

**Monitoring Public Opinion in Cyberspace:  
How Corporate Public Relations Is Facing the Challenge**

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*As publics and journalists increasingly turn to social media as sources of information and consumer commentary, the importance of practitioners' monitoring their organizations' presence on social media will continue to increase. As a domain where publics have unrestrained voice, social media present interesting challenges to practitioners monitoring organizational reputation. Through survey interviews with practitioners at Fortune 500 and 1000s, this study explores current trends in social media management, use, monitoring, and importance in public relations departments at the nation's leading corporations. Findings reveal a large gap in use and perceived importance between practitioners and a slow awakening among even non-users reticent to adopt as they realize its potential value. Further, new directions for research and practice on use of social media for issues management are revealed.*

Social media and personal online networks have revolutionized how the world instantaneously communicates. Web-tracking company Technorati reported almost two years ago there were 59.8 million blogs alone on the Internet, and 175,000 new bloggers visited a blog for the first time every day (Santora, 2006). Since that report, the numbers have grown. Two years later, the number of blogs worldwide had more than doubled to 184 million (Santora, 2006); in the US alone

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there are 26 million. Further, in 2008, there were 77 million first-time visitors to a blog.

It is not known how many corporations sponsor blogs, although evidence of corporate involvement with blogs and other social media is increasing (scmTechnology, 2007 a, b; McCarron, 2007; Griffin, 2006; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Orr, 2004; LaVallee, 2007). In perhaps the largest study of corporations and blogs to that time (Backbone Media, 2005) respondents perceived the highest values attained from blogging to the organization to be quick publishing, thought leadership, building community, sales and online public relations. The largest expressed concern was the time needed to devote to the blog followed by legal liability concerns. The dominant industries utilizing blogs included software, technology, marketing, consumer-goods and manufacturing (Backbone Media, 2005).

In the same way that publics have come to expect an organization of any size to host a Web site, similar expectations may be on the rise with respect to organizations' presence in social media. Given clear evidence above of the rapid adoption of social media in corporate and personal contexts, public relations practitioners can't ignore the importance of the valuable tools social media avail. Technological intimidation will not excuse failure to employ social media tools as publics move beyond Web sites into more interactive online tools such as blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook. Given the unrestrained voice social media grant publics, practitioners will also face mounting pressure to monitor their organizations' presence online to keep their fingers on the pulse of public opinion and engage in "virtual environmental spanning." Just as practitioners can't ignore activist voices that may reach the tipping point, social media demand a new form of surveillance and monitoring on behalf of organizations, particularly given that tools such as blogs may be a vital source of information for journalists (Lariscy, Avery, & Sohn, 2007). This study seeks to investigate how, if at all, corporations are responding to that pressure as well as how they engage and value social media tools in their work.

Social media describe the online practices that utilize technology and enable people to share content, opinions, experiences, insights and media themselves. Some require registration and are password protected (ie., Facebook, MySpace) while others are open to anyone (most blogs, many video and photograph sharing sites). YouTube shows thousands of video clips daily, including both homemade clips and clips from television and movies. Some of those videos are so catchy they quickly become a pervasive viral marketing tool for corporations, illustrating the powerful and unrestrained voice social media grant citizens. NBC News (2007) reported that there were 133 million visits to YouTube in January in 2007 alone. Anyone can upload any clip to the site, where it becomes public and searchable, another example of the far-reaching voice of publics via social media that may pose serious threats for organizational reputation. For example, an Internet video surfaced in 2004 demonstrating how

easily Kryptonite locks, which cyclists depended on to protect their bikes for years, could be picked with nothing more than a Bic pen (Reuters, 2004). When Kryptonite failed to respond bloggers angrily attacked until the company finally agreed to replace the locks, costing the parent firm tens of millions of dollars (Reuters, 2004).

