Chapter 1
How Public Relations Practitioners Perceive Social Media Platforms? A Media Richness Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Prior studies on the use of social media by public relations professionals are often descriptive and did not apply communication theories to fully evaluate the richness of this emerging communication platform. These studies did not explain the technology adoption process of public relations professionals. On the basis of Media Richness Theory, the authors assessed the perceptions of 162 public relations professionals from a national sample in the United States to identify emerging media richness dimensions of social media. This study found that these dimensions are not the same as those in other mass and traditional media platforms. This chapter suggests that social media should not simply be compared to traditional media, because they have demonstrated unique medium characteristics. Both theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Improvements in computers, mobile technologies and integrated technologies have played an essential role in adding ease to the way people communicate with each other (Lica & Tuta, 2011; Margalit, 2014). While the changes generated by “new” technology have presented various opportunities in the field of communication, these fast-paced transformations demand prompt and intelligent adaptation in order to continue the efficient flow of information to its publics (Elliott, 2011; Macario, Edncot, Ullberg &
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Reichel, 2011). Among the various communication professions that are faced with the challenges and opportunities of change due to technological advancements is public relations (henceforth, PR) (Berkowitz, 2007; Elliott, 2011; Taylor & Kent, 2010; Supa, 2014). The potential impacts of social media on PR practices have led the Public Relations Society of America, the industry’s largest organization, to consider the redefinition of “public relations” (Elliott, 2011). Supa (2014) claims that social media have changed “the purposes of public relations, or its strategic value to organizations” (para 6). Since its inception, PR has relied on traditional media to communicate with the public and its target audience. However, social media have allowed PR professionals direct access to their audiences through interactive and two-way conversation (Elliott, 2011). As such, there is now a transformation of the delivery of the press release directly to the audience (Elliott, 2011; Vorvoreanu, 2008). While PR continues to rely on traditional media platforms, such as newspapers, television and radio to communicate with its target audience, the 21st century has brought an array of challenges and changes that have the potential to impact the future of the profession (Darnowski & Wright, 2010; Elliott, 2011; Supa, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2010).

These technological advancements such as social media have provided a two-way interactive communication, allowing PR specialists to create dialogue between the organization and its public, instead of the one-way communication model based on interaction between journalist and editors (Berkowitz, 2007; Elliott, 2011). As such, social media have the potential for PR specialists to access new communication tools to reach their audience directly while shifting the purpose and usage of traditional media (Vorvoreanu, 2008). Thus, the innovation of communication technologies has made it non-productive for PR specialists to simply rely on traditional methods to communicate with their audiences (Macario et al., 2011). More importantly, supported by emerging social media platforms, PR professionals have the potential to wield a powerful mechanism in reach and message delivery to target audiences (Macario et al., 2011; Wang & Hung, 2011).

While this potential creates the impetus for PR professionals to embrace social media as a beneficial tool, PR scholars have also cast doubt on their effectiveness in the educational context (Taylor & Kent, 2010) and their limited use in the media relations (Supa, 2014). A fundamental question that is lacking in the current literature is what explains the characteristics of social media as viable and effective PR communication tools. The current sub-set of the literature also did not provide a theoretical framework to support and justify these proposed recommendations to integrate social media into PR campaigns (Iodhia, 2012). In an effort to bolster that theoretical vacuum, this book chapter proposes Media Richness Theory (henceforth, MRT) as a prospective model to assess social media by focusing on their media characteristics as predictive variables to account for PR professionals’ decisions to use these emerging platforms. With the support of the MRT theoretical framework, this research aims to gauge the perceptions of PR professionals’ use of social media as a medium to communicate to audiences effectively, and to what degree the characteristics of social media facilitate the overall professional tasks necessary for PR professionals. Furthermore, the study also examines the media richness dimensions as perceived by PR professionals, to compare with existing dimensions derived from more traditional media.

BACKGROUND

The Role of Social Media in Public Relations

Although various PR organizations argue that the new frontier in PR practices is social media (Elliott, 2011; Wright & Hinson, 2014), Kent (2010) argued that social media is a concept that has existed for
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