than
authoritarian culture at organization level (see Grunig et al., 2002), European understandings are
relevant and informative in examining social media. In addition to managerial and operational
roles similar to those conceived in U.S. PR theories and models, European conceptualizations of
communication management incorporate a reflective role (van Ruler, Verčič, Bütschi, & Flodin,
2000, 2001; van Ruler & Verčič, 2004, 2005; Verčič, van Ruler, Bütschi, & Flodin, 2001) and an
educational role (Verčič et al., 2001).

The reflective role relates to analyzing changing standards and values in society and discussing
these with organization management in order to adjust the standards and values of the organi-
zation to ensure social responsibility and maintain legitimacy. Verhoeven, Zerfass, and Tench
(2011) note that “preserving societal legitimacy of an organization is the primary task of com-
unication management” (p. 96). The educational role involves helping members of the organization
become sensitive to social demands and expectations and communicatively competent to respond
appropriately to those social demands (Verčič et al., 2001). The relevance and importance of
these theoretical frameworks and concepts become clear as we look at social media.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as internet-based applications built on the ide-
ological and technological foundations of Web 2.0. To understand the characteristics of Web
2.0 in a way that avoids technological determinism and focuses on the communication practices
and affordances that it enables and fosters, it is useful to consider the views of the pioneers and
architects of this interactive communication and media environment as well as scholarly studies.

The term Web 2.0 is widely attributed to Tim O’Reilly who used it as the theme of a con-
ference in 2004 referring to a second generation of Web-based services that feature openness
for participation, collaboration and interactivity (Boler, 2008, p. 39; O’Reilly, 2005).\(^1\) In his

\(^1\) First use of the term Web 2.0 dates back to a 1999 article in Print magazine by Darcy DiNucci (1999, p. 32). However, DiNucci used the term mainly in relation to design and aesthetics in her article targeted at Web designers. The more common broad use of Web 2.0 is attributed to Tim O’Reilly (2005).
description, O’Reilly emphasized a new way of thinking behind Web 2.0 more than particular technologies. In a much-quoted essay titled ‘What is Web 2.0,’ O’Reilly said a central principle of Web 2.0 is harnessing “collective intelligence,” a concept discussed extensively by sociologist Pierre Lévy (1997). O’Reilly summarized: “you can visualize Web 2.0 as a set of principles and practices” (2005, para. 7) [italics added].

Another Web 2.0 pioneer Peter Merholz refers to a philosophy behind the practices of Web 2.0 [italics added]. In his blog Peterme.com under a salutary heading ‘Web 2.0—it’s not about the technology,’ Merholz (2005) states: “Web 2.0 is primarily interesting from a philosophical standpoint. It’s about relinquishing control, it’s about openness, trust and authenticity” (para. 5).

Publisher of ReadWriteWeb which is one of the world’s top 20 blogs specializing in analysis of Web products and trends, New Zealander Richard MacManus (2005) presents a number of definitions of Web 2.0 including describing it as a platform, but also as “an attitude not a technology” and specifically as “the underlying philosophy of relinquishing control” (paragraphs 2, 3, 5).

In Convergence Culture, Henry Jenkins (2006, p. 243) also emphasizes that convergence of communication and content on the latest iteration of the Web is about culture more than technology and, in particular, “participatory culture.”

In scholarly texts, Bucy (2004) similarly emphasizes interactivity as a defining element of Web communication, particularly Web 2.0—albeit interactivity is interpreted in multiple ways and needs clarification to fully appreciate Web 2.0-based social media. Three levels of interactivity are discussed by Carpentier (2007), McMillan (2002, pp. 166–172) and Szuprowicz (1995) in relation to computer mediated communication. The latter defines these as user-to-system interactivity, user-to-documents interactivity, and user-to-user interactivity. User-to-system interactivity such as clicking a mouse and accessing menus (what Carpentier calls person-to-machine interaction), while significant in Human Computer Interface terms, is a basic and largely perfunctory interaction in terms of human communication. It is user-to-user interactivity that is most significant in Web 2.0, as well as open user-to-documents access to edit and create content rather than simply consume content. Boler (2008) notes that “the Web has always been about voice and conversation” and cites Web founder Tim Berners-Lee, who said the Web was never intended to be about delivering content to passive audiences, but to be about “shared creativity” (p. 39).

