

Social Media Challenges and Adoption Patterns among Public Relations Practitioners

RADHE KRISHAN

Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies, New Delhi, India

Social media has altered the design of modern society. It has changed the way people lived and worked. Though no profession or industry is left untouched by the communication revolution stirred by social media, yet communication professionals bore maximum impact. This paper analyzed the usage and perception of public relation (PR) professionals regarding the use of social media, particularly, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The primary research questions, this paper attempted to find answers for, are: (i) Did social media transformed the modus operandi of PR practitioners?; (ii) Do PR practitioners rely on one social media tool/platform over the other?; and (iii) To find out whether social media is an aid or a burden for a PR practitioner? By attempting to answer these three questions the paper explored fresh aspects of social media with regards to public relations. For the purpose of the study a survey was conducted among PR practitioners based in Delhi and working with prominent multinational companies or PR agencies.

Keywords: Public relations, social media, social networking, media usage, media professionals

According to anthropology the relationships between leaders and their supporters have been significant throughout historical events even before the recorded history. These relationships played decisive roles in the major breakthrough events in the past. The leaders soon understood the importance of these relationships and made efforts to improve by getting closer to the followers. The foundations of democracy were led on this premises as free flow of information is the prerequisite for any democratic society (Kellner, 1995). Eventually, public relations, one of the fields of mass communication and journalism, emerged as a discipline to cater to this very need of democratic societies in a systematic manner. Bernays (1952) talked about three elements of public relations:

The three main elements of public relations are practically as old as society; informing people, persuading people, or integrating people with people. Of course, the means and methods of accomplishing these ends have changed as society changed. In a technologically advanced society, like that of today, ideas are communicated by newspapers, magazines, films, radio, television and other methods (pp. 11-17).

Correspondence to: Radhe Krishan, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies, AU Block, Outer Ring Road, Pitampura, Delhi-110034, India. E-mail: rk.radhekrishan@gmail.com

Information technology (IT) revolution of 21st century led public relations (PR) to evolve to become one among the most powerful professions. Rapid advancements in information and communications technology (ICT) sector directly impacted the public relations industry. Communication being core produce of the field, this development provided an impetus to the PR and communications activities both inside and outside the organizations.

Communication being its core produce, the PR industry was directly impacted by the rapid advancements in ICT sector. It is a fact that this development provided an impetus to the PR and communications activities. Moreover, it has simultaneously empowered and equipped PR professionals by offering a large number of communication platforms that remarkably strengthened their armory. Though many surveys and studies have proved that PR practitioners have widely accepted, appreciated and gained from social media and other ICT, yet many feel that it's all the more challenging to keep oneself equally updated with the technology given such a pace, especially in the case of those engrossed deep into communication processes. Hence, PR practitioners often come across such dilemmas where they feel trapped in the web of communication technologies.

Every other day a new social media platform emerges and creates a niche for itself in the existing sphere. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Google Plus, LinkedIn are among many other social media platforms that grew by leaps and bounds in a considerably short span of time. WhatsApp, being the latest fad among all social media enthusiasts, prompted mushrooming of similar instant messaging platforms like WeChat, Line, Viber, Kakao, Kik and many more. This puts up a challenge and builds pressure on PR practitioners and communication professionals. The primary aim of the present study is to gauge the penetration and reception of these social media platforms among public relations professionals.

Clear and Weideman (2001) explained the role of a public relations practitioner as a link between management and employees by channeling information to the employees. While discussing the importance of channel in the process they mentioned that 'the public relations practitioner should always communicate with employees through appropriate internal communication channels and not through mass communication media directed at large, diverse audience' (Annette Clear, 1997).

Modern day public relations practitioner cannot afford staying away from the technology for even a single day if not an hour. He has to remain online 24X7. Fortunately, majority of the public relations professionals have already adopted almost all the latest social media platforms (Eyrich, 2008).

According to a study, jointly conducted by Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and IRIS Knowledge Foundation and published in *The Hindu* on April 11, 2013, there are more than 62 million Indians using social media and the count most likely touch 80 million mark before 2014 parliamentary elections. More importantly 97 per cent of them are on Facebook. A three year longitudinal trend study conducted from 2009 to 2012 ascertained that public relations practitioners consider 'Facebook as most important new communications medium for public relations messages' (Wright, Hinson 2011)

Communication professionals almost everywhere act as a bridge of information among different stakeholders. They are always expected to be quick and transparent channel of communication on behalf of their clients, organizations or groups. To meet such demands and requirements they add social media to their existing toolkit. They use specific tool or

platform of communication to contact specific stakeholder based on the characteristics and preferences of the latter, objective of the communication, nature of the message etc., among other factors.

