

The Use of Digital Environments in Public Relations Activities

Rasha Alyaqoub ¹, and Nik Adzrieman Abdul Rahman ²

¹ Faculty of Mass Communication, University of Petra, Amman, Jordan

² University Utara Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur Campus, Malaysia

rasha.alyaqoub@uop.edu.jo

adzrieman@uum.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The increasing role of public relations (PR) in the organizations is the result of the dynamic social media tools that permit participation and provide reliable and continuous access to the information. Thus, scholars have been paid more attention to online PR practices to keep pace with this social media concerning PR. Given the phenomenon, this study intends to explore the utilization of online public relations from the perspective of public relations practitioners in Jordanian universities. Through qualitative research, the approach was used, which consists of conducting and analyzing in-depth face-to-face interviews with 23 PR managers from public and private Jordanian universities based on a purposive sampling technique. The output of interviews was transcribed after each interview, and then the content analysis was used via thematic data analysis with the assistance of NVivo 12 software. Findings show that online PR was used in multifaceted ways in terms of how online PR activities were utilized in Jordanian universities. Among the usages were publishing and broadcasting, communication channel, and an events platform for students and the public.

Keywords: *Online PR; Social Media; Utilization; Jordanian Universities; PR practitioners.*

INTRODUCTION

Aronson, Spetner and Ames (2010) argued that PR today is considered to be one of the most vital communication tools for companies, organizations, countries and product marketers because all compete creating, enhancing, and projecting positive public images. Effective PR writing remains at the heart of agile and innovative marketing that technology and traditional PR tools have made it possible to communicate with customers, to expand audiences, and to reach target audiences. Blogs, E-mail, digital newsletters, live conference calls, search engines, podcasts, viral marketing, and websites are just a few of the tools now available to PR professionals (Aronson, Spetner & Ames, 2010).

In an applied communication discipline and management function, information and communication technologies (ICT) greatly affect PR (Zerfaß, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven, & Moreno, 2014). This relationship with new ICT began in the mid-1990s, and, as technology evolved, Internet technology has significantly impacted PR practices (Verčič, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2015; Ye & Ki, 2012). One study that discovered the use of Internet practitioners in this early period the study was that of Gustafson and Thomsen (1996) who determined that practitioners would begin spending additional time online with clients and media audiences within a short time and that practitioners would also begin to count more on databases and information services (Gustafson & Thomsen, 1996). Furthermore, Rayan (1999) noted that, according to a survey of PRSA members, many used the Internet to monitor government activities. Indeed, the Internet has been described as a way to put great power and reach into the hands of practitioners (Ryan, 1999).

Online PR serves several functions. Online PR can be a method to create media relations, to issue media releases electronically and to generate publicity using several corporate online communication technologies (Du Plessis, 2005). Also, online PR may provide unique ways of promoting an organization and its products or services and enhancing visibility in a virtual environment (Petrovici, 2014). Furthermore, online PR can support the general goals of PR and help to balance long-term relationships between and among an organization and its target groups (Fischer, 2006, as cited in Petrovici, 2014).

Generally, a PR practitioner utilizes online PR because the Internet is valuable to people, and PR is a competitive field (Petrovici, 2014). Moreover, a PR practitioner who does not communicate effectively with online communities can no longer shape or maintain the desired public image effectively. While PR specialists had virtually no competition in the traditional media era, the democracy of the Internet has forced these specialists to compete with the entire world.

Digital Environment

Furthermore, by means of online PR, the audience can interact with an organization and receive an immediate response. Thus, the Internet makes mutually and effective advantageous communication possible. Knowing the audience and the lower costs associated with the Internet are other noteworthy advantages that can create a difference. In addition, other relevant advantages of the utilization of online PR include message accuracy and precision (Petrovici, 2014). Nonetheless, little empirical data exists on how PR practitioners are utilizing online PR and how this utilization is influencing PR practices. Several case studies have suggested that reasonable bases for concern exist because some organizations are trying to engage in public communication in the Web 2.0 environment utilizing one-way information transmission and a control paradigm of communication reminiscent of the characteristics of mass media and Web 1.0 (Macnamara, 2010). Furthermore, in some instances, case studies in Australia have shown that social media and social networks are adopting either inappropriate or unethical practices. Conversely, other case studies have shown that organizations are engaging with their stakeholders in new and productive ways by using interactive social networks and social media (Macnamara, 2010).