From definitions offered by the founders and architects of Web 2.0 as well as from scholarly literature, the defining characteristics of this emergent communication environment can be summarized as openness for participation and interactivity involving dialogue, conversation, collaboration, and co-creativity harnessing collective intelligence. Explicit in definitions and descriptions of this environment is relinquishing control that characterizes one-way, top-down information distribution models, as well as a requirement for authenticity instead of pre-packaged content (Boler, 2008; Bucy, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Macnamara, 2010, pp. 38–39).

Research Questions

Within these understandings, this study set out to investigate the following four research questions:

RQ1: What forms of social media are mostly used by organizations?
RQ2: What levels of knowledge and understanding of social media do PR and corporate communication practitioners claim to have?
RQ3: How are organizational objectives, strategy, and management operationalized in social media, particularly in relation to control and interests (organizational, stakeholders’, societal, or a combination)?

RQ4: Can organizational objectives, strategy and management be operationalized in social media in a way that is compatible with the philosophy, principles, and practices of social media and, if so, how?

**METHODOLOGY**

The studies were undertaken between May and August 2011 in two stages using a mixed method approach. The first stage involved online surveys conducted in three European countries (Austria, Germany and Switzerland) and three Australasian countries and one territory\(^2\) (Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Hong Kong), designed to provide comparable international data. These countries and one territory were selected as major developed markets able to be directly compared when studied using the same methodology, as well as being broadly comparable with the United States where some previous studies have been undertaken, as cited in the literature. The purpose of undertaking studies in a number of countries in both Europe and Australasia was to identify international patterns and trends and explore whether findings are peculiar to particular societies and cultures, or generalizable about organizational communication in multiple countries and regions.

**Sample**

The sampling frame for the online surveys was professional corporate communication and public relations practitioners. This occupational group was selected for studying organizational social media communication based on the finding of Fink and Zerfass (2010) and Zerfass et al. (2010) that PR/communication departments and units claim to be primarily responsible for social media in organizations.

Practitioners in this category in Australasia were identified as accredited members of the following organizations which supported the survey by providing access to their membership lists: the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA); the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ); the Institute of Public Relations of Singapore (IPRS); the Hong Kong PR Professionals Association (HKPRPA); and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) in Australia. Practitioners in Europe were identified and accessed through the mailing list of *pressesprecher* magazine and the *Bundesverband deutscher Pressesprecher* (BdP) [German Association of Press Officers], the leading German language publication and the largest professional organization in the field.

Recruitment of participants was undertaken using an e-mail invitation containing a link to the online survey questionnaire sent to all names in the databases of the above organizations which contain registered members prequalified by occupation and role. This provided a reasonable level of control over the sample and validity in the study.

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\(^2\)Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China.
Methods

The survey used a structured online questionnaire with 22 closed-end questions in Europe and 25 closed-end questions in Australasia, up to seven of which had an option for open-end comments, as well as one fully open-end question.

The survey yielded 596 completed questionnaires in Europe, sufficient for strong statistical reliability, and 221 responses in Australasia. The latter was a response rate of just five per cent and yielded an insufficient number of responses for high statistical reliability. This was somewhat disappointing, but as many practitioners are not yet actively involved in or competent with social media as demonstrated in this and other research, this response rate is perhaps not surprising. While not having high statistical reliability in Australasia, the surveys nonetheless provide useful insights into the views and practices of PR practitioners in Australasia and Europe.

