PR 2.0: The Impact of New Media in Public Relations

Amber Rethman

April 8, 2014

PBRL 3013 - Mass Media and Public Opinion

Introduction

The growth of new media has lead to significant changes in how public relations is practiced and has introduced the term "PR 2.0". Public relations practitioners are now able to communicate with publics and influencers in interactive and mutually beneficial ways with the click of a button. Hazelton, Harrison-Rexrode and Kennan (as cited in Fitch, 2009) identified three main impacts of new media on public relations: "the fragmentation of mass audiences (which makes public relations more cost-effective than advertising); new media users are active rather than passive participants; and, finally, that practitioners require different knowledge and skills to use new media than those required in traditional public relations."

What is Traditional Media? New Media? Social Media?

New media is generally contrasted against traditional media, which includes communication mediums that existed before the invention of the Internet. Examples of traditional media include newspapers, TV, radio, magazines, books, landline phones, and movies. New media is distributed digitally and has drastically affected the time it takes to receive information. The impact of new media on traditional media has been largely negative by forcing traditional mediums to find ways to use new media to their advantage in order to remain successful.

New media and social media are not interchangeable terms. New media includes "Twitter and Facebook and YouTube, but it is also about e-books and downloading movies and paying your concert ticket on-line," it includes digital actions which are not necessarily considered social (Pridmore et al, 2013). New media has affected diverse areas such as

dating, education, banking, advertising, and gaming for example (James, 2007). "Social

media are forms of new media, but not all forms of new media are social media. New media

can be seen to cover everything that has been changed in the now digitized sharing of

information" (Pridmore et al, 2013). New media allows for mobility in communications and

has a wider, more accessible reach than anything before (Lindgren as cited in James, 2007).

The introduction of new media has lead to media convergence, which in turn has lead to

"interactive media, a participatory culture, and media 'prosumers'" (MacPhail, 2014). New

media provide content delivery on demand through "pull media". Pull media includes RSS

feeds, email news and information subscriptions, podcasts, VODcasts, and customized

digital television (James, 2007). The tools available through the Internet aren't confined to a

computer screen. Tablets, e-readers, gaming systems, smartphones, and interactive

televisions all provide online access. The Wall Street Journal reported that 81 million

smartphones were sold between October and the end of December 2010 (as cited in

Theaker, 2011). The improvement of cellphones and the invention of apps allow for easy

access to news and social media.

Social media is "anything that uses the Internet to facilitate conversations between

people" (Solis as cited in Breakenridge, 2008). Facebook is the largest social media site with

1.23 billion monthly active users as of December 31, 2013 (Facebook, 2014) and YouTube

has more than 1 billion unique user visits each month (YouTube, 2014). It is necessary for

social media to be interactive, connective, and to use two-way communication. In business

practices, the choice to use new media and the choice to use social media aren't the same

thing. It's important to understand the difference between the two terms in public relations

in order to engage in effective communication practices.

What is PR 2.0?

To understand PR 2.0 we must look to Web 1.0, Web 2.0, and the rise of the Internet. Web 1.0 created a new information distribution channel and it forced traditional media to evolve. It changed how people searched for information and how news was collected and shared (Solis as cited in Breakenridge, 2008). People no longer had to tune in to the five o'clock news or read the newspaper. Web 1.0 was what inspired Brian Solis to coin the term "PR 2.0" in the early 1990s. He believed that "public relations [would] become a hybrid of communications, evangelism, and web marketing." Solis came up with the term "PR 2.0" after analyzing how the Web and multimedia was redefining public relations by changing how companies communicate with journalists, accidental influencers, and customers (Breakenridge, 2008). Solis claimed that with the shift from PR to PR 2.0 "monologue has given way to dialogue"(as cited in Breakenride, 2009).

Web 2.0, coined by Tim O'Reilly the founder of O'Reilly Media, introduced a read/write Web. It introduced the 'Social Web' which allowed for people to contribute to information in a collaborative manner. "Online conversations and the discovery, creation, and sharing of content is the foundation for Web 2.0, social media, and new PR. In the Web 2.0 world, brands are more embraceable, shapeable, and approachable than ever before" (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). People can actively participate through social media by sharing, liking, pinning, searching, and writing about things that interest them. "The Internet has allowed individuals to become content producers, not just content consumers" (MacPhail, 2014).

