

How New Communications Media Are Being Used in Public Relations: A Longitudinal Analysis

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It's an understatement to suggest that a variety of new communications media have had a huge impact on the practice of public relations since the first weblogs, or blogs, appeared more than a dozen years ago. Since then these new communications media have developed into a number of different forms including text, images, audio and video through the development of forums, message boards, photo sharing, podcasts RSS (really simple syndication), search engine marketing, video sharing, Wikis, social networks, professional networks and micro-blogging sites.

Although social and other new communications media are changing the way people and organizations communicate there might not be any two people who define social media the same way. Mark 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" (p. 1). Joe Marchese (2007) suggests the difference between traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, radio-television and social media "is not the media itself, but the system of discovery, distribution, consumption and conversation surrounding the media." Even though both social and traditional media have the ability to reach small or large audiences, production costs usually are large for what has become a small number of traditional media outlets while social media technologies basically give anyone with access to a computer the ability to reach a potentially global audience at little or no cost.

IMPACT OF NEW COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA ON PUBLIC RELATIONS

The Pew Research Center (2008) annually tracks the sources Americans use for news and for the first time in 2008 noted more people were getting their news online than from traditional mass media. However, most blend online and traditional sources in their quest for news and information. This Pew study also points out more young people than ever before are reading online versions of traditional news media.

All of this comes at a significant time for traditional news media, especially newspapers. Paid circulation figures for daily newspapers in many large American cities continue to decline to the point where some daily's such as Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* ceased publication in 2009. Major daily

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newspapers such as the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Boston Globe* are seriously considering not publishing hard-copy editions seven days each week. Following a century-long tradition of excellence, the *Christian Science Monitor* stopped publishing as a daily in March 2009 in order to concentrate on publishing a weekly edition and refining its online offerings. According to *Boston Magazine* (2009) the *Monitor's* circulation had slipped 75 percent during the past 40 years.

Similar changes have presented themselves within some of the trade publications that serve the public relations industry. In 2009, *PR Week*, considered by most to be the nation's most dominant public relations trade publication, changed its weekly print edition into an online format, although it does produce a printed magazine each month. Some other public relations trade publications appear to have been impacted recently, including *PR News* which now offers nearly as many public relations short courses and seminars as it does publications.

The senior author of this article has been studying the impact of various "new technologies" on public relations practice for nearly a decade (Wright, 2001). Each year since 2005 the authors of this article have conducted annual surveys measuring the impact social and other new communications media are having on public relations (Wright & Hinson, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d, 2009e, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Results of this research show that these new communications media have brought dramatic changes to many aspects of the field. Findings also suggest that the development of various new technologies has significantly empowered a wide variety of strategic publics by giving them dynamic new media many are using to communicate effectively with a variety of internal and external audiences.

A number of recently published books have explored how blogs, social media and other new communications media are changing the way organizations communicate with strategic publics such as employees, customers, stockholders, communities, governments and other stakeholders.

Larry Weber (2007), who has spent most of his professional career building global communications companies including Weber Shandwick Worldwide, suggests the communications world is dramatically moving in a digital direction and those who understand this transformation will communicate much more effectively than those who do not.

Robert Scoble, who authors the nation's most read business blog and runs Microsoft's Channel 9 web site, and Shell Israel, who has more than two decades experience as an expert on communication innovation, provide a road-map showing how blogs are changing the way organizations communicate with important publics, especially customers (Scoble & Israel, 2006).

Brian Reich and Dan Solomon, who both have many unique accomplishments in public relations and advertising, offer tips and suggestions for companies and

individuals to master the new technology in a way that will connect with and keep audiences (Reich & Solomon, 2008).

David Meerman Scott (2008a), an online thought leadership and viral marketing strategist, says, “one of the coolest things about the Web is that when an idea takes off it can propel a brand or a company to seemingly instant fame and fortune” (p. 8).

Scott also points out that although communicating via the Web usually is free – as opposed to purchasing space through traditional advertising – only a small number of public relations practitioners are effectively using blogs and other social media when communicating with their strategic publics.

Furthermore, Scott (2007 & 2008) thinks many of the differences between what he calls the “old” and “new” rules of press releases are important. As he explains, nobody actually saw the old press releases except a few reporters and editors, and the only way members of the general public would learn about the content of a press release was if the media wrote or broadcast a story about it. Scott also points out the way most practitioners measured the effectiveness of a press release was through clippings, the simplest and most basic commodity of output research. Scott’s thesis about today’s “new” press releases focuses on information senders now deliver directly to receivers in various target publics via the Web. He also advocates measurement based upon whether or not the releases change or reinforce attitudes, opinions and behavior – the essence of what supporters of outcome research recommend.