Clearly, communication technology tools such as blogs and social network sites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace) represent an emergent area of personal publishing, where pedestrian consumers (i.e., non-media) are able to post potentially influential commentary (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005) and connect with others. Like-minded voices find one another through simple word searches, and what may have previously been an isolated opinion or incident becomes a force with potential to have a large impact on public opinion itself. Consider illustrations of Sony admitting to launching a fake blog (Marketing Vox, 2006), video footage of a Dell laptop bursting into flames at an international conference, and Wal Mart's fake blog. A Google search for "Dell laptop in flames" yielded 323,000 results and "Wal Mart fake blog" returned more than a million (*Business Week*, 2007).

As rapidly as social media are entering corporate America, it is not surprising that documentation of their extent of use, particularly with regard to public relations, purposes and return on investment is slow in materializing. As we began this research, there primarily existed individual case studies and anecdotal reports of individual corporate blogs that provided useful insights for corporations interested in sponsoring blogs or devoting time and resources to other social media. Indeed, Kelleher and Miller (2006) found that a corporate blog can put a human face on an organization and build relationships with publics, and Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) found that blogging through a crisis can decrease public perception that the corporation is in crisis. Several corporations are setting examples of the power of blogs; General Motors' "fast lane" blog has been written about and positively reviewed by several sources ([prfirms.org](http://prfirms.org) ; [fastlane.gmblogs.com](http://fastlane.gmblogs.com) ; [blogwrite.blogs.com](http://blogwrite.blogs.com) ; [intuitive.com/blog](http://intuitive.com/blog)). Maytag, Microsoft and IBM were among six case studies detailed by Backbone (2005); Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) winning case studies showcased corporate uses of new media (see i.e., Coca-Cola Company "Blog Blast '06").

Slightly more common in the literature are surveys of individuals and students in professional organizations that were largely designed to assess users' acceptance of, perceived expertise in, and concerns about credibility of, new media technology. Notable among these is one sponsored by PRSA itself ([www.prcsearch.prso.org/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.d11](http://www.prcsearch.prso.org/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.d11)). A series of surveys did much to illuminate adoption of and perception of blogs. Porter and colleagues (Porter et al., 2007) found that public relations practitioners were using blogs to advance their power in the workplace. Furthermore, Porter et al. (2007) revealed three different uses for blogs among practitioners: routine information and research, interactive blog communication, and issues identification. Sweetser,

Porter, Chung, and Kim (2008) found that while practitioners and journalists think blogs are important professional tools, they do not assign a high level of credibility to them. Chung, Kim, Trammell, and Porter (2007) revealed that both journalism educators and professionals recognized the importance of adopting blogs for newsgathering purposes, but journalists actually used blogs more often than their professorial counterparts. These studies of individual professionals in public relations and related fields provide important insight into issues of training, workforce ethical standards and practices, and analyses of how technology is shaping public relations and all communication practices.

It is apparent to many who study public opinion, public relations and communication that information received from a blog or other social media site should not automatically be accepted as credible information, and a survey of public relations practitioners and journalists concurs (Sweetser et al., 2008). Beyond what those in the industry think of blogs, we must consider what the public thinks of blogs. Johnson and Kaye (2004) found that blog users rate blogs to be the number one “most credible source” of information (higher than traditional media such as TV or newspapers), but a national phone survey found a much lower assessment of credibility among the general American population (Banning & Trammell, 2006). Research on credibility deserves attention for several reasons, including: (1) rapid growth of blogs, from about 30,000 in 1998 to more than 3 million in 2004 (Amis, 2002; Pew, 2004) to 26 million in the U.S. in 2008 (eMarketer, 2008); (2) blog influence exceeds their readership (Pew, 2004); and (3) the growing acceptability of blogs by traditional journalists as story sources and for story ideas (Rosenberg, 2003; Lariscy, Avery, & Sohn, 2006).