This process of selecting one communication platform or tool over the other has to be exhaustive and accurate all the time to avoid unexpected crisis. The present study attempted to explore the above discussed process with special focus on major social media platforms. It also aimed at analyzing the present status of the transition from traditional media to social media specifically among PR practitioners. The media mix devised by these professionals was also investigated.

Though the topic of this research may sound quite new and challenging, yet various components separately have been much discussed by scholars in the areas of Public Relations and Social Media. The motive was to further explore the areas considering the conspicuous change being brought in by the social media and other ICTs. In fact, Public Relations is not the lone profession that is facing the heat, however here the responsibility, involvement and immediacy is much more.

This paper analyzed the usage and perception of public relation professionals regarding the use of social media, particularly, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The primary research questions, this paper attempted to find answers for, are: (i) Did social media transformed the modus operandi of PR practitioners?; (ii) Do PR practitioners rely on one social media tool/platform over the other?; and (iii) To find out whether social media is an aid or a burden for a PR practitioner?

Research Questions

The basic research questions are further broken into subparts to be more specific.

RQ1: Did social media transform the modus operandi of PR practitioners?

- (i) Do they consider using social media for their professional use?
- (ii) Do they use all the tools simultaneously?

RQ2: Do PR practitioners rely on one social media tool/platform over the other?

- (i) Do they feel that some social media tool/platform is better than the others?
- (ii) Do they choose specific tools for specific audience?

RQ3: Do PR practitioners consider social media as an aid or burden?

- (i) Do they feel social media have strengthened their toolkit?
- (ii) Do they think their audience trust social media more than the traditional media?

The present research also attempted to explore the opinion of the Public Relations Professional regarding the use of social media for public relations profession. It also explored their opinion over the shift from traditional to social media and whether they see social media as a threat to mainstream traditional media.

Method

For the purpose of the study a questionnaire was developed using five point Likert scale. Delhi, the capital of India is taken as universe considering that almost all the public relations agencies or PR wings of multinational corporations are either based in Delhi or have their offices in the capital. To achieve maximum diversity in the sample, alumni of Indian Institute

of Mass Communication's (IIMC) Advertising and Public Relations batches of before 2010 were considered for the study as they spread over the capital's top Ad and public relations businesses.

As an alumnus of Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), which is regarded as the most prestigious institute for Public Relations education in India, the researcher has access to alumni data of the institute. Using the same data a total of 75 Public Relations professionals, who are working in reputed PR agencies or PR departments of multinationals in Delhi, were approached using emails and personal visits. Out of these 75 respondents, 63 respondents completed the survey successfully.

The respondents were given clear instructions before filling up the questionnaire. Each of the 15 questions focused only on the use of social media for professional use, the opinion of the user regarding the tools and their usage and regarding the usefulness of the social media tools for public relations profession.

Analysis and Findings

The data was analyzed using SPSS. Out of the total 63 respondents, 42 were males and 21 were females. There was variation in age groups however majority of the respondents were from three age groups that range between 30-44 years. A total of 15 questions were asked in the questionnaire, out of these, first eight questions were related to the perception of respondents about the usage, role and credibility of social media in Public Relations' context. The next seven questions dealt specifically with the use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for professional use. The questionnaire was developed using the five point Likert Scale. Respondents are asked to select only one out of the five options that suits them most. It was also communicated to them that checking more than one box will lead to disqualification of the questionnaire for the final research analysis and conclusion. Below are the tables displaying the demographic details of the respondents:

Table 1. Gender

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Male	42	66.7	66.7	66.7
	Female	21	33.3	33.3	100.0
	Total	63	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. Age Group

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	25-29	11	17.5	17.5	17.5
	30-34	14	22.2	22.2	39.7
	35-39	23	36.5	36.5	76.2
	40-44	10	15.9	15.9	92.1
	45 and above	5	7.9	7.9	100.0
	Total	63	100.0	100.0	

RQ 1. *Did social media transform the modus operandi of PR practitioners?*

To find out the opinion of PR practitioners about whether social media have changed the way they worked there were two questions in the questionnaire. Out of these two, one was direct question asking the same and the other included functioning of all the departments in an organization. Majority of the respondents agreed that social media has changed the way PR industry worked. Almost negligible part of the sample disagreed with the statement (Table 3). 87.3% of the respondents agreed to the statement that social media has changed the way all the departments in any organization worked, while none of them disagree as the rest of 12.7% neither agree nor disagree (Table 4). 63.5% of the respondents agreed that they used Facebook, YouTube and Twitter simultaneously; however a significant number (36.5%) said they never used these tools together to reach their target audience (Table 5).

