The Minimized Face of Internal Communication:
An Exploration of How Public Relations Agency Websites Frame
Internal Communication and its Connection to Social Media

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Abstract

Internal communication is increasingly vital to organizational success due to the influence of social media, yet it remains understudied within public relations research. Using a qualitative content analysis of 181 websites, this study examines how leading public relations agency websites frame the value of internal communication and its connection to social media. Findings reveal internal communication is largely missing from the frame. When explicitly referenced, it is mostly framed as synonymous with employee communication as a means for management to communicate to employees, though some portrayals are more robust. Websites frame internal communication's value as enhancing financial outcomes by improving workplace culture, employee engagement, and workers' willingness to support management's preferred organization brand or reputation. Social media are disconnected from internal communication and are mostly framed as tools that require additional employee training to use in order to reach external audiences. A handful of agencies urge organizations to include social media and internal stakeholders within the internal communication function. Recommendations are made for future internal communication research and practice.

Introduction

Internal communication's importance is rising as organizations pay more attention to how they communicate with internal stakeholders in turbulent, dynamic operational environments characterized by increasing globalization, mergers, restructuring, technology adoption and other challenges (e.g., Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2014; Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014; Vercic, Vercic, & Sriramesh, 2012). Yet, internal communication has been understudied within public relations research, which has focused more on external organizational audiences and stakeholders (e.g., Kim & Rhee, 2011; Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2014; Waymer & Ni, 2009).

Internal communication's rising importance in practice may have renewed scholars' interest in the topic. In a special 2012 issue of *Public Relations Review* focused on internal communication, the editors list a series of industry and academic initiatives and analyses that had begun to examine internal communication as important and as a separate public relations or communication domain (Vercic et al., 2012). Welch (2013) pointed out that internal communication practitioners need specialized knowledge and skills to meet the demands of diverse internal stakeholders, yet the most recent master's level education standards from the 2012 Commission on Public Relations Education do not include knowledge components or categories specific to internal communication.

Given the historic undervaluing of internal communication and the reported renaissance in its appreciation, this paper explores how 181 leading public relations agency websites frame internal communication's value and its connection to social media. Agency websites serve as the public faces companies use to communicate their services and skills to external audiences (Rolland & Bazzoni, 2009). In doing so, websites also communicate industry norms and priorities, or lack thereof, related to internal communication. The results and subsequent discussion offer theoretical and practical implications for expanding the way internal communication and its connection to social media are understood and depicted.

Literature Review

Internal communication ranges from informal office grapevine communication or gossip to more formal corporate communication between senior managers and all employees as part of the public relations or corporate communication functions (Welch & Jackson, 2007). Omilion-Hodges and Baker (2014) define strategic internal communication as "thoughtful and proactive framing of messages tailored to meet employees' temporal, informational, and affective needs" (p. 436).

The most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* describes internal communication as "public relations directed to and among employees in an organization" (Sowa, 2013, p. 464). As these definitions suggest, internal communication is often used interchangeably with intra-organizational communication and equated with employee communication (Vercic et al., 2012). Additionally, *organization* usually refers to the managers, supervisors or leaders while *employee* refers to non-management personnel (e.g., Ruck & Welch, 2012; Ortiz & Ford, 2009).

Welch and Jackson (2007) called on scholars to expand their definition of internal communication as the "strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders within organisations across a number of interrelated dimensions including, internal line manager communication, internal team peer communication, internal project peer communication and internal corporate communication" (p. 184). They also called for a broader understanding of internal stakeholders since most internal communication research oversimplifies employees as one public (L'Etang, 2005). Welch and Jackson (2007) call for more research on internal corporate communication, which takes place at the top management level and has been predominantly one-way communication focused on organizational and corporate issues such as goals, objectives, new developments, activities and achievements.

Value of Internal Communication

Most internal communication research takes a functionalist management-centric perspective seeking to improve effectiveness from management's view (Cameron & McCollum, 1993; Ruck & Welch, 2012; Welch, 2012). Employees may be undervalued within an organization's larger communication strategy, yet they represent a critical stakeholder group, because they interact most frequently with key external publics (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Employees play important roles in carrying out the larger corporate communication strategy (Dolphin, 2005), reinforcing a preferred corporate culture (Ortiz & Ford, 2009), including executing companies' external public relations (White, Vanc, & Stafford, 2010), and serving as internal and external brand ambassadors (Dolphin, 2005; Ortiz & Ford, 2009).

