How Blogs and Social Media are Changing Public Relations and the Way it is Practiced

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This article reports on a three-year-long international survey of public relations practitioners examining the impact blogs and other social media are having on public relations practice. Findings show these new media are dramatically changing public relations. Results indicate blogs and social media have enhanced what happens in public relations and that social media and traditional mainstream media complement each other. The study also finds the emergence of blogs and social media have changed the way their organizations communicate, especially to external audiences. Findings suggest social media complement traditional news media, and that blogs and social media influence coverage in traditional news media. The study reports blogs and social media have made communications more instantaneous by encouraging organizations to respond more quickly to criticism.

Introduction

David Meerman Scott (2008), 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. Scott claims the challenge to public relations and marketing people "is to harness the amazing power of . . . whatever you call it – viral, buzz, word-of-mouse, or word-of-blog – having other people tell your story drives action. One person sends it to another, then that person sends it to yet another, and on and on" (p. 8).

In our previous research (Wright & Hinson, 2006 & 2007) examining the impact new technologies are having on public relations, we found the phenomenon of blogging and other aspects of the social media have the potential to bring dramatic changes to many aspects of public relations. We have claimed the development of various new technologies has significantly empowered a wide variety of strategic

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publics by giving them dynamic new media many are using to communicate effectively with a variety of internal and external audiences.

Unfortunately, few academic articles about blogs or social media appear in the public relations scholarly literature and we continue to find the greatest interest in blogs in the public relations field comes from the trade press, from reports written on behalf of some of the world's largest public relations firms and from practitioners who have written books and articles on the subject. In addition to several books, these practitioner and other industry-related interests have led to the publication of several reports and white papers investigating the phenomenon of employee blogging, the credibility of blog messages, and how companies are reacting to this new form of consumer generated communication.

There now are several recently published books that explore how blogs, social media and other new technologies are changing the way organizations communicate with strategic publics such as employees, customers, stockholders, communities, governments and other stakeholders.

Larry Weber, 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 (Weber, 2007).

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).

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.

Blogging and Public Relations

Many aspects of technology recently have challenged how public relations is practiced. As Robert J. Key (2005) explains, "Public relations in the digital age requires understanding how your key constituents are gathering and sharing information and then influencing them at key points. Doing so requires strategies that embrace the digital age" (p. 19).

The term "blogs" is an abbreviation of "weblogs" that Edelman and Intellissek (2005) say are "easily published, personal web sites that serve as sources of commentary, opinion and uncensored, unfiltered sources of information on a variety of topics." (p. 4). According to Robert J. Key (2005), many weblogs began sporadically as vanity publishing because "anyone with an opinion about anything could create, in a matter of minutes, his or her own web site for publishing news, opinion, commentary and links to other sites" (p. 18).

It is believed there were 34 million blogs in existence at the end of 2005 (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005). Weber (2007) claims there were 100 million blogs by 2007. Technorati, a search tool that tracks blogging topics, links and trends, claims the number of blogs doubled from about 30 million to about 60 million between 2003 and 2006. Weber (2007) says more than 100,000 new blogs are created every day. He also says 1.3 million posts are added to existing blogs every day.

Just as important to public relations practitioners as the number of blogs is how many of them are news-related. Technoati figures indicate more than 50,000 blogs mention typical news events every day and on some days that figure is greater than 100,000.

Although blogging most definitely is a global phenomenon, Scoble and Israel (2006) point out some companies are actively involved in blogging while others are not. They also indicate a variety of factors, including the availability of technology and reasons of culture, have encouraged blogging in some countries while inhibiting it in others. They say blogging is "exploding in the United States, France and Japan but (is) growing slowly in Germany, Russia and China" (p. 130).

Dave Winer (2005), who runs the Scripting News weblog, one of the first and currently the longest-running blog on the internet, and also is a fellow at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, says the phenomenon of blogging "is nothing less than revolutionary." Winer (2003) also points out that "Weblogs are unique in that only a weblog gives you a publication where your ideas can stand alone without interference. It gives the public writer a kind of relaxation not available in other forms."

