Social Media Adoption Among University Communicators

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Long interviews were conducted with university communicators at 2 distant universities with distinct social systems. Participants were drawn to adopt social media mainly by relative advantage, compatibility, and trialability attributes of the innovation. Inductive themes that emerged from the interviews included an emphasis on publics, information sharing, cost, and convenience. A believer–nonbeliever distinction among adopters is introduced. Believers are driven by the same characteristics of social media that public relations researchers have found to be essential to the practice of public relations itself: 2-way communication, interactivity, dialogue, and engagement.

Social media present a popular set of tools that allow public relations practitioners additional opportunities to establish and cultivate relationships and engage their publics. Sweetser and Weaver Lariscy (2008, p. 179), among others, have defined social media as being "centered around a concept of a read-write Web, where the online audience moves beyond the passive viewing of Web content to actually contributing to the content." Furthermore, "the term social media describes a set of technology tools that are just as they sound—mediated opportunities for bringing people together and encouraging social networking and dialogic communication" (Sweetser & Weaver Lariscy, 2008, p. 180).

University applicants, students and recent alumni are likely to overlap demographically with *Generation-Y* publics who are often assumed to be the most prevalent users of social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia, and blogs. University communicators span the boundaries between the student communities assumed to have already adopted social media and the university professionals feeling the gravity of the choices they must make regarding new media. Those who work in offices with titles such as *university relations, admissions, external affairs, student services, university development*, and *athletics* operate right where traditional hierarchical flow charts for communication meet free-for-all Facebook. University communicators are commonly examined with regard to their communication and relationships with key publics (e.g., Beard & Olsen, 1999; Bruning & Ralston, 2001; Hon & Brunner, 2001; Jo, Hon, & Brunner, 2004; Kang

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& Norton, 2006; McAllister & Taylor, 2007; Poock & Lefond, 2001). But are university communicators on track to join the new influencers who use social media to position themselves as the next generation of opinion leaders (Gillin, 2007; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005)? Or are they reluctant *influencees*? More important, what can be learned from university communicators about the diffusion of social media in public relations? The purpose of this study is to understand the adoption process for university communicators in terms of how and why they incorporate social media into their communication programs. Using qualitative interviews, this study examines the process and concerns associated with adoption among a group of practitioners whose primary publics include assumedly social-media-savvy stakeholders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kent (2008) and Wright and Hinson (2008, 2009) have examined blogs and social media and found a plethora of public relations trade research and professional literature on the topic, but far less scholarly research. In calling for future research, Kent (2008) highlighted the usefulness of blogs for persuasive communication, research, and environmental scanning. In response to open-ended questions to practitioners about social media in general, Wright and Hinson (2009) found that practitioners were excited about the direction social media are taking the field as relatively high-speed, low-cost options ''for facilitating more two-way communication by opening up direct channels of communications between organizations and their publics'' (p. 22). Participants in Wright and Hinson's (2009) study also mentioned the ability to ''bypass traditional media'' and in particular, ''reach new, younger audiences that we might not get to through traditional media'' (p. 22).

On the negative side, the issue of control is a double-edged concern. Too much control over blogs by organizations may seem ''propagandistic''; whereas having too little control raises fears of communication being ''altered, poorly placed, or not given adequate attention'' (Kent, 2008, p. 36). Wright and Hinson found that adding social media channels to an already crowded menu of communication options makes it harder for practitioners to ''manage and control information dissemination'' (2008, p. 19).

Studying new forms of communication technology as they emerge in public relations has been a fruitful approach to scholarship that connects public relations theory with practice. Many of the most appropriate questions for studying social media can be developed based on research on earlier media innovations. Consider the following quote from a 1997 public relations journal that flows just as naturally more than a decade later. ''In the past few years, professional trade communication journals have devoted considerable space to describing how to change public relations practice by employing new communication technologies'' (Johnson, 1997, p. 213). Of course, the trend continues, even as the technologies change. ''In analyzing the diffusion of technologies in public relations, it is interesting to investigate what is driving the change'' (Johnson, 1997, p. 214).

Johnson (1997) found that reaching specific audiences was high on the list of motivations for the public relations practitioners she interviewed in 1995. Of particular interest at the time was ''the under-35 Generation X group'' (Johnson, 1997, p. 223). She also found that practitioners were concerned about professionalism and the stress of living up to what ought to be done while facing increasing workload expectations. Although the under-35 group has changed to include

Generation Y and the Web has been upgraded in the minds of communication experts to Web 2.0 to describe a more interactive exchange forum, it is unclear which motivations and worries have changed and which are constant as the landscape of new media changes.

Although higher education Web sites have been content analyzed in the context of public relations (e.g., Kang & Norton, 2006; McAllister & Taylor, 2007; Rudolph & Sweetser, 2010), and public relations researchers have studied organization–public relationships in university settings (e.g., Bruning & Ralston, 2001; Jo et al., 2004; McAllister-Spooner, 2009b), public relations theory will be informed further by inquiry into the adoption of media innovations that connect university communicators with their generally younger key publics.