Internal communication strategies can be especially important to organizations experiencing major changes (Dolphin, 2005), including mergers and acquisitions, downsizings, reorganizations (Stein, 2006; Williamson, 2005), internal/external conflicts such as union campaign efforts (Ortiz & Ford, 2009), and crises in general (Johansen, Aggerholm, & Frandsen, 2012; Dolphin, 2005). Change communication may be used with internal stakeholders to help bring about organizational change goals (Lies, 2012).

McKie and Willis (2012) encourage organizations to foster employee engagement in order to link themselves "to a wider stakeholder universe beyond the customer and commercially driven value chain" (p. 849). However, internal communication's commercially driven value is often stressed, because organizations are under increasing financial pressure and tend to use financial indicators to assess internal communication's value (Meng & Pan, 2012). External stakeholders such as investors are often considered the most important to financial performance, yet employees are just as critical (de Bussy & Suprawan, 2012). A company's employee orientation, such as fostering employee dialogue and showing employee concern, may impact corporate financial performance more than its orientation toward any other stakeholder group, including shareholders, customers, and the community (de Bussy & Suprawan, 2012).

Employee-centric internal communication programs can increase engagement by providing feedback mechanisms to cultivate employees' voices in the organization and develop dialogue; by providing content-rich information that employees want to know versus what managers want to communicate; and by involving employees in organizational activities and developments (Men, 2012; Ruck & Welch, 2012). Yet scant attention has been paid to employees' preferred communication content that will increase identification and engagement with the organization (Ruck & Welch, 2012).

Influence of Social Media

When determining how to communicate with employees, organizational leaders should take into account employees' channel and content preferences (e.g., Friedl & Vercic, 2011; Gallicano et al., 2012; Ruck & Welch, 2012). Social media are interactive digital or mobile tools that allow users to access, create or influence content (Wright & Hinson, 2010), including within an internal communication context. These interactive tools meet employees' desires for the ability to express personal opinions, create content, build community and share knowledge within organizations (Friedl & Vercic, 2011).

Social media give employees a larger platform for instantaneously, publicly expressing positive and negative thoughts about employers (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2014). As such, social media can collapse the internal and external dichotomy. Within a

shifting landscape, internal stakeholders shape an organization's identity and "can arguably also have a great effect on the organization's bottom line due to the fluidity of organizational boundaries" (Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2014, p. 436).

While the majority of employees under 30 in their study showed a preference for traditional media within an internal communication context, Friedl and Vercic (2011) urge communicators to include social media tools such as intranets and online newsletters to complement traditional internal communication. Stein (2006) found that employees prefer intranets second only to face-to-face communication as a means to effectively establish a sense of community for organizations with multiple sites.

Internal social media could answer the call for more interpersonal channels that actively engage with employees (Cameron & McCollum, 1993). Such interpersonal channels can enhance employees' shared reality and identification with the organization, while improving leaders' ability to communicate with them (Cameron & McCollum).

Whenever new technologies like social media are discussed, the issue of control emerges (e.g., Kent, 2008; Marken, 2005). Internal social media communication is no exception. Kent (2008) lists communication risks, including loss of control, in a list of weaknesses of using blogs in public relations. Blurred boundaries and rising internal voices have instilled concern regarding the negative impact of employees' online communication, including disgruntled employees' ability to attack the organization online (e.g., Cásarez, 2002; Miles & Mangold, 2014). In their article titled, "Employee voice: Untapped resource or social media time bomb?", Miles and Mangold (2014) urge organizations to guide and manage employees' voices to strategically advantage the organization. Yet, organizational social media could engage employees as part of the multiple voices now speaking on behalf of organizations (Huang, Baptista, & Galliers, 2013; Waymer & Ni, 2009).

However, when top-down control of voice is emphasized, employee engagement via social media may be used more by management to achieve buy-in than to co-create meaning and strategy with employees (Huang et al., 2013). That use of social media falls under what scholars like Cameron and McCollum (1993) and McKie and Willis (2012) describe as the command-and-control mode of internal communication that sees employees as passive audiences that can be aligned with management's desired organizational culture.

Similarly, research often positions the corporate brand, image and identity as external communication products rather than internally produced processes (Ruck & Welch, 2012). Yet, organizations' identities are co-produced in a fragmented media environment with many platforms from which current and former employees, customers, partners, competitors, and related parties communicate about organizations (Gilpin, 2010). Employees' online voices can contribute to an organization's human, conversational voice that enhances organization-public relationships (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006).

