Social Media: Commentary, Extrapolation and Development of a Mediated Communication Analysis Model

Kathryn Rebecca Laing
School of Communication & Creative Industries
Faculty of Arts, Business & Law,
University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

Umi Khattab
School of Communication & Creative Industries
Faculty of Arts, Business & Law,
University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is the development of a model for the evaluation of social media communication to assess the use of social media by organisations and determine its effectiveness in public relations, communication and marketing.

Design/methodology/approach: The approach employed in this paper involves the review of the literature to establish the grounding for the theoretical constructs to apply in developing a Model of Social Media Communication Analysis.

Findings: As this is not an empirical paper but rather an investigation of social media as a communication tool and the theoretical models which have evolved to investigate their application there are no results per se but rather the establishment of a model for the analysis of social media communications.

Practical implications: The paper provides some unique insights into the evolution of communication as a tool for the marketing and public relations fields.

Keywords: Mediated communication; public relations; social media; content analysis; discourse analysis; model of social media.

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, new and emerging forms of media technology have rapidly altered the face of communication with a growing reliance on electronic interaction, particularly the use of social media. In this age of globalisation and transnationalism, driven by Internet and mobile technology, we are witnessing significant changes in relationships, transactions and identities of individuals and public entities, in ways that may have been envisioned or imagined but were not possible till now. Communication has always been at the centre of the public sphere, or the public sphere itself, but today, the forms of interaction, whether business or personal, have been transformed with the speed of technological revolution. As such, there is rising recognition of the role of emerging (social) media on politics, business and everyday life.

As face-to-face communication and technology merge, the influence of these interactive forms of communication is forever changing how we describe and evaluate what is real or believable, in effect, how to ascertain ‘real life’. For example, responding to good news with a ‘like’ or announcing a relationship by declaring it official on Facebook. This demonstrates how the language of digital interaction (social media) is being applied to what would otherwise have been a face-to-face encounter (Edwards, Edwards, Wahl & Myers, 2013). Even in this area, social media is rapidly evolving, with no defined future direction (Kohli, Suri & Kapoor, 2015). Definitions of social media can result in identifying a list of social tools such as Facebook and Twitter and how they are digital technologies with user-generated content and interaction (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Howard and Park (2012: 362) define social media as:

(a) The information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content; (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, and cultural products; and
(b) the people, organisations, and industries that produce and consume digital content.

An alternative definition of social media that encompasses a broader perspective yet offers a simple overview is provided by Kent (2010: 645):

“...any interactive communication channel that allows for two-way interaction and feedback [with]... the potential for real-time interaction, reduced anonymity, a sense of propinquity, short response times, and the ability to ‘time shift,’ or to engage in the social network whenever suits each particular member”.

The use and indeed the impact that social media can have is evident in the way in which it was used by two United States Presidential candidates. Barack Obama is credited with having used Facebook to his advantage in order to gain support and vital votes that saw him win the Presidential election (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In a similar way Donald Trump used social media to reach out to voters in his campaign for the Presidency of the United States. Social media may have contributed in no small way to his winning of what many saw as an unwinnable campaign (Oates & Moe, 2016). The importance of communication cannot be emphasised more and the following sections provide a brief history of the development of communication and its significant role in society.

Apart from describing a mere conversation between people in non-mediated form, communication, especially mediated communication, has a long and somewhat dark history. The concept of communication has been a key concern in the fields of marketing, communication studies, journalism and public relations, and the use and abuse of mediated forms of communication in politics and business has often raised concerns about its manipulative and propagandistic power.

Over the past twenty years the use of social media has been widely researched as the rise of sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, transformed the face of social interactions and impacted the communication practices of business and politics. These sites are being used by organisations employing the use of persuasive and influential communication strategies to interact with their publics while managing their brand/image (Waddington, 2012). Social media has changed the way consumers interact with each other and with organisations (Dijkmans et al. 2015). As the use of communication technologies permeate the everyday life of people around the world, many social and business problems seem to emerge. In this regard, Edwards et al. (2013: 2) point out that “Many of the communication issues we face today are strikingly similar to those faced by
generations long past... the ancient Greeks had similar concerns about the first communications technology: writing! The market place has changed for organisations, and must evolve accordingly, to stay competitive. Publics are currently sharing information on social media sites, outside of the organisations’ control, at an unreadable pace (Kohli et al. 2015).

