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Examining How Public Relations Practitioners Actually Are Using Social Media

Donald K. Wright and Michelle Drifka Hinson

The international survey of public relations practitioners (n=574) reported about in this article appears to be the world's first extensive examination of how social media are being implemented in public relations practice. In addition to measuring how social media are being employed in the practice of public relations, this study also explores actual social media use by individual public relations practitioners. Results suggest meaningful and statistically significant gaps exist between what practitioners say is happening in terms of social media use and what they say should be happening. When subjects were asked how important various social media are in the overall public relations efforts of their organizations, respondents listed search engine marketing most important followed in importance by blogs, social networks, video sharing and forums or message boards. When asked how important the same list of social media options should be responses didn't do much to change the perceived order of importance, but mean scores and the overall perceived importance of all of the measured items are much higher when subjects are asked what should be happening in terms of social media use than they are when the question asks what actually is happening. Differences based upon demographics found younger respondents were more likely to recommend using social media in public relations. They also were more likely to use social media and other Internet-based technologies in their daily pursuit of news and information.

INTRODUCTION

When FedEx, the global overnight package delivery service, acquired Kinko's, the copy and office services company, in 2004, the struggle over what to call this new division of FedEx began. At first these copy stores were called Kinko's, then they became known as FedEx Kinko's, but four years after the merger the Kinko's brand was eliminated and the service is now known as FedEx Office.

Donald K. Wright, Ph.D., APR, Fellow PRSA, is Professor of Public Relations in the College of Communication at Boston University, DonaldKWright@aol.com.

Michelle Drifka Hinson, M.A., is the Director of Development for the Institute for Public Relations that is based in the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Florida, MHinson@jou.ufl.edu.

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What is interesting about the five-year transition from Kinko's to FedEx Office from a public relations and communications perspective is the strategic use FedEx made of social media, including blogs and social networks, in its successful attempt to smoothly merge two highly visible brands while maintaining public confidence and acquiring market share.

When Gayle Christensen, Director of Global Brand Management at FedEx, highlights the various things her company did during this transition, she focuses on eight steps. Most of these represent traditional things that have been done for decades in public relations and marketing campaigns including establishing a transition team, conducting quantitative and qualitative research, developing messaging about the merger, training the staff on the merger, implementing a visual identity and continually reassessing the strategy (Marketing Sherpa, 2009). In addition, FedEx established a social media strategy that included conducting interviews with bloggers and finding out who was talking about the merger on social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, as well as monitoring what was being written on online forums and blogs making a point to comment on sites mentioning the merger, especially if any of these postings involved misinformation (Marketing Sherpa, 2009).

Shel Horowitz (2009), an international expert in marketing and online communications, noted the following when commenting about the end result of this FedEx and Kinko's merger:

"I'm fascinated that setting up interviews with bloggers warrants a main headline, while traditional media is mentioned but glossed over in the paragraph. It shows how far we've come that bloggers are considered opinion molders, while traditional journalists are barely noticed. This is a growing trend, I think, and it has many implications for how we (as a society) deliver and digest news." (p.1)

WHAT ARE SOCIAL MEDIA?

It's an understatement to suggest that social media have had a huge impact on the practice of public relations since the first weblogs, or blogs, appeared more than a dozen years ago. Since then social media have developed into a number of different forms including text, images, audio and video through the development of forums, message boards, photo sharing, podcasts RSS (really simple syndication), search engine marketing, video sharing, Wikis, social networks, professional networks and micro-blogging sites.

Bill Tancer (2008), the general manager of global research at Hitwise, the world's leading online competitive insight service, says social media have overtaken pornography as the number one use of the Internet.

The International Association of Business Communicators reports more than half of all Internet users have joined a social network, social networks have become the number one platform for creating and sharing content and nearly 75 percent of all Internet users have read a blog (Young, 2009).

Although social media are changing the way people and organizations communicate there might not be any two people who define social media the same way. Mark Dykeman (2008) says, "Social media are the means for any person to: publish digital creative content; provide and obtain real-time feedback via online discussions, commentary and evaluations; and incorporate changes or corrections to the original content" (p. 1). A communication on Wikipedia (2009) claims, "Social media are primarily Internet and mobile-based tools for sharing and discussing information among human beings." In some circles what most people call social media are referred to by others as "consumer-generated media" or as "user-generated content."

Joe Marchese (2007) suggests the difference between traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, radio-television and social media "is not the media itself, but the system of discovery, distribution, consumption and conversation surrounding the media." Another Wikipedia (2009) comment, this one about financial differences between traditional and social media, points out that "social media are relatively cheap tools that enable anyone (even private individuals) to publish or access information; traditional media generally require significant financial capital to publish information." Even though both social and traditional media have the ability to reach small or large audiences, production costs usually are large for what has become a small number of traditional media outlets while social media technologies basically give anyone with access to a computer the ability to reach a potentially global audience at little or no cost.

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON PUBLIC RELATIONS

The Pew Research Center (2008) annually tracks the sources Americans use for news and for the first time in 2008 noted more people were getting their news online than from traditional mass media. However, most blend online and traditional sources in their quest for news and information. This Pew study also points out more young people than ever before are reading online versions of traditional news media.

All of this comes at a significant time for traditional news media, especially newspapers. Paid circulation figures for daily newspapers in many large American cities continue to decline to the point where some daily's such as Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* ceased publication earlier this year. Major daily newspapers such as the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Boston Globe* and are seriously considering not publishing hard-copy editions seven days each week. Following a century-long tradition of excellence, the *Christian Science Monitor* stopped publishing as a daily in March

2009 in order to concentrate on publishing a weekly edition and refining its online offerings. According to *Boston Magazine* (2009) the *Monitor's* circulation had slipped 75 percent during the past 40 years.

Similar changes have presented themselves within some of the trade publications that serve the public relations industry. Earlier this year, *PR Week*, considered by most to be the nation's most dominant public relations trade publication, changed its weekly print edition into an online format, although it does produce a printed magazine once each month. Some other public relations trade publications appear to have been impacted recently, including *PR News* which now offers nearly as many public relations short courses and seminars as it does publications.

For several years, the authors of this article have conducted an annual trend study examining the impact social media are having on public relations throughout the world (2008a, 2008b & 2009). Results clearly show that social media are bringing dramatic changes to many aspects of the field. The findings of these studies also suggest that the development of various new technologies has significantly empowered a wide variety of strategic publics by giving them dynamic new media many are using to communicate effectively with a variety of internal and external audiences.