In its second stage, this study sought to test the claims of PR and corporate communication practitioners obtained as self-reporting in the surveys and further explore the key issues of strategy, objectives, management, control, and organizational interests versus openness and others’ interests through depth interviews with a selection of leaders and “experts” in social media. Interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 14 social media specialists in Australia (9), Singapore (1), and Hong Kong (2). Qualitative interviews were not conducted in Europe and may be a further useful stage of research. However, a number of the social media leaders and ‘experts’ interviewed work with multinational companies and had international experience which they could report. For instance, while confidentiality was offered to interviewees, it can be revealed that interviewees included the heads of digital media for Deloitte Digital and two leading international PR consultancies. For the purposes of this study, social media specialists were defined as practitioners employed specifically in senior social/digital media management roles within organizations and specialist consultants in social/digital media.

Limitations

Although use of identical survey instruments internationally was considered ideal from a statistical analysis perspective, regional differences in terminology, stage of social media uptake and sociocultural factors necessitated some adaptation of the survey instrument across regions. For instance, the notion of control is understood quite differently in Germany where “communication control” and the role of “communication controllers” are seen as equivalents of financial control and financial controllers, focused on tracking, measurement and process, and performance management, compared with Australasian countries, where control is perceived as wielding power, restraint and domination. Also, the concept of governance in relation to social media that emerged as a key issue in previous European research (Zerfass et al., 2010; Zerfass, Fink, & Linke, 2011) is not well understood in some Australasian countries. Also, varying samples sizes and response rates meant that advanced statistical analysis could not be conducted. However, the purpose of the research was exploratory rather than definitive and broadly similar survey questionnaires were used in the first stage of the study with a number of common questions, which allowed descriptive statistical analysis and comparison of key findings.
Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis of survey data was undertaken to produce data tables and charts reporting and comparing responses using SPSS and Microsoft Excel. Advanced statistical analysis was not undertaken of the total data pool because of variances in sample size and some variations in the survey instruments, as discussed previously. However, statistical significance and dependencies were tested within each study using variance analysis and correlation coefficients (Pearson’s or Spearman’s Rho, depending on data volume).

Interview transcripts were produced from digital recordings and analyzed using two levels of coding. First, in vivo coding was undertaken to identify main themes and topics. Second, pattern or axial coding was used to identify predominant views within each category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Punch, 1998, p. 205). The predominant views of specialists were compared with the generalized views of practitioners as part of validating findings and used to gain deeper insights into current methods of social media use and management.

KEY FINDINGS

A number of findings with important implications for senior management as well as PR and corporate communication practitioners emerged from this study. Key findings of quantitative and qualitative analysis are reported together and integrated, as they complement to provide an understanding of how social media are used and managed in organizations.

Main Types of Social Media Used by Organizations

The surveys found that the main types of social media used by organizations in Australasia and Europe are public social networks such as Facebook, video sharing sites such as YouTube, microblogs such as Twitter, blogs, and photo-sharing sites (see Table 1). To a lesser extent, wikis, podcasting, and private social networks such as Yammer are used for communication by organizations. Only a small proportion of organizations use vodcasting and virtual worlds such as Second Life.

Some regional differences are evident, with video sharing sites almost as popular as social networks in Europe, yet microblogging is more popular in Australasia than in Europe where blogs continue to be used more than short-format microblogs.

| TABLE 1 | Types of Social Media Most Used by Organizations (Australasia: n = 221; Europe: n = 596) |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| Social media used | Australasia | Europe |
| Social networks (e.g. Facebook) | 73% | 56% |
| Microblogging (e.g., Twitter) | 55% | 50% |
| Video sharing (e.g., YouTube) | 51% | 52% |
| Blogs | 48% | 29% |
| Photo sharing (e.g., Flickr) | 24% | 19% |

Note. Percentages do not total 100% as respondents could select more than one type.
Although direct comparison with other studies is not the purpose or appropriate here due to different methodologies and research instruments, it is significant that the findings are broadly consistent with those of previous U.S. and European studies as reported by Wright and Hinson (2009) and Zerfass et al. (2010), which also reported social networks, video sharing, microblogging, and blogging to be the most used social media. Also, a wider pan-European study of 43 countries reported in the *European Communication Monitor 2011* (Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, et al., 2011) confirms these to be the social media most used by organizations.