Despite these benefits, though, the dominant view in research portrays univocal organizations seeking to improve employees' alignment with an organization's culture and communicating the brand to external stakeholders (Welch, 2012). Lack of education or training related to internal communication, including how to leverage emerging communication tools and channels (Welch, 2013; Ruck & Welch, 2012), could limit organizations' ability to use social media to engage employees.

Posing another challenge, public relations personnel are portrayed as producers of employee communication tools and channels and employees are depicted as passive consumers

of their efforts and messages (Cameron & McCollum, 1993). Public relations agencies may influence such limited views as organizations increasingly seek outside counsel (Hinrichsen, 2013).

Framing Internal Communication

Public relations agencies offer an understanding of the "possibilities and reality" of a communication function such as internal communication (Lies, 2012, p. 255). Additionally, agencies highlight salient attributes related to communication functions like internal communication "by promoting specific frames to news media and the public" (Lim & Jones, 2010, p. 296).

Websites reveal these frames and help communicate topic importance to external audiences. Scholars have called for an expanded employee-centric view of internal communication dimensions and stakeholders (Ruck & Welch, 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007). Social and digital media may provide greater possibility for doing so (Huang et al., 2013). Given gaps in internal communication education (Welch, 2013), organization leaders and communicators may look to public relations agencies to offer guidance, training and support related to effective internal communication, especially related to social media. As such, this paper explores how public relations agencies frame internal communication.

Public relations scholars use framing theory as a way to investigate how professionals and organizations shape specific messages for audiences (e.g. Austin, 2010; Hallahan, 1999; Reber & Berger, 2005). Framing in public relations scholarship and practice shapes the view through which individuals understand the world (Hallahan, 1999). Both a theory and process, framing involves the selection of constructed attributes of an item to "make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The process leads to the social construction of reality for audiences by highlighting salient attributes related to specific cultural artifacts (Entman, 1993). PR practitioners "routinely engage in framing of attributes by accentuating particular aspects of the causes, candidates, products, or services they represent" (Hallahan, 1999, p. 225).

Agency websites are one of many cultural products where framing is used to communicate attribute salience of topics to external audiences. While agency websites may not completely capture or match the professional and ethical values of the agency and individual practitioners, they can provide insight into what the agency thinks is important to portray. The framing process seeks to align audience understanding and interpretations with the organization's (Reber & Berger, 2005). This study analyzes internal communication frames on PR agency websites by asking:

RQ1: How do agency websites frame the value of internal communication?
RQ2: How do agency websites frame internal communication's connection to social media?

Method

Given the study's exploratory nature, researchers followed Altheide and Schneider's (2013) qualitative content analysis approach to determine how agencies frame internal communication's value and connection to social media. The approach includes a rigorous,

systematic process for analyzing artifacts' relevance, significance, and meaning based on the constructed frames.

Sample

This study used purposive sampling, which selects a sample based on significance to the phenomena under study (Merriam, 2009). Because the study sought to understand how leading agency websites depict internal communication, the initial sample included O'Dwyer's 2013 list of the top 124 public relations firms with major U.S. operations based on supporting fee, employee totals and current account information. To increase variety, investigators included the 101 firms designated as members of the Council of Public Relations Firms. Some appeared on both lists and one was no longer in business bringing the final sample to 181 agencies. U.S.-based lists were used, but many companies had global offices and operations. Of the 117 organizations that posted personnel numbers, staff size ranged from 1 to 4,518, with a median of 29 employees.

Data Collection and Analysis

Researchers followed Altheide and Schneider's (2013) twelve-step approach to qualitative document analysis. Initially, researchers determined the problem to investigate by reviewing relevant literature, examining the information source context (i.e., communication firm websites), and discussing several relevant websites. Then, researchers developed a protocol to guide data collection. For the purpose of understanding how firms framed internal communication, the protocol involved visiting the site's homepage and "about" page or a comparable page to gather information about how the firm described itself. Researchers then sought pages related to the firm's offerings where information about internal communication practice areas or services could be located. For example, most sites had one or more pages related to "services," "capabilities," or "practice areas."

In some cases, sites would include a separate relevant page that focused on "industry" offerings. If organizations provided links to additional information about internal communication on any pages, researchers followed the paths to gather content related to the research questions. A software screenshot capture tool was used to save images of visited website pages in a Google Drive folder to document what the website looked like when it was observed.

A shared master spreadsheet in Google Drive allowed for synchronous and asynchronous review and commentary. An Excel randomization tool allowed researchers to ensure they were not visiting sites based on any particular order such as size or O'Dwyer ranking. After dual coding the first 3% of the sample, researchers were confident of their shared understanding of the data collection process and split the remaining sample. To maintain a clear chain of evidence and research auditability, the spreadsheet included information related to method as well as data used to answer the research questions.