Argenti and Barnes (2009) say new communications media have “changed the rules of the game in every part” of strategic communication. They also claim that over the past decade these new communications vehicles have not only turned upside down everything people knew about communications but also have dramatically changed the business of managing relationships. Findings of the noted *Authentic Enterprise Report* of the Arthur W. Page Society (2007) give the new communications media credit for dramatically changing the ways in which stakeholders are empowered.

Social media are being utilized on an ever-increasing basis by corporations and other organizations. McCorkindale (2009) reports more than two-thirds (69%) of the current Fortune 2000 companies are using social networking sites. Ruh and Magallon (2009) indicate the U.S. military currently is involved in studying the potential of using social media for some of its internal communication campaigns. Paine (2009a, 2009b, 2009c) points out many organizations now are trying to measure the effectiveness of their social media communication efforts.

Another measure of the growth and development of social media in public relations is the level of social media activity currently displayed by various professional societies active in the field. In addition to web pages and e-mail communication, social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and others all have pages organized by organizations such as the Institute for Public Relations (IPR), the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the

Council of Public Relations Firms, the Arthur W. Page Society and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC).

The micro-blogging site Twitter frequently gets cited for being the first source to provide news seekers with information about major news events including the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India; the massive 2010 earthquake in Haiti; and the US Airways flight landing in the Hudson River on January 15, 2009. While he was Editor of *PR Week*, Keith O'Brien (2009), pointed out that "there has been great progress in the use of social media to reach various constituencies."

At a time when current economic conditions are bringing layoffs in many aspects of the public relations industry, *PR Week* (Maul, 2009) claims the future is bright for social media in public relations. According to a survey of 285 public relations practitioners conducted by the Council of Public Relations Firms (2009), most (79%) believe social media will be included more in future public relations campaigns while more than half (59%) think technology is not used enough in public relations campaigns.

SPECIFIC KINDS OF NEW COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA

Social and other new communications media deliver web-based information created by people with the intention of facilitating communication. These new communications media now represent one of the world's major sources of social interaction as people share stories and experiences with each other.

Traffikd (2009), a blog about social media, claims there currently are more than 400 new communications web sites that have been classified into categories such as: Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, wikis, podcasts, pictures and video. Since these new media represent a young and emerging set of technologies there are many different thoughts and opinions when it comes to categorization. For the purposes of the 2009 study reported on in this paper, social media were divided into the following categories: blogs, forums or message boards, photo sharing, podcasts, RSS (really simple syndication), search engine marketing, social bookmarking, social networking sites, micro-blogging sites, video sharing and Wikis. Given the low use in public relations campaigns of photo sharing, RSS, social bookmarking and Wikis were not incorporated into the 2010 measures.

Blogs are regularly updated websites usually maintained by an individual that describe events, provide news and commentary and sometimes serve as online diaries. Most blogs contain text, images and embedded links to websites or other blogs. Many blogs encourage readers to leave comments that can lead to interactive information exchange.

Electronic Internet Forums or Message Boards are online discussion sites that some might describe as the modern equivalent of a traditional bulletin board. They are web applications that involve user-generated content. Those who participate in Internet forums are able to build relationships with others while discussing various topics.

Podcasts offer a combination of audio and/or video made available for download via syndication that sets them apart from e-mailed, attached files available to be downloaded.

Search Engine Marketing involves utilizing various search engines in attempts to increase the visibility of websites. A variety of methods are used including search engine optimization, paid placement, contextual advertising and paid inclusion. Some sources define Search Engine Marketing as the practice of buying these services.

Micro-Blogging is a form of multimedia blogging that allows users to send brief text updates or micromedia such as photos or audio clips and publish them, either to be viewed by anyone or by a restricted group which can be chosen by the user.

Video Sharing allows people to upload video clips to Internet hosting websites, usually called video sharing websites. You Tube is the most frequently used of several hundred video sharing services.

Social Networking Websites have been, in the words of *USA Today* “the rage of the tech industry for more than a year” (Swartz, 2008). These websites permit people to participate in interactive discussions with a user-submitted network of friends who share information with each other including messages, blog posts, photos, videos, web links, news stories, music and personal profiles. Originally started so college-aged students could communicate with each other; today’s social networking sites offer considerable audience and advertiser potential for the future (Vorvoreanu 2009). The most widely used, free-access social networking sites are Facebook (www.facebook.com) which now has 400 million users worldwide and MySpace (www.myspace.com) which has about 200 million users. LinkedIn is the most popular of the business-oriented social networking sites and claims to have more than 45 million users.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Although a number of research studies have examined the huge impact new communications media are having on the practice of public relations, what is missing is research studying how public relations practitioners actually are using these new media. The two-year trend study of public relations practitioners reported about in this paper provides one of the most extensive examinations of how social media are being implemented in public relations practice. In addition to measuring how social media are being employed in the practice of public relations, this study also explores actual new communications media use by individual public relations practitioners.