THE INTERNET, INTERACTIVITY AND PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH

Since the late 1990s, many public relations researchers have examined what Kent and Taylor (1998) identified as the Internet's great potential for dialogic communication. Generally, researchers in this stream of public relations scholarship have studied Web sites by tallying technical features such as site maps, search boxes, and downloadable documents to serve as distal measures of interactivity and hence evidence of dialogic potential. For example, McAllister and Taylor (2007) conducted a content analysis of 19 community college Web sites in New Jersey. They found that the sites included many dialogic features, but they also identified an ''overall lack of interactive features that solicit input and feedback from key stakeholders'' (McAllister & Taylor, 2007, p. 232). McAllister-Spooner (2009a) reviewed a decade of research in this vein and articulated a major concern with this approach. Although many organizations employ Web sites with dialogic features, these sites are often ''very poorly used dialogic tools. . . . They are easy to use, offer useful information, but they do not do the dialogic functions very well'' (p. 329). Web sites alone, of course, do not do dialogue. People do.

McAllister-Spooner (2008) cited a void in research examining two-way communication between colleges and their publics (e.g., prospective and current students) via online media. McAllister-Spooner (2008) extended the study of dialogic potential to include usability testing. She found that the community colleges she studied were not making effective use of their Web sites for interaction with key publics.

Rudolph and Sweetser (2010) took up this issue by examining the trend of university-sponsored student blogs. Half freshman tell-all, half campus brochure, such university relations-sponsored blog sites are hosted officially by the university, and students are selected and trained by university relations to act as information ambassadors. These blogs appear to be geared more toward recruiting new students, but some do offer a more organic feedback opportunity to hear from an ''official'' at a university—even though she may be an 18-year-old freshman.

Programs such as these blog integration experiments are likely the result of these key publics' (i.e., potential students and their families) desire to have more dialogue with the universities and to find a more human face to the organizations (McAllister-Spooner, 2009b). In a survey of 86 US-based high school students and 96 parents/guardians of high school students, McAllister-Spooner (2009b) found that both groups desire more dialogic features on college and university Web sites.

Bortree and Seltzer (2009, p. 318) added ''organizational engagement'' to the dialogic strategies originally proposed by Kent and Taylor (1998) and Taylor, Kent, and White (2001).

Bortree and Seltzer (2009) looked for evidence in the Facebook profiles of environmental advocacy groups that members of the organization had actually commented in dialogic spaces. They found that this strategy ''exhibited the most significant relationships'' with actual dialogic outcomes including user posts, network activity, network growth, network extensiveness, network growth, user responses, and organization response to users (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009, p. 318).

Kelleher (2009) discussed how organizational blogs afford contingency interactivity, which is the actual back-and-forth communication between members of an organization and the readers and responders who constitute online publics. Kelleher cited Sundar, Kalyanaraman, and Brown (2003) to contrast contingency interactivity with the functional interactivity commonly sought in studies of dialogic potential. He found that the perceived conversational voice of bloggers was statistically associated with relational outcomes such as trust, control mutuality, and commitment. Kelleher and Miller (2006) presented experimental evidence that blogs may be perceived as carrying more of a conversational human voice than traditional Web pages used as instruments for public relations.

Yang and Kang (2009) tested a four-dimensional scale of blog engagement that defined blog engagement as ''the likelihood and outcomes of interactive blog communication that encompasses cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral attachment'' (p. 323). The dimensions included contingency interactivity, self-company connection, attitudes toward company, and word-of-mouth intentions.

Public relations researchers have begun to shift their focus from technical features of Web pages as evidence of dialogic potential to the actual interaction of organizations and publics online via blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook. This shift over the course of the first decade of the new millennium parallels a simultaneous shift in practitioner interest in social media as highlighted by Kent (2008) and Wright and Hinson (2008, 2009). These trends raise important questions of how public relations practitioners are responding to the introduction of social media into their professional environments.

SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Recent quantitative research has suggested that social media have been at least partially adopted by a majority of public relations practitioners who are members of prominent international professional organizations. Wright and Hinson (2009) surveyed 574 public relations practitioners from the Arthur W. Page Society, from the International Public Relations Association, and from lists provided by the Institute for Public Relations, and found that 93% reported spending part of their workdays ''with some aspects of blogs and social media'' (p. 21). However, the nature and extent of practitioner use remains questionable. For example, 88% of 200 nonprofit and foundation executive directors and communicators who were interviewed via telephone for a Weber Shandwick/KRC Research survey in July and August of 2009 reported ''experimenting'' with social media, but only 51% reported ''active'' use of social media (Massey, 2009, ¶ 2). Also, a recent survey of public relations practitioners in corporate America at Fortune 500 companies revealed that social media adoption within the practice had not yet reached critical mass (Sweetser, Avery, Lariscy, & Howes, 2009).