### Social Media Knowledge and Understanding in Organizations

Three-quarters of PR and corporate communication practitioners in Australasia and almost 70% of European practitioners claim to have “advanced” or “intermediate” knowledge of social media. In contrast, less than a third of European practitioners and just a quarter of Australasian practitioners describe themselves as a novice, beginner or not knowing anything about using social media (see Table 2).

However, other findings of these surveys suggest that a number of these claims are over-stated. For instance, a lack of policies and guidelines on social media use by employees, a lack of monitoring of social media content, a lack of training and support provided to staff engaged in social media in most organizations (see Table 3), and a lack of social media strategies in organizations.

#### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media Knowledge</th>
<th>Australasia</th>
<th>Europe</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced/high</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate/medium</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low/novice/or leave it to others</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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#### Table 3

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<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Australasia</th>
<th>Europe</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broad social media strategy/policy</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific social media guidelines</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring of social media</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training of staff in social media</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measures social media KPIs</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Percentages do not total 100% as respondents could select more than one type.

a. Tools or services capable of monitoring all social media mentions of the organization. Some organizations monitor specific social media or monitor in an ad hoc way.

b. Qualitative and specific Key Performance Indicator (KPI) evaluation only. Some additional organizations collect quantitative metrics such as the number of views, visitors and downloads.
were found, as discussed in the following, which are inconsistent with the knowledge levels and role claims of PR and corporate communication practitioners. Also, all social media specialists interviewed rated the knowledge of PR and corporate communication practitioners as low to moderate in relation to social media.

Managing Social Media in Organizations

This study found that only 20% of Australasian organizations and 23% of European organizations have an overarching social media strategy or policy outlining the objectives of social media use, who can speak on behalf of the organization in social media and under what circumstances (see Table 3).

This investigation and the literature suggest that the terms “strategy,” “policy,” and “guidelines” are used in varying ways in relation to social media. For instance, a study by Hrdinová, Helbig, and Peters (2010) for the Center for Technology in Government at the University at Albany, SUNY, differentiated between social media policies and guidelines, describing them as follows:

In general, guidelines provide advice on how to best use social media tools to achieve a desired result, such as eliciting citizen engagement or providing suggestions for creating interesting content. Policies, on the other hand, represent official positions that govern the use of social media by employees in government agencies, such as detailing what constitutes acceptable use or outlining official processes for gaining access to social media sites. (p. 3)

Hrdinová et al. found a mixture of “policies” and “guidelines” used by the 32 government communication professionals who they interviewed. Of 26 documents reviewed, they reported 10 were official social media policies and 12 were social media guidelines, with four being a mixture of both. They reported further in relation to social media policies for government organizations:

Developing a social media policy can be an important first step for those government agencies considering using social media and can ultimately serve as a key enabler for responsibly and effectively leveraging social media tools. Yet, many governments are struggling with what such a policy should encompass and convey. Not surprisingly, given the emergent nature of social media, relatively few U.S. governments actually have a formalised set of policies to guide their own efforts, as well as for others to draw on or learn from. (p. 2)

Social media specialists interviewed in this study unanimously advocated that both public and private sector organizations should have a social media strategy and argued that, while policies and guidelines inform who is authorized to speak on what, when and how within organizations, a strategy should include overall objectives, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), an outline of measurement methods and explain how social media communication is integrated with other corporate and organizational communication.

Examination of the types and forms of policies and guidelines informing social media use in organizations revealed that only 31% of European organizations and slightly more than a third (35%) of Australasian organizations have specific social media policies and/or guidelines—and even fewer appear to have social media strategies. (This means that around two-thirds of organizations do not have specific policies or guidelines in relation to social media.) This accords with
recent pan-European research findings—for example, Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, et al. (2011) found that 40% of PR professionals cite the existence of social media policies and/or guidelines in their organization (i.e., 60% do not have policies or guidelines).