UNDERPINNING THEORY

Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Model

Effective PR models are crucial for organizations to stay competitive and thrive in the digital landscape. Because, it's builds and maintain a positive reputation and help organizations to connect with their target audience and build long-term relationships. By creating messaging that aligns with their mission, values, (Kent, 2013). PR models help businesses to stay current and responsive to changes, allowing them to pivot and adjust their strategies as needed. Contextually, Higher education institutions prioritize effective PR models will be better positioned to succeed in the competitive online space. As a result, Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed four main models of PR for communication between organizations and their stakeholders/publics. These models are namely; the press agency, public information models, which are both based on one-way dissemination of information, the two-way asymmetrical model, which focuses on organizational efforts to change public, and the two-way symmetrical model of PR, which focuses on a balanced relationship between an organization and its publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huan, & Lyra, 1995).

Generally, the four-model describes how PR can be effectively and ethically practiced by offering a normative theory in the two-way symmetrical model. Mixed- motive PR combines the two-way symmetrical model and the two-way asymmetrical model (Parveen, Jaafar & Ainin, 2015). Therefore, the two-way symmetrical model for communication maintains both the best interests of organizations and its publics in the fairest and balanced way possible. Through the utilization of this model, both an organization and its publics can collaborate to both grow and strengthen an organization, leading it to greater success (Kirat, 2016). Culturally speaking, two-way symmetrical communication is linked to the notion that power is distributed equally between groups, which is an oversimplification given the diversities of culture and organizations across the globe (Gregory & Halff, 2013). The Arabic culture of Jordan is one of those diverse cultures, and this study helped determine how Grunig's model can be adopted and adapted to meets the values and norms of that society. In addition to helping to benchmark the spread of professional knowledge among PR practitioners at Jordanian universities and give guidance on what must be done in the future to improve practices (Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017).

This model is characterized as the ideal form of PR. It describes an equivalence scale of communication rarely found in real life, in which each party is willing to alter its behavior to accommodate the other party's needs. While a monologue-style communication distinguishes other models, the symmetric model encompasses a dialogue. In this model, an organization's management exchanges view with stakeholders, possibly influencing both management and its publics to adjust their attitudes and behaviors. Thus, communication in this model is entirely reciprocal, and the power relationships are balanced. The appellations of the sender and receiver are inapplicable in this communication process because the intention is mutual understanding (Windahl et al., 1992). Grunig and others have argued that this model is the most ethical because the model creates equality of exchange and is the foundation of excellence in PR. Nonetheless, others have criticized this logic, arguing that a PR practitioner is never disinterested. An employer or client always exists, and because organizations rarely act against their own best interests, the communication remains asymmetrical (Theaker, 2013). Thus, these arguments align with the current research. By using the two-way symmetrical model, this study was able to understand and explore the experiences of PR officers in the universities while using social media in their work. this is because there is a need exists to develop a framework to guide practices for the PR community at large and PR practitioners at Jordanian

universities precisely so that they can take full usefulness of the affordances of new technology-based communications.

Problem Statement

The problem especially in Jordan is that the PR practice, as all Arab world still suffers from misconceptions and misunderstandings online Public Relations (Badran, 2014; Elkarhili, 2014; Kirat, 2016). Moreover, PR functions and activities concentrate on guest relations, protocol, receptions, liaising with the media, brochures, and publications (Kirat, 2005). In Jordan, the practice and role remnants have remained very low (Alyaqoub & Abdul Rahman, 2018). They are not seen as vital PR, and agencies have not effectively introduced PR policies into the society compared to PR integration worldwide (Nasereddin, QaQish, & İrvan 2015). The profession is seen as being focused on publicity and press agency role at the expense of strategic planning, research, and evaluation and organizations still use online PR without clear objectives (Alyaqoub & Alsharairi, 2020), without a clear strategic vision and a clear plan of action (Kirat, 2005). Additionally, the lack of technical skills often poses a barrier taking full advantage of online PR (Adel, 2020 ;Badran, 2014; Elkarhili, 2014; Kirat, 2016).