**Literature Review**

*Communication*

In the early days, prior to Internet and the arrival of social media, a mechanical communication model (Shannon, 1948) was developed to depict the process of communication as involving the transmission of information from one party to another. In simple terms the communication process was described as requiring a sender, message, medium and a recipient. This mechanical perspective explains how information is coded by a sender, transmitted over a channel that flows to a receiver who then decodes the message (Ariel & Avidar, 2015). The important point here is the distinctive, separate and identifiable role of sender and receiver where power is assumed to rest with the sender and ignorance/weakness assumed of the receiver. The notion of active sender and inactive receiver therefore prevailed and this was extensively exploited by both government and business through direct and indirect control and manipulation of the mass media. In the current cyber world, the communication process is no longer linear, mechanical, procedural or hierarchical. In fact, it is becoming chaotic and fragmentalised with the rise of new social communication tools. The process of communication has become circular with shifting roles, fluid identities and flowing power, as space and time varies with changing boundaries and territories. Clearly, we are witnessing communication occurring across varying distances of time and space through the internet (Gifu et al., 2014). In effect, this is what sociologist, Giddens (1991), referred to as time-space distanciation in explaining the intensification of globalisation by new media technologies and its consequences on modernity.

In the present mediated communication age, new media technologies enable individuals and public entities to simultaneously consume, produce and share online information, in effect becoming “produsers” (Ariel & Avidar, 2015) The Shannon model employs a mechanical approach to communication and fails to adequately depict the communication explosion that now exists in the online cultural environment. However, the model can be said to be reflective of the pre-Internet era and to some extent the model reiterates the propagandistic nature of communication in an era when those with power and resources (senders) deployed media to achieve desired goals. By contrast, and in a timely manner, the Internet Mass Communication Model developed by Dominick (2011) addresses how individuals and public entities can now send and receive messages simultaneously thus the role of the sender and receiver becomes superimposed and superfluous. Simply put, the model explains the process of communication as a form of interaction between individuals and organisations, linked by a computer mediated environment provided by the internet. In this context, several publics emerge to participate in conversations, offering various meanings and definitions to products, services and ideas. This has in many ways shifted power from top to bottom, making Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) symmetrical or excellence theory more realistic in the current mediated context. In fact, new forms of online participatory social communication have empowered users as we witness the rise of cyber activism and netizenship. Communication models and theory may represent useful ways of depicting communication processes and interactions, however due to the rapidly changing nature of media technology they are hard pressed to capture the complexity of current reality.

*Publics*

As with almost all fields of research the field of communications has devolved its own forms of what might be considered constructs. One such construct is the term “publics” which in common parlance would seem to be grammatically out of place but resides in the communication literature as an established term. The use of this term can be traced back to the seminal work of Habermas (1989) and the emergence of the model of the public sphere (Ikegami, 2000). Perhaps the most simplistic definition of publics is every person in society. To that extent “publics” may be viewed as a heterogeneous group; multifaceted and unpredictable as the individuals that compose it (Burns, O’Connor & Stocklmyer, 2003).
Social Media

Social media was defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0”. These applications provide a form of communication between users and have evolved to allow for the inclusion of marketing or public relations content to be communicated in a variety of ways. Limited studies have been conducted to understand the key elements intertwining persuasive communication strategies used via social media to enhance image/brand (Bicakci & Colak, 2012). Studies conducted in relation to how and why organisations used social media found it was used to: shape producer-consumer discussion, measure success, create a community of like-minded people and allow feedback (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Social media in the field of communication studies is forever evolving and will continue to grow. Twitter has more than 230 million users, which Kohli, Suri and Kapoor (2015) report send 500 million tweets on a typical day, whereas Facebook has just over 1 billion users. The use of effective persuasive communication has numerous advantages for communication and public relations practitioners (Luttrell, 2015) but more importantly for organisational branding and image-building. However, some organisations tend to overlook the importance of, or fail to understand how to use this medium (Luttrell, 2015).