The spreadsheet included a row for each of the 181 agency websites in order to track time spent on the site, date visited, agency type and background information, location, size, and fee information when provided. Additional columns summarized the depictions of internal communication, internal communication practice or service areas, relevant pages on the site, related terms or topics, audiences referenced, any social/digital media connections to internal communication. Researchers used the data to write a frame summary in answer to the research questions. Memo space allowed researchers to include supporting examples and compare

findings. The Appendix provides a sample of the coding sheet for three of the agency websites. In total, data collection took place over an 11-day period in 2014 with 57.5 total hours spent reviewing websites. Time spent on each site varied based on the amount of relevant content and lasted from 3 to 94 minutes with an average of 19 minutes.

Data analysis was iterative and ongoing (Altheide & Schneider, 2013), which involved performing data analysis by refining concepts as data collection continued. After reaching the midpoint of data collection, researchers met to discuss and compare findings. Categories and additional codes emerged that refined the authors' understanding of the phenomena and assisted in the identification of frames during the rest of data collection. After analyzing 72% of the sample, researchers again discussed findings, frames and rival explanations. After completing data collection, researchers used meetings and memos to compare extremes and key differences within each category and made notes about those differences that resulted in the findings.

Results

The study's questions focus on how public relations agency websites frame the value of internal communication and its connection to social media. Table 1 provides a summary of the frames, which are further explained in the sections that follow. Website quotes attributed to agencies were gathered during the initial data collection period.

Table 1. *Overview of Internal Communication Frames*

Frames	Summary
RQ1: How do agency websites frame the value of internal communication?	
Invisible	Most agency websites leave out internal communication altogether.
Synonymous with employee communication	When present, most websites frame internal communication as employee communication (from organizational leaders or managers to non-management employees).
Tool to reach employees and enhance engagement	Less than a quarter of websites reference two-way communication, engagement, conversations, internal dialogue, or relationships with employees, suggesting internal communication presents a means to influence employee engagement.
Tool to enhance organization's financial performance and ability to meet business goals	These websites claim internal communication can enhance the financial bottom-line by improving work culture and job performance, and improving workers' ability and willingness to align with management's preferred organization brand or reputation.
RQ2: How do agency websites frame the connection between internal communication and social media?	

Disconnected	Most websites do not connect internal communication and social media – framing social media as an external-facing communication tool.
Employee communication tool or channel	When referenced in connection to internal communication, social media are framed as additional tools or channels through which to send messages to employees.
New channels requiring employee training or guidance	Social media are framed as new channels that create a need for more employee training or guidance (e.g., social media policies, social media monitoring training).
Powerful connection	A minority of agency sites frame social media's connection to internal communication as powerful and important.

Internal Communication Value Frames (RQ1)

In answering the first research question - *how do agency websites frame the value of internal communication* – three frames were found. On most sites, internal communication was not mentioned, making it largely *invisible*. When present, it was most often framed as synonymous with *employee communication*. A minority of agency websites framed internal communication as a *tool to reach employees, enhance engagement and improve financial outcomes*. Each theme is explicated with examples.

Invisible internal communication. Nearly a third of agency websites do not explicitly mention internal communication or internal stakeholders like employees. In some cases their absence contrasts with previous references to the public relations agency's own employees as critical to its effectiveness and, by extension, its ability to deliver excellent communication services to its clients. For example, DeVries Global does not reference internal communication services or employee communication offerings, but says: "Hands down, our greatest asset is the people who work here," including their "business acumen and unyielding dedication" and their "energetic, anything-is-possible approach."

Synonymous with employee communication. When present, internal communication is most often framed as employee communication, specifically communication from organizational leaders or managers to non-management employees. As 5W Public Relations notes, "Just as companies and organizations need outward public communication, 5W Public Relations (5W) understands internal communication needs as well." This section details that depiction, including the audiences and capabilities or services agencies connected to it.

In more than a dozen cases, no specific internal communication services are listed. However, *employees* or *internal stakeholders* are referenced as stakeholder audiences. For example, Communique PR stresses: "The way businesses need to communicate today has undergone a seismic shift, making PR one of the most strategic tools a company can utilize to communicate with its key audiences - customers, potential customers, investors, employees and others."

