New and Social Media: The Meaning and the Use of Communication Technologies in Public Relations

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Abstract

Ambiguity in the definition, understanding, and use of new and social media persists. The terms are often used interchangeably, even though each bears its own peculiarities, both semantically and in the practice of online public relations. This paper provides a conceptual framework of new and social media operationalizes the two concepts and explores them in depth to clarify what new and social media are constitutively and how they are used in public relations.
Mark is a typical twenty year old student. He wakes up at 7a.m. and grabs his coffee and muffin while he checks his emails thought his latest generation mobile phone. He browses the news online and checks the status of his Facebook friends so as not to forget a birthday and/or an important event. Mark is looking for a student job and, his friend Susanne, had recommended that he registers in LinkedIn, the professional social network to make his resume available to potential employers. Mark did so, and today he is trying to enlarge his professional network through secondary contacts. Mark also uses the Internet for his studies. He has found sites where he can get tips on writing essays as well as useful information for preparing his class work. He chats online with his classmates via instant messaging and discusses the contents of their next group presentations. Before buying a new product or planning a trip, Mark checks online consumers’ reviews and considers them when making his decisions.

Tom, on the other hand, is a journalist for a large-circulation newspaper and he is searching the web for story ideas for possible articles on pharmaceutical products and their effects on human health. He has become a member of a few online communities in which discussions among members take place about health and hygiene products. He likes those conversations because they appear to be so passionate and unspoiled – but are they? For his story about pharmaceutical products and their effects on human health, he plans to quote some of the main arguments that have been discussed in those online communities as well as some information that he has downloaded from the main websites of large pharmaceutical corporations. Tom knows that he needs to check source credibility and accuracy before using this information; however, with the pressing deadlines of major daily newspapers such as the one for which he works, he has no time to wait for companies’ official responses, and he does not necessarily need to communicate with those companies when he can find what he needs directly on the Internet.

Emily is a new policy advisor for a state’s politician, and in her job she needs to find new ways to interact with the politician’s constituents. Emily was hired for her online skills and capabilities to use information and communication technologies. Emily uses Twitter each day to post her boss’ thoughts, ideas, and opinions. She has created a Facebook page for this politician on which she posts interesting information about the politician’s personal and political life. She also updates the politician’s blog with longer commentaries about different political issues, and she tries to address blog readers’ comments in a personal manner.

These are some of the many possible daily scenarios of our 21st Century lives. New and social media are part of us; they influence our ways of communicating, interacting, and organizing our lives. They influence our choices and even our identities. Organizations of all types also have increasingly been adopting new communication strategies in their public relations activities that integrate new and social media. However, considerable conceptual ambiguity still exists within the professional and academic communities about what are new and social media.

This paper provides a conceptual framework for these media. We operationalize the two concepts and explore them in depth to clarify how new and social media should be defined and used in public relations. We will first provide an overview of the research fields that have examined new and social media and will try to clarify their similarities and differences by providing definitions of and discussions about new media and social media. We will then
provide a definition for both new and social media. We will conclude with some reflections about the profession of public relations and the new and social media.

MAPPING THE RESEARCH FIELD - AMBIGUITY AND POTENTIAL

Understanding a phenomenon that has so rapidly enveloped us and has so rapidly affected the way in which communication is conceived and practiced requires reflection on the roots of this phenomenon and on its implications and consequences. Especially during the past ten years, new and social media have profoundly impacted society, and academic debates have followed. The scientific community has not been immune from the desire to have its own perspective in this area, with resulting multiple interpretations and parallel discussions.

Since 2000, the number of publications on this subject has increased exponentially, introducing new approaches and wide-ranging discussions. Reviewing what has been published so far, we have discovered five primarily research fields that have provided the largest number of contributions in the development of knowledge about new and social media (see table 1).