Prior to the arrival of Internet and mobile technology, messages transmitted by electronic and print media to large audiences across vast distances was commonly referred to as mass communication (Ariel & Avidar, 2015). Initially, mass communication involved little interaction between the producer and the consumer including mediums such as television and newspapers, and was hence deemed one-way in orientation. Interactivity is seen as an important element of the communication process and with different types of strategies deployed by the communicator, it is assumed to contribute further to relationship building (Ariel & Avidar, 2015). The rise of the internet has enabled mass communication to become far more interactive, two-way, multi-directional and multi-faceted. Consumers now have the opportunity to provide comments and feedback as well as propagate a message making it viral, beyond existing mass communication methods (Edwards et al. 2013). According to Bicakci (2012: 322) “...social media made communication more transparent since there is dramatic change in the way mass media content is created.” Further, research has shown that the various persuasive communication strategies deployed by organisations through social media tend to influence the environment on Facebook and Twitter and the interactions that take place (Hanna et al. 2011; Noort et al. 2012; Ryan et al. 2013). In other words, social media appears to have empowered both the consumer and the organisation, enabling both to deploy a range of strategies and tactics to achieve desired outcomes.

Models

In Public Relations theory and practice, the role of media and communication is considered fundamental. As such, transformations in media technology impact the practice to a significant extent. In determining the nature of the changing practice of PR and the communication process within it, Grunig and Hunt’s early pre-Internet research in the United States contributed to the development of the ‘Four Models’ that evolved into symmetrical and excellence theory following critiques and further research within the US and without.

The concept of excellence was identified and developed through, and premised on the four models of PR (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The Press Agentry Model (Model 1) and The Public Information Model (Model 2), relate to one-way communication from organisations to their publics and do not involve research for the development of messages (Mahoney, 2008). Whereas, the two-way Asymmetric Model (Model 3), and the two-way Symmetric Model (Model 4), relate to organisations engaging in two-way communication and research for varying goals (Johnston & Zawawi, 2009). Grunig and Hunt’s Model 1, The Press Agentry Model and Model 2, The Public Information Model have been critiqued for their promotional and propagandistic approach. As these models may still reflect forms of practice in a war context and deceptive forms of marketing and political communication, it may not be appropriate to totally dismiss them (see the work of Bernays, 1928). However, they certainly are not generally considered to be reflective of good practice.
Table 1: Summary of Grunig and Hunt’s Four Models of Public Relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Press Agentry/ Publicity</th>
<th>Public Information</th>
<th>Two-Way Asymmetrical Communication</th>
<th>Two-way Symmetrical Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Propaganda</td>
<td>Dissemination of information</td>
<td>Scientific persuasion</td>
<td>Mutual understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of communication</td>
<td>One-way: complete truth not essential</td>
<td>One-way: truth important</td>
<td>Two-way: imbalanced effects</td>
<td>Two-way: balanced effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication model</td>
<td>Source to receiver</td>
<td>Source to receiver</td>
<td>Source to receiver to source group</td>
<td>Source group to receiver group to source group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of research</td>
<td>Little (e.g. counting clips)</td>
<td>Little (e.g. readability, readership)</td>
<td>Formative: evaluative of attitudes</td>
<td>Formative: evaluative of understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading historical figures</td>
<td>P.T. Barnum</td>
<td>Ivy Lee</td>
<td>Edward L. Bernays</td>
<td>Educators, professional leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where practised today</td>
<td>Sports, theatre, product information</td>
<td>Government, non-profit organisations, business</td>
<td>Competitive business</td>
<td>Regulated business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated percentage of organisations practising today</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The two-way asymmetrical communication model is based on scientific persuasion, where practitioners research public attitudes and behaviours and develop campaigns in order to persuade publics to accept and support their point of view (Liechty & Springston, 1993). This model is applied to all types of PR work, in both the private and public sectors (Morris & Goldsworthy, 2012). Practitioners using this model are attempting to control their environment, in order to meet an organisational need (Liechty & Nielson, 1997). Whereas, the two-way symmetrical communication model is based on dialogue and the relationship built on the long-term interaction between the organisation and its publics and open two-way communication (Liechty & Springston, 1993). This model is increasingly reflective of current PR practice and seem largely theoretical or idealistic in the pre-Internet context (Morris & Goldsworthy, 2012). Based on a version of systems theory the symmetric model suggests that it is possible for an organisation to equally meet its public’s terms and to logically determine equally beneficial outcomes (Leitch & Nielson, 1997). These two-way models are identified according to Morsing and Schultz (2006) as the theory of sense-making in relation to public information building with the process of sense-giving intertwined. Hence, there is an ever-growing need to develop corporate two-way communication processes for effective outcomes (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