That final point served as the second major impetus for the current study. One early assessment of reporters across topical beats reported that 28 percent of reporters admitted to using blogs to find story ideas and 16 percent used them to locate sources (Nail, 2006). Another survey reported that more than half of journalists were using blogs for the same reasons (Euro RSCG Magnet, 2005). In their survey of journalism educators and professionals, Chung et al. (2007) found that use of blogs for generating story ideas was the second most important component of the “surveillance and research factor.” It went without saying for us that, if journalists are being taught to turn to blogs for information and consistently monitor social media in order to break scandals, public relations practitioners should also actively monitor online conversations about their organizations. Thus, it was pressing to explore how practitioners at some of the nation’s largest corporations are responding to that charge through internal or external resources; the results of this investigation will not only make prescriptions for practitioners’ at smaller organizations based on what their larger counterparts are doing but also reveal the “state of the art” of social media use and surveillance.

### Study Overview

Based on this information and rationale, this study examined opinions of public relations persons in Fortune 500 (plus some Fortune 1000) companies who either manage their companies' presence in social media or make decisions related to use of the tools social media avails. The following research questions guided the data gathering:

- 1) What are the most common titles of departments, titles of practitioners, and sizes of departments?
  - 1a) Is social media monitoring/management an internal department or external agency function?
  - 1b) Who in the department monitors social media reports?
- 2) What is the extent of use of a number of social media tools?
  - 2a) Which tool is used most frequently?
  - 2b) How do they evaluate the importance of each of the social media tools?
- 3) What are the use objectives of social media for corporate practitioners in the study?
  - 3a) How are various social media tools being used to supplement or replace traditional media/story placement?
- 4) How, if at all, do the corporate respondents in the study view social media as changing how they practice public relations?

This study helps fill a gap in existing literature and makes an important contribution for practitioners, analysts and scholars alike.

## **METHODS**

Important first steps included receiving Institutional Review Board approval for conducting research with human subjects. A university research review board approved the instrument, population identified from which interviewees would be recruited, and study overview. The interview instrument was pre-tested with local public relations practitioners who were ineligible to participate. The instrument included open-ended question items ("what is the title of your department?") as well as numerous scaled items (agree/disagree on a 5 point scale, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree"). Participant recruitment (including mail and telephone contacts) occurred over a period of two months; times for interviews were arranged. Once a participant was located and his/her cooperation obtained, standard quality control procedures were implemented. All surveys were conducted by a university Survey Research Center (SRC). Interviewers attended two, three-hour training sessions on the survey instruments and were informed on standard procedures of telephone interviewing and the purpose of the study. After an in-depth explanation of the instrument, interviewers conducted two practice sessions. Interviews were conducted with a CATI (computer assisted telephone interview) system that automatically recorded and coded all interview data. This process eliminates most human coding error potential. SRC supervisors monitored interviewers in progress for quality control.

We began with a complete list of Fortune 500 companies and their public relations (or other department name designation) contacts. Mailed participant recruitment letters invited 1000 corporate public relations persons to participate. Letters indicated the potential participant could expect a call for interview on a certain date and time. Names were primarily obtained from corporate Web sites, directories and annual reports. If these individuals either did not respond or failed to be accessible at the designated time, screening calls were conducted to locate the appropriate individual and department within each organization. Great care was taken in these participant recruitment calls to ensure that we were speaking with a person who was highly knowledgeable about the organization’s use of online communication. After initial contact our callers said:

“First, I need to confirm that you are highly familiar with your corporate communication/public relations department’s uses of and policies related to online Internet communication?” If yes, the interview continued. If no: “can you please tell me who in the department would be best for us to speak with? We are seeking to know how corporate communications/public relations monitors/uses online vehicles—not the corporation as a whole entity, or other departments, such as marketing.”

Having exhausted the Fortune 500 list and not completed 200 interviews, individual researchers on the team made personal contacts to some of the corporations that had initially refused where a researcher knew an individual public relations person; this yielded 35 additional interviews. After exhausting the original 500 list, some corporations were selected from the Fortune 1000 list. Every corporation contacted had a minimum of 1000 employees, and the majority are Fortune 500 companies.