Tab. 1 Mapping the research fields in new and social media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term used</th>
<th>Research field</th>
<th>References*</th>
<th>Focus on</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>New Media</strong></td>
<td>Computer mediated communications</td>
<td>Silverstone 1999</td>
<td>Applications, use of digital technologies</td>
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<td>Tomasello et al. 2010;</td>
<td>Innovation, evolution theory</td>
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<td>Social Network</td>
<td>Van Dijk 2006, Bennett 2003</td>
<td>Networks, interactions, human behaviors</td>
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<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Oostveen 2010</td>
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<td>Empowerment of people, drivers for global activism</td>
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<td>Journalism &amp;</td>
<td>Scolari 2009; Pavlik 2008; Dewdney &amp;</td>
<td>New forms of conversations, language, practices</td>
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<td>mass communication</td>
<td>Ride 2006; Manovich 2001;</td>
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<td>Stöber 1994; Marvin 1988;</td>
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<td>Media evolution</td>
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<td>Business &amp;</td>
<td>Weinberg &amp; Pehlivan 2011</td>
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<td>Marketing communication mix</td>
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<td>Marketing</td>
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<td>Public relations</td>
<td>Seo et al. 2009; Vorvoreanu 2008;</td>
<td>The Web and mediated communications</td>
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<td>Kelleher 2006; Kent et al. 2003;</td>
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<td>White &amp; Raman 1999; Johnson 1997</td>
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<td>Social Media</td>
<td>Boyd &amp; Ellison 2007; Knox et al. 2006</td>
<td>Networks as relations</td>
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<td>Social Network</td>
<td>Lee &amp; Lee 2010; Beckett 2008</td>
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<td>Community building</td>
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<td>Analysis</td>
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<td>Journalism &amp;</td>
<td>Moran &amp; Gossieux 2010; Safko &amp; Brake</td>
<td>Behavior and interaction of users</td>
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<td>mass communication</td>
<td>2009</td>
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<td>Business &amp;</td>
<td>Kaplan &amp; Haenlein 2010</td>
<td>User generated contents,</td>
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<td>Marketing</td>
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The first group is computer-mediated communication (CMC) research, which sometimes is referred as new media - which has developed its own specific domain of research. CMC scholars tend to use an applied a socio-psychological approach to mediated communications. They are particularly interested in studying how people use computers or digital media to manage interpersonal interactions and relationships and to form impressions. These scholars often discuss new communication technologies from human interaction perspectives, focusing upon possible applications and new uses of digital technologies.

The second group encompasses social network scholars who have also become interested in the online environment, but mostly to studying virtual networks and their impact on globalized society (Bennett, 2003; Van Dijk, 2006; Mejias, 2010). Their point of departure, however, is the network. Their contributions lie in the possibilities to quantify and qualify the power of a virtual network, or, so to speak, the capacity of certain online users - because of their network centrality - to influence other network members (Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011).

The third group consists of journalism and mass communication scholars who also have contributed to the development of knowledge in digital and social media research fields by trying to further develop and adapt “mass communication theories” to the new digital environment (Scolari, 2009; Beckett, 2008), by focusing on new forms of conversations, language, and practices (Pavlik, 2008; Manovich, 2001), or by studying online environment content reception, thus the effects of online mediated contents on human behaviors (Lee & Lee, 2010). In this respect, much of this research cross-references theories and models from psychology and social behavioral studies, which often focus on human behaviors, albeit in virtual spheres. Confusion about the uses of these two terms is often present in journalism and mass communication discussions. This is because these scholars mingle mediated communications – therefore digital media – and user-generated content, the latter which represents a form of self-expression (Kennedy, 2008), that is, an empowerment of single individuals – hereby a social media conceptualization.

