

Social Media PR as a Catalyst: Balancing the Political Pressures to Communicate “with” or “to” the Public

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Abstract: *Sensuous public relations practices, the activity through which dialogue and communication is shaped, transmitted and disseminated. In its different ways, PR conceptualizes societal evolution as inter-woven with social practices; and those practices, in turn, shape its activity. PR arises among distinctive social groups and institutions, between a political figure and its constituency, on the basis, and as a response to given conditions and relationships. It is in the presence of these conditions Romanian PR practitioners have to handle and respond to the conditions of existence. We engage in quantitative and qualitative research Romanian PR practitioners so as to understand the impact of social media in Romanian PR political campaigns. We seek to place PR practitioners within a new society conceived as a complex expressive entity with new demands out of its political figures, and in consequence, in need of new PR instruments and solutions. There are, of course, some unresolved problems and some new threats for both Romanian PR practitioners and Romanian political figures, not least of which is the unevenness of dialogue between public and political figure. We alert to the assumption about the channels of communication with the young community, apparently disengaged from civic participation and disillusioned by political figures.*

Keywords: social media, communication, politics, public relations.

Cuvinte-cheie: social media, comunicare, politică, relații publice.

The general context of the research

Politicians operate under the collective social pressure of the public sphere. The public sphere is changing, the family is changing (Flaquer, 2011; Flaquer, 2007) and the individual is changing. The politician has to construct ties and channels of communications with the community, the family and the individual. Usually, in Romania politicians have to manage the

pressure coming from the political party and the pressure coming from their electorate. As a result, successful politicians have different methods of dealing with these pressures. The need to handle the public sphere pressure determined an increase interest in using PR in political campaigns. We have documented in considerable detail how in the struggle to attain a superior position in the polls, political figures employ PR in the political campaign. Nevertheless, this is not the only

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reasons for using PR in political campaigns. Its usage stems also from the need to control potentially image damaging situations, which are quite frequent in Romania. Politicians have encapsulated PR in their campaign so as to deal with the new needs of their public image. The need for PR also resulted from the need to adapt to the new public sphere environment in Romania. In order to meet the steadily increasing number of social media users, politicians have started to show a growing interest in using social media. Our research is meant to support this attempt through offering a better understanding of the social media instrument of the public sphere. Only through proper understanding of the impact of social media can it be used accurately and efficiently. Current research in this field is limited and rarely does it refer to the context of the Romanian society.

We would like to better understand the context in which we are witnessing this increase of interest in political PR in Romania. It happened for determinate political, economical and social reasons. We agree with the author Constantin Schifirneț on the changing nature of our society. Changes occur at every level and PR political campaigns are no exceptions. The author Constant Schifirnet coined the concept of “tendentious modernity” (Schifirneț, 2012), which is “useful for studying transitional societies where modernity is a trend which coexists with obsolete institutional forms and ancient substance. (Schifirneț, 2009). Our research on PR campaigns has revealed that at the PR level both traditional and modern instruments coexist, but not evenly distributed.

It has been noticed an increasing disinterest of Romanian young people not only towards the political activities of the country, but also towards participating in the voting system all together (Boțan, 2010, 11). There is a tendency of young people of not being interested any more in the

traditional media. Traditional media has been the backbone of political campaigns. This way of perceiving reality has partially to do with the partisan role played by traditional media in political campaigns. This attitude has lead, in time, to political disengagement and cynicism (Boțan and Corbu, 2011; Tătar, 2011). In this situation, the job of the PR professionals is to try to fix this break. Their efforts concentrate on including once again the segment of audience composed by young people in civic participation. Acknowledging that people tend to have the same views as their principal source of information (Tunstall, 1970) was a natural course to start employing social media. Most of the time, the users of traditional media are not aware of what is being said, promised or done through the on-line community. Social media is noteworthy because it impacts two prominent predictive variables: trust and social ties (Duhe, 2007). Our scientific methodology was based on both qualitative and quantitative results, so as to offer an accurate depiction.

The structure of the articles has been built around the qualitative and quantitative findings, so as to answer the research question. In our scientific effort we have debated past and current scientific literature on the topic and presented our hypothesis. The current scientific literature has proved the need for further research and has supported our scientific choice of study. The methodology used is fully and detailed described in the chapter following the scientific literature review and it is followed by the presentation of the findings. We have completed our research with a short chapter dedicated to conclusions and limitations of our research. Naturally, we have acknowledged the help received in undertaking our research.