This research project also has the potential of enhancing the credibility of scholarly research in public relations because it involves a longitudinal analysis of a larger-than-usual number of subjects. As Dougall (2006) explains, the lack of a significant number of panel and trend studies in the public relations literature does not

reflect positively on our field when the public relations body of knowledge is compared with research productivity in the social sciences and other professions.

Furthermore, since more than half of the survey research projects in the public relations literature contain reports about studies involving less than 350 respondents, and more than two-thirds of these studies have usable responses from fewer than 250 subjects, the larger-than-usual number of participants in the study at hand – a total of 1,126 respondents during the two years of the research – is a plus for public relations research.

METHOD

Two different large, purposive samples of public relations practitioners from various parts of the world took part in this longitudinal trend study analysis survey research project in 2009 and 2010. Invitations to participate by completing the study's web-based questionnaire were extended via e-mail messages to purposive samples collected from membership rosters of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the Arthur W. Page Society and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA). Additional subjects were gathered from donor, task-force and commission membership lists of the Institute for Public Relations (IPR).

More than a thousand (n=1,126) respondents (n=574 in 2009 and n=563 in 2010) took part in this study by completing web-based questionnaires. Subjects came from many different parts of the world and represented a good cross-section of a wide variety of segments of the public relations industry.

Of the 574 respondents in the 2009 study, more (25%) worked with small agencies or consultancies than any other area but corporations (20%) and educational institutions (20%) also were well represented. Large agencies accounted for 10 percent of the respondents while seven percent worked in governmental public relations positions, five percent came from the not-for-profit area, five percent were research providers, one percent worked in health care and seven percent responded "other" when asked what kind of organization they worked for.

Demographic breakdowns of the 563 respondents to the 2010 study had 24 percent working with small agencies or consultancies, 19 percent employed by corporations, 14 percent from educational institutions, 13 percent from the non-profit sector, eight percent from government, six percent from large agencies, five percent from health care and one percent from the research provider category. Nine percent of the 2010 respondents checked "other" in their response to this question.

The biggest demographic difference between 2009 and 2010 was in terms of gender. There was a fairly even split between female (52%) and male (48%) respondents in 2009 but the breakdown was two-thirds female (68%) and one-third male (32%) in 2010. Most (67% in 2009 and 87% in 2010) were based in North America but respondents also came from Europe, Asia, Australia, Africa and South America. The

authors believe that the increase in female respondents in the 2010 study was caused by two factors. First, there were more respondents from the Middle East in 2009 and men tend to dominate public relations practice in that part of the world. Second, the enthusiastic participation by PRSA in the 2010 study led to a much higher percentage of respondents from North America in 2010 over 2009, and there are considerably more women than men in PRSA.

Responses were nicely distributed across various age categories in both years. In 2009, 15 percent of the respondents were younger than 30, 25 percent were between 30 and 39, 26 percent were aged 40 to 49, 27 percent were 50 to 59 and seven percent were 60 or older. In the 2010 study 26 percent were younger than 30, 26 percent were between 30 and 39, 24 percent were aged 40 to 49, 20 percent were 50 to 59 and four percent were 60 or older.

RESULTS

The study's main measuring instrument consisted of a two-pronged, seven-item answer matrix. Subjects were first asked to respond on a five-point, Likert-type scale to questions asking how important each of the seven new communications media items was "in the overall communications and public relations efforts of your organization (or your client's organizations)." Results displayed in Table 1 show that although search engine marketing was considered to be the most important of the seven media options in 2009, social networks such as Facebook were clearly listed as the most important by the 2010 respondents.

Micro-blogging sites such as Twitter and video sharing sites such as YouTube dramatically increased in perceived importance between 2009 and 2010 while the importance of blogs, search engine marketing and electronic forums or message boards remained relatively similar between the two years and the importance of podcasts decreased slightly.

