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## **Examining Modern Media Relations: An Exploratory Study of the Effect of Twitter on the Public Relations – Journalist Relationship.**

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### **Abstract**

Media relations is one of the most common functions of the modern public relations. This study examines the impact of emerging media technologies on that function, and seeks to understand how public relations practitioners and journalists are using Twitter in both their personal work and in the relationship with the other profession

### **Introduction**

Media relations is a vital function for both public relations practitioners and journalists in the creation and dissemination of news that is important and relevant to the public. Although an antagonistic relationship between the two professions appears to remain, advances in technology are changing the practices of modern media relations. Most notably, the relatively recent emergence of social media could have a profound impact on future relationships between journalists and public relations practitioners. Twitter, unique from other social media in that it is primarily an information-sharing site rather than a social network, could have perhaps the most profound implications for media relations practice. Both journalists and public relations

practitioners use Twitter professionally, but little research has been done on how it is used as a component of the media relations process.

The rate at which technology has progressed over the last two decades has outdated many of the studies that have sought to examine the effects of technology on media relations. This study represents an exploratory step in generating information on modern media relations and the impact of social media, specifically Twitter, on that process.

While the overall impact of social media on the media relations process cannot be fully explicated in the course of a single study, it is the hope of the authors that this empirical investigation will provide cues for future research into the role that emerging technologies are beginning to play in the relationship between practitioners and journalists. Using similar methodology that has been employed in previous research on media relations (Aronoff, 1975; Kopenhaver, Martinson & Ryan, 1984; Supa & Zoch, 2009) and a grounded theory approach, the goal of this study is to contribute to the growing number of studies that explore the impact of social media on public relations practice.

### **Literature Review**

The importance of media relations in public relations has been explored by researchers for many years. Harmon (1965) found that 86 percent of public relations practitioners engaged in media relations. Adams (1995) found that 70 percent of CEO's named media relations as the most important qualification for communication specialists. A recent study of public relations practitioners revealed that media relations was considered the main function of public relations practitioners by more than 60 percent of respondents (Darnowski, DiStaso, Fussell-Sisco & McCorkindale, 2013).

Clearly, media relations has been identified as an important aspect of the public relations process. As Grabowski (1992) explains, "you must have a medium through which to deliver your message. And you must know how to employ that medium" (p.37). Public relations

campaigns often center on media relations and the interaction of practitioners and journalists, because the media can garner the most attention and create the largest effects for an organization. The core of the public relations profession is media relations, and most campaigns hinge on their success (Desiere & Sha, 2007).

### Journalist-Practitioner Relationship & Agenda Building

Media relations has been defined as the “systematic, planned, purposeful and mutually beneficial relationship between journalists in the mass media and public relations practitioners” (Supa & Zoch, 2009). The importance of media relations for practitioners is derived from multiple perspectives, but the role of agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) is integral to understanding the role of media relations.

Agenda-setting deals with the media’s impact on the public. Practitioners use information subsidies (Gandy, 1982) to aid in setting the media agenda, leading to the process of agenda-building. McCombs (2004) explains that agenda-building is important because “control of the media agenda implies significant influence on the public agenda” (p.104). The opportunity to influence the media agenda is the primary reason for the importance of media relations.

The use of information subsidies is the foundation of the relationship between the practitioner and the journalist, who work together in the formation of news content. Fortunato (2000) explains the relationship:

In this triangular relationship among public relations, mass media, and the audience, the mass media have power in two critical dimensions: (1) the power to potentially influence the public as studied in mass media effects research and (2) the power to perform a gate keeping function through processes of selecting and framing issues that will be exposed to an audience. (para.2)

The power of the journalists as gatekeepers of information is not lost on public relations practitioners.

Journalists use public relations-supplied information subsidies today more than ever before (Pincus, Rimmer, Rayfield & Cropp, 1993). Practitioners have the potential to serve as the most influential sources for mass media news by supplying information subsidies to journalists (Shin & Cameron, 2003). In fact, use of subsidies has become so routine that journalists take it for granted that the news is created by sorting through the public relations-supplied information each day (Zhang & Cameron, 2003).