These models have been tested by numerous academics and many criticisms have been identified. Liechty and Springston (1993: 321) found through extensive research that there is a clear lack of difference between the asymmetric and symmetric models, “If the two-way symmetrical typifies excellence in public relations, then we would expect it to clearly [be] differentiated from other measures, and how it relates to important criterion variables.” Thus, two-way models show similar patterns of relationships, which raise doubts that the symmetrical and asymmetrical models measure different constraints (Liechty & Springston, 1993). Leitch and Nielson (1997: 18) argue that “The Grunig and Hunt model is flawed in several key respects… [because] in their extensive study of public relations practice within organisations, Grunig and Hunt (1989), were, however, unable to find many instances of symmetrical public relations.” No proof or research backs up their claims, as much of what is described is vague, questionable, and...
it is not clear where one model stops and where another one starts (Liechty & Springston, 1993). Therefore, the two-way communication models could be used for market research (Morris & Goldsworthy, 2012). Hence, despite Grunig and Grunig’s (1989) efforts to create a descriptive theory, they reluctantly acknowledge that the symmetrical models were primarily a normative theory (Leitch & Nielsen, 1997).

The concept of power in the asymmetric and symmetric models appears only as an absence (Coombs, 1993). Yet power should be present in these models, as it is a key element for analysis in social relations and theory (Leitch & Nielsen, 1997). This notion is supported by Fairclough (1995: 1-2) who states “Power is conceptualized both in terms of asymmetries between participants in discourse events, and in terms of unequal capacity to control how texts are produced, distributed and consumed (and hence the shapes of texts) in particular sociocultural contexts”. Karlberg (1996) further explains that the Grunig and Hunt models do not adequately distinguish the terms between ‘public’ and ‘organisation’, which is a primary reason that symmetrical communication and its ethics have been woven within these models. Thus, if public relations is about the relationship between an organisation and its publics, then it should be important to distinguish this rather than conflate them (Karlberg, 1996). Morris and Goldsworthy (2012) add that all effective PR contains some type of two-way communication, and PR practitioners need to always find a way to ‘listen’ across channels to deem if their message is being reached. The two-way symmetrical model is more ideal than reality. Hence, PR practitioners want to carefully consider the views of different publics, whilst ultimately serving the company’s better interest (Morris & Goldsworthy, 2012).

Morsing and Schultz (2006) further criticised Grunig and Hunt’s symmetrical and asymmetrical models claiming that what aspires to be a two-way communication mechanism is really portrayed as a one-way method to support and reinforce organisation’s actions and individuality. Morris and Goldsworthy (2012) go on to say the models appear to be self-serving: organisation’s reputational problems seem to be pushed away rather than attempting to engage with the realities of PR work. Thus these models seem to be more about advertising PR than analysing it (Macnamara, 2012).

There seems limited support for Grunig and Hunt’s Four Models of Public Relations, and in particular the asymmetrical and symmetrical two-way models. However, Ledington and Brunig (2000) examined the theoretical evolution of symmetrical communication and argue that these models were instrumental in shifting the management of publics and public opinion to the new emphasis on building, nurturing and maintaining relationships. These models further allowed organisations to build relationships with their publics, and to enhance organisations’ ability to achieve their missions (Kent & Taylor, 2002). This was a positive change from intrapersonal to interpersonal channels of communication, with the increase of media outlets, including cable television and internet (Ledington & Brunig, 2000).