In an experimental design with participants from one local chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), Kelleher (2008) found that practitioners who perceived social

media (e.g., blogs) to be a normal part of their organization's day-to-day communication were less likely to choose an accommodating stance toward a key public than practitioners in non-social-media conditions when facing a scenario in which organizations and publics were engaged with a contentious issue. Kelleher's (2008) empirical findings with a limited population corroborate Kent's (2008) suggestion and Wright and Hinson's (2008, 2009) findings that in some situations social media are not particularly welcomed by practitioners if these newly introduced options mean ceding control. Kelleher assigned participants to social media conditions rather than allowing them to self-select. Voluntariness of adoption may be an important moderating variable in practitioner adoption of new technologies, as discussed in detail by Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, and Davis (2003). A year later, in a survey sampling from the same population as Kelleher (2008), Diga and Kelleher (2009) found that those who used social networking sites and social media tools (sans experimental assignments) were more likely to report feeling empowered to their current position, has greater perceived expertise, and fel greater prestige within their organizations. Diga and Kelleher worked from Porter and colleagues' model of power and new media use in public relations (e.g., Porter & Sallot, 2005; Porter, Sweetser Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007).

At this stage of research and theoretical development, a qualitative approach seems most appropriate to allow more in-depth discussion of the factors influencing not only adoption but also active use of social media, which requires human participation.

One area of theory that seems particularly well suited for examining the adoption of social media by public relations practitioners is diffusion of innovations.

DIFFUSION OF SOCIAL MEDIA INNOVATIONS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

The theory of diffusion of innovations has been applied in myriad contexts since Everett Rogers articulated the ideas he learned from rural sociology in the 1940s and 1950s (Rogers, 2003). Diffusion theory helps frame questions of adoption of social media by public relations people by underscoring the importance of attributes of the innovations, the communication channels involved in diffusion, the decision processes of adopters over time, and the social systems in which adopters live and work.

Johnson's (1997) research was largely driven by diffusion theory. Likewise, Taylor and Perry (2005) examined the diffusion rate of Internet technologies among organizations in the context of public relations. They found that the use of online technologies was still evolving and that ''multiple factors play a role'' in the adoption and use of Internet features in crisis communications (Taylor & Perry, 2005, p. 216).

Whereas Johnson (1997) looked at fundamental information and communication technologies such as e-mail, CD-ROMs and Web pages, and Taylor and Perry (2005) looked at functions of organizational Web pages including links, polls, hot buttons, and real-time chat, this study aims to define social media as the innovation of interest.

Blogs and media-sharing sites like YouTube are prime examples of what public relations practitioners may call social media. Social networking sites qualify as well. Boyd and Ellison defined social network sites as ''Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system'' (2007, p. 2).

Rogers (2003) defined diffusion as ''the process by which (1) an *innovation* (2) is *communicated* through certain *channels* (3) over *time* (4) among the members of a *social system*'' (p. 11). In further explicating the concept, he described the perceived attributes of innovations. *Relative advantage* is ''the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes'' (Rogers, 2003, p. 15). Relative advantage is assessed through the eyes of the adopter, and can be measured through social prestige, satisfaction, etc. He defined *compatibility* as ''the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters'' (Rogers, 2003, p. 15). For this attribute, innovations that are easily integrated into the existing system without revision of values or processes are more easily adopted. *Complexity* is defined as ''the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use'' (Rogers, 2003, p. 16). Parsimony is key with regard to the concept of complexity in that easy-to-understand ideas are more quickly adopted. *Trialability* refers to the ''degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis'' (Rogers, 2003, p. 16). Research shows that innovations or ideas that can be easily adopted on a trial basis, without much risk and the ability to discontinue, will be more quickly adopted (Rogers, 2003). Finally, *observability* ''is the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others'' (Rogers, 2003, p. 16). Rogers suggested a positive correlation between likelihood to adopt and how visible results of the innovation are.

METHOD

In studying innovations, what is innovative is in the eye of the beholder. Rogers (2003) emphasized the subjective nature of newness and cited Markus (1987) to explain how innovations are socially defined. ''In order to explore the nature of a process, one needs a dynamic perspective,'' Rogers (2003) wrote, noting that the data needed for this perspective ''are typically more qualitative in nature'' than diffusion studies designed to describe variance in larger populations (p. 196). Given the unknown number of factors that drive adoption of social media in public relations, the following qualitative approach was developed.

Sampling

This study used a nonrandom purposive sampling technique. Researchers conducted qualitative interviews of 26 university communicators across the United States from [southeastern university] ($n = 15$) to [Pacific university] ($n = 11$) in 2008 and 2009 to understand the process of adopting social media. Participants included 17 female practitioners and 9 male practitioners.

The communicators selected ranged from university-level public-affairs-type personnel who work in university relations, admissions, libraries, and athletic associations to college- and academic-unit level communicators who work in the universities' professional colleges (including law, business, and communications), leadership programs, and liberal arts colleges.

The first round of interviewees were selected after researchers identified social media tools on unit Web sites. Units that posted links or mentions of podcasts, blogs, Facebook presence, Twitter presence, viral video, chat options, or other social media tools were marked for recruitment for this study. Once a unit was identified, the researchers contacted the public relations practitioner. If a public relations practitioner was not clearly apparent, researchers contacted

the appropriate unit leader (e.g., vice president, chair, etc.) to identify the communicator behind the project. Potential participants were advised that the researchers wanted to discuss social media tools.