Nearly half the agency websites explicitly name internal or employee communication capabilities or services. At least one-third of sites contrast "employees" as separate from management in an internal context. In addition to *employees*, these non-management personnel are called *front-line employees, labor force, staff, talent* and the *workforce*. Only a few websites reference non-employee internal stakeholders such as members, board members, partners and vendors. In reference to healthcare expertise, Crosby Marketing Communications includes

clinicians, nursing staff, donors, and board members as stakeholders. However, internal communication is predominantly focused on employees and is referred to as *employee communication(s), employee engagement, employee relations, internal communication(s), labor communication, labor relations,* and *workforce communication*.

A few agency websites describe an internal or employee communication service area. Reputation Partners LLC dedicates a service area to employee communication and lists employees as key audiences under corporate, labor and social media service areas. The employee communication service area states: "Reputation Partners expertly helps companies communicate with one of their most important audiences – its employees. We develop communications strategies that grow employee commitment and drive top performance."

Most sites, however, list relevant services under other service offerings such as corporate communication, human resources, marketing, or public relations. Related functions include brand management, change management, corporate social responsibility, crisis management, and reputation management. Agency websites include related tools and tactics for communicating to employees such as internal communication audits, blogs, events, intranets, meetings, newsletters, portals, trainings, videos, and wikis. In sum, internal communication is most often constructed as communicating management messages to non-management employees through channels, platforms and tools.

Tool to reach employees, enhance engagement, improve financial outcomes. Less than a quarter of agency websites reference two-way communication, engagement, conversations, internal dialogue, or relationships with employees, suggesting one contribution of internal communication is that it presents a means to influence employee engagement. JohnstonWells Public Relations lists "success factors…critical to an effective internal communications program" that include "the importance of two-way communication, stability and the repetition of messages" and "require the buy-in and participation of all levels of management, not to mention management's responsiveness to employee feedback."

Even when agency websites describe employees as stakeholders to engage and listen to, they often reference the need to align them to organization goals, brand, or values. FleishmanHillard says: "Employees are the heart and soul of any organization, and aligning their behaviors with business strategies is critical to success." Global Strategy Group calls employees the "organization's most important asset" and say, "We know what motivates people and how to change behaviors…we can help you engage your employees and manage your workforce."

Some references to internal communication appear stakeholder-centric. O'Malley Hansen Communications says it understands that "effective communication within a company is the foundation for success" and claims to be "experts in helping our clients create conversations with their most valuable assets, their employees." W20 describes employees as having worldviews necessary to consider through employee engagement that helps organizations meet strategic goals. Organizations are urged to look internally and face the reality of how they operate, and to ask employees what they want to hear and how they want to be communicated with. Weber Shandwick calls employees powerful advocates and global broadcasters. rbb Public Relations stresses that employee perceptions of the organization are crucial to creating effective messages. Chicco Agency considers employees the most important audience and says they need to understand the company vision so they can live the culture.

Linhart Public Relations calls for "empowering and equipping employees to be informed, enthusiastic brand ambassadors" and says "employees want to understand the business direction"

and "have a positive feeling about what the company does and feel good about working there." The video embedded on the GolinHarris employee communications capability page describes the importance of employee communication given organizations' complex operating systems where walls have broken down between internal and external and personal and professional communication. Therefore, internal communication is seen as a valuable tool to reach employees and enhance engagement.

Yet these strengths are most frequently framed as valuable to an organization's financial outcomes and ability to meet business goals. According to the websites, effective internal communication can enhance an organization's bottom-line value by improving work culture and subsequent employee job performance, which improves workers' ability and willingness to support, deliver and protect the management's preferred organization brand or reputation. Ketchum represents the connected values by offering to help leaders empower and engage employees with the brand and strategies to drive success; build connections between brands and employees; build connections between strategy and employees; and foster employee culture to improve organizational effectiveness.

Internal communication is said to improve employees' performance/productivity and improve their commitment, passion, satisfaction, and retention. Porter Novelli suggests that internal communication can transform a workforce from disengaged and lethargic into engaged organizational ambassadors. Kohnstamm Communications connects internal communication as developing competitive advantages and media opportunities by enhancing work culture, work-life balance, and the ability to retain top talent. Havas PR considers internal communication strategy important to bringing a "brand to life," supporting business objectives, securing employee commitment, creating an ideal internal brand aligned with an external reputation in order to help organizations speak with one voice in complex global environments.

Dozens of websites connect internal communication to brand management and frame employees as brand ambassadors or needing to be aligned to the preferred brand – in order to manage and protect the brand and reputation. Jackson Spalding states: "Your employees are the most important ambassadors for your business. We can help you cultivate and maintain your relationship so they represent your brand well." While most organizations represent brand delivery and value as external related to customers, Anne Klein Communications Group describes employee engagement as increasing goodwill with employees to create goodwill ambassadors within a company.