Grunig and Grunig’s (1992) excellence theory developed in response to criticisms, and in its new form is a mix of several interesting applied theories. Grunig and Hunt progressively modified and clarified the Four Models of PR throughout the 1990s as the Excellence Theory unfolded (Mahoney, 2008; Macnamara, 2012). Hence, the original Four Models were integrated to make excellence theory (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Zerfass, Ruler & Sriramesh, 2008; Cain, 2009). Macnamara (2012: 197) confirms this integration by stating that, “Specially, PR excellence theory incorporates the situational theory of publics...the two-way symmetrical/ two-way contingency models of public relations...” Therefore, the notion of excellence theory with the symmetrical model helps organisations to understand expectations, to result in a positive outcome by the organisation and its publics (Cain, 2009). However, Zerfass et al. (2008: 338) argue that research suggests that “…the excellence departments designed more of their communication programs on the two-way symmetrical model of collaboration and public participation than on [the] three other typical models...” of PR. Nevertheless, excellence theory in Public Relations highlights the importance of authorisation in dominant and strategic decision-making fields to evidently help guide organisations (Cain, 2009). This theory further helps PR professionals to possess and practice their managerial roles, through the use of empowerment (L’Etang, 2008). Zerfass et al. (2008: 327) claim that excellence theory explains the “…value of public relations to an organisation and to identify the characteristics of public relations functions that increase its value.” The key features of excellence in public relations include, according to
Cain (2009: 74) “...strong cultures, symmetrical communication systems, empowering leadership, the decentralisation of strategic planning, entrepreneurship and social responsibility”. Hence, the key features focused initially on excellence in management and its impact on efficiency with an opinion to discover the implications for management of communication (Cain, 2009). Zerfass et al. (2008) further explain that the use of excellence theory has allowed organisations to empower publics in their decision-making process, whilst developing explanations of how this concept helps to benefit organisations.

Kietzmann et al.’s ‘Honeycomb of Social Media’ model (2011) defines the use of social media through seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups (see Figure 1). This framework provides implications for how each section of these blocks should be used to engage with the public. Additionally, each block examines a specific social media user’s experience, alongside its implications for organisations (Kietzmann et al. 2011).

Each block allows a PR professional or social media manager to examine a public’s experience of a social media site and how to specifically use the medium for the benefit of the organisation (Smith, Fischer & Yongjian, 2012). In this sense, Kietzmann et al. (2011: 243) explain that “These building blocks are neither mutually exclusive, nor do they all have to be present in a social media experience”. The blocks have been constructed to allow managers of social media sites to depict the different levels of each medium and how the functionality of social media pages can be changed (see Table 1).

Table 2: Outlining the Purpose and Functions of Kietzmann’s Seven Building Blocks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building Block</th>
<th>Purpose and Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>The ways in which consumers present themselves via a social media site, including name, age, gender, occupation and location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations</td>
<td>Represents the extent of how consumers communicate with other users in a social media setting, such as tweeting comments to meet likeminded people, find true love, build self-esteem, or to simply get the news out there first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>The extent to which publics exchange, distribute and receive content. Social media consists of consumers who are connected by shared content, of either an update, file, video or picture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence</td>
<td>The extent to which consumers can know if other consumers are accessible, including knowing where other consumers are, virtually and in real life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Represents the extent to which consumers can be related to others, through the interest which leads two consumers to converse or choose to follow/like an organisational page etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>The extent to which consumers can identify the standing of each other on any social media platform, through trust of the organisation and the content shared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>This represents how consumers can form communities and subcommunities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from: Kietzmann et al. 2011: 243-248

