

Critical Analysis Essay on Social Media Communication in Organizations:

The Challenges of Balancing Openness, Strategy, and Management

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In 2017, social media are a ubiquitous influence in our lives, businesses, and organizations. It is no longer a rarity for organizations to utilize and participate in various forms of social media to communicate with customers, stakeholders, and employees. For many people, business, and organizations, social media have become embedded into the fabric of our daily lives whose use is expected. Ubiquitous social media usage was not always the case, and in the earlier days of social media, its usage brought to light new challenges for organizations venturing into the world of social media. Much of the foundational principles that organizations learned early in their social media usage are still applicable today.

Article Review

In their article, *Social Media Communication in Organizations: The Challenges of Balancing Openness, Strategy, and Management* Macnamara & Zerfass (2012) explore the use of social media as a public relations (PR) and strategic communication tool. This article was written when social media use for business and organizations was just beginning to gain popularity. Macnamara & Zerfass report that "69% of Fortune 500 companies are using social networking sites...65% planned to increase their use of social media to engage and build relationships with employees and other stakeholders" (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 288). From the research in 2012, it appeared that social media was becoming an important strategy for businesses and organizations and that growth in the social networking arena appeared to be on a significant upward trend. This growth in social media usage presents some challenges for companies and organizations who use traditional strategic communication practices.

Macnamara & Zerfass explore the challenges that traditional organizational communication and PR will have with the open, decentralized nature of social media. Traditional organizational communication and PR models often use one-way transmissional models where communication is centralized, asymmetrical, and goal or outcome focused. These models run contrary to social media, which at its core is transactional, decentralized, participatory and open. (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). The authors explore if and how organizations can balance the need for organizational control, and desired outcomes with social media's openness, authenticity and lack of control.

This study was informed by Strategic Communication Theory (SCT). According to Johansson, C. (n.d.), SCT is defined as the purposeful communication of an organization to advance its mission. It is communication that involves sound research, meticulous planning, implementation, and evaluation. SCT says that good communication and PR should have focused efforts that improve effectiveness. It should view communication in the long-term. Using strategic communication effectively will help set the agenda for the organization, reconcile conflicts, minimize mishaps while demonstrating value for the money (Johansson, C, n.d.).

Macnamara & Zerfass (2012) also use the Excellence theory of PR as one perspective that interprets their research. James Grunig developed the excellence theory after 15 years of research on PR in organizations Excellence theory states that communication managers must be part of the dominant coalition in an organization and that good PR must be two-way, symmetrical and participative. Communication, according to Excellent Theory must consider the needs of stakeholders and communication will be shaped by societal pressures and ideals if organizational communication is operating outside of those norms (Gruning, 1992).

Macnamara & Zerfass (2012) seek to understand how organizations from three European countries (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) and three Australasian countries and one territory (Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Hong Kong) use social networking sites. They start by asking the basic question of what social networking sites are used by the organization. This is the starting point to learn what companies are using for social media communication. Which social network gives a baseline understanding of social media implementation. The second question asked is related to the level of knowledge and understanding of social media do PR and corporate communication practitioners believe they possess? This question is used to help understand where practitioners believe they fall in understanding social media. I think this question is used to draw out inconsistencies in or affirm where PR specialist believe they land in the scale of social media understanding and what the actual reality of that perception is.

The next question the research seeks to understand is about control and organizational objectives. This falls squarely in line with Strategic Communication Theory (SCT). If an organization is operating under SCT, then control of the messages will be critical. This control and meeting of organizational objectives run counter to how social media works. Social media is open, decentralized, and participatory. This does not fit well with SCT. Can social media operationalize organizational objectives, strategy, and management particularly concerning control and interests of the organization and stakeholders? This is an important question that this research seeks to understand (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

The final question of the research seeks to learn if organizational objectives, strategy, and management can be operationalized using social media in a way that is compatible with the philosophy, principles, and practices of social media. Is it possible to use social media in a way

that works toward the organizational objectives and strategy while staying true to social media principles? If it is possible, how can this be done (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012)?