Our previous research also has examined the impact blogs and other forms of social media have on the science that is the communication process (Wright & Hinson, 2007). Findings from these studies enhance the appropriateness of Lasswell's paradigm that asks "Who says What to Whom through which Channel with what Effect." Our findings also show that blogs and other social media are in the process of impacting the state of several traditional communication models and theories especially two-step flow theory, the conceptual model, agenda setting theory, spiral of silence theory and excellence theory.

Several recently published books explore how blogs, social media and other new technologies are changing the way organizations communicate with strategic publics such as employees, customers, stockholders, communities, governments and other stakeholders.

Larry Weber (2007), who has spent most of his professional career building global communications companies including Weber Shandwick Worldwide, suggests the communications world is dramatically moving in a digital direction and those who understand this transformation will communicate much more effectively than those who do not.

Robert Scoble, who authors the nation's most read business blog and runs Microsoft's Channel 9 web site, and Shell Israel, who has more than two decades experience as an expert on communication innovation, provide a road-

map showing how blogs are changing the way organizations communicate with important publics, especially customers (Scoble & Israel, 2006).

Brian Reich and Dan Solomon, who both have many unique accomplishments in public relations and advertising, offer tips and suggestions for companies and individuals to master the new technology in a way that will connect with and keep audiences (Reich & Solomon, 2008).

David Meerman Scott (2008a), an online thought leadership and viral marketing strategist, says, “one of the coolest things about the Web is that when an idea takes off it can propel a brand or a company to seemingly instant fame and fortune” (p. 8).

Scott also points out that although communicating via the Web usually is free – as opposed to purchasing space through traditional advertising – only a small number of public relations practitioners are effectively using blogs and other social media when communicating with their strategic publics. Scott claims the challenge to public relations and marketing people “is to harness the amazing power of . . . whatever you call it – viral, buzz, word-of-mouth, or word-of-blog – having other people tell your story drives action. One person sends it to another, then that person sends it to yet another, and on and on” (p. 8).

Furthermore, Scott (2007 & 2008) thinks many of the differences between what he calls the “old” and “new” rules of press releases are important. As he explains, nobody actually saw the old press releases except a few reporters and editors, and the only way members of the general public would learn about the content of a press release was if the media wrote or broadcast a story about it. Scott also points out the way most practitioners measured the effectiveness of a press release was through clippings, the simplest and most basic commodity of output research. Scott’s thesis about today’s “new” press releases focuses on information senders now deliver directly to receivers in various target publics via the Web. He also advocates measurement based upon whether or not the releases change or reinforce attitudes, opinions and behavior – the essence of what supporters of outcome research recommend.

Social media are being utilized on an ever-increasing basis by corporations and other organizations. McCorkindale (2009) reports more than two-thirds (69%) of the current Fortune 2000 companies are using social networking sites. Ruh and Magallon (2009) indicate the U.S. military currently is involved in studying the potential of using social media for some of its internal communication campaigns. Paine (2009a, 2009b, 2009c) points out many organizations now are trying to measure the effectiveness of their social media communication efforts.

Another measure of the growth and development of social media in public relations is the level of social media activity currently displayed by various

professional societies active in the field. In addition to web pages and e-mail communication, social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and others all have pages organized by organizations such as the Institute for Public Relations (IPR), the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the Council of Public Relations Firms, the Arthur W. Page Society and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC).

In March 2009, when IPR elected Robert W. Grupp to become its President and CEO effective this summer, the Institute's first official announcement of the appointment was made via Twitter. Twitter also has been cited as the first source to provide news seekers with information about the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India, and as the first medium to provide video when the US Air flight landed in the Hudson River on January 15, 2009. Keith O'Brien (2009), the Editor of *PR Week*, points out that "there has been great progress in the use of social media to reach various constituencies," but also says public relations and marketing practitioners have become "obsessed" with Twitter within the past year.

At a time when current economic conditions are bringing layoffs in many aspects of the public relations industry, *PR Week* (Maul, 2009) claims the future is bright for social media in public relations. According to a survey of 285 public relations practitioners conducted by the Council of Public Relations Firms (2009), most (79%) believe social media will be included more in future public relations campaigns while more than half (59%) think technology is not used enough in public relations campaigns. Kathy Cripps, President of the Council of Public Relations Firms says this about the future potential for social media and public relations. "Social media is clearly a huge growth area, and firms have done a great job of building their capabilities [and] integrating social media with the other tools that are used in public relations. Those are the areas where clients see value, and PR firms are ready to support those programs" (Maul, 2009, p. 2).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE 2008 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Many point to the 2008 presidential election in the United States as a pivotal time in the development of the importance of social media in public relations and communication because Barack Obama and his supporters effectively integrated social media and community organizing skills to shape the winning campaign (Caesar, Bush & Pitney, 2009; Jarvis, 2009; Todd & Gawiser, 2009; Hutchinson, 2008; and Libert & Faulk, 2009). The *New York Times* (Nagourney, Rutenberg & Zeleny, 2008) said the Obama campaign, that included effective use of both social and traditional media, was viewed as "almost flawless, even by rivals." (p. A1)

Ryan Alexander (2009), a social media expert with Booz Allen Hamilton, a noted strategy and technology consulting firm, has studied the role of social

media in politics and government, especially the impact social media is having on grassroots political campaigns. He points out many of the political tactics now being conveyed via social media were commonly used previously in other ways.

For example, Alexander submits that Paul Revere's depiction of the Boston Massacre might be the equivalent to a YouTube "mash up" given how individuals build on each-other's work to make the content more powerful. He also points out that Revere's large "social network" is thought to be a major reason why his "midnight ride" was successful but fellow rider William Dawes' was not. Alexander also sees many roots of today's social media in some of the grassroots tactics used in the 1960s by the civil rights movement and Vietnam War protests.

Alexander says the first political campaigns to use websites came in the presidential elections of 1996. In the 2000 presidential primary campaign, Republican John McCain raised more than \$1 Million online in 48 hours following his victory in New Hampshire. That same year, Democratic presidential hopeful Howard Dean raised \$51 Million online with most (61%) of it coming in donations of less than \$200. Alexander says this happened because Dean had a strong network of bloggers. Although Dean did not win the campaign, political fundraising was forever changed with Dean becoming the first candidate to "opt out" of matching funds. Something Obama would do in 2008.