Theoretical perspectives on the potential of social media in PR political campaigns

The standards by which PR should be judged are always in a constant state of change. Referring to this reality, an author mentions PR in a state of repositioning in relation with its original coordinates (Pricopie, 2005). Much has been claimed about the power of PR to determine what are regarded as prime issues since its first use of the term, in 1897, by the Association of American Railroads (Cameron et al., 2008, 66). Particular reference has been made to the power of PR (Entman, 2007; Coombs and Holladay, 2010) to reach, inform and change public opinion, to be persuasive (Starck and Kruckeberg, 2001) and to construct a political brand (Săvulescu and Vițelar, 2012). Secondly, the purpose of PR is to identify, reach and manage the relationships with their key audience (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, 4). From the point of view of the audience, of the people, they are interested in what has a consequence for them (Van Leuven and Slater, 1991) and discuss it as part of a dialogue. There are circumstances when PR has to act as a defensive force (Brissenden and Moloney, 2005). In order to be able to do so, it has to understand the public (Cutlip, 2006; Eyrich, Padman and Sweetser, 2008). Public Relations have been an efficient way of bringing together and managing the relationship between the public sphere and political figure since the 20th century (Baines, 2004). The function of PR is to facilitate not only the creation of a simple relation of communication to the public, but a complex, long standing relation of the type communication with the public, from the part of the political figure (Bernays, 1955; Hellweg, 2011).

In association, conjointly with the social, the Internet, the new instrument, has managed to offer people a new way of

creating and disseminating (Solis and Breakenridge, 2009) content through dialogue. The convergence of public relations and social media can create a powerful tool especially in political campaigns. This thesis is naturally supplied with support from recent research in this field (Toledano, 2010; Wright and Hinson, 2011). Of course, one could argue that the immediate, tangible consequence of the presence of social media together with public relations presents an excellent value (Venter, 2010). Perhaps the greatest value of social media, value that can be exploited by PR, consists in its powerful dialogic communication function (Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010). To speak of the political role of social media in political PR in Romania is not an abstract undertaking. Nonetheless, Romanian political figures are at different stages of using social media in their PR activities, but we notice the powerful practical use of it (Venter, 2010; Shirky, 2011).

To connect public sphere with the political sphere, PR should handle transmission but while using an instrument such as social media to disseminate the information through friends, family (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 2005), so as to increase its intensity. This interpretation suggests that social media usage in PR can be used to further the activity of political opinion leaders through social media (Mangold, 2009).

Public relations practitioners have to complement their traditional way of promoting the political sphere. They have to complete the traditional PR instruments, such as messages, unilateral activities, in which there is no relation between the stakeholders (Bruning and Ledingham, 2000) with a new model of public relations. This new model of PR not only engulfs social media, but transforms it into a process of relations management (Gruning and Hunt, 1984). We agree with the statement that there is a situation of unbalance between the political sphere and

the public. This unbalance is rooted in the lack of trust and proper communication (Cișmaru, 2011; Stoica, 2012). Social media, part of PR activities in political campaigns, is no longer a deviance. It has turned into a much needed label that is attached to the PR process, via a series of complex social and political processes. This was done so as to manifest openness and dialogue for resolving disputes (Ackerman, 1980). This is yet another task of the political figure, to resolve disputes, but first the political figure has to engage the public. In this case, the public, especially the young are present especially via the Internet. It can be no dialogue with an entire generation without PR activities through social media. No longer does PR refer only to getting people to do what you want, quote from James Tolley (cited in Grunig, 1992, 38). Now, it starts through an engagement towards a smoothening of the way in which the society is functioning (Tedlow, 1979). It continues with providing information necessary for the citizen (Weeks, 2008) and determines the existence of a necessary system of communication entitled a two-way symmetrical system (Gordon and Berhow, 2009).

Methodology

In the quantitative research, we have based this scientific effort on the support

and participation of public relations practitioners. These practitioners were between the age of 19 and 27, of Romanian citizenship. It is the aim of this research to test the opinion of people that were either at the beginning of their career or with a work experience of at least three years. From the point of view of experience, the public relations practitioners had a minimum of six months experience to a maximum of three years experience. The respondents came from different parts of Romania, and represented a wide variety of the public relations industry. The participants were not in an equal percent, as you shall see: 20% of the public relations representatives worked for corporations (n=56), 23% worked for small agencies (n=64), 10% worked for consultancies (n=28), 12% worked for their own company (n=34), 15% worked for Non Governmental Organizations (n=42), 20% worked for political figures or people engaged in political activities (n=56). All of them were engaged in using both traditional public relations instruments, and new public relations instruments. All of the participants were also actively using Social Media in their personal lives, for periods between a minimum of three years and a maximum period of about six years. The participations were fairly divided in male (49%, n=138) and female (51%, n=142). The respondents were contacted in two ways: personally or via the Internet.