The fourth group is marketing and business studies. These scholars have traditionally approached the online environment from a pragmatic perspective. Terminologically speaking, these scholars often see digital media as synonymous with social media and use them as tools to engage consumers and to reinforce their corporate identities and reputations, and, in general, as a new tool to in a company’s promotional mix (Bhagat et al., 2009; Safko & Brake, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011). In the past ten years, some of these scholars have moved from a traditional marketing communication conceptualization

| Public relations | Briones et al. 2011; Curtis et al. 2010; Taylor & Kent 2010; Wright & Hinson, 2008, 2009, 2010 | Their use among corporations, public and nonprofits organizations |

* These references should be not considered an exhaustive list of scholarly work on the subject. They have been chosen as examples to summarize main research discourses about new media and social media in these five traditions of research.
toward a more integrated approach that extends beyond the sole marketing of a product or service or of a brand to include long-range strategic considerations that encompass the role of stakeholders and these stakeholders’ contributions to organizational performance (Kliatchko, 2008; Proctor & Kitchen, 2002; Schultz & Kitchen, 2000). In this new consideration of identity (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Hutton, 1996; Gronstedt, 1996), integrated marketing communication scholars are moving closer to strategic and managerial public relations functions. Thus, even marketing communication is re-considering the potential of the online environment as a tool for organization-public relationships (Moran & Gossieaux, 2010; Tapp & Hughes, 2004).

Finally, public relations scholars have been claiming a key role in these discussions about the online environment, especially in relation to its role in organizations and their publics (Hiebert, 2005; Kent et al., 2003; White & Raman, 1999). Some scholars have even claimed that public relations has found its “reason of expression” in the digital technologies because social media are mostly an environment of social interactions in which organization-public relations can occur (Kelleher, 2006; Heath, 1998). Others have criticized social media effectiveness as a communication tool (Taylor & Kent, 2010) and call for more researched-based proof. Many current studies focus on practitioners and organizations’ use of digital and social media for a range of purposes (Curtis et al. 2010, Eyrich et al., 2008), including activities in support of media relations (Kirat, 2007; Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006), crisis communication responses (Coombs, 2012; Taylor & Kent, 2007; Taylor & Perry, 2005), employee communication, government and investor relations as well as customer and consumer relations (Johnson, 1997). Little is known about how relationships are formed in the online environment and about the potential for community relations (Vorvoreanu, 2006; Seo et al., 2009; Briones et al., 2011).

As this summary shows, the ambiguity in the terminology of these media mirrors the chaotic development of this research field. Information and communication technologies have experienced fast grow, both in the realm of innovation and in that of human behaviors. They have become the new Holy Grail of public, nonprofit, and private organizations and even of individuals. In the next section, we will clarify the boundaries that differentiate new media from social media and will provide a conceptual framework to resolve this ambiguity.

A CLARIFICATION OF THE CONCEPT ‘NEW MEDIA’

The term “new media” generally refers to emerging communication technologies and applications such as mobile phones, the Internet, streaming technologies, wireless networks, and the high-quality publishing and information-sharing capacities of the World Wide Web (Bennett 2003; Wardrip-Fruin & Montfort 2003). Van Dijk (2006) defines new media as those that are simultaneously integrated and interactive and that also use digital code. Therefore, integration, interactivity, and digitalization must all be present to qualify a medium as part of the new media. However, the term new media is much older than is the invention of 21st Century information and communication technologies. McLuhan (1959) was the first scholar to use this term in his discussions about the impact of mass media in society. The medium is the message, one of his most famous quotes, specifically underlines the role played by mass media in shaping society (McLuhan 1959, 1964 [1994]). However, McLuhan’s new media referred to electronic media that were being developed in the first half of the 20th Century. He is,
nevertheless, recognized as the first scholar to discuss the influence of those “new media” in the economic, cultural, and political developments of societies (Levinson 1999, Logan 2010).

Today, new media refer to different communication media than what McLuhan had described. Specifically, the prefix “new” refers to those technologies that have been developed most recently, in particular digital technologies (Silverstone, 1999). “New” also defines novel applications as well as the technologies that allow innovative ways to perform new tasks. Internet and digital technologies give us new powers – for example in creating, sharing, and diffusing ideas, opinions, and interests – but they also create new consequences for us as human beings. “They bend minds. They transform institutions. They liberate. They oppress” (ibid., 1998: 10).