The potential impact of blogs on public relations and corporate communications is phenomenal. Steve Crescenzo, writing in *The Ragan Report* (October 24, 2005) says employee blogs have "massive, almost unlimited potential to share knowledge, foster dialogue, market goods and services, and open up two-way channels of communication" (p. 1). A recent study commissioned by Edelman Public Relations and Intelliseek (2005) claims, "The rise of the blogosphere has the potential to empower employees in ways not unlike the rise of labor unions in the late 19th and 20th centuries" (p. 3). The 2005 *PR Week*/Burson-Marsteller CEO Survey reports that "59 percent of CEOs rate blogs as a good, very good, or excellent corporate communications tool for internal audiences" (p. 1).

In spite of the huge potential for blogs in both business and public relations an amazingly small number of corporations are blogging. Anderson (2005) and *Wired Magazine* said only 20 Fortune 500 companies were blogging late in 2005 and although this figure has increased since then it remains relatively small. The Socialtext *Fortune 500 Business Blogging* Wiki that tracks Fortune 500 companies that are blogging, claimed only 54 (10.8%) of these organizations were active in blogging as of February 2008.

Fredrik Wackå (2005), who manages the Guide to Corporate Blogging (www.corporateblogging.info) claims there are several reasons why employees are blogging. These include:

- Becoming an Expert: Positioning the employee as a thought leader.

- Testing Ideas: The conversational and informal nature of blogs, and the ability to encourage audience feedback, makes blogging a good way to toss out ideas and see if they generate interest.

- Personalizing Relationships: Employees can use blogs to personalize relationships with other employees and members of other strategic publics (customers, stockholders, etc.).

According to a Backbone Media (2005) survey the top five reasons why employees have created web blogs are to publish content and ideas (52%), build communities (47%), promote thought leadership (44%), get information to customers (36%) and get feedback from customers (23%). Steve Hirschfeld's (2006) research on behalf of the Employment Law Alliance claims millions of American workers blog – as much as five percent of the work force.

There are conflicting viewpoints regarding whether employee blogs are good or bad. According to a 2004 *BusinessWeek* article, companies such as Microsoft, Dell and Sun have encouraged their employees to blog citing benefits such as these:

- "In a world of fragmented media, employees' online diaries can be a seductive way to lure customers into conversations."

- "They're sticky – readers check back several times a day. And posts get linked to other sites amplifying their impact."

- "They're efficient. Employees can post questions about their work and get instant, mass feedback."

- "They're free. Blogs can serve as a global focus group, letting employees know exactly what customers want."

- "Done well, they can humanize faceless behemoths. The Evil Empire of Redmond can instead become the home of 'The Scobleizer,' Microsoft's most famous blogger."

Michelle Conlin and Andrew Park (2004) point out that many corporate executives encourage employees to blog so they can create personal relationships with other employees and customers. David Weinberger (2002), the co-author of *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual* says employee blogs establish connections "through real human beings speaking like real human beings, which is something companies have forgotten how to do."

Although some companies encourage their employees to blog, others do not. Anderson and Mayfield (2005) claim some of the companies currently encouraging blogging include Dell, Hewlett-Packard, Honeywell International, IBM, Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, Viacom and Xerox. Anderson, the editor of *Wired Magazine,* and Mayfield, the author of *Socialtext,* are collaborating on a project that will create an index of business blogging.   The Ragan Report (February 20, 2006) claims some companies have large numbers of webloggers and says IBM has "more than 15,000 registered employee bloggers" (p. 6).

Even though some organizations encourage employee blogging, many organizations do not because they fear employees might misuse employee blogs and either communicate negative information about the company or exchange confidential information.

According to the *Ragan Report* (November 14, 2005) although employee blogs currently are a big phenomenon, many who work in employee communications do not like the idea of their employees blogging because the company is not able to control their messages. Communication consultant Allan Jenkins (2005) believes many public relations people fear employee blogs because they "are reluctant to let go of the communication reins." Jenkins says "90% of this [concern is attributable to] loss of message control." Conlin and Park (2004) claim many companies are willing to give up this message control because they now realize employee bloggers can develop

meaningful relationships with customers. However, Dan Gillmor (2004) believes companies inevitably will try to co-opt blogs.

An Overview of Our Previous Research

Since this is our third annual study examining how new technologies are impacting public relations practice, it probably makes sense to provide a review of what we discovered in 2006 and 2007.