Multiple studies have explored the modern relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists (Adams, 2002; Aronoff, 1975; Dansker, Wilcox & van Tubergen, 1980; DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Janowitz, 1975; Jeffers, 1975; Kopenhaver, Martinson & Ryan, 1984; Pincus, Rimmer, Rayfield & Cropp, 1993; Ryan & Martinson, 1988; Sachsman, 1976, Samsup Jo, 2003; Spicer, 1993; Supa & Zoch, 2009; Turk, 1986). The findings reveal that journalists still hold negative perceptions of public relations for a variety of reasons, while public relations professionals believe their role in the relationship is of equal value to journalists, and generally view their relationships as positive.

It is important to note that practitioners engage in media relations with the assumption that they are on the same level of journalists and extremely influential in the creation of news. In fact, Sallot, Steinfatt and Salwen (1998) found that practitioners perceived a much greater view of public relations' influence on media agenda setting than journalists. This is undoubtedly reflective of each individual practitioner's successes in placing information subsidies, while journalists view this information as often unwanted. Ultimately, practitioners have maintained the view that the two professions collaborate efficiently and work well together (Supa, 2008). Meanwhile, journalists perceive an overall lack of credibility within the public relations industry and in individual practitioners, which may influence their relationships with practitioners and ultimately the possibility of a successful relationship. Journalists may sometimes rely on information subsidies from practitioners but mistrust the power that public relations exerts in the flow of information, as journalists are conscious of their role as defenders in the formation of

public knowledge (Shin & Cameron, 2003b). This lack of trust affects media relations campaigns, making it less likely a public relations practitioner is able to place information to impact the public agenda.

### Impact of Technology

The modern practice of media relations is transforming with the emergence and use of new media technologies, which aid in the professional relationships among practitioners and journalists. Bleecker and Lento (1982) explained that technology transforms the way we send, receive and process information. Today, “new media” have become a worldwide phenomenon and a major focus in academic research within the field of communication (Xianhong & Guilan, 2009).

Media relations has incurred a fundamental shift with the emergence of the Internet, changing the way practitioners and journalists interact. Public relations practitioners must accept that traditional forms of media relations, such as crafting an information subsidy and sending them to journalists, are becoming outdated and putting practitioners out of touch with the journalists, who are looking for effective relationships being built over time through valued information exchange (Supa, 2008). An increasing number of practitioners are acknowledging that traditional media relations is losing dominance in public relations; therefore, scholars, educators and practitioners must explore the new era of media relations (Waters, Tindall & Morton, 2010).

Ultimately, practitioners and journalists are able to utilize new technology to enhance both professions and achieve mutual goals. Kirat (2007) best explains the new online relationship, stating,

There is a common denominator between online journalism and online public relations, both need each other and both use news, reports and data from each other. Online journalism needs and uses online public relations. Public relations departments use online newspapers and publications to monitor the organization’s corporate image, news coverage and public opinion. (para.4)

Practitioners and journalists perceive that online media has enhanced the source-reporter relationship inherent in all interactions (Shin & Cameron, 2003b). The Internet has developed and promoted media relations for practitioners and journalists (Kirat, 2007). However, the Internet holds a vast array of possibilities yet to be explored by professionals in both fields. Callison (2003) asserts that the Internet “has the potential to be a key public relations tool but is not currently being used to its full potential in media relations” (para.11). As the Internet (and its users) has matured, the interconnectivity of the public has become seamless using new resources such as social media, which hold the potential to drastically impact the media relations landscape.

### Social Media

Social media, or online social networking sites, have been heralded as groundbreaking interactions which will allow for networked communication to occur instantaneously (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser & Howes, 2009). Social media describes online practices the use technology by enabling people to share content, opinions, experiences, insights and media themselves (Lariscy, et al, 2009). These social media sites encourage two-way symmetrical communication among its participants. This approach to social media allows public relations practitioners to reach and interact with multiple publics and stakeholders, ultimately opening the possibility for mutually beneficial relationships (Berger & Dong-Jin, 2003).