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Survey Effort:**  
**PSRA Practitioner Survey**

|                                  | n          | % Category   |
|----------------------------------|------------|--------------|
| <b><i>Known Eligibility:</i></b> |            |              |
| Completed Interviews             | 201        | 22.8         |
| Partial Interview                | 0          | 0.0          |
| Refusal to Participate           | 599        | 68.0         |
| Callbacks Not Completed          | 81         | 9.2          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                     | <b>881</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

Known eligibility means the person indicated s/he is the appropriate person within the department to complete the interview.

Almost 23% of qualified practitioners who were contacted completed the interview, which is a strong response rate for this difficult-to-reach target population. A number of potential respondents (of the 599 refused) indicated that corporate policies prohibited them from participating.

## RESULTS

The first research question asked for descriptions of titles and size of departments, titles of practitioners, and determination of whether monitoring and/or managing social media was an internal function to the department or if it was outsourced. Several of these were asked in open-ended format.

O'Dwyer's PR Services Report, cited in public relations textbooks like *Public Relations Today* (Cameron, Wilcox, Reber, & Shin, 2008, p.92) reported that in Fortune 500 companies *corporate communications* or *communications* outnumber *public relations* by almost four to one. In response to: "What is the exact title of your department?", our findings are consistent with O'Dwyer's, as *corporate communication* or *communication* was reported by 77 (38%) of our respondents and *public relations* by 22 (10.9%). One interesting variation on the O'Dwyer Report in this study, however, is a wider range of department titles, many of which reflect new media functions. In this study, each of the following was mentioned by at least several respondents: *media relations, global media, public affairs, marketing or marketing and communication, corporate affairs, investor relations* and some combinations of those titles. Of special interest, however, are the following, which were reported as the department titles by between one and five respondents each: *Internet and corporate communication, IT communication, Web communication, interactive marketing, digital media, e-commerce, and e-business communication.*

In response to the second open-ended question asked, "And what is your title/position within this department?", "*director*" was the largest single response at 33 (16.4%), followed by "*manager*" (n=23, 11.4%), and "*vice-president*" or other executive title by 16 (.08%). As with department titles, position titles were also highly varied and include "*senior specialist in external communication,*" "*senior specialist,*" "*spokesman,*" "*Web content coordinator,*" "*senior producer of Web communications,*" and "*principle strategist for online communications.*"

The final open-ended item asked the size of respondents' departments. Practitioners in this sample worked in departments with between 1 and 400 people, and the average was 15. About 90% of the sample worked with approximately 30 colleagues.

Practitioners were asked whether or not they use an external agency to monitor social media for things said about their companies online. About 34% of the sample (69 practitioners) indicated they use an external agency for such monitoring. Regarding frequency of receipt of those reports from the agency, 9

practitioners (4.5% of the overall sample) receive them monthly, and 13 practitioners (6.5% of the sample) receive them weekly. 45 practitioners indicated that they receive them on a different basis but did not specify. With regard to policies that provide guidelines for reading the reports, 43 practitioners (21.4%) indicated they do not have a policy while 22 practitioners (10.9%) do.

Almost half of the sample (45.3%) replied that their companies have internal departments to monitor what is being said about them online. When asked what percentage of budget was devoted to monitoring and using social media, of the 64 responses the most frequent reply was 1%. Practitioners were also asked the average amount of time allocated per day to social media; about one-quarter of the overall sample (24.9%) indicated that they spend about 1 hour per day. Five percent of the overall sample devoted 2 hours per day; two respondents indicated they spend 8-10 hours per day using and monitoring social media. When asked if their departments maintain social media Web sites, 39 practitioners answered yes (19.4%) and 138 (68.7%) answered no. With respect to maintaining those sites, 14 of the sites had outsourced maintenance and 16 were maintained by another department.

When asked who (what position) analyzes social media reports upon receipt the following answers were provided. Most frequently, someone other than the vice president, director, manager, assistant manager, or coordinator analyzed the reports.

