Chapter 13
Public Relations and Mobile:
Becoming Dialogic

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ABSTRACT

The chapter discusses impact of mobile technologies on public relations practice and scholarship by tracking the historical development of public relations as a distinct field, thus mapping a structural framework for the further discussion of new trends and areas of academic and industry research. Moving from functional to co-creational perspective, public relations enters the conversation age in which the nature of mobile technologies forces practitioners to adopt the dialogic approach to build trust and nurture relationships. Existing theoretical frameworks are supplemented with industry examples within the field of crisis communication, corporate social responsibility and customer and employee relations. An overview of some of the latest trends in social media research, public segmentation and video marketing applied to co-creational perspective of public relations organizes new trends around a more fundamental paradigm shift. This structure places industry practices within broader academic research, providing both tactical and strategic views on public relations in the mobile age.

INTRODUCTION

With inception of advanced mobile connectivity technologies, mobile devices like smartphones and tablets, and wearables like a smartwatch, an array of new challenges and opportunities for public relations practitioners and scholars took off. Increasing multi-functionality of the instantly connected environment is gradually occupying media space and thus leads to a socio-technological lock-in.

New technologies become more and more pervasive and store a rapidly growing amount of personal information. Smartphones are now tied to our bank accounts, social media profiles, instant messaging applications, digital photo albums, and personalized mobile applications. As a result, a single mobile

phone now incorporates a growing number of value-added mobile and Internet services that are tied to a mobile device and reinforce the adoption effect (Tojib et al., 2014).

The reality is now digital and mobile – it changes rapidly and is always on hand in the screen of your smartphone. New publics switch between media platforms every other minute and rarely keep their smartphones more than an arm's length away (Time Inc., 2012). With transformation of communication per se, the essence of connecting with various publics also changes. Social media and instant messaging allow organizations to connect with their publics directly passing over traditional mass media that in the older days held a role of an information gatekeeper.

Researchers and practitioners of public relations are thus facing a major change in how and where communication takes place. Yet to embrace this technological change in its full swing, public relations scholars and practitioners need to change how they see new technology and expand their focus from exclusively tactical implementations of the public relations practice to wider social and technological issues (Kent & Saffer, 2014).

STATE OF THE ART

In the last few decades public relations have undergone a considerable transformation from a narrowly instrumental practice of organizational communication to a more strategically oriented co-creational perspective. The tremendous impact that technology has exerted on public relations was actively discussed in business and academic circles.

Already in the end of 1990s experts (Ross & Middleberg, 1999; Crawford, 1999; Holtz, 1999; Witmer, 2000, cited in Hurme, 2001) started making bold statements that those public relations practitioners who fall behind the Internet hype would have to leave the game.

As an array of new communication channels is burgeoning and the speed of communication rises rapidly, public relations practitioners (James, 2008) faced a sharp need for more technical skills, including search engine optimization (SEO), web analytics, web publishing, database management, and analytic software operation. New media forms are to be taken into consideration with video content proliferating and going mobile too. Forbes (Trautman, 2014), citing an eMarketer study, reported that in 2018 more than 70% of all online videos will be watched on a tablet.

However, apart from increased technological complexity and new opportunities for data visualization, integration, and measurement of communication effectiveness, a multitude of social changes have also come into play. One of the main changes is increased complexity of the environment and far less control over the communication process and messages disseminated that practitioners used to have in the early days of mass society. Planning campaigns is becoming more difficult with the high speed and uncertainty of communication (Argenti, 2006; James, 2008). As a result, the public relations practice turns from central planning and generally one-way communication to the dialogic two-way communication and even beyond (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Taylor & Botan, 2006; Botan & Hazleton, 2006). A co-creational perspective argues that a classic two-way symmetrical model is too procedural and still treats communication as instrumental (Edwards & Hodges, 2011, cited in Waddington, 2013; Phillips & Young, 2009, cited in Grunig, 2009), and thus needs to be replaced by a more strategic view of communication as creating shared meanings and interpretations rather than pursuing organizational goals.

Not only the older concepts are reconsidered but also new avenues of research emerge. One of the most rapidly growing fields is social media research. As reported by Gillin (2008), social media has

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