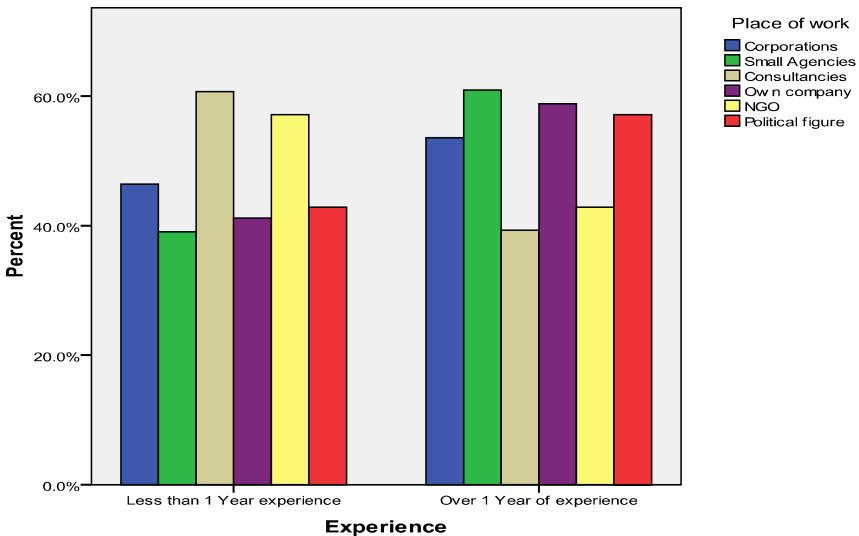


Figure 1: *Descriptive graph of the participants constructed on the correlation between Experience and Place of work.*

From the educational point of view, we have asked them about the presence of special education in the field of public relations and communication. From this question we determined that 45% were studying or graduated a Faculty specialized in Communication and Public Relations (n=126). Around 25% were coming from Social Sciences (n=70), 10% from Humanities (n=28), 15% from Sciences (n=42) and 5% (n=14) graduated from high-school, planning to continue their education at a Faculty that provides Public Relations and Communication specialization. 79% (n=220) of the participants were conducting their Public Relations activities from the office of the company that employed them, while the rest of the 21% (n=60) were working most of the time from their home.

We asked the participants to return the questionnaire completed in maximum two days from receiving it. The respondents were advised to answer the questionnaire question by question, respecting the order of the questions.

The questionnaire was constructed around 38 closed-ended questions and two open ended questions. The questionnaire was intended to research whether or not the appearance of social media has changed the way in which they create and build up the profile of the company/person for which they work for. The feed-back received from the participants and the piloting test demonstrated that the questionnaire took between one hour and one and a half hour to be completed.

The quantitative study took place via the Internet and we initially contacted 400 persons, but we received a positive answer from 280 respondents. It was the intention to recheck the initial results of the study and we contacted the second time the 400 persons that we had in the data base and tried to invite them for a second questionnaire completion. This time, we received 135 affirmative answers and we decided to pick randomly from these another 50 to retake the initial questionnaire. The variables that described the first group of participants were kept, differences in the

structure of the participants being different with only 2%-3% from the initial structure. The second questionnaire, in fact, the same design and the same questions, was conducted on a reduce number of people out of those that responded initially 50 persons and at an interval of three weeks after the first questionnaire. The research has been complemented with a qualitative study represented by 12 in-depth interviews. We selected 12 PR practitioners in such a manner that to represent most of the categories above. Each interview had a length between 35 minutes and 60 minutes.

Working hypothesis

1. The use of social media has enhanced the practice of Public Relations.
2. The presence of social media in the society forces public relations practitioners to respond more quickly to situations/criticism/problems.

3. The emergence of social media changed how political figures should communicate.
4. The use of PR activities through social media channels can influence the profile of a political figure.
5. The use of social media in PR activities has led to new dangerous situations for all the stakeholders, including PR practitioners, political figures and audience.
6. PR practitioners feel comfortable using in their professional life the social media tools that are also common in their personal life. The lack of training and guides limits their social media PR activities to what is situated in their comfort zone.