Table 1

Responses to the question: “How important ARE each of the following in the overall communications and public relations efforts of your organization (or your client’s organizations)?”:

2009						
	Very Unimportant	Somewhat Unimportant	Uncertain	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Mean Score
Blogs	13%	17%	11%	41%	18%	3.34
Electronic Forums or Message Boards	13%	24%	16%	37%	10%	3.07
Podcasts	21%	21%	21%	30%	7%	2.81
Search Engine Marketing	10%	9%	19%	29%	32%	3.63
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	14%	16%	17%	39%	13%	3.20
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	22%	19%	25%	26%	8%	2.80
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	16%	13%	18%	38%	14%	3.20

Note: (a) Percentage scores throughout this report might not always total 100% due to rounding. (b) Mean scores throughout this report are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where “1” = “Very Unimportant” and “5” = “Very Important.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the greater the perceived importance.

2010						
	Very Unimportant	Somewhat Unimportant	Uncertain	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Mean Score
Blogs	11%	22%	10%	39%	18%	3.31
Electronic Forums or Message Boards	14%	28%	17%	30%	10%	2.94
Podcasts	24%	32%	17%	24%	5%	2.54
Search Engine Marketing	8%	15%	13%	46%	5%	3.63
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	5%	9%	9%	47%	30%	3.20
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	8%	15%	12%	42%	23%	2.80
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	9%	13%	13%	43%	22%	3.20

As results displayed in Table 2 show, a substantial amount of statistical significance exists in terms of the displayed mean differences in the perceived importance of each of these seven media between 2009 and 2010.

Table 2

Mean Analysis t-test Comparisons between 2009 and 2010 for responses to the question: “How important ARE each of the following in the overall communications and public relations efforts of your organization (or your client’s organizations)?”:

	2009	2010	Mean Difference	F =	SIG.
Blogs	3.35	3.31	-.04	2.47	.005
Electronic Forums or Message Boards	3.06	2.94	.12	3.65	.031
Podcasts	2.82	2.54	-.28	1.39	.042
Search Engine Marketing	3.62	3.61	-.01	2.84	.001
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	3.21	3.89	+.68	3.29	.000
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	2.81	3.56	+.75	2.27	.001
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	3.19	3.57	+.38	3.86	.031

Note: (a) Mean scores are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where “1” = “Very Unimportant” and “5” = “Very Important.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the greater the perceived importance. (b) Mean difference calculations involve subtracting 2009 mean scores from those of 2010.

The next question asked subjects how important each of these seven new communications media “should be in the overall communications and public relations efforts of your organization (or your client’s organizations).” Results to this question are displayed in Tables 3 and 4. As shown in Table 5, a comparison analysis of responses to the questions asking how important various items are and how important they should be across both years of this trend study reveals that the perceived order of importance of items is fairly similar for what actually is happening as compared to what the study’s respondents believe should be happening. However, mean scores and overall perceived importance for each of the seven new communications media items in both 2009 and 2010 are considerably higher when subjects are asked what should be happening in terms of social media and other new communications media use than they are when the question asks what actually is happening.

Table 3

Responses to the question: “How important SHOULD each of the following BE in these overall communications and public relations efforts of your organization (or your client’s organizations)?”:

2009						
	Very Unimportant	Somewhat Unimportant	Uncertain	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Mean Score
Blogs	4%	8%	7%	45%	36%	4.00
Electronic Forums or Message Boards	10%	12%	12%	48%	24%	3.78
Podcasts	5%	11%	20%	43%	21%	3.64
Search Engine Marketing	4%	5%	12%	34%	45%	4.11
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	7%	13%	16%	36%	28%	3.64
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	7%	14%	24%	34%	21%	3.48
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	9%	9%	16%	39%	27%	3.67

Tables 3, 4 and 5 display mean differences and analysis between each new communications media item in terms of how important respondents think they should be to their organization’s (or their client organizations) public relations and communications efforts.

2010						
	Very Unimportant	Somewhat Unimportant	Uncertain	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Mean Score
Blogs	2%	7%	8%	54%	29%	4.01
Electronic Forums or Message Boards	5%	12%	19%	47%	17%	3.60
Podcasts	6%	14%	25%	44%	12%	3.41
Search Engine Marketing	3%	5%	8%	37%	47%	4.20
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	2%	5%	5%	43%	45%	4.26
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	3%	6%	11%	44%	36%	4.05
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	2%	5%	9%	47%	36%	4.10

Table 4

Mean Analysis t-test Comparisons between 2009 and 2010 for responses to the question: “How important SHOULD each of the following BE in the overall communications and public relations efforts of your organization (or your client’s organizations)?”:

	2009	2010	Mean Difference	F =	SIG.
Blogs	4.01	4.01	+0-	1.53	.001
Electronic Forums or Message Boards	3.77	3.60	-.17	2.12	.004
Podcasts	3.64	3.41	-.23	1.97	.032
Search Engine Marketing	4.10	4.20	+.10	2.84	.013
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	3.65	4.26	+.61	3.14	.000
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	3.48	4.05	+.57	1.47	.000
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	3.67	4.10	+.43	2.38	.023

Note: (a) Mean scores are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where “1” = “Very Unimportant” and “5” = “Very Important.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the greater the perceived importance. (b) Mean difference calculations involve subtracting 2009 mean scores from those of 2010.