Of particular concern, according to social media specialists interviewed, is that many organizations have no social media policy or guidelines for employees at all (e.g., 23% of Australasian organizations). In Australasia, a further 19% rely on verbal instructions to staff or occasional management memos and e-mails. Such an open, unmanaged, and unregulated approach is decidedly non-strategic and even foolhardy in the view of most social media specialists interviewed, as it exposes organizations to substantial risks as will be discussed later.

Monitoring of social media content which could be considered an essential component of environmental scanning, tracking, measurement, and reporting is also only patchily undertaken by most organizations. As shown in Table 3, only 20% of Australasian organizations and 29% of European organizations have tools or services to monitor all social media mentions of the organization and its products or services. A number of others monitor selectively or in an ad hoc way, but in Australasia, for instance, almost half of organizations either do not monitor social media mentions at all or monitor sporadically. Again, this is broadly similar to the pan-European finding of Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, et al. (2011) that only 33% of organizations have tools for monitoring social media and indicates that many organizations are unaware of what is being said about them and their products or services in social media by employees or others.

It can be argued that, in addition to monitoring of social media, content analysis also should be undertaken to identify the issues and topics being discussed, sources quoted, and the tone of content—that is, whether it is positive or negative for the organization. However, this study found that 36% of Australasian organizations do not analyze social media content at all and a further 22% conduct quantitative analysis only focused on volume of mentions, visits, views, and other statistical metrics. Thus, almost 60% of organizations do not know whether negative comments are being made about them or their activities online (breakdown not available for European organizations).

Only 15% of Australasian organizations and 21% of European organizations engage in evaluation of social media coverage against Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). This appears to continue the trend of PR and corporate communication being underresearched, particularly at an outcome evaluation level.

More than two-thirds (67%) of Australasian organizations and almost three-quarters (73%) of European organizations do not provide any training for staff using social media. There is also very limited support provided to employees engaging in social media communication. For instance, in Australasian countries studied, only 23% or organizations provide technical support and only 7% provide editing services (e.g., to help technical staff such as scientists and engineers to write blogs).

This finding and evidence of lack of policies and guidelines are important given the democratized nature of social media. The open ready access to social media available either through organization servers, personal internet connections or near ubiquitous 3G mobile networks and their growing use mean that public communication in organizations is increasingly decentralized from PR and corporate communication departments to all employees, customers, and other stakeholders. With social media, everyone is potentially a public communicator—as expressed in the term *prosumer* (combined producer and consumer) coined by Alvin Toffler (1970, 1980) and
espoused in popular books such as Dan Gillmor’s *We The Media* (2006) and Clay Shirky’s *Here Comes Everybody* (2008).

Concern About Control

The potential for an organization’s customers, members, shareholders, other stakeholders, and publics such as voters, as well as its own employees, to comment online, post videos and photos and engage in public discussion has triggered major concerns among PR and corporate communication practitioners about control. “Loss of control” over messages and image building was cited as the major obstacle and risk in using social media in Australasia, nominated by 58% of practitioners, and as the second highest concern in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, nominated by 55% of practitioners. The only concern rated higher in the European countries studied was the amount of effort and time required to actively use social media at work (76% of European practitioners express this concern).

Although noting differences in understandings of control, social media specialists interviewed were unanimous in the view that social media could not be controlled. But rather than see this as a peculiar challenge in using social media, most noted that corporate and organizational communication have never been controllable in the sense that the term is understood in most English-speaking countries. The problematic nature of control is widely discussed in PR and corporate communication literature. For instance, J. Grunig and L. Grunig (2010) as well as Fawkes and Gregory (2000, p. 122) have critiqued the “illusion of control” that deludes many PR practitioners as well as senior management and restricts open dialogic approaches and engagement.

