

Running head: Critical Analysis Essay

Crisis Analysis Essay

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Introduction

In their article, "Social Media Communication in Organizations: The Challenges of Balancing Openness, Strategy, and Management," Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) describe the use and governance of social media policies in organizations based in Europe and Australasia. They created two surveys and conducted interviews with social media practitioners to determine use of social media in organizational settings. Additionally, the authors defined and described social media and its importance in modern society in order to identify effective and strategic ways for organizations to leverage its use.

The authors' goal was to examine the challenges facing corporations as their employees express themselves using social media both in and out of the workplace. They also sought to understand to what extent corporations were using social media for organizational communication and public relations. Additionally, the authors examined the policies and/or guidelines for social media use among employees of corporations in the Australasia and European regions.

Theories and Philosophical Perspectives

Macnamara and Zerfass were influenced and informed by two major theoretical frameworks: literature on strategic communication and public relations; and emerging understandings of social media (2012). According to most new literature on the topic, corporate communication and public relations are theorized within a framework of strategic communication and communication management while public relations is identified as a strategic managerial function (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). In Europe, public relations is often referred to as communication management and corporate communication, framed within a management context (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). The

authors also identify excellence theory and basic systems theory as part of modern public relations strategy.

Social media is defined as internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which is generally defined as a second generation of web-based services that feature openness for participation, collaboration, and interactivity (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Digital influencers consider the philosophy of Web 2.0 to include openness, trust, authenticity, relinquishing control, and emphasizing a participatory and interactive culture (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

Scope

The article: 1. defines and explains theories behind strategic organizational communication and social media, including Web 2.0; 2. uses scientific survey and interview methods to gauge social media knowledge and understanding in organizations, focusing on the Australasia and European regions; and 3. examines organizational control over employees' social media use and the corporate use of social media to directly engage with external audiences (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

Concepts of interest include: benefits of using social media for corporate and organizational communication and PR purposes; corporate communication and PR theorized within a framework of strategic communication; excellence theory; basic systems theory; social media built on the technological foundations of Web 2.0; and corporate policies and governance related to organizational and employee use of social media (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) created an online survey designed for professional corporate communication and PR practitioners in Australasia and Europe. The survey

recipients were identified as members of professional organizations and were emailed an invitation to participate in the survey. The survey sought to identify: 1. forms of social media used by organizations; 2. corporate communication and PR practitioners' level of understanding of social media; 3. how organizational objectives, strategy, and management are operationalized in social media; and 4. whether organizational social media objectives, strategy, and management can be operationalized in a way that is compatible with the philosophy, principles, and practices of social media (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

Methods

The authors used a mixed method approach to their study. Online surveys designed to provide comparable international data were sent to identified corporate communication and PR practitioners in three European countries, three Australasian countries, and one territory (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). The sampling for the online surveys was selected because PR and communication departments claim to be primarily responsible for organizational social media management in those regions.

The survey yielded 596 responses in Europe and was sufficient for strong statistical reliability in that region. The survey was not statistically reliable in the Australasia region because its response rate was just five percent. Additionally, the survey instruments differed in terminology between the regions, which rendered it unscientific and inappropriate for advanced statistical analysis. However, according to the authors, the purpose of the survey was exploratory rather than definitive, and Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) found that the survey provided useful insights into the views and practices of PR practitioners in Australasia and Europe.

The second stage of the study sought to test whether the self-reported results among the PR and corporate communication practitioners who took the survey were accurate and to further explore key issues of strategy, management, control, and organizational interests by conducting interviews with a selection of social media “experts” (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Interviews were conducted with 14 social media specialists in the Australasia region. For reasons left unexplained, qualitative interviews were not conducted in the European region.

