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Use of social media for corporate communications by research-funding organisations in the UK

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A B S T R A C T

This research sought to explore the implications of social media for organisations' business functions, to help inform organisational approaches to challenges presented by social media. UK-based research-funding bodies provided the focus of this study, and a literature review, quantitative survey and focus groups involving relevant communications professionals were undertaken. Findings show that most UK-based research-funding organisations have adopted social media channels for corporate communications, drawing chiefly on microblogging, video-sharing and social networking sites. Building a dialogue with stakeholders is a prime reason for using social channels, yet one-way 'broadcasting' of information is widespread. Web, media or communications/marketing teams generally manage social media channels. A minority of organisations have policies governing social media use by staff. Social media performance is mainly measured using quantitative metrics.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Justification and aims

Social media allow public relations practitioners – whose discipline is based on building relationships – to engage their publics in conversation. Indeed, the speed and ubiquity of social media have rendered public relations 'a constant dialogue between an organisation and its audience' (Evans, Twomey, & Talan, 2011). Public relations professionals have largely embraced social media: 93% of them spend part of their average working day on aspects of social media (Wright & Hinson, 2009). However, the proliferation of social media platforms places increasing strain on organisational communications resources.

Considerable research into corporate social media use has focused on a single platform (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010) or on its use to meet a specific business aim (Howe, 2010). Minimal research could be identified that investigated: the variety of organisational issues that communications professionals must address in order to make the most effective use of social channels; how these issues are handled; or the use of social media specifically by research-funding organisations. The aim of this research, therefore, was to investigate how research-funding organisations use social media to enhance communications, encompassing the extent and nature of use, motivations, resource allocation, performance measurement, and governance.

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2. Methodology

A literature review was conducted, and a survey of 111 communications professionals employed by research-funding organisations was undertaken. 41% of respondents hailed from charitable trusts or foundations, while other types of charity or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) represented 18% of responses. Research councils produced 15% and other government-funded bodies fielded 13% of responses. The remainder were spread largely between corporations or corporate foundations and unspecified organisations. 85% were from the UK and 7% from the US. The remainder came from a total of five European countries. Nearly half of all respondents worked in large organisations (250+ employees). One-fifth each were based in medium-sized and small organisations (50–249 and 10–49 employees respectively), and 13% were based in micro-organisations (1–9 employees). Media relations staff provided 32% of responses. 22% of respondents were based in a marketing or external communications team, while web teams and grants teams each fielded 12% of respondents. The remainder, where specified, were spread between events, policy, IT, internal communications, research, public engagement and campaigns teams. Over half of all respondents were members of a team, one-third had managerial responsibility and 9% of respondents were senior management. The remaining 5% included a person in a team of one, a volunteer and a trustee. Further context to survey responses was provided by two focus groups, involving a selection of survey respondents.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Extent of use of social media

Three-quarters of respondents worked in organisations using social media for corporate purposes. This high level of adoption is in line with the practices and attitudes of European public relations professionals: 97% use social media professionally (EACD and the University of St. Gallen, 2011). Government organisations led in using social media for communications purposes (all government-funded bodies and 82% of research councils). This is largely explained by the previous UK administration's advocacy of social media to increase transparency and facilitate dialogue with stakeholders. Government use of technology has developed in tandem with technology itself, resulting in social media guidance for government departments (Williams, 2009).

Charities and NGOs were heavy users of social media, at 95%, and ran accounts on several channels. This reflects Muralidharan, Rasmussen, Patterson, and Shin (2011) and Barnes (2010) respectively. The attractiveness of social media to charities, which generally operate on tight budgets, is unsurprising given that most platforms are free to use. Social media also support the increasing professionalism of the charitable economy, in which donors expect information to connect them with beneficiaries and demonstrate 'impact'. Indeed the only full-time position dedicated to social media in this survey was within a charity. Large organisations also exploited social media heavily (94%), which supports Curtis et al. (2010).

3.2. Motivation for using social media

Three principal reasons were expressed for venturing into social media: general promotion (87%); to create a dialogue or sense of community (86%); and to reach a larger audience (81%). Social media was used less for 'listening': the most popular means of monitoring organisational mentions in social channels–Twitter–was used by fewer than two-thirds (63%) of respondents, blogs by 49%, social networking sites by 33%, comments on third-party websites by 26% and video-sharing platforms by 25%. Only 18% used social media for internal communications, and only 4% had become active in social media as a result of a negative incident in this arena.