Social media played a prominent role in the 2008 presidential campaign which essentially began three years earlier. Senator Evan Bayh, a candidate in the 2008 Democratic presidential primary, launched a Facebook page at the College Democrats Convention in 2006. This page had 2,000 Facebook "friends" 48 hours after it was launched and more than 6,000 "friends" two months later. The only other Democratic candidates with a Facebook page in 2006 were John Edwards and Mark Warner but neither kept pace with Bayh's social networking.

As Alexander notes, Barack Obama was not a presidential candidate at that point, but once he entered the campaign his team effectively used the Internet to spread the campaign message. According to Alexander, highlights of Obama's social media activities include:

- Five million friends on 15 different social networks.
- Two million profiles created on the MyBarackObama website.
- 70,000 Obama supporters raising \$30 Million for Obama on their own personal fundraising web pages.
- 200,000 offline events were planned online by more than 35,000 different volunteer groups.

- 400,000 blog posts were written about the campaign.
- The Obama campaign used the Internet to create a campaign e-mail list of 13 million people.
- Three million telephone calls were made in the final four days before the election by using the campaign's virtual phone bank system.

THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

Many aspects of technology recently have challenged how public relations is practiced. When technology first started playing a more significant role four or five years ago, Robert J. Key (2005) wrote, "Public relations in the digital age requires understanding how your key constituents are gathering and sharing information and then influencing them at key points. Doing so requires strategies that embrace the digital age" (p. 19). About this same time, Edelman and Intelliseek (2005) described blogs as being "easily published, personal web sites that serve as sources of commentary, opinion and uncensored, unfiltered sources of information on a variety of topics." (p. 4). Key (2005) suggests that many weblogs began sporadically as vanity publishing because "anyone with an opinion about anything could create, in a matter of minutes, his or her own web site for publishing news, opinion, commentary and links to other sites" (p. 18).

It is believed there were 34 million blogs in existence at the end of 2005 (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005). Weber (2007) claims there were 100 million blogs by 2007. Technorati, a search tool that tracks blogging topics, links and trends, claims the number of blogs doubled from about 30 million to about 60 million between 2003 and 2006. Weber (2007) says more than 100,000 new blogs are created every day. He also says 1.3 million posts are added to existing blogs daily. Technorati (2008) claims that in the US alone in 2008 there were 23 million bloggers and 94 million blog readers.

Just as important to public relations practitioners as the number of blogs is how many of them are news-related. Technorati (2008) figures indicate more than 50,000 blogs mention typical news events every day and on some days that figure is greater than 100,000.

Although blogging most definitely is a global phenomenon, Scoble and Israel (2006) point out some companies are actively involved in blogging while others are not. They also indicate a variety of factors, including culture and the availability of technology have encouraged blogging in some countries while inhibiting it in others. They say blogging is "exploding in the United States, France and Japan but (is) growing slowly in Germany, Russia and China" (p. 130).

Dave Winer (2005), who runs the Scripting News weblog, one of the first and currently the longest-running blog on the Internet, and also is a fellow at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, says the phenomenon of blogging "is nothing less than revolutionary." Winer (2003) also points out that "Weblogs are unique in that only a weblog gives you a publication where your ideas can stand alone without interference. It gives the public writer a kind of relaxation not available in other forms."

The potential impact of blogs on public relations and corporate communications is phenomenal. Steve Crescenzo, writing in *The Ragan Report* (October 24, 2005) says employee blogs have "massive, almost unlimited potential to share knowledge, foster dialogue, market goods and services, and open up two-way channels of communication" (p. 1). A study commissioned by Edelman Public Relations and Intelliseek (2005) claims, "The rise of the blogosphere has the potential to empower employees in ways not unlike the rise of labor unions in the late 19th and 20th centuries" (p. 3). Even as early as 2005, the *PR Week/Burson-Marsteller CEO Survey* (2005) reported that "59 percent of CEOs rate blogs as a good, very good, or excellent corporate communications tool for internal audiences" (p. 1).

In spite of the huge potential for blogs in both business and public relations an amazingly small number of corporations are blogging. Anderson (2005) and *Wired Magazine* said only 20 Fortune 500 companies were blogging late in 2005 and although this figure has increased since then it remains relatively small. The Socialtext *Fortune 500 Business Blogging Wiki* that tracks Fortune 500 companies that are blogging, claimed only 60 (12%) of these organizations were active in blogging as of February 11, 2009. Fredrik Wackå (2005), who manages the Guide to Corporate Blogging (www.corporateblogging.info) claims there are several reasons why employees are blogging. These include becoming an expert, testing ideas and personalizing relationships.

According to a Backbone Media (2005) survey the top five reasons why employees have created web blogs are to publish content and ideas (52%), build communities (47%), promote thought leadership (44%), get information to customers (36%) and get feedback from customers (23%). Steve Hirschfeld's (2006) research on behalf of the Employment Law Alliance claims millions of American workers blog – as much as five percent of the work force.

There are conflicting viewpoints regarding whether employee blogs are good or bad. According to a 2004 *BusinessWeek* article (Colin & Park, 2004), companies such as Microsoft, Dell and Sun have encouraged their employees to blog so they can create personal relationships with other employees and customers. David Weinberger (2002), the co-author of *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual* says employee blogs establish connections

“through real human beings speaking like real human beings, which is something companies have forgotten how to do.”

Although some companies encourage their employees to blog, others do not. Anderson and Mayfield (2005) claim some of the companies currently encouraging blogging include Dell, Hewlett-Packard, Honeywell International, IBM, Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, Viacom and Xerox. Anderson, the editor of *Wired Magazine*, and Mayfield, the author of *Socialtext*, are collaborating on a project that will create an index of business blogging. The Ragan Report (February 20, 2006) claims some companies have large numbers of webloggers and says IBM has “more than 15,000 registered employee bloggers” (p. 6).

According to the *Ragan Report* (November 14, 2005) although employee blogs currently are a big phenomenon, many who work in employee communications do not like the idea of their employees blogging because the company is not able to control their messages. Communication consultant Allan Jenkins (2005) believes many public relations people fear employee blogs because they “are reluctant to let go of the communication reins.” Jenkins says “90% of this [concern is attributable to] loss of message control.” Conlin and Park (2004) claim many companies are willing to give up this message control because they now realize employee bloggers can develop meaningful relationships with customers. However, Dan Gillmor (2004) believes companies inevitably will try to co-opt blogs.