All communicators interviewed spoke on behalf of their units, which had already adopted at least one social media tool to be selected to participate in the study. Strategic yet nontechnical communicators were interviewed first, and then a snowball method was used to expand the sample from those previously interviewed. The snowball sampling employed here applied the technique of asking existing participants to suggest other possible participants. A working list of potential participants was then revised and culled based on the purpose of the study until researchers reached a point at which most the suggested new participants were either outside of the universities studied, inappropriate for the study's purpose (e.g., instructional faculty), or among those already interviewed. One IT director and two webmasters were included based on their influence in the social system as identified by other participants.

Interview Procedure

Long interviews, similar to in-depth interviews, were employed as the primary method. According to Hon (1995, p. 39), long interviews with public relations practitioners may ''go beyond studying individual perceptions and feelings — identifying shared mental categories among participants as the primary goal'' while still providing ''an opportunity for (practitioners) to speak for themselves.'' This method allowed participants to freely discuss the technology cluster of social media and explore specific social media tools employed by the communicator's unit. As Rogers (2003, p.14) noted in discussing technology clusters, the question of ''where one innovation stops and another begins ... ought to be answered by the potential adopters who do the perceiving.'' Researchers were careful to allow participants to identify and explore their own categories in their own terms. Interview guides were designed and followed to help strike the balance between keeping the interviews on topic and making sure that the responses were true to the participants' own ideas and experiences.

Interviews were conducted in locations selected by the professionals, typically their offices. Participants were given a brief description of the study for the purpose of informed consent and asked for permission to audiotape the interviews.[1] Interviews ranged from 30 min to 2 hr, as participants were encouraged to delve further into topics when appropriate. Researchers reviewed recordings, transcripts, and interview notes and analyzed them according to the elements of diffusion set forth by Rogers (2003), while also pursuing any inductive categorization specific to public relations.

Previous studies of public relations practitioners using this approach have relied on a similar number of interviews to gain valuable theoretical insights (Frohlich & Peters, 2007; Johnson, 1997; Wrigley, 2002). The value of the findings sought for this study lies in the adopters' perspectives and the heuristic categories that emerge from participants' subjective interpretations. The sample was not drawn to generate quantitative inferences. For anonymity in reporting results, participants were labeled alphabetically in the order in which interviews were scheduled and conducted.

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[1]In three cases in one university-level unit, interviewees opted to respond in writing to the questions on the interview guide after a brief face-to-face introductory interview.

RESULTS

The Innovation

To understand the innovation in the eyes of each practitioner interviewed, researchers began each interview by asking the university communicator to define social media in his or her own words. As necessary, a definitional prompt for the term *social media* was provided in the form of examples, though few needed it. The purpose of this question was to allow the communicators to define what social media meant to them professionally, and later to tease out specific technologies, which were then discussed in detail.

Participants overwhelmingly defined social media in terms of being online, interactive, user-generated, two-way communication. Participant I said, ''Social media, to me, means that the information doesn't all belong in the heads of us,'' referring to the university, ''but it is more of a two-way process.'' Building on this, Participant K noted the collaboration involved among ''different media channels . . . accessible by general population that have ability for input and output as opposed to other channels like radio.'' Participant X referred to ''any form of media that involves public interactions.''

To others, the distinguishing characteristic of social media wasn't so much participation but reach. Participant A referred to ''another means of being able to interact on a more global scale.'' Participant G focused on the viral nature of the communication, noting that it is very easily spread among interpersonal groups. Likewise, Participant S emphasized the importance of tools that ''encourage networking.'' Participant J said it could be both ''formal and informal.''

Almost all participants also defined social media with the tools of which the cluster consists. Participants A and W referred to ''all this Facebook stuff,'' and ''all the Web 2.0 stuff,'' respectively. Participant W then elaborated on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and Ning, and participant C noted that the ''best way to define it is with examples—Facebook, blog, wikis.''

Next, interviewers explored the perceived attributes of the innovation. Although relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability were not explicitly introduced in the interview procedure, questions about when and why communicators adopted social media yielded many answers consistent with these categories.

Attributes of Social Media

Relative advantage.   Overwhelmingly, the communicators noted the advantages that social media provided in allowing geographically dispersed stakeholders, such as alumni or other people at other universities, to experience content from the university. Podcasting of special lectures and events was cited here. In this way, the social media tools allowed the university or unit to build both relationships and reputation. Participant C asked, ''Do I believe that right now (this tool) is going to help me do what I've got to do?'' and went on to talk about the extensive internal use of wikis within that unit's team. This participant found wikis, in particular, to be beneficial because they help geographically dispersed people keep abreast of current information and enable them to collaborate.

Communicators also noted the immediacy of social media. In this regard, the informal voice and two-way, interactive communication were perceived as key advantages. Participant K called

it a ''higher level'' and ''more personal interactive component,'' referring to the deeper communication and greater opportunity for real engagement.