The methods used in this study were online surveys conducted in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Macnamara & Zerfass (2012) also interviewed in depth those identified through self-reporting as social and digital media experts. Macnamara & Zerfass (2012) obtained the email addresses of participants through names belonging to members of professional public relations organizations and groups. Macnamara & Zerfass (2012) obtained 596 completed surveys from the European group and only 221 responses from the Australasian group. The European group provided enough data to provide strong statistical reliability. The Australasian group did not yield enough; however, the authors felt that the data collected from the Australasian group did provide a snapshot picture of attitudes and practices. The authors also interviewed 14 of the social media experts in depth. "The prominent 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" (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 296).

The findings of the study showed that the most popular social networking sites were Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, with all three networks being used by over 50% of those surveyed. Blogs were common in the Australasia group at 48% usage but only garnered 29% usage in the European group. The findings also showed that only 32% of respondents in the European group and 25% in the Australasia group had a low or novice level of understanding when it came to social media. Most participants believed that they have an intermediate or advanced understanding of social media. This data sits in opposition to the number of participants whose organizations utilize governance in social media. The categories centered

around policy/strategy for social media use, guidelines for social media use, monitoring social media, and training in social media. The numbers for these categories ranged from 20%-35%.

“The study also found that only 20% of Australasian and 23% of European organizations had an overarching social media strategy or policy that outlined objectives of social media use, who can speak on behalf of the organization in social media and under what circumstances” (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 298). Almost 60% of the organizations do not monitor any social media and have no idea whether negative comments are being made about them online. The research brought up the blurring of private and public in social media use by employees. The researchers found the idea of public and private to be a false binary as social media usage continues to increase amongst employees. Social media experts expressed the need for governance and training, while not trying to retain total control over employee social media use (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). These ideas have strong implications for organizations who operate under the Strategic Communication Theory. Traditional planning, implementation, research, and centralized communication will have a difficult time thriving in a world of decentralized social media. The experts unanimously agreed that social media needed to be used in conjunction with other forms of communication for the organization.

The strength of this article lies in illuminating the challenges that organizations face in using social media while trying to achieve their goals and objectives. Particularly salient is the issue around control. Organizations traditionally want to control the messages about them, however, as the article states “social media specialists interviewed were unanimous in the view that social media could not be controlled” (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 300). Since control is not possible with social media sites, organizations must take a different approach when dealing with social media usage by its employees. As this article points out,

social media experts support an open rather than restrictive approach to employee usage 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 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. (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 300)

This process keeps organizations involved in social media without having to control every aspect of what employees post. This type of governance relies on the belief that most employees want to do the right thing for their organizations. As the CEO of Deloitte Digital, Peter Williams said that it comes down to a simple rule; “don’t embarrass us; don’t embarrass yourself; we trust you” (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 300). I think these are reliable assumptions on how organizations can be engaged while not trying to control social media. I too believe that most employees want to do the right thing for their organizations. I also think that governance, training, editing, and monitoring are wise and a good place to start for organizations.

I didn't see much in the article that I would describe as a weakness. I thought the authors did a comprehensive job laying out organizational communication and social media usage, the differences between the two and the challenges that these can create. If I were to try and come up with a weakness in the article, it would be simply the age of the material. This article is now five years old. So much growth and change have happened in organizational social media usage since

this was written. How do paid brand ambassadors, the proliferation of social media, the emergence of ephemeral social media sites affect organizations governance and strategies? In the past five years, with the maturation of social media, have more organizations implemented more forms of training, guidelines, and governance? These are questions that I thought as I read through the article.

Conclusion

I found the article to be enjoyable and interesting to read. The article brought to light for me the ideas of organizational control and social media. This is a concept that I hadn't given any thought to, and yet it seems like such an important issue for organizations to understand. I appreciate much more the balancing act that organizations must try to do so that social media can be both true to its principles and philosophies while serving in some way the organizations. The article expanded my understanding of social media usage in organizations.

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