Steve Rubel (2009), Senior Vice President and Director of Insights at Edelman Digital, claims that although the economy currently is slowing the emphasis on digital communication continues to operate at a brisk pace. He lists public engagement, search and social networking as three themes currently driving major trends in terms of public relations and new media.

Self proclaimed “technology evangelist” Matt Dickman (2009) says we are moving towards a time when all media will be social. He points to situations such as the Facebook partnership with CNN during the inauguration of President Barack Obama that offered participants the unique experience of being able to “chat” with their Facebook “friends” online while watching the inauguration ceremonies. Dickman predicts there will be more of this in the future saying, “Just open Twitter during prime time TV and see what dominates the conversation. It’s people talking together around a common topic enabled by whatever show is on.”

SPECIFIC KINDS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media deliver web-based information created by people with the intention of facilitating communication. These social media now represent one of the world’s major sources of social interaction as people share stories and experiences with each other.

Not counting blogs, Traffikd (2009), a blog about social media, claims there currently are more than 400 social media web sites and these have been classified into the following categories: arts, books, cars, connecting with friends, consumer reviews, cooking and food, cultures and foreign languages, dating, education, event planning, family, fashion, finance, games, general networking, health and medical, kids, Internet marketing, microblogging, movies, news, pets, photo sharing, politics, pop culture, professional, real estate, religious, shopping, social action, sports, technology, teen, travel, video sharing, women and miscellaneous.

Social media have been classified into these categories: Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, wikis, podcasts, pictures and video. Since social media represent a young and emerging set of technologies there are many different thoughts and opinions when it comes to categorization. With the availability of so many social media sites, obviously some receive much more web traffic than others. For example, popular social networking sites such as Facebook (www.facebook.com) and MySpace (www.myspace.com) and popular video sharing site YouTube (www.youtube.com) all are ranked by web information service Alexa (2009) on the list of the world's most accessed websites. Obviously, the same can't be said for social media sites serving the interests of more specialized audiences such as Goodreads (www.goodreads.com) that focuses on library cataloging for book lovers, Horseland (www.horseland.com) aimed at people who own horses, Passportstamp (www.passportstamp.com) provided for travel enthusiasts, Doggie (www.doggie.com) that has become popular with some dog owners, Geni (www.geni.com) a site for families interested in exploring genealogy or Ravelry (www.ravelry.com) that serves interests of people who like to knit and crochet. Wikipedia (2009b) claims there currently are about 150 social networking sites that are receiving a reasonable amount of web traffic.

For the purposes of this study, social media were divided into the following categories: blogs, forums or message boards, photo sharing, podcasts, RSS (really simple syndication), search engine marketing, social bookmarking, social networking sites, micro-blogging sites, video sharing and Wikis.

Blogs are regularly updated websites usually maintained by an individual that describe events, provide news and commentary and sometimes serve as online diaries. Most blogs contain text, images and embedded links to websites or other blogs. Many blogs encourage readers to leave comments that can lead to interactive information exchange. Blood (2000) says blogs began in 1997. According to Technorati (2008), the most recent figures on the number of blogs are 184 million worldwide and 26 million in the US. Technorati also claims 346 million people read blogs worldwide and 60 million in the US. Technorati (2008) cites research by Universal McCann claiming 77 percent of active Internet users read blogs.

Internet Forums or Message Boards are online discussion sites that Wikipedia (2009c) describes as being “the modern equivalent of a traditional bulletin board, and a technological evolution of the dialup bulletin board system.” From the technical perspective, forums or message boards are web applications that involve user-generated content. Those who participate in Internet forums are able to build relationships with others while discussing various topics.

Photo Sharing involves “publishing” digital photographs online where they can be shared with others and can be accessed through both websites and applications facilitating uploads. This term also sometimes is applied to online photo galleries that can be set up and managed by individuals. Photo sharing also is possible from portable devices such as camera phones.

Podcasts offer a combination of audio and/or video made available for download via syndication, and the syndication aspect sets podcasts apart from e-mailed, attached files available to be downloaded. Podcasts are syndicated via **RSS** (Really Simple Syndication) feeds that make it possible to distribute the files over the Internet by syndicated download. Podcasts can be synchronized with devices such as iPods. The RSS formats are used to publish frequently updated works that could include blogs, news, audio and video in a standardized document.

Search Engine Marketing involves utilizing various search engines in attempts to increase the visibility of websites. A variety of methods are used including search engine optimization, paid placement, contextual advertising and paid inclusion. Some sources define Search Engine Marketing as the practice of buying these services.

Social Bookmarking provides opportunities for web users to store, organize, search and manage bookmarked web pages. In this process, users save web page links that they want to remember or share.

Micro-Blogging is described by Wikipedia (2008d) as “a form of multimedia blogging that allows users to send brief text updates or micromedia such as photos or audio clips and publish them, either to be viewed by anyone or by a restricted group which can be chosen by the user.” Some sources put the number of micro-blogging sites at more than 100 but the most frequently used of these is Twitter (www.twitter.com), a service that allows users to send and read updates of other users that are known as “tweets,” and are text-based postings limited in length to 140 characters. These updates are shown on each user’s profile pages and are delivered to other users who have signed up to receive them. Some of the popular social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and others have their own micro-blogging features that are usually known as “status updates.”

Video Sharing allows people to upload video clips to Internet hosting websites, usually called video sharing websites. There are several hundred video sharing services and the most frequently used one is YouTube (www.youtube.com). Although some video services charge fees for their services, most of them are free. Video sharing services can be classified into categories such as user-generated video sharing websites, video-sharing platform/white label providers and web-based video editing.

Wikis are pages or collections of web pages that enable those who access them to contribute or modify content. They have been used effectively to create collaborative websites and to power community websites. Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.com) is the best-known wiki.

SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES

The recent growth and development of social networking websites such as Facebook and MySpace, coupled with their increasing use in public relations, warrants a separate section in this paper. These social networking sites have been, in the words of *USA Today* “the rage of the tech industry for more than a year” (Swartz, 2008). These websites permit people to participate in interactive discussions with a user-submitted network of friends who share information with each other including messages, blog posts, photos, videos, web links, news stories, music and personal profiles.

Originally started so college-aged students could communicate with each other; today’s social networking sites offer considerable audience and advertiser potential for the future (Vorvoreanu 2009). As Swartz (2008) points out, “Big-name advertisers are drooling over millions of young, affluent consumers who are spending more time on their online profiles than in front of TV and movie screens. They are particularly smitten with the prospect of tailoring ads to people’s specific interests.”