Relative advantage also centered on a key university stakeholder group already using the technology cluster: students. Many noted that young people who the universities were either recruiting or currently serving as students were digital natives already immersed in the social media landscape. In contrast to traditional media, Participant T perceived a ''competitive advantage'' in using social media ''to attract and maintain a younger demographic, which is adept and attuned to social media'' Participant G felt that ''If [students] are there and that is where they naturally are, then you have to go to [that] market. . . . We need to be there.''

Illustrations of how social media provided a relative advantage within the social system highlighted how major stakeholder groups already were operating in these spaces. Participant F said ''Students love [blogs], it seems; that is what they want to see.'' Participant P said the allure to incorporating a social site like Facebook into the unit's communication efforts revolved around the existing popularity of Facebook with students: ''We are not invading their space, but we know they are here . . . they don't always respond back to us but we know they hear us.''

Another relative advantage of social media is the ability for practitioners to laser target publics, a concept that Porter and Sallot (2005) described when talking about the Internet in general. Participant P noted that Facebook afforded the ability to target subpopulations of stakeholders with great success in ways that traditional approaches had not previously permitted.

In determining relative advantage, many participants compared similar tools such as Facebook and MySpace, even conducting a ''cost-benefit analysis,'' as Participant Q described, prior to adoption. Through this process, several participants mentioned that they were more likely to adopt tools that were more in line with their public face (citing MySpace as less professional than Facebook). This concern that newer media remain consistent with the organization's values also resonates with compatibility as an attribute of social media innovations.

Compatibility.   For many of the communicators, compatibility with their traditional job functions such as media relations, driving traffic to the Web site, and preserving the university brand was of utmost importance.

In deciding to host an official blog, Participant T, a former journalist, cited the popularity of the local daily metropolitan newspaper's blog as evidence that a blog could work as legitimate university communications tool. Consistent with a traditional gatekeeper model, the blog adopted in this case is actually hosted by the newspaper, with blog entries vetted by university officials in much the same manner as traditional news releases.

Participant X cited the lack of funding for extensive marketing in his unit as a main motivation for using social media as a cost-effective ''vehicle to drive people to the main web site.'' Consistent with the traditional university relations function of preserving a standard identity in mass and mediated communications, Participant S reported maintaining Facebook pages is a way to clearly identify official university Web sites and differentiate them from unofficial groups and pages.

Communicators also looked to their peers and their peer institutions to determine compatibility with values of the broader social system of higher education. Participant B looked at ''whether my colleagues or the people I have to talk to have adopted it in some form or another'' before choosing to adopt a specific social media tool. Participant A talked about looking at how other institutions would use blogs in determining how to integrate the concept. Participant W,

representing a professional school, discussed using social media, Twitter in particular, to follow other professional schools and ''related Twitterers'' in the same field. Of course, identifying what others value to assess compatibility often requires being able to observe. Here, compatibility and observability overlap. As Rogers has written, the perceived attributes in the general classification system are not mutually exclusive and are ''somewhat related empirically'' (2003, p. 223).

Complexity.   Results were mixed for complexity. Several communicators noted ease of use as a key advantage. They found it easy to repurpose existing digital files for social media such as podcasting or viral video sites. However, others found social media to be more difficult and time consuming.

Participant A talked about hearing about blogs via mainstream media, but initially having difficulty understanding the professional application. Participant A summed up a common sentiment on complexity well by saying ''Unless you actually use it, you don't really get it.'' And many agreed with Participant F that it takes a lot of time and energy to ''keep up with what is going on and what others are doing.'' This becomes increasingly difficult and challenging among smaller units where there is just a single technical person to rely on to incorporate new social media features. Participant F reported ''a little concern about the [limitations] of my Web site,'' referring to the backend construction (content management system) running the overall unit Web site (not the social media tool itself).

Others described social media integration as being ''quick'' and ''easy.'' A distinct correlation became apparent among those who felt that social media were easy to use: The number of social media tools used related positively to their assessment of quality of social media features.

Participant J said putting up podcast files was easy because one could repurpose existing digital files. Participant K felt that social media did not require a great level of skill, emphasizing it is ''quick and easy from our end to set something up, get it out there quickly, and maintain it.'' Participant X described a process of adopting progressively easier tools. For example, Facebook was easier than traditional Web pages for reaching out to students and encouraging student and community participation in unit events. Within a few months, Participant X had launched a Twitter account for his unit, noting that it was ''so much easier'' than Facebook. At the time of the interview, he had learned to use feeds and RSS to easily update several Web sites and social network profiles with a single post or to link to new multimedia material via YouTube ''without extra workload.'' However, he also mentioned later in the interview that he wished he had another full-time employee to fully take advantage of the opportunities that social media offer.