**Table 2**  
**Who Analyzes the Reports?**

| <b>Position</b>          | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percent</b> |
|--------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Vice President or Higher | 13               | 6.5            |
| Director                 | 15               | 7.5            |
| Manager                  | 16               | 8              |
| Assistant Manager        | 2                | 1              |
| Coordinator              | 1                | .5             |
| Other                    | 19               | 9.5            |

The second research question explored the extent of use and perceived importance of a series of social media tools. Participants indicated whether or not their department used the tool and, if so, how important it was on a scale of 1-5 with 1 meaning not at all important and 5 indicating of greatest importance. Results of these questions are summarized in Table 3 below. A majority (n=153; 76%) of departments have adopted at least one social media tool. Clearly, the blog is the most frequently used tool (45%) employed. Photo sharing (42.8%) and video sharing (42.3%) are also highly used tools. The evaluations of importance of social media tools are mixed; social/new media releases score

moderately well compared to others, as do photo sharing and blogs; none of these tools were ranked as particularly important, though.

**Table 3**  
**Use and Importance of Social Media Tools**

| <b>Tool</b>     | <b>Percent Who Use <i>n</i>(%)</b> | <b>Importance Score</b>   |
|-----------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Blogs           | 91 (45%)                           | 1= 9 (4.5%)<br>2= 21 (10.4%)<br>3= 29 (14.4%)<br>4= 19 (9.5%)<br>5= 13 (6.5%) |
| Podcasting      | 63 (31.3%)                         | 1= 13 (6.5%)<br>2= 13 (6.5%)<br>3= 24 (11.9%)<br>4= 7 (3.5%)<br>5= 6 (3.0%)   |
| Video Sharing   | 85 (42.3%)                         | 1= 6 (3%)<br>2= 15 (7.5%)<br>3= 29 (14.4%)<br>4= 21 (10.4%)<br>5= 14 (7%)     |
| Text Messaging  | 58 (28.9%)                         | 1= 7 (3.5%)<br>2= 13 (6.5%)<br>3= 16 (8%)<br>4= 15 (7.5%)<br>5= 7 (3.5%)      |
| Social Networks | 45 (22.4%)                         | 1= 6 (3%)<br>2= 8 (4%)<br>3= 18 (9%)<br>4= 5 (2.5%)<br>5= 8 (4%)              |
| Photo Sharing   | 86 (42.8%)                         | 1= 7 (3.5%)<br>2= 7 (3.5%)<br>3= 33 (16.4%)<br>4= 17 (8.5%)<br>5= 22 (10.9%)  |
| Wikis           | 45 (22.4%)                         | 1= 10 (5%)<br>2= 11 (5.5%)<br>3= 12 (6%)                                      |

|                          |            |   |
|--------------------------|------------|---|
|                          |            | 4= 7 (3.5%)<br>5= 5 (2.5%)  |
| Virtual Worlds/Gaming    | 10 (5%)    | 1= 2 (1%)<br>2= 3 (1.5%)<br>3= 2 (1%)<br>4= 2 (1%)<br>5= 1 (.5%)    |
| Social Bookmarking       | 31 (15.4%) | 1= 7 (3.5%)<br>2= 7 (3.5%)<br>3= 6 (3%)<br>4= 7 (3.5%)<br>5= 4 (2%) |
| Social/New Media Release | 56 (27.9%) | 1= 2 (1%)<br>2= 8 (4%)<br>3= 16 (8%)<br>4= 18 (9%)<br>5= 11 (5.5%)  |

The third research question explores the purposes or functions social media fill within the departments. Functions of social media were named, and practitioners indicated if their departments use social media a great deal, some, or not at all. Results of this inquiry are presented in Table 4. The five functions reporting the highest numbers when combining “a great deal” and “some” include, in order of frequency: research (n=142), collect objective information (n=112), establish relationships (n=107), track competition (n=103) and place stories (n=88). The least-named function was represent the public (n=174), followed by entertainment (n=165) and determine opinion (n=132).