Despite the widespread desire to create a dialogue, several respondents noted that their organisations – particularly those funded by the government – 'broadcast' information instead of conversing. This corroborates findings about European Fortune 100 companies' Twitter behaviour (Burson-Marsteller, 2010). However, the charity sector represented in this study actively sought two-way interaction through social media. One of the factors potentially at play here is gender difference in communication behaviour: women – who represented 74% of respondents to this survey – tend to use the internet to interact, whereas men tend to use it more to broadcast information (Naaman, Boase, & Lai, 2010; Warwick, in press).

The charity sector used social media prolifically: charitable trusts (95%) and other types of charity or NGO (92%) used social media the most for general promotion. Small organisations also made generous use of social media: for general promotion; to reach a larger organisation; and to create a dialogue or sense of community (91% in each case). Government-funded and large organisations made particular use of social channels for faster paced communications (71% and 63% respectively) and to change their image (43% and 46% respectively).

Over one-fifth of survey respondents did not use social media for communications purposes. The most common reasons by far were lack of time, perceived irrelevance to the organisation's audience(s) and lack of skills. This dearth of knowledge and confidence has been recognised by the profession: organisations are increasingly offering staff social media training (Handley, 2010).

3.3. Forms of social media used

Over three-quarters of all respondents used Twitter or other forms of microblogging (88%), video-sharing websites (77%) and social networking sites (76%) to promote their organisations. Blogs were the next most common platform employed at 56%, followed by RSS/Atom feeds (50%). This is in line with Wright and Hinson (2010). Less popular were image-sharing platforms (48%), audio-sharing platforms (27%), collaborative authoring tools (26%), social bookmarking sites (23%) and comment options on third-party websites (19%).

Government-related bodies tended to use Twitter (all research councils ran Twitter accounts), while social networking in the form of Facebook was popular in the charity sector (mentioned by 95% of respondents from charities and NGOs, and 80% of respondents from charitable trusts).

Charities and NGOs used social media the most for monitoring purposes, with 79% checking Twitter for mentions of their organisation (32% checked social networking sites and 28% checked blogs). A focus group participant explained: '*We're entirely publicly funded, so we have to be very very careful with anything that can damage the popularity and the integrity of the brand*'. Despite the resource implications, around two-thirds of small, medium and large organisations each monitored social media. EACD and the University of St. Gallen found a higher level of monitoring activity, around 75% of companies (2011). This could be due to approaches to monitoring changing swiftly; the number monitoring social media nearly doubled from 2009 to 2010 (Ipsos MORI, 2011).

3.4. Performance measurement

Just over half of organisations active in social media measured the performance of their social media activity. Large organisations rose above the mean at 60%. Only one organisation set performance targets for social media communications, although it should be noted that one-fifth of respondents from charitable trusts and more than one-third of respondents from research councils did not know whether success was measured. This is in line with levels of uncertainty identified by Johnson (2011). The low level of performance measurement may be explained by the lack of industry-wide benchmarks. Further, several respondents noted that success could simply be equated with preventing inconsistent uses of social media across the organisation.

The vast majority (96%) of organisations which measured performance used quantitative metrics, most commonly numbers of followers on Twitter, reTweets, and click-throughs to the organisation's website from social media platforms. This approach has translated from traditional campaign measurement: 89% of European public relations professionals recognise 'content analysis-related measures' as an effective technique, but only 63% use them often due to lack of time, money, expertise and perceived unimportance at more senior levels (Baskin, Hahn, Seaman, & Reines, 2010). In terms of tools employed, free services predominated, such as Google Analytics, Bitly, and Facebook and YouTube Insights. Free social media management tools, such as Hootsuite, Socialmention.com and Twitalyzer were mentioned by a minority. Only two respondents – both from large organisations – used paid-for tools. Just over half of respondents employed qualitative measures to assess performance, such as ratio of positive: negative comments on blogs.