Definitions of new media remain fluid and are continually evolving (Dewdney & Ride, 2006), but they can be classified into two categories: we should cease using the term “new media”, or we should use new media only to refer to the most recent innovations, that is, applications in digital environments that provide innovative ways of relating, communicating, and interacting. Those in favor of using the term new media are interested in discussing what makes a medium new and which factors affect the extent to which new media lose their novelty. Authors who seek these answers are interested in understanding the relationship between continuity and change and in investigating the complexities of innovations, both as technological and as sociological processes (Silverstone, 1999; Livingstone, 1999). Critics of the term “new media” prefer to use other terms and often use interchangeably the terms new media, multimedia, interactive media, social media, and social networking sites when they discuss digital technologies, communication, organizations, and publics. By doing so, they fail to acknowledge that these terms do not accurately describe the same phenomenon and the terms do not entail the same considerations, for example, in public participation, distribution of power among communication participants, level of transparency and truthiness, and control over contents.

As the above-mentioned and other scholars have pointed out, semantic confusion persists in naming these information and communication technologies (e.g., Peters 2009; Scolari 2009; Lister et al. 2003; Manovich 2001). Because a better term to replace the problematic use of the “new” as prefix to media is not yet agreed upon, we tentatively propose to use the term “digital media” as suggested by Scolari (2009). Scolari (2009) defines “digital media” as those information and communication technologies that can integrate different applications, functions, and content productions and, at the same time, allow great interactivity among users. This definition is similar to the definition proposed by other new media scholars (Bennett 2003; Wardrip-Fruin & Montfort 2003), and, therefore, we believe it can better suit the purpose of defining the boundaries of this phenomenon. Readers should be aware that, as soon as the digital environment becomes obsolete and is replaced by a new invention, the term “digital media” will no longer accurately define this new technological development.

THE ONLINE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Social media are a group of Internet-based applications that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allows for the creation and exchange of user-generated contents (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Furthermore, they refer to “activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information,
knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos and audios” (Safko & Brake 2009: 6). Both definitions focus upon the behavior and interaction that are established between individuals, that is, for what purposes individuals use social media. Since Safko & Brake (2009) emphasized behavior as the central characteristic of social media, we could argue that, accordingly, social media do not exist without users. Social media can thus provide opportunities to bring a variety of people together from different backgrounds and to find common ground in their beliefs and interests (Lee & Lee 2010). However, interaction is not enough to qualify social media as such. As Wright & Hinso (2009: 3) pointed out, the contents must also be posted by people themselves; thus, social media are referred to as “consumer-generated media” or as “user-generated content”.

Social media and social network sites describe similar online environments and often refer to the same digital technologies and applications; however, they define precise boundaries of research interests. The focus on social network sites is on connecting users, that is, attention on the network, whereas the focus of social media is on how users interact, that is, attention on users’ behaviors. While both social network sites and social media connect users, the latter takes this connection a step further, using this connection to create a channel of communication and information to establish relationships among individuals and organizations. In practice, this semantic distinction is relevant for defining the outcomes of online public relations activities. If we use a social network perspective, we are interested in understanding the extent to which a particular stakeholder group is active in different social networks, that is, we focus on analyzing the network; however, if we use the term social media, we are mostly interested in assessing the outcome of our public relations activities vis-à-vis opinion formation, attitudes, and behaviors towards products, services, companies, brands, and values.

A wide variety of social media exist, ranging from social sharing sites such as YouTube and Flickr to social networks such as LinkedIn and Facebook. Social media can be classified according to three parameters: functionality, scope, and popularity. Functionality is related to the capacity of the specific social network site to enable users to do different things. Functionality is thus linked with social media applications, such as blogs, message boards, podcasts, wikis, and vlogs that are integrated into a social network and that allow users to interact. For example, Wikipedia is considered a reference social media, MySpace and Gather.com are social networking, YouTube is a video sharing, Second Life is a virtual reality, Digg is a news sharing, Flickr is a photo sharing, and Miniclip is a game sharing. A second parameter is the scope of the social network site. Traffikid classifies social media according to 38 categories, which can be assembled into five major groups:

- **Informational social media**, such as Tripadvisor, DoctorConnected, BlogBuzz, RateItAll, in which the reason for joining this community is to discover answers to problems, issues, or concerns. Typically, people seek information about products and services as well as the opinions of those who have used or experienced them.
- **Professional social media**, such as LinkedIn, Academic.edu, Xing, Zigg, which are intended for those who want to advance their careers, both by establishing

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1 More information on Traffikd at: http://traffikd.com/social-media-websites/#news
professional links with colleagues and potential employers and by providing or asking advice from professional experts in this community.