Most social media sites offer news, information and story ideas; therefore, practitioners may use them as a media relations resource, which may increase their perceived expertise in the eyes of journalists (Diga & Kelleher, 2009). More often now, journalists are experimenting with social media to collect sources and story ideas, which means public relations practitioners need to engage those journalists on those platforms (Waters, Tindall & Morton, 2010). The future of online media relations is currently unclear; however, for practitioners and journalists, identifying the most appropriate and useful social media is pivotal in their attempts to provide information to the public.

### Potential of Twitter

The budding influence of Twitter is extremely valuable to public relations practitioners and journalists to fulfilling the basic functions of their professions. Twitter's primary function as a nano-blogging site is self-assertion and also the ability to give "voice" of one's ideas regarding a specific issue, establishing the possibility for relationship foundation that is inherent in any social media network (Xifrau & Grau, 2010). However, Twitter is unique among social media, as Smith (2010) explains,

Twitter is more than a message engine – it is a platform for social connection and promotion. Interactivity is a driving force of Twitter use, and involvement seems dependent on technological facilitation (functional interactivity) and interdependent messaging (contingent interactivity). (para. 29)

Twitter is fundamentally centered on the relationships between users and how they fill needs for each other's benefit. The interactivity of users lends Twitter to stronger relationship-building than other social media.

Journalists have tapped Twitter to help fulfill their professional responsibilities by creating profiles and sending out tweets to their audiences (Stassen, 2010). Twitter can be a serious aid for journalists, acting as a living, breathing tip sheet of facts, news sources and story ideas (Farhi, 2009). Successful journalists are using Twitter to enhance their ability to engage and interact with the public. As an organization, Twitter has recognized its usefulness to the journalism profession, and in the summer of 2011, released "Twitter for Journalists: A Best Practices Guide." Twitter is being used to not only distribute information to the public, but as a source in creating the news, both of which public relations practitioners need to pay particular attention.

Practitioners must realize how Twitter is being used by journalists, and how they can reach organizational goals by interacting with journalists and the public to create the coveted mutually beneficial relationships. However, little academic research has been done on how public relations practitioners are using (or not using) Twitter to establish or maintain

relationships with journalists. Because Twitter is a dynamic environment for user interaction (Smith, 2010), and because it provides an opportunity to interact with not only journalists, but the public directly, understanding how this unique form of social media is being used currently for media relations should be of paramount importance to public relations practitioners and researchers.

### Research Questions

Supa (2008) stated that “no matter the direction public relations or the media take, the rise of new media technologies and the continued dominance of the Internet, media relations will continue to play a major role in the practice of public relations” (p.3). This study attempts to address one of those new technologies, Twitter, and both the current role and potential for the platform in the media relations process. Thus, the following research questions are posed.

RQ1) Have public relations practitioners or journalists’ attitudes changed toward the other profession in relation to previous studies?

RQ2) Are practitioners and journalists using Twitter in their work? And, if so, RQ2b) how often are they using the site in relation to traditional functions?

RQ3) Are practitioners and journalists interacting on Twitter to perform media relations?

### **Methodology**

This study held three main purposes: the first, to identify current trends in the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists; the second, to compare the current state of the relationship with past studies; and finally, to examine the effects of Twitter on the media relations relationship.

A survey was used to assess individuals’ attitudes toward the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists and the impact of Twitter on that relationship. This is consistent with previous studies (Aronoff, 1975, Kopenhaver, Martinson & Ryan, 1984, Supa & Zoch, 2009) that also examined the relationships between the two professions. The sample

of public relations practitioners and journalists was constructed and purposive, in order to attempt to represent the variety of practitioners in a Midwestern state. Journalists were identified, and contact information was collected through Cision Point software, while public relations practitioners were identified and contact information was gathered via a Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) directory. A total sample size of 340 journalists and 291 public relations practitioners was used in this study.

A web-based instrument was used, and three total contacts with each potential respondent were employed. The first contact included an initial email with information about the study. The link to the survey was sent six days later, and a single follow-up email was sent two weeks following. While previous studies had used mail survey as the delivery method (Kopenhaver, Martinson, & Ryan, 1984; Supa & Zoch, 2009), this study used a web-based instrument in part to expedite responses, and also to determine if there was a greater viability in one delivery method versus another.