Two years ago we claimed the rise of the blogosphere was significantly empowering employees and had provided a dynamic new medium many were using to communicate with a variety of internal and external audiences. That study also found employee blogging had become a common occurrence and that employees who blog were writing both positive and negative things about their organizations. Although we discovered most agreed it was ethical to discipline employees who write negative things about their organizations on blogs and most also believed it was ethical for organizations to monitor information their employees write on blogs, we also found that only a limited amount of this research is being conducted. We also reported there was little, if anything, in the literature discussing the impact the emergence of blogs and other aspects of new technologies are having on the science that is the communication process.

Building off of our 2006 research and using those results as a benchmark, our 2007 study asked a number of the same questions, permitting a comparison of that year's thinking against what people formerly thought. Findings reported significant increases between 2006 and 2007 in the number of public relations practitioners who were aware of situations where employees of their organization (or a client's organization) had openly communicated on blogs.

Although we found that blogging employees were writing both positive and negative things about their organizations, the positive outweighed the negative. We also reported more positive things were being written in 2007 than was the case in 2006. There also was a noticeable shift in responses between 2006 and 2007 on the question asking whether or not it is ethical for employees to write and post on a blog negative statements about the organizations they work for. The 2006 study found close to one half said doing this was ethical while about one-third disagreed and 18 percent answered "uncertain." The 2007 results show agreement dropping all the way to 29 percent with disagreement rising to 49 percent.

A similar shift of opinion was found in response to a question asking if it is ethical for organizations to monitor what their employees are writing on their blogs. The 2006 study found most agreed with this practice but the 2007 results reported only ten percent agreement and

considerable disagreement. Most 2006 respondents (59%) said it was ethical for an organization to discipline employees who write negative statements about the organization on a bog. Only 19 percent disagreed. The 2007 results showed less agreement with this practice as only 27 percent agreed while 42 percent disagreed.

Since research is such an integral part of the public relations process, both studies asked three questions specifically related to measurement and employee blogs. One of these sought opinions as to whether or not it was ethical for an organization to conduct research that focused on information employees were writing on blogs. Results showed that a very large majority (89% in 2005 and 73% in 2007) believed it was ethical to take such measures. However, in spite of those results, only a very small number of organizations conduct such research or measurement and few predicted we're likely to see changes in this in the immediate future.

Other 2007 findings suggested the emergence of blogs was changing how people communicate. More than half (53%) said blogs have changed how their companies handle external communications while another fairly solid number (40%) suggested this also was the case with internal communications. Although there was some ambivalence in terms of whether or not organizations should let their employees blog during regular working hours, more than one-third (38%) agreed this should happen. At the same time, nearly two-thirds (63%) said employees should ask their organizations for permission to communicate on blogs before doing so during the regular work day. Many (59%) of the 2007 respondents said their organizations had no formal policy on employee blogging. Eighteen percent had written policies and ten percent had unwritten ones.

In 2007, we also examined the impact blogs and other forms of social media were having on the science that is the communication process. We suggested results of our 2006 and 2007 studies enhanced the appropriateness of Lasswell's paradigm asking "Who says What to Whom through which Channel with what Effect." We also said blogs and other social media were in the process of impacting the state of several traditional communication models and theories especially two-step flow theory, the conceptual model, agenda setting theory, spiral of silence theory and excellence theory. We justified those statements by pointing out:

- Many bloggers are themselves becoming "influential's" or "opinion leaders," both crucial components of Lazarsfeld's two-step flow theory process.

- The instantaneous 24/7 nature of blogging brings new meaning to the concept of "feedback" initially introduced to communication theory through the conceptual model.

- Blogs bypass traditional news media and, as such, throw a major wrench in the suggestion that these traditional news media set any agenda for public thought.

- The potential impact for blogs in connection with spiral of silence theory is massive because it provides interesting options and opportunities for minority viewpoints.

- And, the ability of blogs to facilitate two-way symmetrical communication offers tremendous possibilities for the enhancement of excellence theory.

Purpose of the Study

Although our previous work in the area of blogs and social media have concentrated mainly on how employees communicate via blogs and ethical aspects of this communication, this year's paper examines a more broad perspective. Although some of the questions we asked this year are similar to measures explored in our 2006 and 2007 reports, a number of new questions were added this year. While we still are able to compare current thinking against some of our earlier benchmarks this year's research also provides the opportunity to analyze important new ground.