Trialability.   In regard to trying new social media technology, Participant B said, ''We've gone in and tested it'' and played with technology, but integrating specific tools long-term was not planned for an on-going basis. Likewise, Participant S talked about first using Twitter as a ''test'' and discussed ''playing with'' Facebook and other tools. Participant W talked about discontinuing a listserv for newly admitted students and replacing it with Ning (a password-protected social networking site hosted by the unit). She then labeled the Ning site as ''a totally worthy experiment.'' Participant P noted that, in the beginning, Facebook appeared to be a tool that could easily be tested: ''If we didn't' get any responses, then it would have fallen to the wayside like other things we've tried.'' Participant Q expressed a similar sentiment: ''We won't waste our time to maintain something that isn't viable anymore.''

Yet, in most cases mentioned, participants continued the projects with no defined plans to discontinue. One question in the interview guide read, ''How long will you continue to use this medium?'' Researchers were commonly met with confused stares in response, or with open-ended predictions such as ''I don't see an end to it'' (Participant X) or ''as long as Facebook, in general, continues to be a powerful social networking site'' (Participant V).

Trialability is one area where respondents often broadened the context of the interviews beyond their official roles. A vast majority of the practitioners discussed using social media for personal reasons before integrating the tools into their professional communication programs, which suggests trialability often occurs on a personal level prior to professional adoption.

Observability. Although the very use of social media to communicate with others indicates observability, most participants noted it only implicitly as a key factor in adopting social media for their units. Implying a common theme that being observed by others who already have adopted social media tools is important, Participant G noted that ''The more people [who are implementing social media] the more obvious it becomes that you have to participate.''

In contrast, Participant S downplayed the importance of observability saying that the most important question to consider in adopting is whether the tools are ''effective for what I want to achieve,'' as opposed to whether they indicate being on some sort of ''bandwagon.''

Elements in the Diffusion Process

Communication channels. According to Rogers (2003, p. 18), the ''essence of the diffusion process is the information exchange through which one individual communicates a new idea to one or several others.'' As such, it is defined as a very social process involving interpersonal relationships, and in the case of professional adoption it also involves organizational communication. Influencers may be mainstream media sources or social media evangelists in the case of organizational adoption. For personal adoption, which the participants did discuss, personal contacts or friends appeared to be influential opinion leaders.

For professional adoption, the most noted channels of influence were found to be mainstream media and other universities. Participant A noted, ''In public relations, we are always reading the media,'' citing media as a major source for keeping up with the profession. When it comes to how participants reported first hearing about specific technology tools the university or unit implemented, mainstream media were overwhelming reported as a source. However, when it came to decisions to actually adopt for professional purposes, participants, by far, agreed that they took cues via more interpersonal communication with professional peers and via group communication with those serving in similar jobs at other universities. Participant B revealed, ''If other universities are using it, then of course we have to look twice at it,'' and Participant F echoed this: ''There's quite a few universities who have used blogs . . . and have been successful.'' Communications from trade and professional groups also influenced adoption. Participant X reported deciding to use Twitter largely based on what he read in trade group e-mail. Participant S mentioned being influenced to use Twitter after hearing from fellow members of a local PRSA chapter.

Time. With regard to time, innovations can again be charted not only by when one first hears of an innovation, but also when one adopts its use. Key to this element of diffusion is

the innovation-decision process, which commonly moves the potential adopter through stages of (a) knowledge, (b) persuasion, (c) decision, (d), implementation, and (e) confirmation (Rogers, 2003). This process allows the potential adopter to decrease uncertainty about the innovation through an information-seeking and information-evaluation process. This innovation–decision process leads either to innovation adoption, rejection, or discontinuance. The innovation–decision process timeline varies for individuals, and it is through the amount of time that passes as one travels from innovation awareness to adoption that the classic adopter categories emerge: (a) innovators, (b) early adopters, (c) early majority, (d) late majority, and (e) laggards.

For Participant A, the lag between hearing about blogging as a social media tool and adopting it was great. Participant A reported hearing about blogs via the media in 2005, a time when already more than a quarter of all people online were reading blogs (Pew Internet and American Life, 2005) but did not start seriously thinking about blogs for the university until the 6 months prior to the interview, in 2008. This pattern, with only a few exceptions, was the norm for these university communicators when discussing specific social media tools. It appears that the university communicators were often tipped off about the importance of social media through more mainstream media. They then waited for some evidence of critical mass in adoption among users in their social systems before beginning professional integrations. Considering the investment of time involved in maintaining social media tools, this is not necessarily a poor approach to managing communication projects. The flip side to the blog readership statistic cited is that 62% of people in the national sample in 2004 said they didn't even know what blogs were (Pew Internet and American Life, 2005).

Innovators may be described as venturesome, but that adventure comes with risk. The next group, *early adopters*, often earns respect in social systems. However, *early majority* adopters who follow innovators and early adopters generally are more deliberate in their decision processes (Rogers, 2003). Following innovators and early adopters while leading the majority of the broader US population (and apparently the majority of those within their more specific social systems) places most the participants in this study in the category of early majority. The exceptions were those who were dealing with prospective and new students. These communicators appeared to accept a greater amount of risk in the name of either novelty or more personal interactions. In cases such as these, those conducting recruitment activities seemed to work ahead of those more focused on branding and image efforts. For example, those handling recruiting and admissions appeared to use blogs and other social media tools like chat, Skype, and Ning sooner and more frequently than those working on general university or unit communication efforts focused on branding.