- **Educational social media**, such as Booking, Good Reads, MyDish, MiGente, which are social networking sites that have learning purposes, such as improving or practicing a foreign language, learning new cooking recipes, and discussing and sharing opinions on books.

- **Entertainment social media**, such as Game Diggity, Filmcrave, 10Tune, Flickr, Photography Network, which are social media that focus on a passion, for example, music, movies, games, and any other hobby or interest. People who join entertainment social media are looking for advice, but they also enjoy communicating with people who have similar interests.

- **Personal social media**, such as Facebook, Myspace, Bebo, NetFriendships Family 2.0, MyChurch, which are social media that focus on family, social, and religious relationships. People who join these networks are interested in getting to know other people, developing “virtual” relationships, or remaining in touch with longtime friends, family, and religious communities.

The last important variable is the popularity or prestige of a social networking site. The more members a social network has, the greater are the possibilities that online public relations activities address a larger number of targeted publics. Each year, the Social Networking Website Review identifies the top 10 most important social networking sites on the basis of six criteria: profile, security, networking features, search, help/support, and legitimate friend focus. For 2011, the most popular ones are Facebook, Myspace, Bebo, Friendster, Hi5, Orkut, PerfSpot, Zorpia, Netlog, and Habbo. However, public relations practitioners should be aware that choosing the most popular social network as a channel for public relations activities will not automatically result in the best online public relations. Public relations practitioners’ choice of the best digital media should rather be based on a combination of the three above-mentioned variables - functionality, scope, and the popularity of a social network - with an accurate assessment of the underlying goals of online public relations activities for particular stakeholder groups.

Moving away from a mass mediated communication perspective, Skoler (2009) postulated that the role of relationships and interactions in social networks is something beyond the physical mediatization of digital technologies. He claimed that:

*Today’s new culture is about connection and relationship. Social networks are humming because they fit the spirit of the time, not because they created the spirit of sharing. They’re about listening to others and responding. They’re about pursuing our interests because we know they will converge with the interests of others. The new culture values sharing information and being surprised by the experiences, knowledge, and voices of others* (ibid, 2009: 39).

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Accordingly, Skoler (2009) saw social networks as a force for community relations, for enhancing socialiability—at least virtually—among people, and for empowering and reinforcing individuals’ voices. Social media and social network scholarships share a common social functionality that is not necessarily implied in the new/digital media definition. Social media and social networks should thus be conceptualized as online social environments that enable people to engage in relationships of different natures, for example professional, personal, and spiritual ones.

MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NEW/DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

We have identified the main differences between new/digital and social media, the former are intended as a digital technology-based environment that enables people to perform a range of activities across time and space, the latter as an online social environment that enables people to engage in a range of relationships, for example, professional, personal, and spiritual. Taking this as a point of departure, several significant differences exist between new/digital media and social media, for example, on the level of interactivity, the type of communication provided, the direction of communication, the position/power that publics have vis-à-vis to organizations, and the role of publics in these media. New/digital media allow publics to customize their search for information and delivery methods. New/digital media can simultaneously provide audio, visual, and text publication methods as internet users prefer. New/digital media publics can also post comments, for example, in blogs and in digital news articles; however, contents published in the new/digital media have their own existence independent of social interactions. A blog can still exist and present ideas, opinions, positions on issues, persons, institutions, or other content, even if no follower posts comments and discuss the topic that was presented by the blogger. This means that new/digital media can create different forms and types of online communications, but not necessarily to enhance dialogic ones. Corporate blogs, for example, can provide information that is less official and with more insights into organizations’ behaviors and thinking, but this does not necessarily reconcile with the idea of co-creation of meaning around organizations’ products, services, brands, and values.