PR 2.0 allows for companies to talk directly with customers through the use of numerous new media channels such as online forums, social media, wikis and blogs. Solis

claims that "social media forces PR to stop broadcasting and start connecting" (as cited in Breakenridge, 2008). A 2010 study by Cone Inc. found that 95 percent of new media users expect companies to have a social media presence and 78 percent of users expect brands to interact with them through new media channels. Of those studied, 62 percent believe they can influence business decisions by voicing their opinions through the Internet (Cone Inc, 2010). It's important for companies to listen to their clients needs and this survey demonstrates the importance of new media practices in public relations. With the rise of the Internet there has been a huge change in communications bringing immediate access to people across the world and it has lead to the decentralization of mass communication. During the early stages of the Internet, companies were more focused on using the Internet as a way to publish information as a one-way communication platform. The Web has since grown to support and encourage two-way communications where consumers can share their positive and negative experiences with companies in an instant. With the increase in interactivity, public relations practitioners must use appropriate judgment to understand where professional communicators aren't welcome. The uncontrolled environment of the Web provides risks and benefits to the reputation of brands and challenges the boundary spanning role for public relations practitioners. Individuals and organizations can connect and share opinions, often without censorship. This new feedback process has caused public relations practitioners to focus on strategic, reputation management and problem-solving (Theaker, 2011). Professionals in the public relations industry can thrive in this new digital world and should use the Internet to focus more on building relationships, enacting dialogue, and working with 'earned media' rather than marketing and persuasion tactics (Kent as cited in Theaker, 2011).

Using New Media Effectively in PR 2.0

A 2010 report by Wright and Hinson found that 73 per cent of public relations

practitioners reported that social media have changed the way they communicate and 77

per cent believed social media have enhanced public relations. Some of the social media

tools used by PR professionals today include: blogs, intranets, wikis, micro-blogs, text

messages, video conferences, instant messages, social event/calendar systems, social

bookmarks, RSS, and e-mail (Eyrich et al, 2008). New media forces public relations

practitioners to improve technical skills in areas such as online security, multimedia

creation, web publishing, search engine optimization, web analytics, and new software

operation (James, 2007).

The Internet provides may new tools for the PR industry but these shouldn't be used

without caution. Gregory (as cited in Theaker, 2008) set out three phenomena of the

Internet that PR practitioners must take into account. First is porosity, or how the passage

of information from internal to external audiences can be misdirected or leaked. Second is

transparency or how internal systems must be open to scrutiny from external publics.

Lastly is agency or how messages and images are transformed from person to person.

Horton (as cited in Theaker, 2008) believes that communication through the Internet

should obey the same principles as all other corporate communications in that they must

focus on simplicity, timeliness, openness, definition, flexibility, individuality, and that

messages should be meaningful and measurable. The new media environment has caused

the CIPR (Chartered Institute for Public Relations) to establish guidelines to reflect

acceptable public relations practices online. Along with this, in response to complaints from

journalists and bloggers over PR 'polluting' the online environment, the CIPR launched a media spamming charter in 2010 (Theaker, 2011).

The popularity of the Internet has led to the dominance of search engines which in turn has increased the need for search engine optimization in public relations (Theaker, 2011). PR practitioners primarily use organic (content driven) search methods over paid-for methods. "Ensuring an organization's information is the most visible to searchers should be at the forefront of an online communications strategy" (Phillips and Young as cited in Theaker, 2011) This can be done by researching keywords, updating information, and understanding how search engines work (Theaker, 2011). The Internet should also be used in crisis communications so that the organization's website can give its side of the story and address stakeholders (James, 2007). The 'Social Media Release', a blend of the traditional press release and digital social media, is also emerging as a potentially powerful public relations tool (Steyn et al, 2010).

The interactivity of the Internet provides a plethora of company information that needs to be monitored. PR practitioners must examine online debate, scrutinize how issues develope, demonstrate return on investment and evaluate communication efforts (Theaker, 2011). However, this kind of surveillance does raise privacy and security concerns that need to be monitored as well (Theaker, 2011). In order to monitor public opinion, public relations practitioners should do their own research online. PR professionals must utilize available 2.0 research tools, stay well informed, thoroughly evaluate the resources and money available for research and understand key influencers (Breakenridge, 2008). Online monitoring enables practitioners to identify those who are influential to an organization's

key publics. This was once achieved through journalists who provided credible third part

endorsements but can now be provided by bloggers and other online influencers. Blogs

facilitate citizen journalists and public relations practitioners must harness and monitor the

growing 'blogosphere' (Breakenridge, 2008). This has lead to 'blogger relations' which

means that PR practitioners treat bloggers as though they are journalists and provide them

with information, pitch them stories, invite them to launches and build relationships

(Theaker, 2011).