The following research questions form the basis of this year's research:

- Have blogs and social media enhanced the practice of public relations?

- Do blogs and social media influence traditional, mainstream news media? Is the reverse true?

- Since social media (including blogs) have made communications more instantaneous have they forced organizations to respond moe quickly to criticism?

- Has the emergence of social media (including blogs) changed how organizations communicate?

- Do blogs and social media compliment or conflict with mainstream traditional news media?

- Is it ethical for employees to write and post on a web blog negative statements about the organizations they work for?

- Is it ethical for representatives of organizations to monitor information their employees have written on weblogs?

- Is it ethical for an organization to conduct research or measurement studies that focus on information their employees are writing on weblogs?

Method

As has been the case with previous reports of this annual study, a sample of public relations practitioners from various parts of the world took part in the third annual version of this research. Invitations to participate in the study were extended via e-mail messages to random samples collected from organizations such as the Arthur W. Page Society and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA); and from donor, task-force and commission membership lists of the Institute for Public Relations. The study's measuring instrument contained 47 closed-ended and two open-ended questions.

Respondents 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. More (25%) worked with corporations than any other area but small agencies or consultancies (20%) and educational institutions (19%) also were well represented. Large agencies accounted for 11 percent of the respondents while eight percent worked in governmental public relations positions, six percent came from the not-for-profit area, four percent were research providers, two percent worked in health care and five percent responded "other" when asked what kind of organization they worked for.

There was a fairly even split between male (56%) and female (44%) respondents. Most (57%) were based in North America with 20 percent from Europe, ten percent from Asia and Australia, nine percent from Africa, one percent from South America and three percent from "other." Of those based in North America, 95 percent were from the United States. Responses were nicely distributed across various age categories with 13 percent being younger than 30, 25 percent were between 30 and 39, 23 percent were aged 40 to 49, 25 percent were 50 to 59 and 14 percent were 60 or older.

Usable responses were received from 328 subjects. Data were analyzed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) program.

Results

Findings clearly indicate public relations practitioners who responded to this survey believe the emergence of blogs and social media have changed the way their organizations (or their client organizations) communicate. As Table 1 indicates 61 percent agree with this statement while 25 percent disagree and 13 percent are uncertain. This table also shows changes are more prominent in external communications than they are in internal communications.

Table 1: Responses to the question:
"Please tell us whether you agree or disagree that the emergence of social media (including blogs) has changed the way your organization (or your client organizations)":

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score
Communicates?	6%	19%	13%	47%	14%	3.3
Handles external communications?	6%	17%	18%	48%	11%	3.4
Handles internal communications?	10%	25%	28%	27%	11%	3.1

<u>*Note*</u>: (a) Percentage scores 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" = "Strongly Disagree" and "5" = "Strongly Agree." Consequently, the higher the mean score the greater the agreement.*

Even more agreement was found when respondents were asked if they thought social media (including blogs) compliment mainstream traditional media or are in conflict with them. Results in Table 2 show nearly three-quarters (72%) believe they complement each other.

Table 2: Responses to the question:
"Do you agree or disagree that social media (including blogs) and mainstream traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television)":

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score
Complement each other?	3%	13%	12%	52%	20%	3.6
Are in conflict with each other?	12%	42%	17%	24%	5%	2.8

Results also show there is considerable agreement suggesting blogs and social media have enhanced public relations practice. Table 3 shows two-thirds of the study's respondents (66%) believe social media have enhanced public relations and 60 percent feel the same way about blogs. This table also reports most (89%) of those surveyed think blogs and social media influence news coverage in the traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television) while 72 percent say the reverse also is true. There is very solid agreement (84%) that blogs and social media have made communications more instantaneous because they force organizations to respond more quickly to criticism.

Table 3: Responses to these questions:
"Do you agree or disagree that . . ."