Findings

Next we shall try to resume, in short, the most important findings and conclusions of the qualitative and quantitative research.

Table 1: *Do you believe that the use of the Social Media has enhanced the practice of Public Relations and how it is handled in Communication?*

	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Communication?	10	12	18	39	21
with the staff?	38	20	10	22	10
with audience?	3	13	12	52	20

The questionnaire revealed the fact that the use of social media is particularly seen as an advantage in the communication with the public, and in communication in general. During the in-depth interviews we understood that social media is not regarded as a principal factor of communication within the PR company, but more as a possible danger for the private life to be invaded by the professional life. Concerns regarding the possibilities of private events presented through social media to

have a negative impact on their personal life made several PR practitioners to either constantly control the content they display on social media, or even to create a separate account. On this second account they do not have work colleagues or managers from work, trying to keep private life and professional life separated.

In what regards communication in general, we notice that the Agree and Strongly Agree categories are not as decisive in terms of percents, as there are for

the Communication with audience. During the in-depth interviews, an important percent of PR practitioners underline the threat of being too satisfied using social

media for personal communication, and thus not engaging people through direct, face to face communication, or more traditional ways of interacting with people.

Table 2: *Do you believe that Traditional Public Relations Activities and Social Media related Public Relations Activities:*

	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Support each other?	5	10	5	55	25
Are mutually exclusive?	15	10	20	40	15

The two questions seem to be antithetical, at a first glance. Apparently, they offer conflicting results, because it seems to be mutually exclusive. Continuing the research through in-depth interviews we investigated this situation, where PR practitioners seemed to be in agreement that traditional PR and social media PR are, at the same time, exclusive and complementary. Discussions have underlined the fact that PR practitioners consider the context before using the two together or before excluding one. It seems that social media PR is viewed as having an impact

only upon the young community. PR practitioners seldom take into consideration using traditional PR when trying to get in touch with the young community. At the same time, they admit that there is a small percentage of population that is both an Internet user and a social media user, but also trust traditional PR instruments. For this purpose, when addressing issues that are linked with this category, they use both social media PR and traditional PR. It is the case of intellectual persons that are also Internet users.

Table 3: *Taking into account your experience as both a PR professional and a user of Social Media would you say that:*

	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Social media has enhanced the possibilities for the PR field?	1	5	14	65	15
PR through social media could promote a political person?	25	6	10	35	24
PR through social media influences traditional PR practices?	5	25	12	28	30
Traditional PR influences PR through social media?	1	5	19	70	5
There is a need for prompt and instantaneous PR responses in political campaigns?	2	8	5	65	20

The questionnaires have demonstrated that the vast majority of PR practitioners view the social media as a possibility of expansion of the traditional PR. During the in-depth interviews, they were eager to discuss the way in which they adapted traditional PR to on-line activities, transforming them. The replies also demonstrate the fact that traditional PR is still the base for development and the primary source for inspiration while using social media PR. During the discussions, the participants presented only situations of adapting and using traditional concepts and methods from traditional PR in the on-line. They viewed social media PR as an extension of the already known practices in PR, with little new discoveries without being inspired from traditional PR.

Their vast majority consented with the use of social media PR in political campaigns and recognized the need for fast responses. They admitted that this context also represents a potential problem for both them as professionals and for their employees. Most of them admitted that the need for a prompt response made them work, practically, while they were outside their regular schedule, because events happen on an irregular basis. Most of them were under severe stress because of the quantity of information and its constant flow.

During the in-depth interviews we have brought into question the press release as

an instrument of traditional media and made a debate around it as a concise study case. We were curious to discuss the way in which it is still successful and if it was changed in any way. Public Relations practitioners have underlined the degree of penetration that a press release has gained through the use of the Internet. The majority of them have mentioned that using traditional press releases they expected only reporters, editors and a small proportion of other people to see it. They believe that the event presented in the press release reached only accidentally people that were outside this restricted circle, and that it was hardly any important results in terms of audience increase, in the old press release. On the other hand, they pointed out that currently, press releases used in PR campaigns through social media engage a lot more people and reach a larger audience. Another topic that came into discussion was the way in which the information was disseminated. The old press release meant that only a small audience was targeted and, in fact, there was little hope of attracting people outside that circle. The new press releases through social media have improved chances to be passed on to other interested individuals.