The most widely used, free-access social networking sites are Facebook (www.facebook.com) and MySpace (www.myspace.com) and the online social networking space also has other significant players such as business and professional networking sites like LinkedIn (www.Linkedin.com), Ecademy (www.ecademy.com), Plaxo (www.plaxo.com) Xing (www.xing.com), Yorz (www.yorz.com), Ryze (www.ryze.com) and others.

Facebook, the world’s premiere social networking website, began in February 2004 and in the summer of 2009 claimed to have more than 250 million users with more than half of them from outside the US. Although Facebook originally began as a service designed to let Harvard University students communicate with each other, and then expanded to accommodate students from other universities, the site has grown into one that now accommodates users of all ages from elementary school students to senior citizens. The fastest

growing segment of Facebook users are more than 30 years of age. More than 70 percent of Facebook users reside outside of the US.

MySpace, Facebook's major competitor in the social networking arena, began operation in 2003, a year earlier than Facebook, and was the world's most dominant site until Facebook surpassed it in April 2008. MySpace currently has about 180 million users and is particularly popular with artists, musicians and comedians.

LinkedIn is the most popular of the business-oriented social networking sites that are used mainly for professional networking. It was launched in 2003 and currently claims to have more than 35 million registered users in more than 200 different countries, many who are executives with Fortune 500 companies (LinkedIn, 2009). LinkedIn encourages use of its site to "find and be introduced to potential clients, service providers and subject experts who come recommended; create and collaborate on projects, gather data, share files and solve problems; locate business opportunities and find potential partners (LinkedIn, 2009)." The site also permits the posting and distribution of job listings and provides opportunities for users to discover connections that can help them land jobs and close business deals.

The other business and professional networking sites such as Plaxo, Ecademy, Ryze and Xing all provide information exchange where people can market themselves in environments that facilitate knowledge sharing, business networking, job posting, professional contact building and other similar opportunities.

One problem with having such a wide variety of online social and professional networking opportunities is the reality everyone can't be part of each conversation. As noted social media expert David Meerman Scott (2008b) explains:

It sort of reminds me of a terrific cocktail party with a few hundred people. You know there are tons of great conversations going on and you know that you can't be part of them all. What do you do at the party? Some people do the look over the shoulder of the person you're talking to thing to always be on the lookout for a better conversation. Some flit from one person to another every few minutes all night. Some may think you're rude when you spread yourself thin, but hey, you don't miss as much. What I like to do at parties is have a few great conversations and be happy that I'm at a wonderful event. I know I can't be with everyone, so I have fun with the people I'm with. What more could I want? (Scott, 2008b)

Scott takes the same approach in terms of selecting the social networking sites he participates in which are Facebook and Twitter. When he receives requests to join people on other sites, he responds such as this:

I receive a handful of email invitations each week from people saying: "I'd like to add you to my professional network on LinkedIn."

And to each person I send a polite note saying more or less: "Sorry, but I don't do LinkedIn. You can find me at my primary hangouts including my site and my blog and Facebook and Twitter, and you'll see me pop up at several dozen other social networking sites from time to time."

Some people email me back and are either surprised: "Wait! You don't do LinkedIn?" or seem a bit offended: "Why the heck don't you do LinkedIn? Do tell."

. . . all of the things that LinkedIn says it can help me with, I am already doing with the other social networking services that I use, so I don't need that specific help. And if people want to find me they can Google David Meerman Scott.

I hope I'm not offending anyone when I say that I've found that the majority of people who email me to ask me to be part of their LinkedIn network fall into one or more of these categories: 1) I do not know them; 2) They are salespeople or; 3) They are looking for a new job.

I meet people every single day on my blog, on others' blogs and on Twitter, and at this stage I am not looking for another way to connect. Regular readers of this blog know that I try really hard to help those who are looking for work by providing ideas for them that are more helpful than linking in to people who I know.

If you want to connect to me, just do it. If you want to know who I know, look at the people who follow me on Twitter or who comment on my blog. Or who write about my ideas on their blogs.

You can't go to every party, so why even try?

Of course, it's not just LinkedIn that I don't do. I'm not on Second Life either. I tried it a few times two years ago and just didn't like it. I don't have a MySpace page because I've found that it is best for artists and musicians, not for me. (Scott, 2008b)

As a general rule, public relations practitioners we spoke with while gathering information for this paper were more active on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn than any of the other social or professional networking websites. The 2008 *PR Week*/Burson-Marsteller CEO Survey reported organizations are more likely to use Facebook when communicating with stakeholders than any other social media.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As this paper's literature review indicates, many have studied or reported on the huge impact social media are having on the practice of public relations. What is missing in this prior research, however, are studies examining how public relations practitioners actually are using the social media. The international survey of public relations practitioners reported about in this article appears to be the world's first extensive examination of how social media are being implemented in public relations practice. In addition to measuring how social media are being employed in the practice of public relations, this study also explores actual social media use by individual public relations practitioners.

METHOD

A sample of public relations practitioners from various parts of the world took part in this survey research project. Invitations to participate by completing the study's web-based questionnaire were extended via e-mail messages to purposive samples collected from membership rosters of the Arthur W. Page Society and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA). Additional subjects were gathered from donor, task-force and commission membership lists of the Institute for Public Relations. The study's measuring instrument contained 77 closed-ended and three open-ended questions plus four demographic measures.

Respondents (n=574) came from many different parts of the world and represented a good cross-section of a wide variety of segments of the public relations industry. More (25%) worked with small agencies or consultancies than any other area but corporations (20%) and educational institutions (20%) also were well represented. Large agencies accounted for 10 percent of the respondents while seven percent worked in governmental public relations positions, five percent came from the not-for-profit area, five percent were research providers, one percent worked in health care and seven percent responded "other" when asked what kind of organization they worked for.

There was a fairly even split between female (52%) and male (48%) respondents. Most (67%) were based in North America with 15 percent from Europe, ten percent from Asia and Australia, ten percent from Africa, two percent from South America and two percent from "other." Responses were nicely distributed across various age categories with 15 percent being younger than 30, 25 percent were between 30 and 39, 26 percent were aged 40 to 49, 27 percent were 50 to 59 and seven percent were 60 or older. The 574 usable responses represented a return rate of approximately 28 percent.