The gaps reported on in Tables 4 and 5 are momentous and results of ANOVA analysis show these differences are statistically significant (at $p = <.05$) in 12 cases out of 14. Statistical significance is evident on 2009 measures involving blogs, forums or message boards, social networks (such as Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.), micro-blogging sites (such as Twitter) and video sharing sites (such as YouTube). Statistical significance is represented on all of these measures in 2010 plus podcasts and search engine marketing

Analysis reported in Table 5 reveals respondents in both years of this trend study perceive that meaningful gaps exist when measuring differences between what is happening and what should be happening in terms of all of the social media use in public relations practice.

Table 5

Mean ANOVA analysis of responses to the question asking how important social media are and how important they should be “in your organization (or your client’s organizations).”:

2009					
	How Important Are These Media in Your Orgs. PR Efforts	How Important Should They Be	Mean Difference	F =	SIG.
Blogs	3.34	4.01	-.67	5.62	.000
Forums or Message Boards	3.07	3.77	-.70	4.34	.001
Podcasts	2.81	3.64	-.83	1.49	.192
Search Engine Marketing	3.63	4.10	-.47	2.12	.064
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	3.20	3.65	-.45	6.06	.000
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	2.80	3.48	-.68	5.90	.000
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	3.20	3.67	-.47	2.97	.013

2010					
	How Important Are These Media in Your Orgs. PR Efforts	How Important Should They Be	Mean Difference	F =	SIG.
Blogs	3.31	4.01	-.70	3.43	.001
Forums or Message Boards	2.94	3.60	-.66	2.37	.000
Podcasts	2.54	3.41	-.87	3.91	.032
Search Engine Marketing	3.61	4.20	-.69	4.17	.013
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	3.89	4.26	-.37	5.03	.004
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	3.56	4.05	-.49	4.78	.000
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	3.57	4.10	-.53	2.21	.008

Note: (a) Mean scores are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where “1” = “Very Unimportant” and “5” = “Very Important.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the greater the perceived importance. (b) Mean difference calculations involve subtracting mean scores from the “how important (specific social media) are” questions from mean scores from the items measuring how important each of the social media should be in an organization’s communications and public relations efforts.

The 2009 and 2010 studies also measured frequency of personal use by respondents of traditional and social media. Subjects were first asked, “How frequently do you personally use each of the following as information sources for news about

what’s happening on the local, regional and international news scene.” Results over both 2009 and 2010 as shown in Table 6 suggest public relations practitioners make much greater use of traditional news media sources such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television than the general public. At a time when reports suggest the news environment is changing for many news consumers, and when audiences for traditional news sources are steadily declining (Pew, 2008), public relations practitioners (or at least those who responded to this survey) continue to make steady use of traditional news sources.

Table 6

Responses to the question: “How frequently do you personally use each of the following as information sources for news about what’s happening on the local, regional, national and international news scene?”:

2009						
	Very Infrequently	Somewhat Infrequently	Neither Frequently nor Infrequently	Somewhat Frequently	Very Frequently	Mean Score
Blogs	16%	14%	12%	32%	26%	3.38
Forums or Message Boards	19%	26%	24%	24%	7%	2.73
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	20%	14%	14%	26%	26%	3.24
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	34%	17%	18%	17%	15%	2.65
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	18%	22%	22%	25%	12%	2.76
Wikis	12%	26%	23%	16%	23%	3.11
Newspapers	9%	4%	1%	16%	69%	4.30
Magazines	6%	8%	7%	27%	52%	4.11
Radio News	9%	11%	9%	23%	48%	3.90
Television News	9%	9%	7%	29%	46%	3.95

Table 6 (Continued)

2010						
	Very Infrequently	Somewhat Infrequently	Neither Frequently nor Infrequently	Somewhat Frequently	Very Frequently	Mean Score
Blogs	14%	14%	19%	32%	21%	3.31
Forums or Message Boards	27%	23%	23%	22%	4%	2.53
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	7%	9%	11%	30%	43%	3.92
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	15%	12%	12%	26%	35%	3.56
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	12%	19%	22%	35%	12%	3.17
Wikis	24%	20%	24%	26%	7%	2.74
Newspapers	1%	5%	5%	34%	55%	4.36
Magazines	2%	10%	12%	43%	33%	3.95
Radio News	5%	11%	12%	34%	39%	3.91
Television News	4%	10%	9%	35%	43%	4.03

Note: Mean scores for the three tables in this section are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where "1" = "Very Infrequently" and "5" = "Very Frequently." Consequently, the higher the mean score the more the medium was used.

