

An international study of social media and its role within journalism and the journalist - PR practitioner relationship

Introduction

Many public relations texts acknowledge that the journalist-public relations practitioner is an important and inter-dependent one and has therefore long been a source of interest and investigation (e.g. Sallot and Johnson 2006). With a changing media and online communications environment, traditional PR practices are increasingly including social media to enhance their media relations. Social media and the Internet in general, are having dramatic impacts on the role of journalists (Deuze 2002; Sarrica, 2010) and the PR and journalist interface. Eyrich, Padman, Sweetser (2008) research into PR practitioners' use of social media concluded that it 'provides an avenue to strengthen media relations' p412. Given practitioners acknowledge the declining prominence of traditional media relations strategies e.g. the media kit preparation, news release distribution and pitch (Bajkiewicz, Kraus and Hong, 2011) there is considerable mileage in investigating the social media interface between the PR and journalism. Indeed, Verhoeven, Tench, Zerfass, Moreno and Vercic (2012) acknowledge that 'working with journalists as gatekeepers of the news media is still the most important communication channel' p165 and therefore effectiveness in reaching this group is important. Eyrich et al (2008) found that PR practitioners had adopted 'more established and institutional tools (e-mail, Intranet) ...[but] are slower to integrate more technologically complicated tools that cater for a niche audience (e.g., text messaging, social networks, virtual worlds)' p414. By analysing how journalists use both traditional and new communication tools in eight countries, the research seeks to explore the changing role of social media in the journalist-PR relationship.

Aims

The aims of this study were to compare and contrast patterns of social media use by journalists in different countries and their communication methods with PR practitioners to identify common characteristics in how they utilise social media. This is to understand whether PR practitioners communicated with journalists through preferred platforms.

Methodology

This international online study was conducted in eight countries; Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Sweden, UK, and USA in summer 2012. The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions, including multi-item, multiple choice, rank ordering and ordinal scales. The questions covered use, behaviour and attitude towards social media and the current use and preference and of social media use with PR practitioners. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) view social media as a collection of Internet-based applications using Web 2.0 to enable interactive dialogue, social interaction and the creation and exchange of user-generated content. 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' (p1). As social media includes many different tools and platforms the definitions vary (Poynter, 2010). This research applied one of the leading typologies, (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) who identified six categories: collaborative projects, blogs and microblogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. This was adapted for this particular research to cover; blogs, content communities, crowdsourcing sites, microblogs, social reader and bookmarking tools, professional social networking, social networking and audio-visual sharing sites.

A sample of 134,884 unique contacts from the eight countries was drawn from CisionPoint, a commercial database holding 1.5 million media and communication professionals worldwide. A random stratified sample of 25% was generated in proportion to country size, excluding smaller countries where a higher proportion (up to 70%) was sampled to gain a more valid sample size. The online survey was piloted in the UK to a random sample of 1000 journalists and tested for both individual question response rates, exit points and response rates to different email headings. Following the test, amendments were made and then translations made by native speakers and then piloted on a convenience sample. An incentive (an ipad) was used and a reminder sent after two weeks to improve response rates (Göriz, 2004). This final sample achieved a response rate of 2.71% equalling 3656 completed questionnaires from the eight countries. To summarise and conceptualise the data and understand how and why journalists use social media, a 'Social Journalism Barometer' was created applying methodologies from industry (Ease of Doing Business Index, 2013 and Doing Business Economy Rankings, 2012). The countries were ranked in relation to four dimensions: social media involvement, practice, knowledge and attitudes. These scores were calculated from values in nine indicators which together measured a total of 47 variables.

Combined rankings

The overall rankings of the Social Journalism Barometer are calculated by taking an average rank score across four dimensions in each country (Appendix 1). Canada and the US were consistently on the top in the rankings with few differences between these two countries. As they were top of most individual dimensions, unsurprisingly they come out on the top for the overall ranking. Germany and Finland, on the other hand, were often at the bottom of the rankings in individual dimensions and therefore their overall ranking is low. The middling countries vary in their ranking in the different indicators, but they tend to rank high at least in one dimension.

As part of 'involvement' daily social media use for journalists work is high in the eight countries but Canada and the US recorded an average of more than 4 hours per day using social media, while Finland and Germany less than 3 hours. The percentage of journalists who use social media for work for less than an hour a day were lowest in Canada (6.3%) and the US (8.5%) and highest in Germany (18.3%) and Finland (16.9%). A similar pattern of ranking emerged when countries were compared in relation to how many followers/friends respondents had on their preferred social networking or microblogging site. There were very little differences between Canada, US and the UK, with about half of the journalists recording having more than 500 followers on their preferred site and less than 8% having no followers/friends. Germany and Finland reported the highest number of those with no followers (24.5% and 15% respectively) and lowest number of those with more than 500 followers (21.1% and 18.3% respectively). The UK, for instance, ranks high in terms of social media involvement and practices of journalists, while Swedish journalists scored highly on their positive attitudes about the impacts of social media. For PR professionals it is evident that countries high in the barometer would expect and be more receptive to being contacted through social media.