Internal communication is sometimes portrayed as a valuable means to manage issues, risks or threats to an organization's reputation, brand, or bottom line. ICR offers to ensure that employees are the "first to hear of key developments (instead of through newspapers or Web rumors), allowing them to make the greatest possible contribution." Internal communication is also viewed as dealing with crises that involve employees. For Makovsky, internal communications and executive communication are about "managing reputations from the inside out" related to internal and external reputation threats.

The Disconnect Between Social Media and Internal Communication (RQ2)

In answering the second research question – *how do agency websites frame the connection between internal communication and social media* – four frames were identified. On most sites, social media and internal connection were *disconnected*. When referenced together, social media was often framed as *an additional employee communication tool or channel*. It was

also framed as a *new channel requiring employee training or guidance*. A minority of websites depicted a *powerful connection between internal communication and social media*.

 Disconnection. Most agencies do not make the connection on their websites between internal communication and social media. Of those that do, most minimize the connection. A small handful of agency websites portray a significant connection between the two and urges organizations to use social media as part of their internal communication functions or to include internal stakeholders in their understanding of social media. The findings and frames within them are provided next.

 Social media: Just another (mostly external) tool. More than two-thirds of public relations agency websites do not represent a connection between internal communication and social media. Even though many agency websites include references to social or digital media's influence on the way that organizations communicate, internal communication is not explicitly mentioned in relation to it. Instead, social media are mostly framed as useful for communicating with external audiences. For example, Catalyst states, "Consumers today create their own content, break news and generate buzz all on their own using digital platforms, often without the help or influence of the media. Therefore, it is critical that each brand have a clear, focused digital strategy to engage and influence consumers directly."

 For those agency websites that reference a relationship between internal communication and social media, most frame these media as 1) additional tools or channels through which to send messages to employees or 2) new tools or channels that require additional employee training or guidance. Few agencies list intranets, blogs, websites, portals, and wikis as tools under service offerings for internal audiences. For example, Chandler Chicco frames digital media offerings as tools to facilitate internal communication. Some agency websites recognize employees as a social media audience; however, employees are lumped into one group, without recognizing differences between employee types or individuals. While some agencies within this category promote social media's ability to increase "executive visibility" and "thought leadership," the executive internal stakeholder is juxtaposed with references to social media tools or services that can be used to communicate to employees as internal stakeholders.

 Organizations like Bliss Integrated Communication offer a service to create social media policies to "protect" employees. Other organizations like FleishmanHillard offer social media training "to equip leadership, stakeholders and employees with an understanding of social media, from policy to activation to measurement." Establishing policies also helps organizations monitor what their employees are saying about the organization as unofficial spokespersons. Furthermore, tools are offered to accompany the social media policies to manage online conversations, like Maccabee that offers an online measurement tool to monitor online media and how employees are talking about the organization.

 Powerful connection. A minority of agency websites frame internal communication and social media's connection as powerful and important. These agencies urge organizations to harness social media's power to maximize internal communication effectiveness by engaging employees to improve their performance. For example, Hill & Knowlton recognizes how digital technologies create a complex and challenging business environment. Their services combine "both traditional and digital communications strategies into a single platform to increase the impact of a company's efforts."

 APCO Worldwide's social media services include a proprietary model designed to improve bottom-line results including recruiting, retaining and engaging employees, fostering

collaboration, enhancing productivity and innovation, breaking down silos and improving executive visibility. Other companies like Atomic see digital as a way to engage employees and consider engagement to be part of "wowing" employees. Bliss Integrated Communication also strives to engage employees through the use of blogs and rich digital content. Gibbs & Soell also sees the 24/7 availability of digital information as a way to engage and collaborate with employees. As MSLGroup states, digital and social media provide "ways to engage people in understanding and delivering the brand experience you promise."

Discussion

The current top-down, bottom-line portrayal of internal communication on most public relations agency websites and its disconnection from social media provide ample opportunities to expand the current frame.

Challenging the Top-Down, Bottom-Line Reality

A handful of firms represent the *possibilities* of a robust effective internal communication program that prioritizes and engages with a diverse set of internal stakeholders, including using social media to dialogue with those stakeholders. However, the *reality* of internal communication practice today is framed as absent, minimalized or marginalized. When referenced, internal communication is generally framed as employee communication and specifically, management-centric communication to non-management personnel in a hierarchical, command-and-control approach.