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score
Social media have enhanced the practice of public relations?	1%	15%	18%	46%	20%	3.6
Blogs have enhanced the practice of public relations?	2%	16%	23%	45%	15%	3.5
Social media (including blogs) influence the traditional mainstream media?		5%	6%	60%	29%	4.1
Traditional mainstream media influence social media (including blogs)?	1%	10%	17%	54%	18%	3.7
Since social media (including blogs) have made communications more instantaneous they have forced organizations to respond more quickly to criticism?		8%	7%	46%	38%	4.2

Subjects also were asked a variety of questions about how social media compare with traditional news media in terms of accuracy, credibility, truth, ethics and so forth. Results, displayed in Table 4, show respondents think blogs and social media have a long distance to go before they will be equal to traditional media in these categories. This table also shows respondents do not give blogs and social media very high scores in terms of truth telling or advocating transparent and ethical cultures. However, respondents give social media high marks for offering organizations low-cost ways to develop relationships with members of various strategic publics (80% agreement), serving as a watchdog for traditional mainstream media (61% agreement) and impacting corporate and organizational transparency (76% agreement).

Table 4: Responses to these questions:
"Do you agree or disagree that social media (including blogs) . . ."

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score
Are more accurate than traditional mainstream media?	25%	42%	26%	6%	1%	2.3
Are more credible than traditional mainstream media?	19%	45%	26%	9%	2%	2.3
Are a more trusted information source than traditional mainstream media?	16%	35%	29%	18%	2%	4.1
Tell the truth?	14%	24%	49%	13%		2.6
Advocate a transparent and ethical culture?	11%	21%	31%	30%	7%	3.0
Offer organizations a low-cost way to develop relationships with members of various strategic publics?	2%	7%	11%	62%	18%	3.8
Serve as a watch-dog for traditional mainstream media?	4%	10%	24%	46%	15%	3.6
Are impacting corporate and organizational transparency.	1%	3%	20%	58%	18%	3.8

This study also wanted to investigate whether people have different expectations in terms of honesty, truth telling, ethics, etc., between social media and the more traditional media. Results are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: Responses to these questions:
"Do you agree or disagree that people who receive information from mainstream media expect these news outlets to be honest, tell the truth and advocate a transparent and ethical culture?"

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score
2%	12%	11%	50%	25%	3.9

Table 5 shows most (75%) expect traditional mainstream media to be honest, tell the truth and be ethical. However, results displayed in Table 6 suggest expectations in these areas are considerably less (44%) for blogs and other social media.

A question also asked if respondents thought colleges and universities teaching public relations should include instruction and study about blogs and other social media and found most (94%) agreed this should happen.

Table 6: Responses to these questions:
"Do you agree or disagree that people who receive information from blogs and other social media expect these outlets to be honest, tell the truth and advocate a transparent and ethical culture?"

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score
3%	27%	26%	36%	8%	3.3

The measuring instrument also asked a number of questions that had been included on the study's questionnaire in previous years. Table 7 displays results of the question asking whether or not it is ethical for employees to write and post on a blog negative statements about the organizations they work for. Results indicate a fairly significant change of opinion in this area.

Table 7: Responses to the question:
Do you agree or disagree that it is ethical for employees to write and post on a weblog negative statements about the organizations they work for?

	2006	2007	2008
Strongly Agree	29%	7%	4%
Agree	20%	22%	21%
Uncertain	18%	22%	22%
Disagree	33%	34%	39%
Strongly Disagree	1%	15%	13%
Mean Score	3.4	2.7	2.6

Mean Differences

	N	Mean	SD	F	DF	p
2005 Responses	290	3.42	.62	3.14	36	.001
2007 Responses	157	2.68	.83			
2008 Responses	162	2.57	.72			

Our 2006 study found close to one half (49%) saying doing this was ethical while about one-third (34%) disagreed and 18% answered "uncertain." The 2007 results show agreement dropping all the way to 29 percent with disagreement rising to 49 percent. In 2008 the agreement slipped to 25 percent with disagreement rising to more than half of the respondents (52%). Analysis of Variance tests between the means of these two groups are significant at p=.001.

As Table 8 shows, a majority of the 2006 respondents (59%) said it was ethical for an organization to discipline employees who write negative statements about the organization on a blog. Only 19% disagreed and 21% were uncertain. The 2007 results show less agreement with this practice as only 27 percent agree while 42 percent disagree. This trend was reversed in 2008 where results show 44 percent agree and 32 percent disagree, however results of ANOVA tests fail to show much statistical significance.

Table 8: Responses to the question:
Do you agree or disagree that it is ethical for an organization to discipline an employee who writes negative statements about the organization on a world wide weblog?