Social system.   The social system refers to a ''defined set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal'' (Rogers, 2003, p. 23). In this case, the social systems observed were the universities with a particular emphasis on the communicators charged with public relations and related functions. These social structures have various points of hierarchy in that an academic unit (individual college, department) may exist within a university. Within an observed social system, opinion leaders are influential and can work with change agents to bring about adoption. Participant A discussed an example of the influence of an opinion leader. According to Participant A, this opinion leader directly asked a group of university communicators '' 'How are you folks reaching out via the Internet [. . .] where are you advertising, what are you looking at, is anyone familiar with, are you using

Facebook?,' and all of a sudden we went 'Hmmm, we haven't really gone down that avenue yet'.'' According to Participant A, many members of that audience then began to start experimenting with Facebook on a personal basis to begin to understand the community.

The most important and applicable aspects to the social system examined here deal with the consequences of the innovation on the system. Risk in adoption and ''losing control'' of the message or medium was an issue all of the communicators mentioned, though in varying degrees. On one hand, there were the very cautious (i.e., deliberate) communicators who appeared to let the risk associated with specific tool adoption hold them back. This is illustrated through comments like those from Participant C, who admitted not wanting to set up a blog because the participant was ''afraid I'll get consumed with the comments posted'' on that blog. Similarly, Participant E discussed the importance of having safeguards against erroneous material that might populate social media spaces. Participant I discussed how social media ''(distributed) the responsibility'' for creating content in that users who wouldn't normally be able to post content to the university's Web site are now able to do so.

Earlier adopters certainly understood the risks, but were less inhibited by them. These communicators mentioned concerns of loss of message control to a much lesser extent. Participant G admitted to being concerned with the balance between authenticity and image, noting that if you ''control (the content) then it loses its effect and the genuine conversation students are having with each other.''

Other system concerns dealt with the technology itself. Participant B noted, ''If it's too cutting edge and new and hasn't met those requirements in terms of ease of use and people being interested then I'm less likely to spend any time with it.'' Staffing and project management also came into play here, as Participant D said one had to ''have someone to keep it up to date because if you aren't current and up-to-date on it then people will stop visiting. . . . You have to have the resources whether it is supervising workers or having staff to make it part of their job responsibility'' and discussed setting up a routine.

Participant D also described the unit Web site as a ''mess'' with little organizational structure or support historically as an excuse for not having yet adopted social media nor having any immediate plans to do so in the future. ''The priorities . . . are to getting the Web site fixed and getting it up to basic standards.'' Participant F considers production quality, download time for users, and content in the decision making process as to whether specific content will be loaded to the unit's Web site. Participant J discussed the inherent risk the university accepts by using third-party software system (e.g., Facebook) because rules internally may or may not apply (privacy policy, etc.). In sum, participants discussed more risks than quelled concerns with regard to social media's effect on their systems.

Themes

In addition to the elements of diffusion defined in prior literature and examined previously, several inductive themes emerged from the interviews. The emerging themes were specific enough to the management of public relations work that they should be explored separately here. The major themes were publics, information sharing, cost/efficiency, and convenience.

Publics.   With regard to publics, the general consensus was that current and prospective students already were in these spaces. Participant L said, ''We're dealing with15-, 16-, 17-year-olds

who are very accustomed to this kind of . . . content, and they gauge schools now based on how interactive, how robust their Web sites are, what types of media are they utilizing with which to contact students. . . . Although it's an expensive proposition or pricey one, with the volume that we're dealing with, it's probably the most effective way to communicate with students.'' Participants time and time again stressed that with the millennial generation, universities would ''miss out'' if they were not online communicating in the spaces the youth occupy.

Information sharing.   Information sharing was a theme that crosscut publics. Participants expressed a sense that their organizations—both individual units and whole institutions—held a wealth of knowledge and resources on campus that were not being fully shared with the world. Participants indicated a desire to better serve their publics by further opening up the university through podcasts and video of special events and lectures on campus. Participant G noted, ''We just want people to see (the college) as a resource; not just a resource for education but a resource for expertise.'' From admissions to fundraising aspects, communicators saw this as a meaningful way to share the product of the university with their publics.

Cost/efficiency.   Cost savings and efficiency often were cited as main factors in adopting technology. From facilitating an increase in communication to improving the quality of that communication with one's publics, the university communicators felt that they could talk to more people on a more human level. Although they acknowledged costs in terms of time and effort, many described social media as ''free,'' compared to paid media such as advertising. For recruiting purposes, participants talked about using technology like chat or video programs such as Skype to talk with prospective students and the community-building capacity of social networks such as Ning. Each of these tools have the benefit of cost savings on printed materials, postage, telephone charges, etc. From a more technical perspective, a few of the respondents pointed out that using third-party software takes the strain off the university's servers if other sites are storing and serving their video or large multimedia files.