Organisations which use this framework as a guide to examine their publics’ experience with their social media pages should note that there are various aspects involved with using, functioning and monitoring technological mediums (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). They should not assume that profile information is completed, as consumers will have different hobbies and interests on the social page of Facebook compared to the business page of LinkedIn (Hammar-Lahav, 2007). Organisations also need tools and the capabilities which allow them to make sense of the short and speedy conversations presented on social media sites (Berthon et al. 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).
Hence, ‘conversation’ is the building block that outlines organisations starting or manipulating a topic through positive key messages (Smith et al. 2012). It should be noted that organisations should know when and when not to add to a conversation with consumers (Kietzmann et al. 2011). The organisational use of social media is to either converse or build relationships, which depends upon the functionality of the social media site (Berthon et al. 2007). Therefore, research should be conducted on what their publics have in common, to ideally bring to attention new objects which can mediate the organisations’ shared interests (Smith et al. 2012). Without this, publics will simply be formed together on a network without anything connecting them other than the organisation, which can lead to disloyalty and the consumers supporting a competitor (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Organisations also need to be mindful of a consumer’s availability and location (Smith et al. 2012). Hence, a firm may want to research if its publics have a desire for selective presences, i.e. when and where to be online, or choose to be ‘hidden’ (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). If the firm is seeking to engage with its publics, ideally it should understand how it can maintain and/or build relationship with them (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Reputation is a major aspect for organisations to be mindful of, not only of the business itself, but also of the content it chooses to share. If an organisation and its publics value their reputation, then a guideline must be produced of what and when content should be shared (Smith et al. 2012). Once an organisation has developed this, an appropriate evaluation tool (such as the number of likes a post receives etc.) can be used to monitor what their publics support and do not support (Kietzmann et al. 2011). It should be further noted that an organisation would benefit from studying which groups would be supported and how this will affect engagement of the other building blocks of the Honeycomb Model (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

There are limited studies which use this framework, due to it only being a new concept, however Helms, Booij and Spruit (2012) claim that this Honeycomb model is primarily aimed at characteristics related to users and the social capital of organisations, and therefore it fails to consider important content and time related aspects. Further, social media has introduced substantial and persuasive changes to communication between an organisation and its publics (Helms et al. 2012). This presents a challenge for firms, as consumers now want organisations to listen, engage and respond. Thus, it is advised by Kietzmann et al. (2011) for organisations to analyse the seven functional building blocks, and use them to monitor and understand how social media can be effectively and efficiently used to their benefit. Figure 1 illustrates the quadrants where the X and Y axis’s are represented by mean scores when conducting analysis into the levels of importance and performance.

Figure 1:
Kietzmann et al (2011) Matrix

Content analysis is predominantly used for research in the communication field (Weerakkody, 2009). Content analysis is used to explore the manifest messages contained in media and communications. The approach allows for categories to be ‘counted’ in order to arrive at a measure of their contribution towards the type of communication strategies being
used (Weerakkody, 2009). The process of content analysis recommended by Wimmer and Dominick (2003) is generally undertaken in ten steps as depicted in Table 3.

**Table 3:**
**Ten Steps to Conducting Content Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps of Content Analysis</th>
<th>How this will be conducted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Formulating a Research Question</td>
<td>How organisations in a particular sector use communication strategies via social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to interact with publics whilst promoting brand and image.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2. Defining the Universe | ● Social media use for organisations are the social online mediums which are used to communicate with publics.  
● An industry sector may comprise a web of diverse and well-known organisations. |
| 3. Sampling | To identify a sample of organisations in a particular industry sector and determine their social media use for promotional purposes. The analyses of social media tools such as Facebook or Twitter through the various postings over a period relevant to the industry. |
| 4. Selecting Units of Analysis | The unit of analysis would likely be headlines, words, pictures, videos, hyperlinks, comments, shares and ‘likes’. |
| 5. Constructing Content Categories | A coding schedule needs to be established with the use of open coding. |
| 6. Levels of Measurement of Items and their Coding Categories | Ordinal measurement (frequency) need to be used to depict the effectiveness of the communication strategies through the identification of target publics, tone, visuals and prominence. |
| 7. Conduction of a Pilot Study | A pilot study of the data should be conducted to ensure each of the categories of coding is suitable for analysis. |
| 8. Coding the Content | Using a coding schedule, the content should be coded from the pages on Facebook and/or Twitter. |
| 9. Analysing the Data | The data may need to be analysed manually using a spreadsheet. |
| 10. Interpretation of the Results, Making Conclusions and Reporting the Findings | The results may be used to respond to the research questions and objectives and the conclusion will engage with theories and models and address gaps identified earlier. |