**Table 4**  
**Functions of Social Media**

| <b>Function</b>         | <b>A Great Deal (#)</b> | <b>Some (#)</b> | <b>Not At All (#)</b> |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Surveillance            | 24                      | 29              | 107                   |
| Entertainment           | 8                       | 20              | 165                   |
| Establish Relationships | 31                      | 76              | 86                    |
| Track Competition       | 32                      | 71              | 89                    |
| Place Stories           | 27                      | 61              | 102                   |
| Counter Neg. Story      | 12                      | 65              | 113                   |
| Research                | 50                      | 92              | 50                    |
| Collect Obj. Info.      | 28                      | 84              | 80                    |

|                       |    |    |     |
|-----------------------|----|----|-----|
| Interpret Information | 20 | 57 | 113 |
| Represent the Public  | 3  | 12 | 174 |
| Determine Opinion     | 12 | 49 | 132 |
| Focus Attn. on Issue  | 22 | 64 | 105 |

Since we had a particular interest in exploring how, if at all, social media were changing traditional media relations/story placement processes (RQ3a), practitioners were asked if there were online sites their departments use (other than company ones) to get a story out such as industry chat rooms. About 35% of the sample (70 people) indicated they used online sites to release stories. 152 practitioners (75.6% of the total sample) indicated they do not ever refer to reporters to sites that are not their own in order to have a story attributed to someone beyond their departments. However, more than half the sample (58.7%) indicated that they had found stories online about their companies that were not true. When asked what they did in that scenario, the majority indicated they would “try to set the record straight,” either by contacting the source, issuing an online statement, or communicating to internal audiences about it. These respondents believed the most important response to that erroneous information was to reassure their own employees and stakeholders that the story was not true.

The fourth research question explores respondents’ perceptions of how social media may be changing their practice of public relations—how they see social media being used. Practitioners were read several statements and asked whether they strongly agreed (SA), agreed (A), neither agreed nor disagreed (N), disagreed (D), or strongly disagreed (SD) with each one. The six statements receiving the highest numbers of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses are presented in Table 5.

**Nature and Use of Social Media<sup>1</sup>**

| <b>Statement</b>   | <b>SA<br/>n, %</b> | <b>A<br/>n, %</b> | <b>N<br/>n, %</b> | <b>D<br/>n, %</b> | <b>SD<br/>n, %</b> |
|--|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Social media are changing how your department practices public relations.                              | 39, 19%            | 64, 32%           | 30, 15%           | 42, 21%           | 17, 9%             |
| Social media must be monitored daily for rumors or other negative information about your organization. | 39, 19%            | 60, 30%           | 32, 16%           | 48, 24%           | 14, 7%             |
| Monitoring social media is as important for practitioners as   | 27, 13%            | 77, 28%           | 33, 16%           | 47, 23%           | 10, 5%             |

<sup>1</sup> This is a partial list of the “most agreed with statements.” A complete list is available through the PRSA Foundation report..

|  |          |         |         |         |        |
|--|----------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| monitoring more traditional media, such as newspapers and television.                            |          |         |         |         |        |
| Social media represent a new way for your organization to interact with your publics.            | 47, 23 % | 89, 44% | 22, 11% | 27, 13% | 5, 3%  |
| Your organization has the knowledge needed to use social media.                                  | 21, 10%  | 89, 44% | 30, 15% | 41, 20% | 9, 5%  |
| Using social media has enhanced your department's ability to identify and track emerging issues. | 24, 12%  | 80, 40% | 31, 15% | 43, 21% | 11, 6% |

As evidenced in Table 5, fully 67% (n=136) of respondents regard social media as a new way to interact with publics. A majority of respondents (n=110) believe they and their organizations' possess adequate knowledge to use social media. Tied with 104 each are that social media "enhanced your department's ability to identify and track emerging issues" and that "monitoring social media is as important as monitoring traditional media." The fifth most agreed with statement (n=103) is that "social media are changing how your department practices public relations."