We have also created a ranking of the preferred social media instruments used in PR activities.

Table 4: *Frequency of Social media instruments used in PR activities*

Social media instruments used in PR activities					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Electronic mail	50	17.9	17.9	17.9
	Corporate web sites	11	3.9	3.9	21.8
	Social networks	70	25.0	25.0	46.8
	Video and photo sharing	14	5.0	5.0	51.8
	Blogs	34	12.1	12.1	63.9
	Forum/News groups	28	10.0	10.0	73.9

Instant messaging	36	12.9	12.9	86.8
Intranet	3	1.1	1.1	87.9
PDA's	3	1.1	1.1	88.9
Game applications	7	2.5	2.5	91.4
Wikis	12	4.3	4.3	95.7
Social Bookmarking	5	1.8	1.8	97.5
Virtual Worlds	7	2.5	2.5	100.0
Total	280	100.0	100.0	

PR practitioners were given a list of social media instruments, and they had to limit themselves to just one choice. There was a great preference for social networks, but, surprisingly, there is still a great focus upon the use of the traditional e-mail. A very small percent chose to think about using only virtual world or PDA's, or even the intranet, leading us to believe that those areas lack proper training and information about their potential. Their personal choices reflected their comfort zone. The fact that most of the PR practitioners chose social networks, forums, blogs and e-mail demonstrates that they were in the position of learning from their personal experience before using those tools in their professional life.

In depth interviews confirmed these assumptions and showed that they feel confident in using at work the same social media instruments that they use in their personal life.

During the in-depth interview, those that chose to use more unconventional tools, such as PDA's and Intranet, recognized that they made this choice so as to have an edge over the others, anticipating that the others won't use this method. They admitted that they do not master completely the use of these tools.

We noticed that there still is a great gap based on the work place of the PR practitioners in terms of instrument usage. This, in turn, means that PR practitioners from one field of activity will have more experience only with one social media instrument. In each cases we notice dramatic differences in social media instruments usage, and sometimes, even all together omissions of one instrument.

Correlating the level of experience with social media instruments used we understand a lot better the inclination of some PR practitioners towards a particular media. Those PR practitioners that have less experience use, most of the time, Social networks, while those with a solid experience background rely on Electronic mail. Although we do not put into question the importance of each of the instruments, we observe that the two categories tend to over-rely on only one instrument, for most of the cases. As a consequence, we expect less efficiency then in a mixed PR campaign. We understand the difference, and we believe in the existence of either mixed teams or in training sessions for specialists in PR.

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Table 5: *PR practices using social media are:*

	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
More credible for you than traditional PR?	2	6	56	34	2
More precise and to the point than the traditional PR?	11	20	46	18	5
Better at establishing a sentiment of trust than the traditional PR?	16	15	17	38	14
Have an impact upon the entire society?	45	15	27	13	-
Cheaper than the traditional PR?	-	-	5	45	40
More transparent than the traditional PR?	5	20	25	43	7
Offer a balance between to inform, to reach and to change?	14	19	18	37	12

In this set of question we have found the impulse we needed for further research. The responses in the questionnaires demonstrate that there is still an open field of research, because a great percent of PR practitioners could not offer a positive or a negative answer regarding either the credibility of social PR in comparison with the traditional PR or its precise character. Although all of them found that, in terms of price, social PR is obviously without any competition, they also observe the fact that it still does not affect the entire society. The limitations of social PR are obvious and it seems well known for PR practitioners, limitations given by technology access, education access, age differences and cultural stereotypes, all of them discussed during the in-depth interviews. An important percent of PR practitioners considered that social media PR benefits from a better image in the eyes of both PR practitioners and users. During the in-depth interviews, explanations of this situation were presented. It seems that traditional PR has known also some unfortunate situations in which it had lost credibility, social media PR is a relatively new instrument and it is associated with the Internet that has an image dominated by freedom of expression

and without being under the pressure of interest, the fact that the majority of young people distrust traditional PR and look at the social media for the true face of reality.

There is still the question of impact upon society. PR practitioners are aware of the fact that not the entire Romanian society is plugged in the social media space and are reluctant in considering that all sectors of the Romanian society can be affected by social media PR. Those that agree consider that the young generation that uses social media might engage other members of the family in discussions inspired from the Internet, and, by doing this, they could contribute at the dissemination of the message.