RESULTS

The study's main measuring instrument consisted of a two-pronged, eleven-item answer matrix. Subjects were first asked to respond on a five-point, Likert-type scale to questions asking how important each of the eleven items was "in the overall communications and public relations efforts of your organization (or your client's organizations)." Results displayed in Table 1 show search engine marketing was considered the most important of the eleven media options followed in importance by blogs, social networks, video sharing and forums or message boards. Photo sharing and social bookmarking were considered the least important.

Table 1. Responses to the question: "How important ARE each of the following in the overall communications and public relations efforts of your organization (or your client's organizations)?"

| | Very Unimportant | Somewhat Unimportant | Uncertain | Somewhat Important | Very Important | Mean Score |
|--|------------------|----------------------|-----------|--------------------|----------------|------------|
| Blogs | 13% | 17% | 11% | 41% | 18% | 3.34 |
| Forums or Message Boards | 13% | 24% | 16% | 37% | 10% | 3.07 |
| Photo Sharing | 25% | 26% | 19% | 25% | 5% | 2.60 |
| Podcasts | 21% | 21% | 21% | 30% | 7% | 2.81 |
| RSS (Really Simple Syndication) | 15% | 16% | 20% | 31% | 17% | 3.20 |
| Search Engine Marketing | 10% | 9% | 19% | 29% | 32% | 3.63 |
| Social Bookmarking | 19% | 20% | 33% | 22% | 5% | 2.74 |
| Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) | 14% | 16% | 17% | 39% | 13% | 3.20 |
| Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.) | 22% | 19% | 25% | 26% | 8% | 2.80 |
| Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.) | 16% | 13% | 18% | 38% | 14% | 3.20 |
| Wikis | 19% | 17% | 27% | 28% | 9% | 2.91 |

Note: (a) Percentage scores throughout this report might not always total 100% due to rounding. (b) Mean scores throughout this report are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where "1" = "Very Unimportant" and "5" = "Very Important." Consequently, the higher the mean score the greater the perceived importance.

Subjects were then asked how important each of these eleven media "should be in the overall communications and public relations efforts of your organization (or your client's organizations)." Table 2 reports these findings.

Although an analysis of responses to both of these measures reveals that the perceived order of importance is fairly similar for both sets of questions, mean scores and overall perceived importance of each of the eleven items are considerably higher when subjects are asked what should be happening in terms of social media use than they are when the question asks what actually is happening.

Table 2. Responses to the question: “How important SHOULD each of the following BE in these overall communications and public relations efforts of your organization (or your client’s organizations)?”:

| | Very Unimportant | Somewhat Unimportant | Uncertain | Somewhat Important | Very Important | Mean Score |
|--|------------------|----------------------|-----------|--------------------|----------------|------------|
| Blogs | 4% | 8% | 7% | 45% | 36% | 4.00 |
| Forums or Message Boards | 10% | 12% | 12% | 48% | 24% | 3.78 |
| Photo Sharing | 11% | 17% | 27% | 34% | 12% | 3.19 |
| Podcasts | 5% | 11% | 20% | 43% | 21% | 3.64 |
| RSS (Really Simple Syndication) | 4% | 6% | 17% | 40% | 32% | 3.90 |
| Search Engine Marketing | 4% | 5% | 12% | 34% | 45% | 4.11 |
| Social Bookmarking | 8% | 12% | 30% | 34% | 16% | 3.38 |
| Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) | 7% | 13% | 16% | 36% | 28% | 3.64 |
| Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.) | 7% | 14% | 24% | 34% | 21% | 3.48 |
| Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.) | 9% | 9% | 16% | 39% | 27% | 3.67 |
| Wikis | 5% | 9% | 27% | 37% | 22% | 3.61 |

Table 3 shows mean differences between each social media item in terms of how important organizations consider them to be at the present time and how important respondents think each of these social media should be to an organization’s public relations and communications efforts.

The gaps reported on in this table are momentous and results of ANOVA analysis show these differences are statistically significant (at $p = <.05$) in seven cases out of eleven. Statistical significance is evident on measures involving blogs, forums or message boards, RSS (really simple syndication), social networks (such as Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.), micro-blogging sites (such as Twitter), video sharing sites (such as YouTube) and Wikis.

The analysis reported in Table 3 reveals respondents perceive that meaningful gaps exist when measuring differences between what is happening and what should be happening in terms of all of the social media options measured in this study. Ironically, the smallest gap between what is happening and what should be happening come on photo sharing which subjects consider to be the least important of all of the social media.

Table 3. Mean ANOVA analysis of responses to the question asking how important social media are and how important they should be “in your organization (or your client’s organizations).”:

| | How Important Are These Media in Your Orgs. PR Efforts | How Important Should They Be | Mean Difference | F = | SIG. |
|---|--|---------------------------------------|--------------------|------|-------------|
| Blogs | 3.34 | 4.00 | .66 | 5.62 | .000 |
| Forums or Message Boards | 3.07 | 3.78 | .71 | 4.34 | .001 |
| Photo Sharing | 2.60 | 3.19 | .38 | 1.46 | .203 |
| Podcasts | 2.81 | 3.64 | .83 | 1.49 | .192 |
| RSS (Really Simple Syndication) | 3.20 | 3.90 | .70 | 4.01 | .002 |
| Search Engine Marketing | 3.63 | 4.11 | .48 | 2.12 | .064 |
| Social Bookmarking | 2.74 | 3.38 | .64 | 3.81 | .002 |
| Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) | 3.20 | 3.64 | .44 | 6.06 | .000 |
| Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.) | 2.80 | 3.48 | .68 | 5.90 | .000 |
| Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.) | 3.20 | 3.67 | .47 | 2.97 | .013 |
| Wikis | 2.91 | 3.61 | .70 | 2.69 | .021 |

Note: (a) Mean scores are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where “1” = “Very Unimportant” and “5” = “Very Important.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the greater the perceived importance. (b) Mean difference calculations involve subtracting mean scores from the “how important (specific social media) are” questions from mean scores from the items measuring how important each of the social media should be in an organization’s communications and public relations efforts.

Table 3, however, also shows smaller than average importance-scale gaps on items measuring social networks and search engine marketing. Larger than average gaps are reported on items measuring podcasts, forums or message boards, RSS, Wikis, micro-blogging sites and blogs. With the exception of podcasts, analysis shows ample statistical significance on mean analyses on all seven of these items. In short, the differences are huge when one compares how important this study’s respondents tell us they think social media should be and then compare those results to what’s actually happening in the public relations and communications marketplace.

