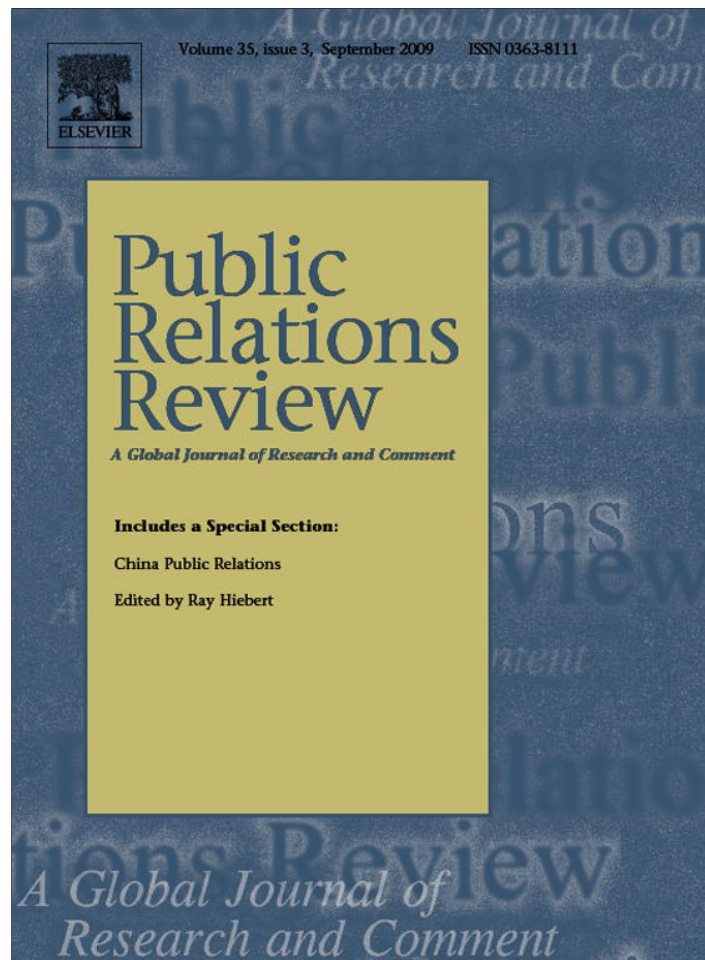


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## Public Relations Review



Research in brief

## An examination of the role of online social media in journalists' source mix<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Using telephone surveys of business/financial journalists in the United States ( $n = 200$ ), this research investigates the agenda-building role of social media content in journalists' work. Understanding that more non-public relations content from user-generated and social network sites, like YouTube and Twitter, are fast becoming resources for journalists to get story ideas, break scandals, and find sources, we began this scholarly work to determine the frequency of such uses of social media. Overall, findings indicate very little use of social media by these business journalists. Results and implications for public relations practitioners are discussed in detail.

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Social media, the term commonly referring to blogs and social network sites online, have been heralded as ushering in a change allowing worldwide, networked communication instantaneous. Such media describe the online practices that utilize technology and enable people to share content, opinions, experiences, insights, and media themselves. As an illustration, compare the tragic events of September 11, 2001, in New York City and the breaking of that news story to the more recent plane crash of U.S. Airways flight 1549 into the Hudson River. The latter, while certainly covered extensively in the traditional media outlets, features many more "eye witness" reports from microblogging sites such as Twitter, as victims and on-lookers began posting announcements and images as the event unfolded.

Scholars have argued for the case that such social media can be used for agenda building, as journalists look to these third-party "general population" sources in writing their stories and certainly public relations practitioners have begun engaging social media content authors with this in mind. While some have begun to look at how journalists use blogs, very few academic studies focus on how journalists use – or do not use – social media as a whole.

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Telephone interviews with 200 journalists explored the use, extent of use, and perceived value of various social media as sources contributing to agenda building. If journalists are regularly monitoring blogs and chat rooms for story ideas and information, it behooves if not compels public relations persons within each industry to carefully monitor the information placed there and perhaps engage content producers.

## 1. Methods

Business journalists ( $n = 200$ ) participated in structured telephone interviews in late 2008. The majority were reporters at influential publications like the Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, and Business Week. Data collection, funded by a grant from the Public Relations Society of America Foundation, was conducted by a university survey research center and included various questions on demographics, uses, and perceived value of social media by business journalists.

## 2. Results

The majority of the sample worked for newspapers (90%), and the remaining worked for a trade publication, finance magazine, newsletter or others. They published both in print (primary) and online (secondary) (73%), one-quarter published in print only, and 2% were online only.

Only 7.5% ( $n = 15$ ) of journalists indicated that social media is “very important” to their work, and 24.5% ( $n = 49$ ) believe it to be important. Although 22.5% of the sample was neutral, 34% considered social media use to be of little or no importance.