To effectively utilize the potential of new media, public relations practitioners must

immerse themselves in it through participation. Breakenridge (2008) believes that "you

can't truly understand what audiences want and why they demand social media unless

you're heavily engaged in it yourself." The more familiar practitioners are with all new

media, the better they can apply PR 2.0 strategies. With the rise of the Internet it is

becoming more important for public relations practitioners to be as transparent as possible.

Theaker (2011) encourages professionals to openly contributing to a blog or Twitter

account. "The alternative approach of anonymous organization participation runs the risk

of lacking personality, and probably reflects a one-way broadcasting approach to online

communications" (Theaker, 2011). Public relations professionals also need to be flexible in

order to keep up with the fast pace of new media communication.

About two-thirds of the world's population do not have access to the Internet. A digital

divide exists among those with lower education levels and lower incomes. Those who do

have the ability to go on the Internet are divided into digital natives (the younger

demographic who have grown up surrounded by the Web) and digital immigrants (the

older demographic) (Prensky as cited in Theaker, 2011). Generation C has also been

identified, an online community "who connect with others in their 'tribes', derive social

status by co-creating and sharing online, 'swarm' around topics on the basis of peer

approval, and are constantly connected via social media platforms' (Pankraz as cited in

Theaker, 2011). Public relations practitioners must be aware of the digital environment and

reach those who are unable to communicate through new media via traditional media

channels.

Conclusion

The digitalization of public relations enables practitioners to engage in easy and high

speed two-way communication with publics. Social media platforms provide an authentic

communication style that, when used effectively, can receive meaningful public

participation and consultation. New media has altered the media landscape by giving

consumers the power to influence. This 'prosumer' and 'citizen journalist' evolution has

augmented traditional media and has created new layers of top-down and bottom-up

communication (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). When public relations professionals

contribute content through new media they build an online portfolio that enhances client

reputation, boosts their brand, and encourages customer loyalty (Solis & Breakenridge,

2009). Public relations practitioners working within digital PR need to have a strategic and

tactical role within their organizations (Theaker, 2011). In the new media world, PR

professionals must provide accessible online information as well as stay active in social

networks to build relationships and monitor client reputations.

References

Breakenridge, D. (2008). *PR 2.0: New media, new tools, new audiences.* Upper Saddle River, N.J: FT Press.

Eyrich, N., Padman, M. L., & Sweetser, K. D. (2008). PR practitioners' use of social media tools and communication technology. *Public Relations Review, 34,* 4, 412-414.

Fitch, K. (2009).The new frontier: Singaporean and Malaysian public relations practitioners' perceptions of new media. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal, 10,* 17 – 33.

James, M. (2007). A review of the impact of new media on public relations: Challenges for terrain, practice and education. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal 8* (8), 137-148

MacPhail, S. (2014). Media in an ever-changing communications universe. Retrieved from http://www.moodle233.msvu.ca

Pridmore, J., Falk, A., & Sprenkels, I. (2013). New media & social media: What's the difference? *Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University.* Retrieved from www.academia.edu

Solis, B., & Breakenridge, D. (2009). *Putting the public back in public relations: How social media is reinventing the aging business of PR*. Upper Saddle River, N.J: FT Press.

Steyn, P., Salehi-Sangari, E., Pitt, L., Parent, M., & Berthon, P. (2010). The Social Media Release as a public relations tool: Intentions to use among B2B bloggers.*Public*

Relations Review, 36, 1, 87-89.

Theaker, A. (2011). *The public relations handbook.* Hoboken: Taylor & Francis. 411 - 431.

Theaker, A. (2008). *The public relations handbook.* New York: Routledge.

Wright, D., & Hinson, M. (2010). How new communications media are being used in public

relations: A longitudinal analysis. *Public Relations Journal,* Vol. 4, No. 3, Summer.

Public Relations Society of America.