Findings

The authors found that the most common types of social media used by organizations in Australasia and Europe were social networks such as Facebook, video sharing sites such as Youtube, microblogs such as Twitter, and “photo-sharing” sites (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). This is a good example of the differences between 2012, when the paper was published, and present day. A “photo sharing” site would today include Snapchat and Instagram, neither of which existed in 2012. Facebook and Youtube are still very popular in many countries, but there are other sites that may be more popular among younger employees in the Australasian and European regions.

The implications of these findings are largely irrelevant today because so much has changed in social media. Several popular social media applications didn’t even exist in 2012. For example, photo sharing was used by just 19 percent of European survey respondents (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). That number would definitely be much higher today. People throughout the world are much more advanced in their knowledge of social media because they spend much more time online in general today than they did in 2012. Additionally, most companies have firm policies and guidelines on social media use among

employees and all organizations have at least some sort of social media strategy, neither of which were necessarily true in 2012.

Strengths and Weaknesses

As discussed, a weakness of the article is that its findings are largely irrelevant today. Reading about social media trends and surveys tracking organizational knowledge of social media in 2012 is anachronistic because things have changed so much. For example, it doesn't matter how many organizations had social media guidelines in 2012 because virtually every organization does today. Additionally, only 23 percent of European corporate communication practitioners who responded to the survey reported a high knowledge about social media (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 297). That number would be 80 percent or higher today because social media is the most important aspect of most PR or corporate communication professionals' knowledge base. Additionally, few would question whether claims of advanced knowledge were over-stated (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 297) because PR firms and corporate communication departments are heavily focused on measuring social media impact using data and metrics, neither of which were commonly used in 2012.

Another weakness in the article is the fact that the survey given to PR and corporate communication practitioners in Australasia was not statistically significant. While the article may have provided "useful insights into the views and practices in Australasia and Europe (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 295)," a response rate of just five percent is not only highly statistically unreliable, it calls into question why the survey was published in the first place. The authors themselves even stated in the article that the survey is inappropriate for advanced statistical analysis. If more than five percent of PR and

corporate communication professionals in Australasia (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 295) were unable to return the survey, perhaps the entire paper should have been suspended until a more statistically reliable response rate could be achieved.

The article defines many concepts with clarity and detail and effectively explains the difference in PR and corporate communication roles and responsibilities in Europe and the United States. Many Americans may not know that, while the practices used are similar in America and Europe, they are referred to as strategic communication, communication management, and corporate communication in Europe (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 290). Public relations is an American term. Strategic communication is a term used worldwide, and the authors display a deep knowledge of the concept by defining and describing its philosophical origins and use in modern-day PR.

Conclusion

Overall, the article was well-thought out and presented in an in-depth and professional manner. However, it is not relevant to an American reader in 2018. Organizational guidelines of employee use of social media have changed so much in the past six years that what was done in 2012 has virtually no bearing on what is being done today. PR and corporate communication practitioners are almost completely focused on social media in their work and organizations have clearly defined social media policies and strategies for use of social media tools to promote their brands. Few would even think to conduct a survey today to measure what levels of knowledge and understanding of social media do PR and corporate communication practitioners claim to have, as the authors did in 2012. Such an answer is irrelevant because it is assumed that a vast majority of PR and

corporate communication practitioners worldwide have a high level of knowledge and understanding of social media.

The authors did succeed in defining and explaining the theoretical frameworks related to strategic communication, using dozens of references to describe concepts such as excellence theory, communication management, basic systems theory, and social media under Web 2.0 (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Of course, technology advances very quickly and studies published even months prior can be rendered irrelevant by new advancements. The article's findings were probably groundbreaking and highly insightful in 2012 and likely helped many corporate communication professionals determine appropriate levels of oversight and guidance for their companies' nascent social media policies. While the data may not be relevant in 2018, scholars would be wise to refer to this article as they create their own social media-focused surveys and studies for the next generation of PR and corporate communication professionals.

References

Macnamara, J. & Zerfass, A. (2012). Social media communication in organizations: the challenges of balancing openness, strategy, and management. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 6, 287-308. doi: 10.1080/1553118X.2012.711402