	2006	2007	2008
Strongly Agree	21%	5%	11%
Agree	38%	22%	33%
Uncertain	21%	31%	26%
Disagree	19%	31%	26%
Strongly Disagree	0%	11%	6%
Mean Score	3.6	2.8	3.1

Mean Differences

	N	Mean	SD	F	DF	p
2005 Responses	287	3.61	.65	4.35	42	.328
2007 Responses	156	2.82	.83			
2008 Responses	176	3.08	.93			

Since research is such an integral part of the corporate public relations process, all three of these annual studies have asked two questions specifically related to measurement and employee blogs. The first of these sought opinions as to whether or not it was ethical for an organization to conduct research that focused on information employees were writing on blogs. Results in Table 9 show that a very large majority (89% in 2006, 73% in 2007 and 73% in 2008) believe this is ethical. What's interesting, however, is that while only a small number of respondents (4% in 2006 and 10% in 2007) say doing this would be unethical that figure increased dramatically to 20 percent in 2008. ANOVA tests on this measure show statistical significance at p=.041.

Table 9: Responses to the question:
Do you agree or disagree that it is ethical for an organization to conduct research about or monitor information that their employees are communicating via blogs and other social media?

	2006	2007	2008
Strongly Agree	29%	19%	11%
Agree	60%	54%	52%
Uncertain	7%	17%	17%
Disagree	4%	9%	16%
Strongly Disagree	0%	1%	4%
Mean Score	4.1	3.8	3.4

Mean Differences

	N	Mean	SD	F	DF	p
2005 Responses	287	4.08	.72	3.34	36	.041
2007 Responses	156	3.77	.78			
2008 Responses	162	3.42	.81			

As Table 10 indicates only a very small number of organizations appear to have commissioned or conducted such research or measurement but this percentage has been increasing each year.

Table 10: Responses to the question:
To the best of your knowledge, has your organization ever commissioned or conducted a research or measurement study that focused on information employees communicated on www blogs?

	2006	2007	2008
Yes	3%	11%	15%
No	77%	62%	55%
Uncertain/ Don't Know	20%	27%	30%

Table 11 reports on results to a question asked in the 2007 and 2008 studies regarding whether or not organizations should permit their employees to communicate on blogs during regular working hours. Findings suggest acceptance of this concept is increasing. In 2007, only 38 percent agreed with this idea but that number increased to 44 percent in 2008. When t-tests were performed on group means, this finding was found to be significant at p=.023.

Table 11: Responses to the question:
Do you agree or disagree that organizations should permit their employees to communicate on blogs and other social media during regular working hours?

	2007	2008
Strongly Agree	7%	7%
Agree	31%	37%
Uncertain	31%	27%
Disagree	21%	21%
Strongly Disagree	10%	8%
Mean Score	3.1	3.6

Mean Differences

	N	Mean	SD	t	DF	p
2007 Responses	203	3.08	.67	3.29	36	.023
2008 Responses	156	3.62	.74			

Open-Ended Comments

The questionnaire asked an open-ended question of those who answered "agree" or "strongly agree" to either (or both) of the two questions asking if blogs and/or other social media have enhanced the practice of public relations. This open-ended query provided an opportunity for respondents to elaborate on their answers to these two questions.

Open-ended response highlights include a recurring suggestion that blogs and social media have had a huge impact moving public relations into the direction of facilitating more two-way communication by opening up direct channels of communications between organizations and their publics. One respondent called them

"great tools that we need to embrace and use." Another said these new media "provide us with immediate feedback on situations we previously received no feedback from." One wrote, "they make public relations two-way symmetrical thus enhancing and facilitating mutual understanding." Others pointed out these new media create additional information channels thus making it more difficult for those who practice public relations to help organizations manage and control information dissemination. Others thought the presence of more two-way communication brings with it the potential to enhance authenticity, accountability and transparency. Another respondent wrote, "They provide organizations with a true opportunity for listening and for true dialogue."

Several suggested the emergence of social media has dramatically reduced the turn-around time when organizations are communicating with certain target publics. Others said the need to communicate more quickly has lessened the impact lawyers used to have forcing organizations to withhold information. One suggested today's new media environment with blogs, social media and 24/7 news organizations would change the way cases such as the Tylenol crisis would play out if they happened today.