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 7 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) on a series of 18 statements regarding the public relations-journalist relationship, which were taken from previous studies that sought to examine media relations (Aronoff, 1975; Kopenhaver, Martinson & Ryan, 1984; Supa & Zoch, 2009). Using the same Likert scale, respondents were then asked to respond to 18 statements regarding their use of Twitter and the impact it has on media relations.

A total of 631(340 journalists, 291 practitioners) potential respondents were contacted. Of those that completed the survey, 48 (42%) were journalists and 66 (57%) practiced public relations, totaling 114 responses. The response rate for the survey was 18% (journalist response rate, 14%; practitioner response rate, 22.6%). While the total number of responses was fairly low, the response rate was deemed acceptable for a web-administered survey. The number of responses prevents generalizability; however, the authors feel that there are

sufficient numbers to reflect how journalists and public relations practitioners feel about both media relations and the role of Twitter in the relationship in the Midwestern state.

## Results

### Study Demographics

Of the 66 responses from public relations practitioners, 50 (75.7%) indicated they held a managerial role in their organization. Eighteen (37.5%) journalists stated their current role had managerial responsibilities. There were 45 (68%) public relations practitioners who had worked professionally as journalists at some point in their career, but only 8 (16.6%) journalists who indicated professional experience in public relations. The average number of years of experience for all respondents was 16.72, with a range of 34.

### Study Findings

Table 1 shows the results of the 20 statements used to gauge the current state of the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists for the respondents in this study. The tests for significance indicated the level of agreement within each profession.

The findings of the current study are on par with results reported by previous research (Kopenhaver, Martinson & Ryan, 1984; Supa & Zoch, 2009) that have used these statements. In fact, there were no significant differences between respondents in this study and those from previous studies. Therefore, the answer to RQ1 (*Have public relations practitioners or journalists' attitudes changed toward the other profession in relation to previous studies?*) is shown to be negative. Journalists and public relations practitioners continue to be divergent on their opinion of the relationship between the professions, yet within each profession, answers have a high level of consistency.

**Table 1 – Journalists and Practitioners Relationship Views**

	Journ Mean	PR Mean	p≤
Public relations practitioners and journalists are partners in the dissemination of information	4.46	5.86	.000
Public relations practitioners too frequently insist on promoting products, services and other activities which do not legitimately deserve promotion	5.37	4.36	.002
Public relations is a profession equal in status to journalism	3.58	5.86	.000
Public relations practitioners often act as obstructionists, keeping journalists from the people they really should be seeing	4.5	2.56	.000
The abundance of free and easily obtainable information provided by public relations practitioners has caused an increase in the quality of journalism	3.4	4.14	.022
Public relations material is usually publicity disguised as news	5.15	3.71	.000
The public relations practitioner does work for the newspaper that would otherwise go undone	3.69	4.89	.000
Public relations practitioners too often try to deceive journalists by attaching too much importance to a trivial, uneventful happening	4.54	3.06	.000
Public relations practitioners serve as an extension to the newspaper staff	2.35	4.05	.000
Public relations practitioners are people of good sense, good will and good moral character	4.6	5.83	.000
Public relations practitioners understand such journalistic problems as meeting deadlines, attracting reader interest and making the best use of space	4.48	6.33	.000
Public relations practitioners are trustworthy	4.27	5.97	.000
Public relations practitioners and journalists carry on a running battle	3.67	3.7	.918
Public relations practitioners help journalists obtain accurate, complete and timely news	4.65	6.15	.000
Public relations practitioners are necessary for news production	3.52	5.2	.000
Public relations practitioners are pests to journalists	3.54	3.08	.095
Public relations practitioners typically issue news releases or statements on matters of genuine news value and public interest	4.0	5.67	.000
The prime function of public relations is to get free advertising space for the companies they represent	4.98	2.48	.000

Table 2 represents respondents' answers on using Twitter at work, and how the platform impacts the relationship between practitioners and journalists.