In social media, in particular, the philosophy of openness in terms of access, participation and range of content that is foundational to Web 2.0 means that organizations need to tread sensitively in managing employees’ use of social media as well as in moderating public comments on online sites.

All social media specialists interviewed support an open rather than a restrictive approach to employee use of social media. A number go beyond permitting employees to comment online and call for organizations to proactively develop staff as “ambassadors” and even “evangelists” for their organizations. They argue that the spontaneously expressed views of staff are usually far more authentic and credible than organization communication distributed through centrally controlled departments such as PR and corporate communication. However, social media specialists recommend such an open approach within a framework of clear policies and guidelines, thorough training, sometimes editing services to guide and assist staff, and comprehensive monitoring of social media content.

One senior social media specialist who agreed to be named, CEO of Deloitte Digital, Peter Williams, reported that despite having lawyers on Deloitte’s Social Media Committee and a 30-page global social media policy, the international consultancy firm advocated and practiced an open approach to employees using social media. Williams said, “it comes down to a simple rule: ‘don’t embarrass us; don’t embarrass yourself; we trust you’” (personal communication, September 30, 2011). But, like other experienced social media specialists interviewed, Williams simultaneously advocated a strong management and governance framework for social media use.

However, openness is counter-intuitive to many organizations, particularly those with hierarchal structures and reporting systems, those operating in highly regulated environments, and
those concerned about security, privacy, and reputation. There is also potential tension, if not outright conflict, between organizational requirements for strategy and management and societal interests—particularly when narrow notions of strategic communication and communication management are applied. Findings of this study require some degree of reflection and discussion to fully understand their implications and what future directions they suggest in social media communication by organizations.

DISCUSSION

Blurring of the Private and Public

One of the reasons for tensions and some confusion surrounding communication practices in social media is that they are social spaces that traverse both the private sphere (Chartier, 1989; Hansson, 2007; Papacharissi, 2010) and the public sphere (Habermas, 1989, 2006), which have been viewed as fundamental divisions in Western social, political, and economic thinking (Gal, 2005). Increasingly scholars challenge the separation of a private sphere (individuality, personal relations, and home life) and the public sphere of society (communities, politics, and work).

For instance, Goodman (1992) says that “the public sphere articulated by Habermas is a dimension of the private sphere delineated by Chartier and his collaborators” and she concludes that “the false opposition between them can be collapsed” (p. 2). Contemporary scholars further argue that globalization, network society (Castells, 1996) and the open nature of and widespread use of the internet have negated any sustainable separation between private and public spheres—although Livingstone (2005) notes that public and private mean different things in different contexts and forms of privacy can exist on the internet. Nevertheless, in her 2011 analysis of relationships and voice, Baxter proposes a “reworking” of “the false binary of public/private” (2011, p. 8) and such a reworking aids understanding of social media communication, particularly employees’ use of social media and the complex and changing notions of privacy in an online world. Today, organizations need to recognize and adjust to this blurring of what is public and what is private.

A second reason for uncertainty and nascent strategies in relation to social media is the widespread recognition of blogs, microblogging sites, social networks, and photo- and video-sharing internet sites as “new media” (Flew, 2008; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2005; Lister et al., 2009). Although the concept of “new media” is questioned as a useful and durable description by some (e.g., Macnamara, 2010), these media constitute relatively recent and quite substantial changes in the mediaspace that governments and organizations are still adapting to and learning to use, according to the literature and social media specialists interviewed. This relative newness, and a lack of research to inform planning and management, is evident in the following discussion.

Governance

A number of the findings of this study can be grouped under the rubric of governance and this affords a useful alternative to control as a management framework for organizational use of social media. Drawing on social science literature on governance (e.g., Van Kersbergen & Van Waarden,
social media governance as “the formal or informal frameworks which regulate the actions of the members of an organization within the social web” (p. 1033). More specifically, Fink and Zerfass (2010) and Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, et al. (2011, pp. 92–95) identified social media governance as comprising:

- Social media guidelines for communicating in blogs, Twitter, etc.;
- Tools for monitoring stakeholder communication on the social web;
- Training programs for social media; and
- Key performance indicators for measuring social web activities.