Table 7

Mean Analysis t-test Comparisons between 2009 and 2010 for responses to the question: "How frequently do you personally use each of the following as information sources for news about what's happening on the local, regional, national and international scene?":

	2009	2010	Mean Difference	F =	SIG.
Blogs	3.38	3.31	-.07	34.12	.000
Forums or Message Boards	2.73	2.53	-.20	17.63	.032
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	3.24	3.92	+.68	21.72	.000
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	2.65	3.56	+.91	48.31	.000
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	2.76	3.17	+.41	25.73	.004
Wikis	3.11	2.74	-.37	39.63	.021
Newspapers	4.30	4.36	+.06	17.82	.000
Magazines	4.11	3.95	-.16	36.31	.000
Radio News	3.90	3.91	+.01	14.19	.001
Television News	3.95	4.03	+.08	22.34	.000

Note: (a) Mean scores are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where "1" = "Very Infrequent" and "5" = "Very Frequent." Consequently, the higher the mean score the more the medium was used. (b) Mean difference calculations involve subtracting mean scores from 2009 from the mean scores of 2010.

As the mean scores on Tables 6 and 7 indicate, the public relations practitioners who responded to the 2009 study get most of their news from newspapers followed by magazines, television news and radio news. Frequency results show that 85 percent use newspapers “very frequently” or “somewhat frequently” with magazines (79%), television news (75%) and radio news (71%). More than half (58%) say they frequently get news from blogs. The 2010 results found newspapers used the most followed by television news, magazines and radio news. Frequency results for 2010 saw “very frequently” and “somewhat frequently” use for newspapers at 89 percent followed by television news (78%), magazines (76%), and radio news (73%). The use of blogs for news was reported by 53 percent in 2010.

As Table 7 indicates, the main statistically significant differences between 2009 and 2010 in terms of public relations practitioners’ use of information sources for news about what’s happening on the local, regional and international scene involve the increased use of micro-blogging sites such as Twitter (a mean increase of +.91), social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, etc. (a mean increase of +.68) and video sharing services such as YouTube (a mean increase of +.41). Significant decreases were noted in terms of the use of electronic forums or message boards and Wikis. Slight increases were noted in terms of the use of newspapers and television news and a slight decrease appeared when magazine use was analyzed. The use of radio news remained about the same.

Subjects in both years also were asked how frequently they personally used the same list of information sources “for news about what’s happening in the field of public relations and communications.” Results displayed in Tables 8 and 9 show considerable increases in the use of social networks (mean difference of +.77) and micro-blogging sites (mean difference of +.71), a moderate increase in the use of blogs (mean difference of +.19) and a small increase in video sharing use (mean difference of +.09). Moderate decreases were reported in terms of the use of television and radio news and blogs with minimal decreases reported in terms of newspapers and electronic forums or message boards.

Table 8

Responses to the question: “How frequently do you personally use each of the following as information sources for news about what’s happening in the field of public relations and communications?”:

2009						
	Very Infrequently	Somewhat Infrequently	Neither Frequently nor Infrequently	Somewhat Frequently	Very Frequently	Mean Score
Blogs	16%	12%	13%	29%	30%	3.45
Forums or Message Boards	23%	19%	24%	26%	8%	2.77
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	29%	13%	19%	25%	14%	2.57
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	38%	14%	17%	14%	17%	2.58
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	39%	19%	23%	11%	9%	2.35
Wikis	33%	19%	23%	16%	9%	2.49
Newspapers	15%	17%	17%	26%	25%	3.29
Magazines	8%	11%	13%	35%	33%	3.74
Radio News	34%	18%	19%	12%	16%	2.55
Television News	34%	16%	19%	15%	16%	2.48

2010						
	Very Infrequently	Somewhat Infrequently	Neither Frequently nor Infrequently	Somewhat Frequently	Very Frequently	Mean Score
Blogs	8%	12%	15%	37%	28%	3.64
Forums or Message Boards	24%	20%	23%	25%	8%	2.72
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	12%	17%	19%	28%	23%	3.34
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	18%	14%	18%	23%	28%	3.29
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	30%	25%	22%	16%	7%	2.44
Wikis	39%	23%	23%	14%	3%	2.19
Newspapers	16%	19%	20%	28%	18%	3.13
Magazines	6%	8%	16%	46%	23%	3.71
Radio News	42%	19%	18%	12%	9%	2.29
Television News	40%	18%	18%	15%	9%	2.35

Table 9

Mean Analysis t-test Comparisons between 2009 and 2010 for responses to the question: “How frequently do you personally use each of the following as information sources for news about what’s happening in the field of public relations and communications”?