Moreover, no evidence exists that the PR practitioners are using online PR to build relationships based on a two-way communication or that the two-way approach is even understood in Arab countries and Jordan (Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017), even though many Arab countries including Jordan have witnessed a technological revolution, especially after the Arab Spring in 2011 (Rabindranath & Kapil, 2015). The use of social media in the Arab world is increasingly expanding as it is becoming less localized and has many youthful users, particularly in Jordan (Arab Social Media Report, 2017). The younger generations have had their foundation years of growing up with the appearance of new media technologies. They have become so participatory and vocal, very fully connected, and are capable of communicating and acquiring and sharing information efficiently (Ahmad et al., 2015). Consequently, this study intends to understand how public relations practitioners utilize the online PR tools in their practices, especially that no study explains how the online PR utilized in Jordanian universities.

This study came as a response to researchers' calls to conduct more studies to explore the utilization of online PR in different regions in the world, especially in developing countries. Also, much of the PR literature concerning the Internet focuses on adoption rates and the perceptions of PR practitioners, while an understanding of how organizations use social media in their PR practices is limited (Robson, 2013). Despite the popularity of social media studies related to PR, Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) noted that significant gaps remain in the knowledge related to how organizations are using social media and how these valuable new communication channels either can or should be utilized in the context of PR (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Also, scant empirical research exists that applies PR theories to organizational social media use, and best practice suggestions are often provided based on existing theoretical principles or industry case studies without any relevant empirical research for support (Robson, 2013).

Based on the earlier explained, this study sought to answer the following main question:

How are online PR activities utilized in Jordanian universities?

METHOD

The in-depth interview technique was selected as a semi-structured interview to provide an opportunity to explore issues in detail and to uncover ideas or experiences that were not anticipated at the outset.

The sample of the study was purposely chosen and included all public relations managers in Jordanian universities, justified for the following reasons. First, the total number of Jordanian public and private universities is 31, which means that the study sample is the same as the study population. Thus, the population available for study is limited, comprises a specialized group, and is a group of particular interest. So, to ensure a higher rate of response, all 31 PR managers were contacted. Second, this study concerned 31 PR departments at 31 universities in Jordan who have the requisite expertise to answer the research question appropriately. Lastly, other studies have used a similar number of respondents to interview. For example, Lee, Sha, Dozier, and Sargent (2015), who examined the role of new PR practitioners as social media experts with a qualitative design, used 20 PR professionals.

Twenty-two managers of the population frame of 31 were interviewed based on the saturation point. This methodology allowed the researcher to obtain comprehensive perceptions and analyse the question to which this current study sought answers.

Jordan has ten public universities established between 1962 and 2005 and 21 private universities established between 1990 and 2015. These universities are spread across the main cities of Jordan (the North: Irbid, Ramtha, Mafraq, Jerash and Ajloun, the South: Karak, Tafila, Madaba, Aqaba, and Ma'an and the Middle Amman, Balqa, Zarqa). Table 1 shows the universities, the year they were established, the year the PR department was established, and the number of practitioners employed.