**Table 2 – Journalist – Practitioner Twitter Results**

	Journ Mean	PR Mean	p≤
I use Twitter to fulfill my daily responsibilities at work	3.04	4.09	.013
I use Twitter at work for at least thirty minutes each day	2.42	3.15	.080
Actively using Twitter is significant for my profession	3.98	4.83	.040
Twitter is valuable in the dissemination of news	4.71	5.64	.003
Twitter enables journalists to report on breaking news more efficiently	5.08	5.5	.141
My profession benefits from Twitter	4.9	5.59	.015
Twitter makes my specific position easier	3.4	3.83	.206
I use Twitter to engage public relations practitioners or journalists	2.52	4.38	.000
I prefer to be contacted by public relations practitioners or journalists on Twitter rather than email	1.60	1.95	.109
Public relations practitioners and journalists utilize Twitter to share information in order to create news	4.02	4.94	.001
I plan to begin/continue engaging public relations practitioners or journalists on Twitter to aid media relations efforts	3.12	5.06	.000
Twitter is a primary method for contacting public relations practitioners or journalists	2.19	2.76	.062
My interactions with public relations practitioners or journalists on Twitter have been mostly positive	4.0	4.98	.000
Public relations practitioners or journalists I interact with on Twitter are more trustworthy than those I only email	3.19	3.08	.680
Public relations practitioners and journalists collaborating on Twitter is beneficial for both professions	4.1	5.53	.000
Twitter makes media relations more efficient	3.88	4.47	.050
I prefer to interact with public relations practitioners or journalists on Twitter	2.19	2.5	.278
More developed and substantial relationships are formed by public relations practitioners and journalists that use Twitter, along with other methods, to contact one another	3.02	4.02	.003

Research questions 2, 2b and 3 were concerned with how Twitter is being used by both professions, how Twitter is becoming increasingly important in the media relations process, and how much time is being spent on Twitter to perform work tasks. The data here indicates that respondents in this study find value in Twitter as a platform, but are not using it as part of their work day for a significant amount of time. Respondents also indicate that Twitter is not a preferred method of communication with the other profession.

*RQ2: Are practitioners and journalists using Twitter in their work?* Respondents indicated differing perspectives when asked about Twitter's impact on the journalism and public relations professions, as compared to actually using the platform in their work. Respondents agreed that interaction via Twitter benefits both professions, and that each profession overall benefits from Twitter. However, respondents in this study disagreed with the statement that they use Twitter in their daily work, and disagreed even more with the statement that they use Twitter at least thirty minutes for work. This seems to indicate that while journalists and practitioners recognize the potential value of Twitter, they are not currently fully engaged with the communication platform.

Question 2b: *how often are they using the site in relation to traditional functions*, further addresses this lack of engagement with the platform. Respondents indicated a high level of disagreement as far as preferring to interact with members of the other profession on Twitter. The level of disagreement grew when asked if they preferred Twitter over email as a communication method. However, both journalists and practitioners moderately agreed that the interactions they had with members of the other profession had been mostly positive. Respondents also agreed that the two professions use Twitter to share information in order to produce news. Again, it becomes clear that members of both professions recognize the value of Twitter as part of the media relations process; however, there seems to be a lack of adoption thus far, at least with the respondents in the current study.

The third research question asked, *are practitioners and journalists interacting on Twitter to perform media relations?* At least for the respondents in this study, they are not. However, public relations practitioners agreed that they planned on using Twitter in the future to engage journalists. Practitioners also indicated they felt Twitter has the ability to make media relations more efficient, though to a small degree. Journalists did not seem to indicate a readiness to engage with practitioners via Twitter, and were fairly neutral on statements that indicate the potential for interaction with practitioners.

Overall, both journalists and practitioners seem to indicate that Twitter has the potential to be beneficial to both professions, that Twitter has the ability to increase quality and speed of information sharing, and that collaborating via Twitter has potential benefits in the media relations relationship. But it seems that actual use of Twitter for both individual work and media relations purposes is not occurring. In fact, journalists in this study indicate that Twitter may not be a welcome mode of communication from public relations practitioners, and did not agree that more substantial relationships with practitioners could be formed by adding Twitter as a communication vehicle.