	2009	2010	Mean Difference	F =	SIG.
Blogs	3.45	3.64	+.19	23.63	.001
Forums or Message Boards	2.77	2.72	-.05	14.17	.007
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	2.57	3.34	+.77	36.32	.000
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	2.58	3.29	+.71	42.47	.000
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	2.35	2.44	+.09	18.33	.000
Wikis	2.49	2.19	-.30	14.54	.043
Newspapers	3.29	3.13	+.06	32.28	.000
Magazines	3.74	3.71	-.03	26.92	.000
Radio News	2.55	2.29	-.26	19.84	.000
Television News	2.48	2.35	-.13	27.49	.000

Note: (a) Mean scores are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where “1” = “Very Infrequent” and “5” = “Very Frequent.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the more the medium was used. (b) Mean difference calculations involve subtracting mean scores from 2009 from the mean scores of 2010.

Although the question was not asked in 2009, the 2010 respondents were queried regarding their use of traditional news media sources in an attempt to discover if public relations practitioners were receiving information from print and broadcast or online versions of these news media. Results displayed in Table 10 show online versions of newspapers, magazines and newsletters are used more frequently by public relations practitioners than print editions. However, the use of broadcast editions of radio and television news was much more pronounced than online versions of radio and television news reports.

Table 10

Responses to the question: “We are interested in knowing if your use of traditional news media sources involves print/broadcast or online versions? Please tell us by answering the questions below.”:

How frequently do you . . .	Never	Infrequently	Neither Frequently nor Infrequently	Frequently	Very Frequently	Mean Score
Read print editions of newspapers, magazines and newsletters.	3%	16%	12%	33%	37%	3.86
Read online versions of newspapers, magazines and newsletters.	0%	3%	6%	34%	57%	4.44
View or listen to broadcast editions of radio and television news.	3%	11%	11%	33%	42%	3.98
Receive information from online versions of radio and television news reports.	7%	17%	17%	31%	23%	3.40

Subjects in 2010 also were asked how frequently they accessed a variety of social networking, micro-blogging and video sharing sites.

Table 11

Responses to the question: “Please tell us how frequently you access each of the following social networking, micro-blogging and video sharing sites?”

	Never	Infrequently	Neither Frequently nor Infrequently	Frequently	Very Frequently	Mean Score
Facebook	4%	6%	7%	21%	62%	4.31
LinkedIn	8%	15%	22%	37%	18%	3.44
My Space	72%	21%	15%	1%	1%	1.38
Twitter	12%	15%	12%	23%	38%	3.58
YouTube	4%	18%	28%	38%	12%	3.35

Results displayed in Table 11 indicate that Facebook was used the most frequently with 83 percent of the respondents saying they accessed that social networking site “very frequently” or “somewhat frequently.” As mean scores in Table 10 show, the micro-blogging site Twitter was the next most frequently used site followed by social networking site LinkedIn and video sharing outlet YouTube.

Demographic Differences: A variety of analyses were conducted on both the 2009 and 2010 sets of data in an attempt to check for demographic differences based upon age, gender, geographical location and the kind of organization respondents worked for.

Analysis over both years found that the greatest number of statistically significant differences presented themselves when ANOVAs were performed comparing mean scores based upon age. Younger respondents were considerably more likely than older ones to not only advocate greater use of social media in public relations but also to use social media and other Internet-based technologies in their daily searches for news and information. T-tests comparing responses from female and male subjects also revealed a good number of similar significant differences. However, since the study’s women respondents tended to be younger than their male counterparts, it is difficult to tell if these differences are based more upon age or gender. Although some statistical significance materialized when ANOVA analyses were performed based upon geography or the kind of organization subjects worked for, the actual mean differences in both of the study’s two years were minimal and no apparent patterns were evident.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This two-year longitudinal analysis trend study of a large number of public relations practitioners (n=1,137; n=574 in 2009; n=563 in 2010) found that social and other new communications media continue to have a huge impact on the practice of public relations. They have significantly empowered a wide variety of strategic publics by giving them dynamic new communication vehicles many are using effectively with a variety of internal and external strategic audiences. New communications media – and particularly blogs, micro-blogs and social media networks – are changing the way organizations communicate with strategic publics such as employees, customers, stockholders, communities, governments and other stakeholders.