In relation to 'practice', journalists in the two North American countries were the most active; about half of them posting original comment on a social networking or microblogging site daily; one in five using social media daily to meet new people in their field of work; almost a quarter of them maintaining a work-related blog daily; and about a third of them replying to comments they receive on social media sites daily. The most passive users turned out to be respondents in Finland; only 2.4% of whom maintain a work-related blog daily and only 7% reply to comments on social media sites daily. Respondents were asked about their reasons for using social media. Overall, sourcing was reported as the main reason for social

media use (80% on average across the countries) followed by publishing and promoting own content (69.4% on average), while the least popular task was verifying (59.8% on average). Using social media for sourcing information/story was significantly lower in Finland compared to the other countries, and highest for monitoring 'what's going on'. Germany in contrast reported one of the highest figures for sourcing but the lowest use for networking. The two North American countries reported high levels of uses across all professional tasks surveyed. In relation to 'knowledge' most respondents rated their knowledge about social media tools as at least adequate with only 26.6% reporting their knowledge as poor or non-existent. Countries with higher uses of the tools ranked high on perceived knowledge. In Canada and the US 16.8% and 17.2% of journalists respectively told us that they had no or poor knowledge about social media, while the figure was 36.8% in Germany and 36.3% in Finland. To summarise the key points relating to 'attitudes' overall, journalists were more likely to be positive than negative about the impacts of social media on their work. Differences between the countries followed overall patterns of differences in social media use. North American countries were more positive about the impacts than Finland and Germany. For instance, in Canada 47.9% of respondents agree moderately or completely that social media have improved the productivity of their work, while the figure for Germany was 29.5%.

Use of social media in the journalist-PR interface

Once journalists' use of social media had been explored by country the research then focused on journalists' perceptions of PR practitioners and their communication tools. There is widespread agreement that "traditional media relations is beginning to lose its dominance in public relations" (Waters, Tindall and Morton 2010 p242) although the findings show that email and telephone are the dominant current contact methods (Appendix 2) mean score 98.65% and 83.66%. This was supported by Alikilic and Atabek (2012) who found that email was the most popular social media for PR, although the author would argue that email is a traditional communication method and not a social media tool. More importantly, journalists indicated that they prefer to receive information by email (mean 97.46%) but contact by telephone suggests a lesser preference (70.56%). Both face-to-face and social media contact methods show a greater preference than is currently being undertaken by PR professionals suggesting a mix of traditional and new media relations tools should be adopted. Given the interest particularly in social media and an international comparison, it is apparent that all journalists from all countries show an increasing interest in the use of social media, even those who appeared at the bottom of the ranking table (Appendix 3) .

Conclusion

The research identified widespread and growing use of social media by international journalists for a number of professional tasks, including their communication with PR practitioners. Despite the growing use of social media by both parties, traditional contact methods – both email and face-to-face remain the most widely used contact methods and the most preferred. However, journalists indicated a stronger preference for being contacted by phone and social media than PR practitioners currently use indicating a mix of traditional and new communication tools. This view is supported by Verhoeven et al. (2012) who stated 'digital and social media are gaining importance in European organisations, but they are not the most important element of the organisational media mix' p64. Of particular interest is that despite the varying use of social media by journalists from different countries, all indicated that they have a stronger preference for its use with PR practitioners than is currently being offered.