Table 3. Do you agree or disagree that social media has changed the way PR industry worked ?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	1.6	1.6	1.6
	Disagree	4	6.3	6.3	7.9
	Neutral	19	30.2	30.2	38.1
	Agree	20	31.7	31.7	69.8
	Strongly Agree	19	30.2	30.2	100.0
	Total	63	100.0	100.0	

Table 4. Do you agree or disagree that social media has changed the way all the departments function in an organization?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Neutral	8	12.7	12.7	12.7
	Agree	30	47.6	47.6	60.3
	Strongly Agree	25	39.7	39.7	100.0
	Total	63	100.0	100.0	

Table 5. Do you use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube together for professional communication purposes?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Never	23	36.5	36.5	36.5
	Rarely	29	46.0	46.0	82.5
	Sometimes	11	17.5	17.5	100.0
	Total	63	100.0	100.0	

RQ 2: Do PR practitioners rely on one social media tool/platform over the other?

Considering the challenge of finding the most appropriate tool to contact given target audience, the present research sought opinion of PR practitioners in this regard. However a considerable number of 38 per cent disagreed to the statement that different target groups should be contacted using specific social media platforms that complement their unique communication needs. 25.4 per cent agreed with the statement while 36.5 per cent remained neutral (Table 6).

Table 6. Do you agree or disagree that different target groups should be contacted using specific social media platforms that complement their unique communication needs ?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	4	6.3	6.3	6.3
	Disagree	20	31.7	31.7	38.1
	Neutral	23	36.5	36.5	74.6
	Agree	14	22.2	22.2	96.8
	Strongly Agree	2	3.2	3.2	100.0
	Total	63	100.0	100.0	

RQ 3: Do PR practitioners consider social media as an aid or burden?

Emergence of social media has put a challenge before seasoned professionals as sometimes they find it hard to be familiar with the technology especially ICTs. 69.8% of the respondents accepted that social media have added value to the profession (Table 7). More than 90% of the respondents agreed with the statement that social media have made professional life easier for a Public Relations professional whereas none of them disagreed with the statement (Table 8). 66.7% of the respondents admitted that Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are more important components of a PR professional’s tool kit as compared to traditional media tools. None of them denied the statement (Table 9). In response to the statement that people trust social media more as compared to the traditional media 68.3% of the respondents disagreed (Table 10). When asked specifically whether Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are trusted by their target audience majority of the respondents, i.e. 84.1% agreed that audiences do trust these three platforms (Table 11). There was uncertainty among 42.9% of the respondents when they were asked whether social media has the potential to take over the traditional mainstream media and they remained neutral whereas 20.6% agreed and 36.5% disagreed with the statement (Table 12).

Table 7. Do you agree or disagree that social media has added value to public relations services?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Disagree	5	7.9	7.9	7.9
	Neutral	14	22.2	22.2	30.2
	Agree	23	36.5	36.5	66.7
	Strongly Agree	21	33.3	33.3	100.0
	Total	63	100.0	100.0	

Table 8. Do you agree or disagree that social media has made professional life easier for a Public Relations professional ?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Neutral	6	9.5	9.5	9.5
	Agree	25	39.7	39.7	49.2
	Strongly Agree	32	50.8	50.8	100.0
	Total	63	100.0	100.0	

Table 9. Do you feel that Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are more important components of a PR professional's tool kit as compared to traditional media tools?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Rarely	21	33.3	33.3	33.3
	Sometimes	19	30.2	30.2	63.5
	Often	23	36.5	36.5	100.0
	Total	63	100.0	100.0	

Table 10. Do you agree or disagree that people trust social media more as compared to traditional media?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	16	25.4	25.4	25.4
	Disagree	27	42.9	42.9	68.3
	Neutral	15	23.8	23.8	92.1
	Agree	5	7.9	7.9	100.0
	Total	63	100.0	100.0	