The communication programs, strategies, and tactics are framed as valuable because they align employees to organizational leaders' preferred brand and culture and improve non-management employees' performance in order to manage and protect the organization's brand, reputation and financial outcomes. These purposes align with previous research findings on internal communication uses and values (e.g., Dolphin, 2005; White et al., 2010). Change management (Lies, 2012), crisis management (Johansen et al., 2012) and the connection to labor conflicts (Ortiz & Ford, 2009; Stein, 2006) are also connected to internal communication.

Practice has not yet evolved beyond what McKie and Willis (2012) pointed out was the dominant focus of employees as assets and threats to the organization's financial bottom line. Meng and Pan (2012) suggest that organizations would benefit from assessment strategies that include nonfinancial indicators, including fostering multiple dialogs and approaches to drive effectiveness. Yet, this study shows that is not how current practice frames internal communication. Scholars may need to continue to demonstrate effective measures for how employee engagement may influence organizational effectiveness (Mishra et al., 2014).

Need for a Wider View

The dominant frame also runs counter to calls for a broader view of internal communication's dimensions and stakeholders (Welch & Jackson, 2007) and recommendations to recognize internal stakeholders' perceptions, needs and voices as critical to organizational effectiveness (Cameron & McCollum, 1993; Ruck & Welch, 2012). Most agency websites in this study still represent employees as a monolithic audience, ignoring the complexities associated with segmenting and understanding diverse internal stakeholders and meeting their needs (L'Etang, 2005).

Researchers and practitioners should continue to expand their understanding of internal communication (e.g., Welch & Jackson, 2007). For example, internal stakeholders could be segmented based on relevant links to the organizations or factors such as language, longevity with the organization, role or other factors relevant to the organization, recognizing that each audience may require specialized communication. Employees could also be viewed beyond the commercial value chain that currently dominates the picture of non-management personnel as assets to leverage (McKie & Willis, 2012).

In addition to non-mangement employees, the websites also frame management as monolithic, with leaders operating with one voice to represent one brand, culture, and position on behalf of the organization. Line managers and supervisors are not distinguished, despite that they may influence corporate messages based on their own opinions or understandings (Ortiz & Ford, 2009; Welch & Jackson, 2007).

Bridging the Social Media Disconnect

The devaluing of internal stakeholder perceptions and voices also applies to social media. Scholars have suggested organizations should utilize digital resources to engage with internal stakeholders (e.g., Huang et al. 2013; Ruck & Welch, 2012), yet many agency websites in this study do not describe social media's internal engagement potential. While organizations may state that social media allow stakeholders to communicate more widely about a brand, the websites mostly reference external voices like consumers and the media.

Employees are viewed as needing social media policies, guidance, training and monitoring. Such top-down control of voice can weaken employee engagement via social media, because management appears more focused on achieving alignment than co-creating meaning and strategy with employees (Huang et al., 2013). Social media allow multiple voices to speak on behalf of organizations (Gilpin, 2010; Kelleher, 2009), yet with few exceptions, there is a lack of recognition or positive view of a distributed public relations model (Kelleher, 2009) in which public relations outcomes can be achieved through a range of members communicating interactively and representing an organization. Throughout websites, organizations are still framed as univocal rather than multivocal (Huang et al., 2013). Metaphorically, organizations are still portrayed as having one microphone and one message, with one spokesperson at the podium facing external stakeholders.

A small list of agencies bridge the disconnect between internal communication and social media and offer to help organizations maximize internal communication effectiveness by engaging employees online. While firms like APCO Worldwide still offer the external visibility and bottom-line benefits of its internal social media model, including employee recruitment and retention, it also includes fostering collaboration, enhancing productivity and innovation, and breaking down silos.

Strengths and Limitations

This study contributes an in-depth understanding of how leading public relations agency websites frame internal communication's values and connection with social media. As such it answers calls for research expanding the theoretical and practical understanding of this understudied public relations function (e.g., Kim & Rhee, 2011; Mishra et al., 2014; Vercic et al., 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007). The study supports some previous research while expanding

current understandings such as how agencies mostly fail to connect internal communication with social media.

The study also has limitations. Agency personnel, practice and values may differ from what an agency website depicts. As such, the study only looks at how websites frame internal communication – not agency practitioners' opinions or values. Future research can build on the study's findings through interviews and survey data regarding agency and organizational communicators' perceptions regarding internal communication. The sample is limited in its focus on agencies with major U.S. operations and English language websites, though it does include companies with offices in multiple countries. Future studies should see if similar findings hold true when looking at agency websites in other countries and those written in other languages.