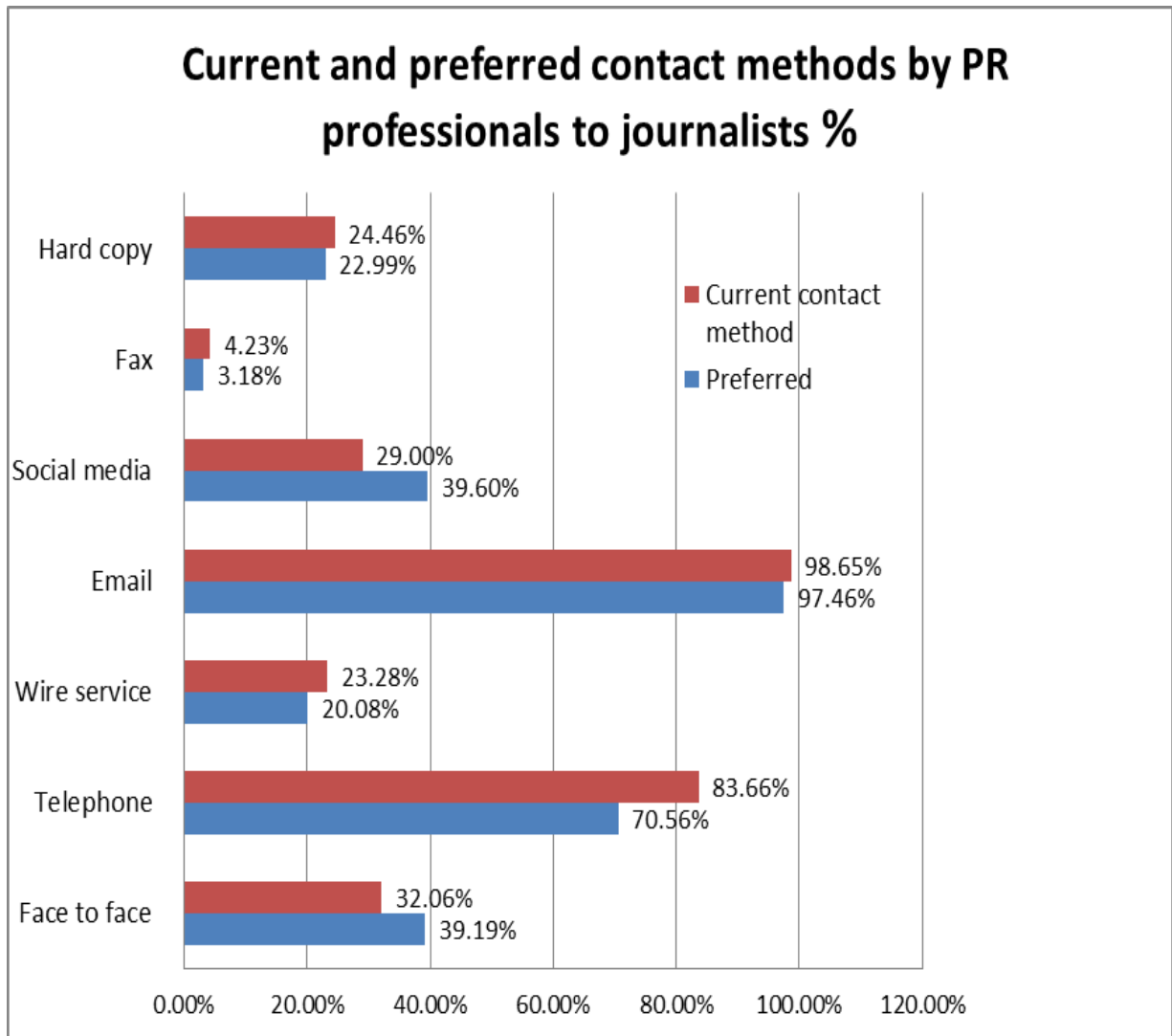
Bibliography

- Alikikic, O and Atabek, U., (2012) Social media adoption among Turkish public relations professionals: A survey of practitioners, *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 38: 56-63
- Bajkiewicz, T.E., Kraus, J.J., Yeon Hong, Soo (2011) The impact of newsroom changes and the rise of social media on the practice of media relations, *Public Relations Review*, 37 (2011) 329-331
- Deuze, M. (2002) 'National News Cultures: A Comparison of Dutch, German, British, Australian, and US Journalists', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 79(1): 134–49.
- Dykeman, M., (2008). How do you define social media?" February 9. Retrieved from <http://broadcasting-brain.com/2008/02/09/how-do-you-define-social-media/>
- Ease of Doing Business Index (2013) The World Bank Group. Retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/about/data-overview/methodologies>
- Doing Business Economy Rankings (2012) The World Bank Group retrieved from <http://www.doingbusiness.org/rankings>
- Eyrich, N., Padman, M.L., Sweetser, K.D., (2008) PR practitioners' use of social media tools and communication technology, *Public Relations Review* Vol 34:412-414
- Görizt, A.S (2004) Incentives in Web Studies: Methodological Issues and a Review, *International Journal of Internet Science* 2006, 1 (1), 58-70
- Kaplan A. M., Heinlein M., (2010), 'Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media, in: *Business Horizons*, Vol.53, Issue 1, pp 59-68.
- Poynter, R (2010) *The Handbook of Online and Social Media Research, Tool and Techniques for Market Researchers*, London: Wiley
- Sallot, L.M and Johnson, E.A (2006) Investigating relationships between journalists and public relations practitioners: Working together to set, frame and build the public agenda, 1991-2004 *Public Relations Review* 32 (2):151-159
- Saricca, M. et al (2010) 'The early stages of the integration of the Internet in EU newsrooms' in: *European Journal of Communication*, 25(4): 413-422.
- Verhoeven, P., Tench, R., Zerfass, R., Moreno, A., Vercic, D. (2012) How European PR practitioners handle digital and social media, *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 38 162-164.
- Waters, R.D, Tindall, N.T.J, Morton, T.S, (2010) Media Catching and the Journalist – Public Relations Practitioner Relationship: How Social Media are Changing the Practice of Media Relations, *Journal of Public Relations Research* 22(3): 241-264

Appendix 1 – Social Journalism Barometer 2012 Combined Ranking

Country	Involvement	Practice	Knowledge	Attitudes	Overall Ranking
Canada	1	1	1	1	1st
United States	2	2	2	3	2nd
United Kingdom	3	3	4	4	3rd
Sweden	4	6	5	1	4th
Australia	4	4	3	7	5th
France	6	5	6	5	6th
Finland	7	8	8	5	7th
Germany	8	7	7	8	8th

Appendix 2



Appendix 3