In terms of transparency it seems that PR practitioners appreciate social media PR as offering a greater transparency. On the other hand, there is also a high degree of uncertainty surrounding the issue. Those that manifested uncertainty has brought into question the endless possibilities offered by the Internet for concealing one's identity. PR activities, while conducted over the Internet, are not governed by any set of rules. Although this is an advantage, sometimes is also a disadvantage, because in combination with concealing one's

identity public image attacks upon political figures can be easily constructed and very difficult to prevent. Social media PR is transparent, in the sense that it is there to be reviewed by anyone with a particular

degree of access, but it is not transparent, at the same time, due to the means it provides for concealing identity, and for not following any rules or policies to control its usage.

Table 6: Mean ANOVA analysis of 'how important social media are' and 'how important they should be'

Social Media	How important are these media in Political PR efforts	How important should these media be in Political PR efforts
Blogs	3.30	3.36
Forums	3.01	3.72
Photo/Video sharing	2.11	3.20
Social networks	2.91	3.80
Wikis	2.81	3.71
Search engine marketing	3.10	4.11
RSS	3.30	4.10

Conclusions

There is growing awareness among PR practitioners that they need to examine the context in which political figures have to function. In order to fit their role, PR practitioners understand that they need to examine their audience reactions to social media PR activities. Social media PR activities stem from two points: first, it is its centrality among the young representatives of the society. This point emphasizes the importance of mastering both the encoding and decoding of information through social media. Secondly, studies regarding audience and use of social media PR activities are essential. This stage is essential in order to illuminate the process whereby PR practitioners facilitate the emergence of a social media PR. The social media PR can handle the task of creating a trusting dialogue between social media users and political figures. The emergence of such a tool can lead to an active consent of political participation and civic engagement from the young community. It can also result in an increased awareness from the political figures, which will also benefit from a strengthened position, through proper representation from all categories of the Romanian society. Getting

the support of those supposedly inactive politically classes could determine a change in the political system, and the way in which civil society interacts with political representation.

What about the other side of the coin? Thus, this line of research has also pointed out some of the dangers felt by the PR community in Romania. It seems there is a growing concern with the danger of not being able to cope with the quantity of information. The daily quantity of information with which PR practitioners have to deal with, while practicing social media PR, has increased considerably. At the same time, PR practitioners are feeling the danger of aggressive attacks towards the political figure they represent. This is a result of the fact that social media is an instrument at which more and more people have access.

PR practitioners feel that social media PR lacks a proper training schedule for those that use it, or intend to use it. Being a relatively new instrument on the Romanian (media) market, it also lacks the training opportunities, necessary for PR practitioners. Most of the time, they are in the position of managing with their own creativity and seldom receive feedback. Throughout the research, both quantitative

and qualitative results have underlined the need for a policy that protects and controls, to a certain degree, the ethical and practical use of social media PR. The PR practitioners feel under a lot of stress in an unregulated and new world that sometimes seems to spiral out of control. Most of the time, the lack of performing indicators and the lack of tools for monitoring the players of this game make their activity even more difficult. They also find it difficult to motivate financing or to prove results. There is a strong demand for the existence of social media guides.

Results also demonstrated that PR practitioners who have less experience in the field value social media PR more than those that are more experienced. There is a tendency of the digital and traditional PR to be valued by experienced PR practitioners. This study did not reveal any difference between male and female, in the importance given to digital or social PR practices. Non-profit PR practitioners value social media PR activities more than other type of practitioners, and are also the most flexible. They are ready to change their client or employer with a greater ease. On the other side, PR practitioners that work within a multinational company tend not to be that flexible. They are ready to change their workplace, but still remain within a multinational company. They are also reluctant in using social media PR

activities. Overall, PR practitioners expect that the means of communication will become more prominent than the content of the communication, which is surprising, conflicting with research in this field done at the European level.

Social media PR is seen as both presenting advantages, but also dangers. On one side, it does present the advantage of faster retrieval of information. It also represents an appealing opportunity to open a direct dialogue, devoid of any apparent control, but it also can be used to threaten the image of the represented political figure. The more experienced PR practitioners tend to be more focused upon the new threats brought about by the expansion of social media, while those with little experience tend to view the advantages. The limitations of the study are based around the sheer number of participants and on the period in which they participated in the experiment. For a better understanding further research should be undertaken in the future so as to cover a longer time span. Also, in order to reach conclusions that can be valid for the entire population, future research should include a larger group of participants. We also consider the need for research involving all the stakeholders in this process: politicians, their staff and the different members of the public sphere.

Note

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