Technology, Crisis Communication and Culture:
Singapore's love-hate relationship with social media

Renae Desai

Murdoch University, Western Australia

Edmund Heng

Murdoch University, Western Australia

Renae Desai, Murdoch University, School of Arts, Murdoch University, 90 South Street, Murdoch, Western Australia, 6150 (R.Desai@murdoch.edu.au). Edmund Heng worked on this research to fulfil his Honours Degree in Communications at Murdoch University.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

The growth of social media has undoubtedly impacted upon public relations practice even in non-liberal societies. A case demonstrating this occurred in December 2011, when operators of Singapore's metro train system, the Singapore Mass Rapid Transit (SMRT) Corporation, suffered a reputational crisis that led to the eventual resignation of its Chief Executive Officer as a result of social media (Ng & Poon, 2011; Channel NewsAsia, 2012). The series of logistic faults that occurred were reported on social media platforms by affected commuters through the use of mobile media technologies as the situations unfolded (Ng & Poon, 2011). This case is one of many in Singapore's recent history that has conclusively indicated a strategic and professional value to social media in public relations. The outcomes and reactions from the incident was made more significant by its context, having occurred in a society where despite the high adoption of communicative technology (ITU, 2012), public relations is still undervalued (Lim, Goh & Sriramesh, 2005, p.323) and the domestic media remains under strict authoritative control by the ruling government (Rodan, 2003, p.503-504).

Studies regarding social media have analysed its phenomenal growth through various points of view: the positive and negative implications of social media (Fitch, 2009, p.337-338); the divided opinions and concerns that the public relations industry has towards it (DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011, p.326; Fitch, 2009, p.430); and the empowerment of the once passive audience (Fitch, 2009, p.337). These varied views coupled with the ongoing evolutionary state of the tools themselves have led to confusing and shallow perceptions of social media and its communicative significance to the relationship-building rudiments of public relations (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.326; Fitch, 2009, p.337-430). Moreover, little empirical attention has been paid to the social media phenomenon from a Southeast Asian perspective, given that the majority of public relations scholarship mentioned was written from a Western context. Conceptual frameworks developed and analysed from the West cannot truly decipher the underlying cultural and professional situations at work in Asian societies, factors which affect the way public relations is practiced.

This paper aims to empirically examine the roles and impacts of social media in public relations conducted in Singapore, with a focus on crisis communication. Due the sensitivity of crises to minute changes in information flows (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.152), they can now be easily influenced by social media's ability to effectively transmit data with a speed akin to "real time" (DiStaso et al., 2011, p.325; Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p.159). It is able to escalate an issue into a crisis, even contain or worsen a crisis, through the ease by which it can communication with different publics across social media's many-to-many paradigm (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p.152).

Method

We used a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with six communication and public relations practitioners in Singapore to derive our findings. The method was chosen for its ability to garner "understanding that is as detailed a manner" (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p.62) and in analysing communication practices (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p.25). It combined flexibility, a standardised structure, and the freedom to modify questions beyond the prescribed while capitalising on the interpretations drawn from the informant (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p.329-330; Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p.167; Weerakkody, 2009, p.167). In all but one of the cases, the interviews were conducted face-to-face while one was conducted through Skype. The participants were asked to comment on a list of nine prescribed open-ended questions which comprised of social media enquiry and views regarding the affected SMRT crisis. The findings were then discussed within an interpretative paradigm, where knowledge is obtained "through interpretation or understanding of human action by examining how people [Singaporeans] make meaning of them" (Weerakkody, 2009, p.27).

Results and Discussion

Our findings indicated that social media has certainly caused more impact than was anticipated in Singapore. It has forced accountability from organisations and even the Singaporean government. While not the earth-shattering paradigm that other literature claim it to be (DiStaso et al., 2011; Fitch, 2009; González-Herrero & Smith, 2008), it is still

important to the field of public relations. For crises, social media is a potent double-edged sword that can both aid and hider social medial in equal measure. Analysing the SMRT crisis indicated that organisations must be proactive in this age of digital information and that former one-way forms of traditional communication is no longer enough to satisfied stakeholders and publics. Social media has given rise to a generation of empowered audiences, who need to be treated with far more caution and respect than ever before. For Singapore, our findings show that organisations and the government are unused to this newfound accountability and are struggling to navigate their way through the upset of power balance. Regardless, for the field of public relations, these results show promising evidence to support the role of social media, and may even be bringing the discipline back to the very core of its framework: to establish, maintain and develop effective relationships with stakeholders and targeted publics.

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