Results of this two-year study also discovered that those who practice public relations consider the social networking site Facebook to be the most important new communications medium for public relations messages in 2010, replacing search engine marketing that was considered the most important in 2009. Respondents to the survey reported about in this paper said they used Facebook more frequently than any of the other new communications media with 83 percent saying they access that social networking site “very frequently” or “somewhat frequently.” The micro-blogging site Twitter was the next most frequently used new media site followed by social networking site LinkedIn and video sharing outlet YouTube.

This research study also found dramatic increases in public relations use of micro-blogging sites such as Twitter and video sharing sites such as YouTube between 2009 and 2010 while the importance of blogs, search engine marketing and electronic forums or message boards remained relatively similar between the two years and the importance of podcasts decreased slightly.

In addition to asking which new communications media actually are being used in public relations practice, this study also asked respondents which of these new media they thought should be used. Results show huge gaps between how much every aspect of new communications media is being used and how much public relations people recommend they be used. Subjects in this two-year study were first asked to compare and contrast how important seven new communications media (blogs, electronic forums or message boards, podcasts, search engine marketing, social networks, micro-blogging sites and video sharing options) are in their organization's public relations efforts. Then they were asked how important each of these new communications media should be. Mean comparisons clearly show that the current use of these new communications doesn't even come close to matching how important public relations practitioners say these new communications vehicles should be. The mean scores and overall perceived importance for each of these seven new communications media in both 2009 and 2010 are considerably higher when subjects are asked what should be happening in terms of social and other new communications media use than they are when the question asks what is actually happening.

The study also measured the frequency of personal use by respondents of traditional news media and new communications media. Subjects were first asked how frequently they personally used various sources for local, regional and international news. A majority said they get most of their news from newspapers followed by magazines, television news and radio news. Frequency results show that 85 percent use newspapers "very frequently" or "somewhat frequently" with magazines (79%), television news (75%) and radio news (71%). The 2010 results found newspapers used the most followed by television news, magazines and radio news. Frequency results for 2010 saw "very frequently" and "somewhat frequently" use for newspapers at 89 percent followed by television news (78%), magazines (76%), and radio news (73%). The use of blogs for news was reported by 58 percent in 2009 and 53 percent in 2010.

The major statistically significant differences between 2009 and 2010 in terms of public relations practitioners' use of information sources for news about what's happening on the local, regional and international scene involve the increased use of micro-blogging sites such as Twitter; social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, etc., and video sharing services such as YouTube. Significant decreases were noted in terms of the use of electronic forums or message boards and Wikis. Slight increases appeared in terms of the use of newspapers and television news and a slight decrease appeared when magazine use was analyzed.

Subjects in both years also were asked how frequently they personally used the same list of information sources “for news about what’s happening in the field of public relations and communications.” Results showed considerable increases in the use of social networks and micro-blogging sites as well as moderate increase in the use of blogs and a small increase in video sharing use. Moderate decreases were reported in terms of the use of television and radio news and blogs with minimal decreases reported in terms of newspapers and electronic forums or message boards.

Although the question was not asked in 2009, the 2010 respondents were queried regarding their use of traditional news media sources in an attempt to determine if this involved print and broadcast or online versions of these media. Results suggest online versions of newspapers, magazines and newsletters are used more frequently than print editions, but the use broadcast editions of radio and television news was much more pronounced than online versions of radio and television news reports.

Subjects in 2010 also were asked how frequently they accessed a variety of social networking, micro-blogging and video sharing sites. Findings indicate that Facebook was used the most frequently with 83 percent of the respondents saying they frequently accessed that social networking site. The micro-blogging site Twitter was the next most frequently used site followed by social networking site LinkedIn and video sharing outlet YouTube.

Subjects in both 2009 and 2010 were asked how frequently they personally used the same list of information sources “for news about what’s happening in the field of public relations and communications.” Results show blogs and forums or message boards are used more frequently for information about what’s happening in public relations or communications than they were for sources of general news. Public relations people who responded to this survey in 2009 ranked blogs as their second most frequently used source for professional information after magazines. Blog use for information about what’s happening in the field of public relations and communications increased dramatically in 2010 where it was the most use source.

In both years of this two-year longitudinal study, differences based upon demographics found younger respondents were more likely to recommend using social media in public relations. They also were more likely to use social media and other Internet-based technologies in their daily pursuit of news and information.

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