

Debate - Social media has helped put the public back into public relations: two way conversations and content sharing have replaced one-way publicity driven communications and media manipulation.

For the motion

First of all, social media and the internet in general has transformed and reshaped the way we communicate, and therefore, the way PR practitioners and organisations handle their relationship with their publics. According to an infographics created by Mylife.com, roughly 1 in 5 users aged 18 to 34 spends 6 hours or more per day on social media, which is a lot compared to the time spent on traditional media like television, radio or print. It is not surprising to see that today, more and more organisations create accounts or pages on social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter, the most used, to keep in touch with their audience and provide a platform for the public to express themselves. Social media has also changed the way organisations evaluate and monitor the public's opinion and reactions. According to the European Communication Monitor of 2013, 89% of respondents believed that the under-30 digital native generation was more interactive and 60% of organisations said they were using specific communication strategies for different generations. This shows that organisations and their PR teams have embraced social media and are trying to make the most out of it to enhance their relationship with their publics. In an article from July 2010, Holly Potter illustrates this effort when she says that *'while social media is an important extension of our earned media efforts, greater value may actually result from the relationships we are developing online: relationships with influencers, relationships with consumers and relationships with employees. Participating in social media lets us develop a deeper connection with these audiences, who ultimately drive word-of-mouth marketing.'*

The second point is that social media provides a very useful new tool for PR practitioners and that it has extended their skills set. Entire campaigns are now conducted online and on social media platforms, which is a way for PR teams to engage with the audience more easily and monitor the impact of the campaign in real time. 46% of respondents to the ECM report declared they had implemented this tool in their organisation. Furthermore, almost every single job offer in PR today asks for applicants to be able to use various social media channels and to be tech-savvy. Some even asks for applicants to have a real online presence to prove they can deal with what social media has to offer. According to the Youtube channel FunkyMarketingTV, more than 65,000 job offers that require social media skills were posted online in October 2012 (+73% year-over-year growth). Politicians are now using social media to spread their messages and engage directly with the voters, which increases involvement and gives them more authenticity and credibility than through traditional media. As an example, Barack Obama has proven how social media is now essential in politics when his 'Four more year' picture got more than 700,000 retweets in a few hours in 2012.

This leads to my third argument which is that organisations and the public can now share information, content, opinions without intermediaries, which provides more transparency and better communication. In their book **Online Public Relations**, Phillips and Young (2009) declare that 'almost all definitions of public relations agree that at some level it is a discipline concerned with an exchange of information.' Social media is a two-way communication tool, that helps practitioners implement Grunig's two-way symmetric model in which '*practitioners serve as mediators between organisations and their publics*' (p22). According to the infographics of Mylife.com, 50% of people learn about breaking news on social media and 65% of traditional media reporters use Facebook or LinkedIn for story research (52% use Twitter). A striking example of the power of social media is how Twitter and Youtube users reported the July 2012 Aurora shooting before news crews could get to the scene. The Red Cross even urged witnesses to tell their families they were safe through social media platforms. Organisations can now be in direct contact with their customers and many of them even use Twitter as an after-sale service where the audience can ask questions and react to what the organisation does very quickly. Social media has become a huge platform for people to connect, share ideas and opinions and reach the organisations much more quickly than they used to. The audience is now as much a content publisher and creator as the traditional media is.

Thus, my last argument is that social media has definitely empowered the audience and has balanced the debate. According to the ECM report, 51% of respondents consider bloggers as relevant gatekeepers for the organisation, 53% consider it's consumers and 58% consider it's digital active employees. If we look at fashion PR for example, the industry has given bloggers and new media editors a much bigger place through the past few years and they are now considered as powerful and influential as traditional media editors. Even the allmighty Anna Wintour is now sitting on the second row to let her colleague from Vogue.com review the show from the front row. If we take television shows and entertainment shows, the Youtube channel FunkyMarketingTV reports in a video that 25% of internet consumers use social media to discuss what they're watching in real time. In 2011, Facebook was the platform that protesters and activists used the most to connect the people all around their country and initiate political change that led to the Arab Spring. All of these examples illustrates how social media has empowered the audience and helped organisations connect with their stakeholders and strengthen these connections. Internet has forced organisations to reconsider the way they were communicating with the public and social media has pushed the need for transparency even further. Social media provides a new tool for practitioners and is just as useful for the public to engage in a two-way communication model.

References :

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