DATA ANALYSIS DESIGN

Indeed, NVivo 12, assists researchers in carrying out this type of research by offering easy-to-use tools for organization and analysis of such data. The use of NVivo to manage data allows for an increased focus on ways of examining the meaning of what is recorded. Also, a computer's capacity for matching, linking, recording, and sorting can be utilized for assistance in answering research questions from the data gathered without losing access to the source data or the contexts from which the data have been derived (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Wong (2008) argued that the analysis of qualitative data via software has made the process easier and leads to more professional results. Indeed, the software substantially reduced the number of manual tasks and provided a researcher with more time to notice tendencies, recognize themes, and derive conclusions. Moreover, NVivo is ideal for researchers working in a team because the software facilitates the combining of individual work in a project (Wong, 2008)

DISCUSSION

Diversified utilizations of online PR were found among PR practitioners in Jordanian universities. These usages were classified into three groups: publishing and broadcasting, communication channel, and an events platform. Publishing and broadcasting is for students and the public. The communication channel is comprised of internal and external communication. The events platform included university events like conferences, academic workshops, examinations, and semester breaks. Public events included service to the community and promotion of university programmes. The interviewed informants found that online PR using social media and websites as an essential events platform to publish university

news and events regarding the dates of examinations, student's registration dates, reporting the holiday's dates, university achievements, and other activities that interest students directly.

They also found that other essential functions were responding to misinformation and rumors about the university and marking the achievements of the university. Among these were announcing conferences, meetings, public events, workshops, and accomplishments of the university. As a communication channel, online PR was found to serve internal and external public. Informants remarked that software like WhatsApp made internal communication fast, widespread, and easy. By using this software, they could remain in contact with internal audiences and spread information to all departments. Additionally, Facebook helped in spreading details of important events like graduation and pertinent deadlines.

These PR professionals uses modern technology to communicate with external audiences, as well. Aided by platforms like social media, they could announce events and attract students from all across the Gulf. Though they might use YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram, they more often used Facebook because of its spread. Some found that Facebook was essential in communicating with those who did not know much about the university but wanted to know more. The latter group often included journalists. In this case, they not only used online PR as an information source but also to counter the sometimes confusing and erroneous information about the university that might affect its reputation and its image. In these efforts, PR practitioners engaged scientific methods to determine which audience used what websites. In doing so, they surveyed their audiences to know what each audience is using.

The Internet has become of prime value as an instrument for communication for the universities studied, and this current research has demonstrated that the Internet is of critical import to them. Generally, a PR practitioner utilizes online PR because the Internet is valuable to people, and PR is a competitive field (Petrovici, 2014). This current study has found, as have others that, online PR allows the audience can interact with an organization and receive an immediate response. Indeed, the current study has shown, as have others, the lower costs associated with the Internet is a unique advantage that can create a difference (Petrovici, 2014).

Little previous data exists on how PR practitioners are utilizing online PR and how this utilization is influencing PR practices, which is a knowledge gap that this current study fills. Several case studies have suggested that reasonable bases for concern exist because some organizations are trying to engage in public communication in the Web 2.0 environment utilizing one-way information transmission and a control paradigm of communication reminiscent of the characteristics of mass media and Web 1.0 (Macnamara, 2010). Such was not the case in this study, which demonstrated that the practitioners are aware of and utilize, the Internet and social media for two-way communications. In this, the current study agrees with Macnamara (2010), who found that organizations engaging with their stakeholders in new and productive ways by using interactive social networks and social media.

The literature suggests that most organizations utilize online PR effectively as a method to interact with the public and to improve relationships with stakeholders and to exploit the interactive two-way communication capabilities of online PR, thereby realizing best practices. This current study agrees with this finding. Like Macnamara (2010) found, this current study determined that PR units in the Jordanian universities studied are using social media (social networks, LinkedIn, Facebook, and YouTube) in approaches exploiting their interactive two-way communication capabilities and realizing best practices as dialogic models in ways that the excellence theory of PR has described.

This study aligned with the findings of Hakeas and Komodromos (2016) who suggested that PR and marketing practitioners utilize blogs, forums, social networks more often today in marketing PR that they allow them to respond to online opinions or criticisms regarding their organizations or their clients. Also, the current study found the use of social media in the marketing PR campaigns can help to build and maintain relationships between an organization and its various publics like Haikais and Komodromos (2016). As Campbell, Lambright, and Wells (2014) found this current study found that the universities studied used social media mostly to market organizational activities, to increase community awareness, and to continue to be relevant to critical constituencies.