### **Discussion**

Before any conclusions are drawn based on the current study, there are several factors that must be addressed regarding the sample. First of all, because of the relatively small sample, any attempt to generalize the results would be impossible. Secondly, since the sample was drawn from a Midwestern state, adoption of emerging technologies in media relations may be different than adoption in other parts of the country. Therefore, the conclusions drawn here are only representative of the respondents in the current study, and the authors recommend further study is necessary to determine whether the findings in this study are in fact reflective of a larger population.

#### Relationship Between Journalists and Practitioners

The findings here indicate little change in the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists over the past 28 years. The results of this study were not significantly different than the findings of studies done in 1984 and 2008 (Kopenhaver, Martinson & Ryan, 1984; Supa & Zoch, 2009). Although this not be necessarily surprising, it does show that the growth of social media over the last few years hasnot apparently had a major impact on media relations. This may be due to a lack of adoption of new platforms in media relations efforts, or a lack of understanding as to how best to implement the new platforms in an information-sharing setting. However, as Supa and Zoch (2009) pointed out,

other factors such as; a tradition of mistrust, lack of education about the others profession and questionable past practices by public relations practitioners, may still have the greatest impact on the state of the relationship between the two professions.

The authors of this study suggest that the adoption of emerging media technologies may in fact aid the media relations process, even if the respondents in this study are not yet fully engaged with those platforms. The results indicate that the respondents do feel that Twitter holds potential for improving both professions, and that the dissemination of news can be enhanced. Therefore, the authors conclude that emerging technologies will play a role in the media relations process. The success or failure of that role will lie primarily with the public relations practitioner, as they most often initiate the media relations relationship (Supa & Zoch, 2009). When engaging journalists via new platforms, though, practitioners will need to ensure that they use established best practices in media relations (Howard & Matthews, 2006; Kopenhaver, Martinson & Ryan, 1984; Supa & Zoch, 2009), and only engage journalists who are willing to interact via those platforms.

#### Impact of Twitter on Media Relations

The respondents in this study did not indicate they were using Twitter as a substantial part of their work day. However, the benefits of Twitter as an information-sharing platform were clearly recognized as important for both journalism and public relations. The authors postulate that public relations practitioners and journalists have not yet worked out how to use the medium in order to engage with each other. It is possible that as adoption of the medium grows within each profession, there will be an increase in the amount of interaction between the professions.

Public relations practitioners and journalists are currently using Twitter to directly provide information to their audiences, i.e., the public at large. For this reason, Twitter is an excellent platform for both professions and increases the viability of the message to targeted groups. In the future, it is possible that public relations practitioners and journalists will use Twitter to

communicate more often with each other, as some research has shown is already occurring (Waters, Tindall & Morton, 2010), and may change the information flow, making the journalist the initiator of the relationship. In fact, some journalists clearly announce on their Twitter accounts that they are looking for story ideas (Supa & Zoch, 2012). These changes may increase even more as Twitter is adopted as a regular part of the media relations relationship.

### Conclusions

For the respondents in this study, the impact of emerging technologies, particularly Twitter, have not had a major impact on the media relations relationship thus far. Over time, this may change, and the authors recommend future research should continue to evaluate the effect of Twitter on media relations. Multiple methods are recommended, including survey, content analysis and depth interviews in order to best understand the impact of not only Twitter, but other emerging technologies as well. Future research might also examine the impact of virtual media relations versus traditional media relations, particularly with regard to source credibility and message adoption. In this way, we might better understand best practices for emerging technologies within media relations.

While this study cannot be generalized beyond the scope of the respondents, it does serve as an exploratory attempt to understand the direct implications of emerging media and new message platforms on media relations. It is the goal of the researchers to expand this research, and ultimately understand how technologies such as Twitter can advance the relationship between practitioners and journalists. In the end, understanding how practitioners can more effectively practice media relations benefits the profession, and may begin to change the journalists' perceptions of the relationship between the professions.

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