Conclusion

The handful of agency websites that urge organizations to engage more diverse internal stakeholders and understand their worldviews represents the possibilities of internal communication. To get there, though, in-house and agency practitioners may need additional internal communication training and education (Mishra et al., 2014; Welch, 2013). The frames found in this study minimize internal communication's value and its connections to social media. The picture that emerges is one that shows culture, brand and reputation as uniform static products coming from executives down the metaphorical assembly line into the waiting hands of employees who then deliver the boxed, sealed brand to waiting customers.

This study does not advocate that internal stakeholders can or should be entirely removed from the commercial value chain that sees them as one-way audiences, assets and brand delivery mechanisms. However, in order to improve organizational effectiveness, practitioners and researchers must move beyond that limited portrayal of internal communication aimed at "aligning" an employee with the employer. Internal communication can also help employers engage multiple internal voices in order to foster dialogue and input (McKie & Willis, 2012; Meng & Pan, 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007). Such an approach would require an expanded employee-centric view of internal communication and stakeholders (Ruck & Welch, 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007), including social media's role in employee engagement and corporate identity and culture (Huang et al., 2013; Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2014).

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Appendix: *Coding Sheet Excerpt*

Agency	Date	Minutes on Site	Agency Type (as described on site)	Organization's Self-Description	Internal Communication Practice Area	Relevant Pages	Internal Comm Depictions	Related Terms or Topics	Audiences	Mentions social/digital	Frame Summary	Memo Blurb	City	State	Size/ 2012 F Staff Info
A	3/15/2014	10	Consumer Brands	"If you're a consumer brand marketer looking for a PR partner who shares your vision and passion for being the very best, for constantly innovating and growing your audience, we'd love to hear from you." Also has offices in San Francisco and Washington, D.C., and is a partner in PROI, the largest partnership of independent PR firms globally.	No	None	No	Spokespers on Identificati on & Training	All external - consumer audiences, brand target audience, media	360 Crowd digital and social media invisible		Internal communication is completely absent and invisible	X	Y	30 Not provide
B	3/4/2014	45	Full-service PR, communication agency	"Full-service Communications move their businesses forward. Headquartered in New York with an office in Los Angeles." Corporate Communications, Government Affairs, Government Relations and Crisis Communications; Public Relations, Reputation Management, CSR, Sustainability Communications; Public Communications; Corporate Communication	Corporate Communication	Yes - Internal Communications, Corporate communications page under Corporate Communication	Internal communications (employees, board members, vendors and clients)		External and internal social/digital page - externally focused	Has a social/digital page - communication is not framed as connected to social/digital.	BJ understands internal communication needs as well." Internal communication is not connected to social/digital. [Agency B] doesn't provide outward public communications, and other critical issues management: "Just financial news to crisis PR situations, buyouts, new business scenarios, organizations need as companies and	communications, [Agency B] Sees as sensitive - doesn't connect social media to internal communication.	X	Y	92 Not provide
C	3/4/2014	25	Communications Firm	Full-Service Integrated Marketing Communications Firm. "Our clients know that a creative concept and delivery method alone are not enough; they rely upon us to develop and implement strategic plans that make sure their messages resonate with the targeted audiences and motivate desired behavior. As a Top 100 PR firm (as ranked by the Council of PR Firms), [Agency C] brings thirty years of marketing and communications experience to help clients create awareness, generate demand, and build credibility while meeting specific and actionable business goals."	Yes	Digital Strategies; Public Relations practice area includes bullets: spokespers on and speaker training; Research & communications; Consulting	Yes - bullet for "internal digital policy development" under Digital Strategies; Public relations practice area includes bullets: "workplace communications," "executive communications," "spokesperson and speaker training;" team building	Internal Digital Policy Development; executive communication; workplace communications; spokesperson and speaker training	Consumers, Customers, Media, Key Stakeholders - No explicit mention of internal audiences/employees but did include externally focused "workplace communications," though it contains a bullet for "executive communications," "Internal Digital Policy Development"	Digital strategy practice area - but communication is separate from executive training for external communication or "workplace communications" and separate "Executive communications," Internal Digital Policy Development	Internal communication as "workplace communication" that is how orgs use digital internally - control lens; first mention of "workplace communications" and separate "Executive communications"	Included in the Digital Strategies - interesting focus on "policy" for internally - control lens; separate "workplace communications" and separate "Executive communications"	X	Y	13 Not provide