3.5. Human resource

Responsibility for creating social media content (for example, posting Tweets or writing blogs) fell in three-quarters of cases to the media and web teams, with the marketing/communications team cited by two-thirds of participants. (Respondents were asked to note all teams involved.) Other teams involved were events (38%), internal communications (23%), policy (19%), grants (10%) and IT (6%). A major caveat is that every organisation has a unique structure, and the remit of teams varies from one institution to another. However, the principal involvement of the web, media and marketing/communications teams was consistent when the data was analysed by all types and sizes of organisation. This broadly reflects findings in Johnson (2011), though Wright and Hinson additionally found heavy involvement of legal teams (2009). The range of organisational functions that could assume responsibility for social media and the resultant need for cross-departmental collaboration supports findings by Avery, Lariscy, and Sweetser (2010).

Responsibility for monitoring organisational mentions on social media fell mostly to the media team (70% of responses), with the web team and marketing/communications team mentioned by fewer than half of respondents. Experiences of focus group participants confirmed the trend of expanding the responsibilities of the media team to incorporate monitoring social media. None of the focus group participants' workplaces had recruited a new staff member to handle social media.

The departments principally responsible for developing social media strategy were those that were responsible for creating social media: communications/marketing (just under two-thirds of responses), web and media (both cited by just under one-fifth of respondents). Responsibility for developing strategy was shared between teams in more than one-fifth of cases. Out of the organisations that had a social media strategy, heads of teams were responsible for this in 42% of cases. Officially, senior management held this responsibility in just under one-third of cases, but two respondents noted that in practice this was delegated to a more junior team member. This reflects a persistent lack of engagement with social media channels, and/or understanding on the part of UK communications senior management of the benefits of social media.

While under-resourcing can cause high-profile social media communications failures, this situation is common: more than half of European communications professionals experience feelings of overload when working with social media (EACD

and the University of St. Gallen, 2011) and nearly two-thirds of European companies have one or no staff dedicated to social media work (Johnson, 2011). However, this could reflect the paucity of in-house social media expertise: 42% of European companies have paid external parties for social media assistance (Johnson, 2011).

3.6. Usage policy

Thirty-six percent of all survey respondents had developed some form of policy governing staff use of social media platforms. Large organisations were most likely to have a social media policy (55%), given the potential volume of activity by staff on these platforms, and the impracticality of liaising with each contributor individually. Focus group participants remarked on the difficulty of imposing rules on those who are not employed by the organisation, such as researchers funded by organisations. None of the focus group participants had been motivated to create a social media policy by a negative incident in these channels, even though one had experienced this.

The nature and extent of policies varied widely; for some, the aim of a policy was to encourage contributions from good spokespeople outside the communications team, rather than curtail them, echoing Zerfass, Tench, Verhoeven, Verčič, and Moreno (2010). Most described by survey respondents consisted of loose guidance, amounting to a requirement to be explicit about the nature of authorship and representation (i.e. whether one is posting in a professional or personal capacity). Those advocating a light touch regarding social media policies cited the ongoing need to adapt these as technology and etiquette evolve. For example, 49% of public relations practitioners believed that posting negative comments about one's employer was ethical in 2006, dropping to 25% in 2008 (Wright & Hinson, 2009). Those within government were encouraged to develop policies on an ongoing basis, in order to capitalise on opportunities for positive engagement.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Summary of findings

Most UK research-funding organisations have adopted social media channels for corporate communications purposes. Government-funded bodies and charities are particularly active, despite – or because of – their perceived bureaucratic culture and their limited resources, respectively. Organisations attempt to meet relevant audiences where they already congregate online, illustrating an evolution in strategy from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

While the capacity to build a dialogue or sense of community with stakeholders is attractive, one-way 'broadcasting' of information is still widespread, largely due to anxiety about the human resource required to maintain a true dialogue. Organisations that have developed policies governing social media use by staff are in the minority, despite common concern about the risks arising from the capacity of those without a communication remit to speak on behalf of the organisation on social channels. Multi-layered policies according to level of advocacy and relationship to the organisation appear to be on the horizon.

Despite the time involved in managing social media channels – which is mostly undertaken by web, media or communications/marketing teams – performance of communicating via these channels is poorly monitored, and quantitative metrics predominate due to a lack of established benchmarks. Organisations rely chiefly on free monitoring tools, despite the rising tide of enterprise-grade professional services. The delegation of strategy and maintenance to junior staff, and prevalent approaches to monitoring and governance underscore the relative immaturity of corporate use of social media. The business case for creating a corporate presence on these channels can be made to senior management on purely defensive terms. Distinctive benefits of social media use in institutional environments, which are increasingly constrained by tight budgets, suggest that social media will become more formally integrated into the communications mix.

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