The study also measured frequency of personal use by respondents of traditional and social media. Subjects were first asked, “How frequently do you personally use each of the following as information sources for news about what’s happening on the local, regional and international news scene.” Results shown in Table 4 suggest public relations practitioners make much greater use of traditional news media sources such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television than the general public. At a time when reports suggest the news environment is changing for many news consumers, and when audiences for traditional news sources are steadily declining (Pew, 2008), public relations practitioners (or at least those who responded to this survey) continue to make steady use of traditional news sources.

Table 4. Responses to the question: “How frequently do you personally use each of the following as information sources for news about what’s happening on the local, regional, national and international news scene?”:

| | Very Infrequently | Somewhat Infrequently | Neither Frequently nor Infrequently | Somewhat Frequently | Very Frequently | Mean Score |
|--|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Blogs | 16% | 14% | 12% | 32% | 26% | 3.38 |
| Forums or Message Boards | 19% | 26% | 24% | 24% | 7% | 2.74 |
| Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) | 20% | 14% | 14% | 26% | 26% | 3.24 |
| Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.) | 34% | 17% | 18% | 17% | 15% | 2.61 |
| Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.) | 18% | 22% | 22% | 25% | 12% | 2.92 |
| Wikis | 23% | 16% | 23% | 26% | 12% | 2.90 |
| Newspapers | 9% | 4% | 1% | 16% | 69% | 4.30 |
| Magazines | 6% | 8% | 7% | 27% | 52% | 4.11 |
| Radio News | 9% | 11% | 9% | 23% | 48% | 3.90 |
| Television News | 9% | 9% | 7% | 29% | 46% | 3.95 |

Note: Mean scores for the three tables in this section are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where “1” = “Very Infrequently” and “5” = “Very Frequently.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the more the medium was used.

As the mean scores on Table 4 indicate, the public relations practitioners who responded to this study get most of their news from newspapers followed by magazines, television news and radio news. Frequency results show that 85

percent use newspapers “very frequently” or “somewhat frequently” with magazines (79%), television news (75%) and radio news (71%). More than half (58%) say they frequently get news from blogs.

Subjects also were asked how frequently they personally used the same list of information sources “for news about what’s happening in the field of public relations and communications.” Results displayed in Table 5 show blogs and forums or message boards are used more frequently for information about what’s happening in public relations or communications than they were for sources of general news. This table also shows that the public relations people who responded to this survey rank blogs as their second most frequently used source for professional information after magazines.

Table 5. Responses to the question: “How frequently do you personally use each of the following as information sources for news about what’s happening in the field of public relations and communications?”:

| | Very Infrequently | Somewhat Infrequently | Neither Frequently nor Infrequently | Somewhat Frequently | Very Frequently | Mean Score |
|--|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Blogs | 16% | 12% | 13% | 29% | 30% | 3.45 |
| Forums or Message Boards | 23% | 19% | 24% | 26% | 8% | 2.78 |
| Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) | 29% | 13% | 19% | 25% | 14% | 2.82 |
| Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.) | 38% | 14% | 17% | 14% | 17% | 2.58 |
| Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.) | 39% | 19% | 23% | 11% | 9% | 2.32 |
| Wikis | 33% | 19% | 23% | 16% | 9% | 2.49 |
| Newspapers | 15% | 17% | 17% | 26% | 25% | 3.29 |
| Magazines | 8% | 11% | 13% | 35% | 33% | 4.02 |
| Radio News | 34% | 18% | 19% | 12% | 16% | 2.56 |
| Television News | 34% | 16% | 19% | 15% | 16% | 2.62 |

Mean differences between answers to the general and professional news questions are reported in Table 6. Although respondents use blogs and forums or message boards more for professional news than for general news and information, their frequency of use for all other media on this table is higher for general as compared with professional news. ANOVA analysis yielded statistical significance (at $p = <.01$) on all mean comparisons in this table.

Table 6. Mean ANOVA analysis of responses to the questions asking which sources respondents use for regular news and for news about the field of public relations and communications.

| | Source for local, regional, national and international news | Source for news about PR and comm. | Mean Difference | F = | SIG. |
|---|--|---|--------------------|-------|------|
| Blogs | 3.38 | 3.45 | +.07 | 65.77 | .000 |
| Forums or Message Boards | 2.74 | 2.78 | +.04 | 24.69 | .000 |
| Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) | 3.24 | 2.82 | .42 | 32.57 | .000 |
| Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.) | 2.61 | 2.58 | .03 | 92.21 | .000 |
| Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.) | 2.92 | 2.32 | .60 | 15.84 | .000 |
| Wikis | 2.90 | 2.49 | .41 | 25.76 | .000 |
| Newspapers | 4.30 | 3.29 | .59 | 10.93 | .000 |
| Magazines | 4.11 | 4.02 | .38 | 27.11 | .000 |
| Radio News | 3.90 | 2.56 | .47 | 7.85 | .000 |
| Television News | 3.95 | 2.62 | .58 | 6.99 | .000 |

Note: (a) Mean scores are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where “1” = “Very Infrequent” and “5” = “Very Frequent.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the more the medium was used. (b) Mean difference calculations involve subtracting mean scores from source for news about public relations and communications from mean scores from the items measuring how frequent each medium was used as a source for local, regional, national and international news.

Demographic Differences: A variety of analyses were conducted in an attempt to check for demographic differences based upon age, gender, geographical location and the kind of organization respondents worked for.

The greatest number of statistically significant differences presented themselves when ANOVAs were performed comparing mean scores based upon age. Younger respondents were considerably more likely than older ones to not only advocate greater use of social media in public relations but also to use social media and other Internet-based technologies in their daily searches for news and information. T-tests comparing responses from female (52%) and male (48%) subjects also revealed a good number of similar significant differences. However, since the study’s women respondents tended to be younger than their male counterparts, it is difficult to tell if these differences are based more upon age or gender. Although some statistical significance materialized when ANOVA analyses were performed based upon geography or the kind of organization

subjects worked for, the actual mean differences were minimal and no apparent patterns were evident.

Additional Findings: In addition to results reported above, the study's questionnaire also inquired about a number of issues related to social media impact. Most (73%) of the respondents agreed social media have changed the way they communicate but this impact definitely is more pronounced in terms of external public relations than it is with internal communication. There was even stronger agreement (85%) with the question asking if social media compliment traditional mainstream media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television).