Social media governance is an important issue worthy of study, as lack of governance in relation to employees’ use of social media exposes organizations to significant risks including:

- Release of confidential information or trade secrets;
- Public embarrassment through employees commenting inappropriately online or engaging with inappropriate content (e.g. ‘flaming,’ denigrating others, racist or sexist language, cyberbullying, pornography, etc);
- Reputation damage through any of the above;

A very limited amount of research has been conducted into social media governance, largely restricted to the work Fink and Zerfass (2010); Zerfass, Fink, and Linke (2011); Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, et al. (2011); and Zerfass et al. (2010) in Europe and Hrdinová, Helbig, and Peters (2010) in the United States, as cited in this analysis. Further examination of governance as a concept in communication management, and social media governance in particular, is desirable to address a significant gap and area of risk.

The Brand Science Institute in Germany reported in 2010 that only 11% of companies had social media policies or guidelines in place. Furthermore, the institute reported that 76% did not moderate social media projects accurately, if at all, and 86 per cent “do not have a clue how to handle a social media backlash” such as that suffered by Nestlé over its use of palm oil, which resulted in a social media campaign that rebranded its Kit-Kat chocolate bars as “Killer Kat” (Brand Science Institute, 2010).

A similar situation in relation to governance was found by Fink and Zerfass (2010) in their survey of 1,007 companies, government institutions and nonprofit organizations in Germany. They found that 90% or organizations had no explicit regulatory framework or governance in place (p. 6). In their pan-European study involving almost 2,000 PR and corporate communication practitioners, Zerfass, Tench, Verhoeven, et al. (2010) also pointed to social media governance as an important emerging issue.

Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, et al. (2011) concluded that “overall, governance structures for social media are still underdeveloped and can be seen to be missing from most communication departments across Europe” (p. 91). The studies reported here also found this also to be the case in Australasia and Europe.

Governance affords a framework for communication management that meets organizational requirements for security, privacy when required on legal or ethical grounds, regulatory compliance, and reputation management without being overly restrictive or manipulative. Governance provides responsible but minimal restrictions and regulatory processes and thus can be seen as a
necessary, but socially sensitive approach to managing PR and corporate communication, whereas control in most cultures and contexts implies organization-centricity and domination.

Social media specialists interviewed in this study were unanimous in the view that control, or even highly restrictive management, are anathematic to social media engagement. This view is supported in a commercial report released during the period of this research by KPMG titled *Social Media: The Voyage of Discovery for Business*. KPMG (2011) recommends that organisations should “guide employee use, rather than developing extensive formal rules that restrict it” (p. 6). Respondents in the KPMG study stated that “clamping down was likely to result in more, rather than less, misuse of social media.” In its key conclusions, the study stated: “Very few employees want to do the wrong thing—if they do, there are probably deeper cultural issues in play” (p. 1).

**Strategy**

As discussed in the literature, organizational communication and PR are widely conceptualized as strategic communication and this study confirmed that a strategic focus and integration of all forms of corporate communication is advocated by social media specialists. While noting the need for interactivity and openness in social media engagement, social media specialists interviewed pointed out that, if there is no strategic benefit to be gained from an organisation engaging in social media, then there was no point in them doing so. Also, they argued strongly that social media communication should be integrated and coordinated with other corporate and organizational communication to maintain a coherent brand and consistent messages. A strategic focus is also strongly recommended in professional literature. For instance, a 2010 report on ‘digital leadership’ by one of the world’s leading executive search firms, Spencer Stuart, listed as the first of its “10 suggestions for thriving in a digital world . . . building a comprehensive digital strategy that is shared broadly and repeatedly across the organisation” (Nadherny et al., 2010, p. 1). Under such pressure, practitioners will increasingly look for ways to achieve strategic communication through social media. The ongoing debate over strategic communication and the different approaches advocated, as discussed in the literature, are therefore pertinent and highly informative to this consideration.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Use of social media for organizational communication is shown to be mostly experimental and ad hoc, rather than strategically planned in organizations across a number of countries. Specifically, organizational social media communication is most often undertaken without clear objectives and it is not integrated with other organizational communication, and not evaluated against objectives and Key Performance Indicators. This is most likely a result of the relative newness of social media, the democratization of media and voice that they enable, and the changing nature of public and private spheres in a globalized, networked “always on” world.