Websites were by far the most often consulted online resource for journalists ( $n = 157$ , 79%), and blogs were the second most frequently used ( $n = 8$ , 4%). Social media networks, messages boards, and Twitter were identified as the most used sources by less than 3 journalists each, indicating only about 3% of the sample are finding the majority of their information in online sources other than blogs and websites.

Of the 200 journalists, 37 (18.5%) identified a social media tool they first utilize when writing a story. Of those 37, the majority of journalists ( $n = 22$ , 59%) first seek blogs as a source. Facebook and MySpace were the second most popular social media tools as first sources of information ( $n = 9$ , 24%), and wikis were the third most frequently identified source ( $n = 5$ , 14%). Only one respondent (2%) used photo-sharing sites first when writing stories.

Next, we identified how much time journalists spend time each day using social media for story generation and information gathering. A third indicated that they spend no time on social media in their daily professional lives ( $n = 65$ , 32.5%). On average, journalists only spend 1 h using social media professionally, though the daily hours reported ranged from 0 to 9 h.

The survey asked journalists to rate a series of uses of social media listed on a 3-point scale, with a higher number indicating greater use. Overall, journalists did not indicate high use for the motivations listed. The most common function of social media for journalists was surveillance ( $M = 2.01$ ), though that use rating was admittedly neutral. Other functions were rated, on average, as “not at all” used: research ( $M = 1.87$ ), collect objective information ( $M = 1.83$ ), investigate a rumor or negative news story ( $M = 1.79$ ), monitor other journalists ( $M = 1.67$ ), find stories ( $M = 1.65$ ), interpret information and events ( $M = 1.61$ ), establish professional relationships ( $M = 1.61$ ), focus attention on issues ( $M = 1.61$ ), represent public ( $M = 1.60$ ), establish professional relationships ( $M = 1.59$ ), determine public opinion ( $M = 1.54$ ), track competition ( $M = 1.52$ ), and entertainment ( $M = 1.47$ ).

On a 5-point Likert scale with a higher number again indicating greater agreement, we asked journalists if using social media increased productivity ( $M = 2.87$ ), enhanced ability to identify and track emerging issues ( $M = 3.01$ ), and positively set one ahead professionally ( $M = 2.59$ ). In all cases, journalists did not feel social media improved their work.

Journalists reported sometimes ( $M = 3$ ) visiting a corporate social media site after being pitched a story by that organization's public relations practitioners. For this item, 35.5% rarely or never did this, but 24.8% visited frequently or every time. Journalists reported reliability of corporate social media sites similarly ( $M = 3$ ). About 20% of the journalists use social media to fact-check information provided by public relations practitioners, and, when they do so, they are going to internally sponsored sites (27%), externally sponsored sites (29%), and both internally and externally sponsored sites (6%).

When asked their level of satisfaction when working with practitioners who use and maintain social media, 62 journalists (32%) replied they are more satisfied with those practitioners. About an equal portion (38%) were not more satisfied when working with those in public relations using social media. Yet, in general, journalists were neutral about their perceptions of how well practitioners were using social media tools ( $M = 3$ ), though 31.8% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. There were similar results in journalists' likelihood to use stories from practitioners who maintain social media tools ( $M = 3$ ), with 64.5% agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Results of crosstabs with Pearson's Chi-square tests reveal a significant relationship between categorized size of publication and use of blogs [ $\chi^2(4) = 11.724$ ,  $p = .020$ ], use of video-sharing sites [ $\chi^2(4) = 15.574$ ,  $p = .004$ ], and social networking sites [ $\chi^2(8) = 16.137$ ,  $p = .040$ ]. Intriguingly, journalists' use of the two most frequently used social media tools was significantly related to the size of their publications. Follow-up analyses revealed that, for blogs, size was a significant predictor of use in that the larger the journalists' publications the more frequently reported use of blogs. The same relationship held true for use of video-sharing sites, in that numbers of users increased with size of publication. For social networking sites, the most frequent use of that tool was among writers at publications with 4–7 on staff, but that number was not significantly less than use among those at the largest publications. Both categories of larger publications, however, had significantly more users of social networking than their smaller counterparts.

### **3. Discussion**

Journalists embrace the concept of social media more than they enact the practices. There may be an adoption gap based on learning that is not related to conceptual acceptance or perceived value. Second, the non-interactive online information sources (web pages, directories) remain the important “first line” sources for journalists. While it appears that journalists are not using social media in droves yet resulting in an agenda-building process, they do not appear opposed to it. As such, and given the responses to desire to work with practitioners using social media, it behooves public relations practitioners to begin engaging social media in preparation for the day social media may contribute to agenda building.