Results also show there is considerable agreement suggesting blogs and social media have enhanced public relations practice. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of the study's respondents believe social media have enhanced public relations while almost two-thirds (66%) feel the same way about blogs. A huge majority (92%) believe social media (including blogs) influence the traditional mainstream media while more than three quarters of the respondents (76%) agree that traditional news media influence social media and blogs. Another big majority (88%) suggest social media and blogs have made communications more instantaneous thus forcing organizations to respond more quickly to criticism.

In spite of a huge growth in terms of importance, social media do not compare favorably to the traditional media when it comes to accuracy, credibility and trust. Only six percent of this study's respondents agree social media (including blogs) are more accurate than traditional mainstream media, only nine percent believe they are more credible while 19 percent say they are a more trusted information source. Only 13 percent agree social media tell the truth, but 42 percent do give social media credit for advocating a transparent and ethical culture. Many (84%) agree social media offer organizations a low-cost way to develop relationships with members of various strategic publics and 71 percent say social media serve as watch-dogs for traditional mainstream media.

Further with regard to questions of trust, 80 percent of the respondents agree that people who receive information from mainstream media expect these news outlets to be honest, tell the truth and advocate a transparent and ethical culture. However, agreement is only 41 percent when this same question is asked about blogs and other social media.

Subjects were asked approximately what percentage of their time working in public relations was spent with blogs or other social media. Results showed four percent spending more than half of their time on social media, 11 percent devoting between 26 and 50 percent, 30 percent between 11 and 25 percent, 48 percent between one and ten percent with seven percent of the respondents indicating they didn't spend any of their working time with social media.

Given the importance of research in public relations, several questions asked about social media measurement. Even though public relations practitioners frequently say research and measurement is important, findings in this study show that only a small percentage of organizations actually are conducting social media measurement. This includes 39 percent of respondents' organizations who are measuring what members of external strategic publics have communicated about their organizations on blogs or other social media and 25 percent who are measuring what employees are communicating. Additional research questions discovered although many respondents said they preferred outcomes research that measures the impact information disseminated about their organizations through blogs and other social media has on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behavior, most of the research that's actually being conducted focused on output measurement examining only the messages being disseminated.

LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

As is the case with most survey research, this study had limitations that were not initially identified through pre-tests and other precautionary measures. If the research team had the opportunity to revise this study's questionnaire care would have been taken to distinguish between the use of traditional formats of mass media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television) and online versions of these media. For example, it would have been interesting to know if respondents use print/broadcast or online versions of these media for news and information about what's going on in the world and in the public relations field. Likewise, since so many people now receive information directly from websites, it would have been wise to include the World Wide Web as a media option in several of this study's measuring scales.

Additionally, given the global aspects of this study, it is unfortunate we utilized only an English version of the measuring instrument. Also, even though the study's results do a good job measuring the various categories of social media being used in public relations practice, it would make sense to explore the specific kinds of media being used within each of these categories. For example, clarifying whether Facebook, LinkedIn, or some other service, is being used more than any other social networking site, and exploring if Twitter, or something else, gets the most use of the micro-blogging sites. It also might have made sense to create separate categories including one for social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace that cater more to general audience interests and another category for sites such as LinkedIn, Plaxo and ecademy that encourage more business-related communication.

Since a major intention of this research was to collect 2009 benchmarks that could be measured against in future years, the research team will seriously consider a few modifications in the study's questionnaire before collecting additional data.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It's an understatement to suggest that social media have had a huge impact on the practice of public relations since the first weblogs, or blogs, appeared more than a dozen years ago. Since then social media have developed into a number of different forms including text, images, audio and video through the development of forums, message boards, photo sharing, podcasts RSS (really simple syndication), search engine marketing, video sharing, Wikis, social networks and micro-blogging sites.

Social media networking sites are becoming increasingly popular each year and have overtaken pornography as the number one use of the Internet. More than half of all Internet users have joined a social network, social networks have become the number one platform for creating and sharing Internet content and nearly 75 percent of all Internet users have read a blog. More people now get their news online than from traditional mass media even though many people blend online and traditional sources in their quest for news and information.

The development of various new technologies has significantly empowered a wide variety of strategic publics by giving them dynamic new media many are using to communicate effectively with a variety of internal and external audiences. Social media are changing the way organizations communicate with strategic publics such as employees, customers, stockholders, communities, governments and other stakeholders.

The 2008 US presidential election was a pivotal time in the development of the importance of social media because Barack Obama and his supporters effectively integrated social media and community organizing skills to shape the winning campaign.

This study asked a sample of international public relations practitioners questions about how social media actually is being used in public relations practice. Results (n=574) suggest meaningful and statistically significant gaps exist between what practitioners say is happening in terms of social media use and what they say should be happening.

When subjects were asked how important various social media are in the overall public relations efforts of their organizations, respondents listed search engine marketing most important followed in importance by blogs, social networks, video sharing and forums or message boards. When asked how important the same list of social media options should be responses didn't do much to change the perceived order of importance, but mean scores and the overall perceived importance of all of the measured items are much higher when subjects are asked what should be happening in terms of social media use than they are when the question asks what actually is happening. The study also measured frequency of personal use by respondents of traditional and social

media. Subjects were first asked, "How frequently do you personally use each of the following as information sources for news about what's happening on the local, regional and international news scene." Analyses reveal huge gaps – many with statistical significance – between what respondents say is happening and what they say should be happening in terms of social media use in public relations.

The study also measured frequency of personal use by respondents of traditional and social media. Subjects were first asked, "How frequently do you personally use each of the following as information sources for news about what's happening on the local, regional and international news scene." Then they were asked how frequently they personally use the same list of information sources "for news about what's happening in the field of public relations and communications."

Respondents reported they receive most of their news from newspapers followed by magazines, television news and radio news. Use of traditional media as news sources definitely is more pronounced by public relations practitioners than it is for the general population. More than half of the study's respondents say they frequently get news from blogs.

When asked how frequently they used the same list of information sources for news about what's happening in public relations, results show blogs and forums or message boards are used more frequently for information about what's happening in public relations than they were for sources of general news. Results also found that blogs were the second most frequently used source for professional information after magazines.

Differences based upon demographics found younger respondents were more likely to recommend using social media in public relations. They also were more likely to use social media and other Internet-based technologies in their daily pursuit of news and information.

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