Table 11. Do you think that Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are trusted by your target audience?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Rarely	1	1.6	1.6	1.6
	Sometimes	9	14.3	14.3	15.9
	Often	13	20.6	20.6	36.5
	Always	40	63.5	63.5	100.0
	Total	63	100.0	100.0	

Table 12. Do you agree or disagree that social media has the potential to take over traditional mainstream media of today?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	4	6.3	6.3	6.3
	Disagree	19	30.2	30.2	36.5
	Neutral	27	42.9	42.9	79.4
	Agree	13	20.6	20.6	100.0
	Total	63	100.0	100.0	

Discussion

This study was aimed at exploring the usage of social media among public relations professionals. To assess the usage and to gauge the opinion about social media among public relations professionals is critical at this moment as both the discipline and the technology is growing at a very fast rate. Moreover, public relations professionals are in the business of communication, thus it becomes more pertinent to study their usage and adoption of social media. This study helps to understand the present status of social media in public relations terms and also provides inputs for prognostications about near future of the relationship between the two. The questionnaire that was designed with the help of five point Likert scale, was kept simple, short and precise. Due to this the response rate was fair.

All the research questions were answered during the study while touching upon some additional issues. Some interesting findings were noted during the study. Majority of the respondents disagreed to the statement that people trust social media more than the traditional media. Though it is a fact that people take information from social media first and then they verify with traditional media. In the research question (RQ 3), the objective was to understand whether social media help PR practitioners for their professional objectives or it is a burden for them as it has become a compulsion for any brand, company or organization today for their growth and survival. However the primary objective was to understand the usage and impact of social media on public relations practices and as per the feedback of RQ 1 from respondents, it is evident that PR professionals accept that social media has transformed the way they worked. Apparently, they also agreed that it not only changed PR but all other departments in any organization. It would also be interesting to know how social media is transforming other disciplines like medical or manufacturing industries etc.

It was also found that majority of respondents disagree to the statement that different target groups should be contacted using specific social media platforms that complement their unique communication needs. However it would make much more sense if the above statement is followed. Choosing an appropriate tool for specific purpose would definitely be more beneficial not only for the communicator but for the organization and the receiver as well.

Conclusion

Findings of this study clearly indicate that the public relation practitioners are using social media for their professional use. However the medium is new and the PR community may

take some more time to adopt and modify it as per their special needs. Social media has become part of business strategies among multinationals and large organizations but there are many organizations and businesses that are still reluctant to adopt it and make use of it. There are so many hidden aspects, probabilities, expectations, possibilities and mysteries related to the phenomenon of social media. Three research questions in the present study explored the attitude of PR professionals towards social media usage and adoption. It can be concluded that PR professionals are making good use of the tools that social media provide and the future of the medium is bright with numerous new uses and platforms to come along the way.

References

- Bernays, E. L. (1952). *Public Relations*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Brown, R. (2010). *Public Relations and the Social Web: Using Social Media and Web 2.0 in communications*. London: Kogan Page.
- Clear, A., & Weideman, L. (1997). *Dynamics of Public Relations and Journalism: A Practical Guide for Media Studies*. Lansdowne: Juta & Co. Ltd.
- Coombs, T. W., & Hollada, S. J. (2013). *It's Not Just PR: Public Relations in Society*. Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.
- Cutlip, S. M., Center, A. H., & Broom, G M. (2000). *Effective Public Relations*. Delhi: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Diggs-Brown, B. (2011). *Strategic Public Relations: Audience Focused Approach*. Boston: Cengage Learning.
- Falls, J. (2012). *No bullshit social media : the all-business, no-hype guide to social media marketing*. USA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Gregory, A. (2008). *Planning and Managing Public Relations Campaigns*. New Delhi: Kogan Page India Pvt. Ltd.
- Lattimore, D. (2004). *Public Relations: The Profession and the Practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Martell, L. (2010). *The Sociology of Globalization*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Qualman, E. (2009, August 24). *Socialnomics : how social media transforms the way we live and do business*. New Jersey, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- Vilanilam, J. V. (2011). *Public Relations in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
- Wright, D. K. (2011). *An Analysis of the Increasing Impact of Social and Other New Media on Public Relations Practice*. Retrieved from PRSA: <http://www.prsa.org/Intelligence/PRJournal/Documents/2011WrightHinson.pdf>

Radhe Krishan is a faculty in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies, Delhi, India. His research interest is public relations and social media.