Several respondents suggested blogs and social media provide excellent opportunities for public relations practitioners to build relationships with strategic publics. One wrote the social media have "made us a bit more nimble and required us to be more closely in touch with groups/individuals who have skin in our game." Another commented the new media have "opened up a new group of stakeholders with which to engage, as well as new vehicles for reaching them."Others suggested these new media "get more employees directly involved" in organizational communication as well as encouraging "greater transparency between employees and management." Some pointed out they give public relations people "a more direct path to newsmakers." One claimed "word of mouth is transforming through social networking."

Some open-ended responses focused on the reality some who practice public relations have not adapted their strategies and tactics to effectively target blogs. Others encouraged practitioners to spend more time monitoring blogs and using them to deliver messages to strategic publics.

A number of the responses focused on the potential blogs and social media provide to enhancing employee communication. As one wrote, "It lets companies communicate with employees in a more natural, human manger." Another pointed out the new media, "Create opportunities for quick responses to events and trends, without being restricted by traditional publishing schedules and frameworks." One comment said blogs and social media have, "Encouraged greater transparency between employees and management."

A second open-ended question invited respondents to "add any additional comments." Results were not as valuable since some of them simply said, "nice survey," or inquired how respondents might get copies of the study's results.

Summary and Conclusion

Our third annual, international empirical examination of public relations practitioners (n=328) on the impact blogs and other social media are having on public relations practice once again finds these new media are dramatically changing public relations and the way it is practiced. Results of this year's study find about two-thirds believe blogs and social media have enhanced what happens in public relations and that social media and traditional mainstream media complement each other. More than half of the study's respondents (61%) believe the emergence of blogs and social media have changed the way their organizations (or their client organizations) communicate. Findings suggest these changes are more prominent in external than internal communications.

Many (72%) believe social media complement traditional news media, and an even higher number (89%) think blogs and social media influence coverage in traditional news media. Most (84%) believe blogs and social media have made communications more instantaneous because they encourage organizations to respond more quickly to criticism.

Results clearly show traditional news media receive higher scores than blogs and social media in terms of accuracy, credibility, telling the truth and being ethical. Findings also show 75 percent expect traditional news media to be honest, tell the truth and be ethical, but only 44 percent hold these same expectations for blogs and other social media.

This study also asked a number of questions that had been included on our questionnaires in previous years. Results of these annual measures find:

- Approval continues to decrease each year when our subjects are asked if it is ethical for employees to write and post on blogs negative statements about the organizations they work for. While 49 percent said this was ethical two years ago, only 29 percent agreed last year and only 25 percent agree in the current study.

- There is significantly more agreement this year than last year on the question asking if organizations should permit their employees to communicate on blogs and other social media during regular working hours. Agreement on this measure was 38 percent last year and 44 percent this year.

- Survey respondents continue to disapprove more each year when asked if it is ethical for organizations to conduct research about or monitor information that their employees are communicating via blogs and other social media.

Three years ago 89 percent of the respondents agreed conducting such research was ethical. This approval figure was 73 percent in 2007 and is 63 percent this year.

- The number of companies actually conducting this kind of research appears to be increasing. Only three percent of our respondents said their organizations (or their client organizations) were conducting this research three years ago. That figure increased to 11 percent last year and is at 15 percent in the current study.

Highlights of responses to the study's open-ended questions include a recurring suggestion that blogs and social media have had a huge impact moving public relations into the direction of facilitating more two-way communication by opening up direct channels of communications between organizations and their publics. Others pointed out these new media create additional information channels thus making it more difficult for those who practice public relations to help organizations manage and control information dissemination.

Several suggested the emergence of social media has dramatically reduced the turn-around time when organizations are communicating with certain target publics. Others said the need to communicate more quickly has lessened the impact lawyers used to have forcing organizations to withhold information. Several respondents suggested blogs and social media provide excellent opportunities for public relations practitioners to build relationships with strategic publics.

And, as one wrote, social media "have provided an opportunity to truly put the public back into public relations by providing a mechanism for organizations to engage in real-time, one-to-one conversations with stakeholders. Additionally, they serve as a focus group of thousands, allowing offline communications to be more relevant."

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