Source Adapted from: Wimmer and Dominick, 2003: 145-156

While content analysis is useful to determine the latent content and enables a researcher to quantify words, themes and phrases, another approach deemed more useful for interpreting underlying meaning of text and deconstructing its ideological underpinning is the Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) which involves the following considerations:

- discourse-as-text which considers the linguistic features such as patterns in vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and text structure.
- discourse-as-discursive-practice as something that is produced, circulated, distributed consumed in society.
- discourse-as-social-practice which concerns power that is achieved through constructing alliances and integrating classes and groups through consent.

According to Janks (1997) the three dimensions espoused by Fairclough (1995) could also be summarized as; the object of analysis; the process by which the object is produced; and the socio-historical conditions under which the processes are governed, and the different types of analysis for each of these dimensions. Generally, industry practice may see more relevance with the quantitative content analysis approach as it offers findings in numerical form. Critical discourse analysis is a qualitative approach that attempts to read underlying meanings and offer critical interpretations of texts informed by theory. However, by combining content analysis with
critical discourse analysis, industry practice would benefit from more realistic findings. It is through critical research that organisations are challenged to make changes and engage in symmetrical communication. For example, in researching publics, industry has embraced qualitative methods such as focus groups, but in researching text and media content, industry appears reluctant to embrace critical textual analysis.

Drawing upon the textual research methods presented, the following model has been developed as a means of evaluating the use of social media in Public Relations practice, while offering new ways of researching social media communication. This model provides guidance for future research in the evolution of social media as an integral part of an organisation’s Public Relations and marketing strategy in the online environment. Figure 2 provides the overview of the links that apply to the analysis of the communication process.

**Figure 2:**
*Model of Social Media Communication Analysis*

The model employs a scientific paradigm in which the seven building blocks of Kietzmann et al. (2011) act as the initial lens (Brunswick, 1956) the outcome of this first stage is then subjected to analysis as a filter with the subsequent refraction providing the results in the form of interpretation.

**Discussion**

This paper offered a public relations perspective to the process of mediated communication that has and is being transformed by the revolution of media technology. In this sense, the paper offered a historical overview of communication and public relations models and theories through a synthesis of literature, while focusing on the impact of social media on individuals and public entities and its role in Public Relations practice. Early Public Relations models were critically analysed. While Public Relations models developed in the 1980s described various forms of practices, it is evident that each model was underpinned by the nature and role of mediated communication. Further, it is argued that (social) media communication plays a deterministic role in defining and shaping public relations practice, then and now. As media technology transformed, and as power shifts occurred, Public Relations has been challenged to practice with public interest at heart. In this regard, the symmetrical model and excellence theory were identified as reflective of current practice despite the fact that these models failed to make reference to the notion of power. Public Relations practitioners today deploy a range of new mediatised strategies and tactics to achieve organisational goals. Every emerging media form presents an emerging threat to public relations, yet it contributes to professionalising the practice and further empowers the practitioner within the organisation. In fact, social media has called for a redefinition and a re-contextualisation of public relations practice.

The paper argued that research is a necessary part of the process of managing new and emerging media and proposed a model of social media communication analysis suggesting the
use of mixed textual methods to research and analyse social media content. Public Relations practice has thus far researched publics and audiences through surveys and focus groups and while this remains important and relevant, it would be more effective to research publics and audiences through their online conversations and representations. Adapting applied content analysis with critical discourse analysis to read and interpret online conversations would enable organisations to engage more creatively and meaningfully with publics.

Future research in this area could benefit from expanding upon the models and framework presented in this paper. Empirical work on the effects of social media would benefit the organisations to engage more creatively and meaningfully with publics.

Future research may well examine the application of the model of social media communication analysis in terms of advertising or public relations activities.

References


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