Convenience.   Many participants cited convenience as they discussed various types of social media tools. For blogs, they said that adding content to a blog was easier than a Web site. For podcasts, convenience was found in the mobility of the content. One respondent noted that the admissions process in her unit is going paperless, and that social media platforms are useful in easing the transition away from paper-based systems. This convenience was noted to not only be an advantage for the publics served, but also for the communicators in charge of sharing content.

DISCUSSION

By research design, all of the participants in this study had adopted some form of social media and integrated it into their unit's online presence to be eligible to participate. A layer beneath that surface criterion, however, emerged groups of what we call *believers* and *nonbelievers*. The believers reflect what most observers would expect to find in a group of communication professionals working for institutions charged with innovation as part of their organizational missions. Believers find social media easy to use. They assign less weight to the barriers or risks associated with integration. For them, adoption is an easier choice. Like the respondents in Wright and Hinson's research (2008, 2009), they understand the risks associated with integrating specific

tools where the organization may lose some control of the message. However, they indicate that the advantages outweigh such concerns. They see social media as the future for creating meaningful connections with their publics, and although all of them may not be considered innovators, they can reasonably be categorized ''early majority'' if not ''early adopters.'' These participants appeared to be intrinsically driven by the social affordances of social media. They voluntarily adopt the innovations. In line with earlier literature (i.e., Kent, 2008; Wright & Hinson, 2008, 2009), they displayed noticeable interest in discussing the new opportunities that social media have provided for them to engage in more direct communication with publics. Participant X, for example, embraced the opportunity to turn his office into a ''sort of news service'' and, in doing so, being able to bypass news media as intermediaries.

However, this study also revealed other reasons for enthusiasm. Participants were excited about how their publics can use social media to engage each other, ''creating a sense of community from the get-go'' according to Participant W and being ''viral in nature'' according to Participant X.

Those we call the nonbelievers have adopted social media, but their use seems to be more extrinsically driven. They tend to focus on the risks associated with adopting the social media technology cluster. They appear to be integrating it mainly to keep up with other universities and units. Nonbelievers remain skeptical about the benefits, and often find the technology aspects overwhelming. Although they may have made time for social media, they are less likely to report increased efficiency, and they are wary about the consequences.

Many of the believers work in admissions and recruiting, and seem to ''believe'' more than the academic-unit-focused participants for several reasons. First, the unit-focused practitioners are pulled between many different publics, spanning generations. From current students to alumni and faculty, these publics likely vary widely in technology use and acceptance. Investing attention and resources into an innovation for communication not widely adopted by later adopters in the stakeholder groups reduces the efficiency of the technology integration. In discussing the diffusion of *interactive innovations*—a classification that certainly befits social media—Rogers (2003) cited the importance of reciprocal influence between later and earlier adopters in which later adopters actually have influence on earlier adopters.

Likewise, the ''reciprocal interdependence'' of adopters of interactive innovations helps explain the decision processes of the believers (Rogers, 2003, p. 344). Admissions staff members, for example, communicate with a more focused set of younger stakeholders. They find prospective students to be digital natives and, therefore, early adopters of social media. Given that admissions people typically work with fewer publics (mainly students and parents), it makes more sense for them to adopt the technology. Furthermore, the nature of the work in admissions and recruiting allows for a greater risk to be taken with implementing new technologies. If a technology program doesn't work, the groups within these stakeholder publics reset each year. Finally, the practitioners in this study working in admissions often were younger—many of them being recent graduates themselves—than their counterparts across campus working in more unit-specific university relations roles.

In any case, believers—those we have identified as early and enthusiastic adopters of social media—are focused on the interactive nature of their communication with their publics. They are driven by the same characteristics of social media that public relations researchers have found to be essential in the practice of public relations itself: two-way communication, interactivity, dialogue, and engagement.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although prospective and current university students indeed use social media at ever-increasing rates, it should also be noted again that at the time of this study, recent broad surveys indicated that social media adoption within many areas of the practice of public relations may not yet have reached critical mass (Massey, 2009; Sweetser et al., 2009). Recognizing the unique character-istics of the social systems examined, this study focused more on the qualitative aspects of the innovation–decision process as opposed to attempting to identify any quantitative variance or timeline. Future research with larger sample sizes should expand this work to more general and varied practices of public relations. Longitudinal studies would offer better interpretation of the role of *time*, which Rogers (2003) has identified as elemental to diffusion process.

This study focused mainly on the middle of the diffusion process by selecting participants who had already decided to adopt and who, as it turned out, had almost unanimously continued use of the tools they had adopted. Sampling to include nonadopters and those who have discon-tinued use of social media innovations would broaden understanding of the process, particularly the antecedents to decisions to not adopt or to discontinue use of social media.

More research comparing adopter-believers to adopter-nonbelievers also would broaden our understanding by examining not just the decision process, but the professional consequences of those decisions. Are those who are intrinsically motivated to use social media somehow more effective communicators because of it? Are they more likely to act as opinion leaders? Will this lead to lead to more organizational power? Public relations researchers have no shortage of new research questions introduced by the diffusion of social media.

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