As social media become deployed in the service of strategic communication in organizations, which inevitably must occur with “institutionalization” of communication management (Verhoeven, Zerfass, & Tench, 2011) and the requirements of organizational planning and governance, it is important that they are not ‘colonized’ for traditional organization-centric forms of
strategic communication. Such an approach is in direct conflict with the philosophies of openness, participation and democratization of Web 2.0. Broader participatory, networked approaches to strategic communication as proposed by Hallahan et al. (2007) and taken up by others such as Falkheimer and Heide (2011), King (2010), Murphy (2011), and Torp (2011) that reflect stakeholders’ and societal interests as well as those of organizations, offer a framework that is compatible with social media.

At a communication management level, governance offers a more compatible framework than control which is problematic, particularly in relation to social media. While noting arguments that control is not possible in any communicative interaction, and European concepts of ‘communication controlling’ as synonymous with monitoring processes and evaluation akin to financial control and accounting (Dühring & Linke, 2011), most expressions of control involve centralization and domination by the controlling entity. Such approaches are again in direct conflict with the philosophies of Web 2.0 and the practices of social media.

It has to be recognized, however, that organizations cannot be expected to engage in social media in a totally responsive, unmanaged way—and indeed it would be contrary to many regulations and the interests of many stakeholders if they did so. Governance offers a management framework in which the mutual interests of organizations, their stakeholders and society at large can be protected and advanced. Increased research and focus on the practices of governance in social media communication by organizations is therefore strongly recommended.

In addition to seeking to exhibit the characteristics of contemporary strategic communication theory as discussed, management of organizational social media communication can benefit from European conceptualizations of communication management which emphasize reflective thinking as well as an educational role. Reflective thinking involves “viewing an organisation from the outside, or public view,” according to van Ruler & Verčič (2005, p. 253), while the educational aspects of communication management “help all the members of the organisation become sensitive to social demands and expectations and communicatively competent to respond appropriately to those social demands” (Macnamara, 2011, p. 246). These elements of European models of communication management are particularly applicable to social media and could be beneficially adopted internationally.

Overall, organizational social media communication requires balance—balancing the dual purposes of communication identified by Deetz (1992): participation involving openness and community on one hand and effectiveness in representing organizational interests and achieving organizational objectives on the other. Although this symmetry has long been a stated goal of public relations and corporate communication, interactive social media place additional demands on organizations in relation to the number of voices that are allowed to speak for and about the organization and require increased capacity for community engagement and listening.

Despite strong interest in social media and claims for intermediate to advanced knowledge and skills among PR and corporate communication practitioners, the lack of strategy, policies, guidelines for employees, training, monitoring, and evaluation in relation to social media shown by this research suggests that their knowledge and skills are still low to intermediate. Thus, education of PR and corporate communication practitioners in social media practices, not simply the technologies, is an important step towards achieving that balance in organizational social media engagement.

Coping with the digital evolution and the social web is rated one of the most important issues for communication management over the coming years (Zerfass et al., 2010, p. 90).
The international collaborative studies reported here highlight some of the gaps and risks to be addressed, as well as approaches to communication strategy and communication management that can balance the interests of organizations and the communities in which they operate.

REFERENCES


MACNAMARA AND ZERFASS