## DISCUSSION

Several summary observations emerge from an overview of these findings. First, and of great importance, there is a huge gap in corporate America's public relations departments on familiarity with, use of, and perceived value of *all* social media. It seems that somewhat less than half of departments in the Fortune 500s + are highly sophisticated regarding a variety of types of social media. Further, and not surprising, those that are most sophisticated with social media value them more highly. There is also, however, a large component who show little-to-no sophistication with any social media—some, by their answers to open-ended items particularly, reveal that they are uncertain what social media really are.

We suspect, but can't confirm, that age and technology-sophistication play into these responses. As more young practitioners with very high social media sophistication and knowledge enter these departments, they will bring these skills with them. The outsourcing of monitoring may lessen as this occurs. Social media currently seem, from respondents in this study, to be more the province of public relations than marketing or advertising. As public relations educators who recognize, from this research and other studies cited, the largely untapped value social media can bring to a department, we hope this trend continues.

A second theme that emerged from this study is that while there is a huge technological divide, the non-users are recognizing, even if in some cases slowly, the value and importance of incorporating social media into their media mix. Representative of this contention, in response to the question “[Does] your crisis communication plan include procedures for using social media to communicate to your publics?”, one public relations director said: “not now but it will!”

In terms of use of various social media tools, blogs (45%) were most used, followed by video sharing (42%) and photo sharing (42.8%). Interesting, however, is that as a whole our respondents appear largely “uncertain” about the importance of these tools. Again, there is evidence of a divide---those who use them and are sophisticated with them certainly recognize their value. This further suggests an awakening to the importance of all social media in our nation’s largest corporations.

One of the most striking findings resulted from the question, “What are the most important functions of social media?” With 225 indicating “highest importance,” the response “getting attention focused on an issue” dominated. This is interesting given that an issues focus had not been previously revealed. What this tells us is that they may or may not *use* social media for this function, but the practitioners recognize its tremendous potential in issues monitoring and management.

One finding we think has much value is how practitioners value social media as an outlet for news releases—they see this as a very fast, efficient way to get their message conveyed. They also recognize its value in crisis management and relationship building. Actually, by a slight edge, practitioners view social media as most valuable for initiating and maintaining relationship over monitoring the environment. The reality that social media are a close-to-ideal forum in which to do both is slowly being realized by corporate public relations practitioners.

This value for releasing stories is also seen in practitioners’ use of industry chat rooms. A third (35%) of practitioners in this study have released news in a chat room. Additionally, almost 60% report having found inaccurate information about their organization in an online chatroom. This is strong evidence of the importance of monitoring the environment alone! Further, given their statements about what they do when this occurs (correct it in the same venue, contact the writer, inform employees, etc) it is apparent that promptness is important. No organization wants a rumor or inaccurate statement to remain unchecked in an industry chatroom. Previous case studies have found that such peer-to-peer discussion can quickly turn a manageable issue into a crisis. This is another argument for the importance of public relations departments maintaining control of the monitoring function.

Some of the most interesting findings resulted from respondents' perceptions of the nature and use of social media. The largest number of respondents, 67%, either "strongly agree" or "agree" that "social media are a new way for you to interact with your publics." 51% "strongly agree" or "agree" that social media "are changing how your department practices public relations." Also more than half (54%) "strongly agree" or "agree" that their departments possess the necessary knowledge and skills to use social media, and 44% believe that the highest persons in their corporations are supportive of their efforts to do so. More than half (52%) feel strongly or agree that social media represent an important new way for them to track emerging issues. These are strong statements of endorsement for using social media.

Findings from this study support existence of a technological divide in corporate America. They also, however, support growing perception of value and importance of social media tools. It does seem that the more they are exposed, even through interviews like this one, the more they realize the potential value social media could add to their public relations functions in multiple areas.

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