This study also found that ease of use was essential. This finding aligned with that of El-Kasim and Idid (2016), who found that the perceived ease of utilization had a significant and indirect

impact on behavioral intention through perceived usefulness. As did El-Kasim and Idid (2016), this current study found that it has become imperative for PR practitioners to utilize online PR to provide and shape cordial relationships with their strategic constituents (See also, Kang & Norton, 2006; Curtis et al., 2010). Additionally, Wigley and Zhang (2011), in a survey of members of the PR Society of American, found utilizing online PR was a useful tool, especially in a crisis. In this, the informants of this study agreed. The findings of this current study agree with Dornyo (2014), who found that PR practitioners in Ghana utilized Facebook pages for their organizations because they consider Facebook to be an effective tool to communicate with their target audiences. In Jordan, the respondents agreed that Facebook was the most useful tool be because of its widespread use and its interactivity.

As Robson and James (2011) found, the current study demonstrated that practitioners had a keen awareness of social media platforms, and all had made use of at least one social media platform at a point in time. Sometimes organizations suffer from either a narrow view of the potential value of social media or do not have a long-term vision. Indeed, Campbell, Lambricht, and Wells (2014) found that among the barriers to utilization are issues related to institutional policies. The current study was similar in that it determined that barriers included institutional policies related to law and ethics.

As Moya and Moqasa (2016), who found in a study of a university in Cape Town South Africa that the utilization of ICTs as PR tools had become a vital instrument in institutions of higher learning, this study found that ICT was critical to the Jordanian universities studied. As they did, the current study found that ICTs played a significant role in the communication division at the university because they enabled the department to be in touch with its publics and work efficiently.

CONCLUSIONS

The study found that online PR was used in multifaceted ways in terms of how online PR activities were utilized in Jordanian universities. Among the usages were publishing and broadcasting, communication channel, and an events platform for students and the public. Online PR was found to be an effective and efficient channel for disseminating a wide variety of information about the university and its events and for correcting misinformation about the

university, its people, and its programmes. The most important vehicle for this dissemination was Facebook, mostly because of its widespread penetration in Jordan, although the universities utilized Twitter and Instagram in other countries. Several universities also used data analysis to develop their strategic plans and their concomitant tactics.

Along with research done in the field, this research does have some shortcomings. This study faced several limitations. First, this study employed a qualitative research approach that can assist research to deeply to understand the utilization of online PR from the perspective of PR practitioners in Jordanian universities. However, this present research is far from representative of online PR practice in all Jordanian sectors and organizations. Because this study using a small number of interviews in public and private universities in the context of Jordan, at a single moment in time. Thus, the study suffered from some of the biases that are inherent in qualitative studies.

Additionally, the study is limited in scope it in nature is qualitative and, therefore, a generalization of the results is impossible. Thus, future studies need to conduct quantitative studies to be more generalized. Nevertheless, it provides some initial evidence for how to practice the online PR in Jordanian public relation departments. Hence, future studies could consider other sectors in Jordan and other organizations in the Arab and develop countries and make a comparison with these findings. Further studies could also replicate the information contained in this study to develop a study with a larger sample, which may have more generalizable results. Additionally, future studies could be longitudinal in nature.

Second, the current study only examined at the point of view of the PR managers in Jordanian universities. As with any study using in-depth interviews, the data gathered can illuminate the interviewees' point of view, which may or may not representative of the other opinions of PR practitioners. Therefore, future studies are recommended on levels of mid-level employees working in PR departments.

Third, qualitative studies are restricted by the researcher's interpretation. Though the researcher did the best to mitigate any bias, the different researcher may have interpreted the respondents to answer in another way. Personal experiences, knowledge and backgrounds undoubtedly impact on the understanding of communication phenomena. Thereby, future studies should

conduct further studies from an external perspective, such as the recipients of the service to avoid the researcher from interference, the results consequently more generalization results.

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