In contrast, social media are interactive and require the participation of others. In social media, the focus is on the community, and communities are established around a common interest, a passion, an idea, or around the human need to be around like-minded people. Without conversations, interactions, and collaborations, social media lose their function of being social. The scope of using social media is thus social in nature. Social media exist because individuals have the opportunity to create social relations with others by building and interacting in virtual communities, not primarily because they want to receive organizations’ messages and product information. Social media, thus, need a certain level of interactivity, participation, and engagement by different parties, and organizations must understand that social media environments are multi-vocal and are primarily dependent on community members’ willingness to enter into a dialogue with organizations. Organizations can provide the means and the tools to enhance members’ conversations, for example, by providing interesting feeds that engage members’ interests and that enable them to reinforce the community, perhaps even creating social capital. Social media members participate in online communities
to obtain mutual benefits among group members, for example, by strengthening social ties, circulating information, archiving experiences, and exchanging opinions. These elements, Lee and Lee (2010) claimed, distinguish social media – as a means of a social function – from digital media. The social function is also evident from netnographic \(^3\) studies on online communities that show how people transfer the norms of real-life social relations into online relations, creating new norms. This makes it easier for community members to know how to behave online and to gain a sense of belonging in these communities (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994; Haythornthwaite, 2000; Wellman et al., 1996). Relationships in social network sites, thus, have similarities with real-life relationships when it comes to norms of behaviors and interactions; however, they also occur in a unique context in which time and space are not relevant; in which identities of community members can be real, partial, or completely invented; and in which conversations are opinioned and can, in fact, be filtered. This has direct consequences on the level of communicative efficacy of an organization and on relationships among an organization’s online publics.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The Internet has cemented its place as an avenue of communication by using a variety of methods, such as emails, listservs, instant messenger, online chatting, electronic bulletin boards, and web blogs. These interpersonal and interactive functions enable people to actively communicate with others online, at high speed, and with relatively low cost, regardless of time and distance (Lee & Lee 2010). New/digital media and social media provide a relatively inexpensive means to communicate with, and more importantly, to enter into a dialogue with, strategic publics. Social media, more than do new/digital media, must be at the heart of public relations activities because social media can enhance organization-public relationships by increasing and improving community relations. Although in a virtual community, they provide opportunities for community-building as advocated by Kruckeberg and Starck (1988: 21), who argued that “(A) fundamental reason public relations practice exists today is because of a loss of community resulting from new means of communication and transportation”. Their contention in 1988 that new means of communication have resulted in the loss of community today has the potential of being addressed, albeit “virtually,” by new means of communication, i.e., the digital and social media.

Ironically, Kruckeberg and Starck’s (1988) call for the restoration and maintenance of a sense of community is more possible technologically than ever before. However, as Kruckeberg and Tsutsura (2009, November) have argued, an infinite number of volatile “publics” worldwide can form immediately and unpredictably with unforeseen power, and they can act seemingly chaotically. As Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2010a, 2010b) have noted, the question remains whether these communities that form in the social media will be used to create a truly virtual public space, that is, a so-called Habermasian public sphere, or whether social media are used in public relations as just another means, for example, paid corporate bloggers, to disseminate

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\(^3\) Netnography is a branch of Ethnography that analyses the free behavior of individuals on the internet. See

information and obtain feedback on an organization’s behavior by creating pockets of controlled “private spheres,” rather than to utilize these resources to create awareness and build communities around issues within the global context.

In sum, organizations’ effective use of new/digital media and social media to achieve public relations goals and objectives is not as simple as it might appear; proliferation of these media provide ample and inexpensive opportunities for communication, but not all new/digital and social media lend themselves to such use. Differences in the functionality, scope and popularity as well as on the online environment should make public relations practitioners reflect upon their strategies and tactics and at the same time upon consequences and implications for “virtual” community relations. Furthermore, they should be aware that public relations outcomes can be difficult to perceive, let alone measure in online environments.


