

Use, Value and Impact of Social Media on Public Relations Practitioners in the Fox Cities

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## **Abstract**

Social media use has increased among consumers around the world, causing an increase in the adoption of social media as tactics for many public relations professionals. Because this new form of communication is growing at such a rapid pace, it is important to analyze the impact it has on the overall public relations practice as well as on how universities are incorporating it into their communications curriculum to better prepare future practitioners. Through an online survey of Northeastern Wisconsin (NEW) Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) members, this project set out to assess the use, value and impact social media have on public relations practitioners in the Fox Cities. The data were then compared to the curriculum currently being taught at select Wisconsin universities.

The survey of public relations professionals revealed that they value social media more than they actually use it; however, a majority of respondents believe social media have changed the way their organizations communicate. Respondents' answers showed that they and their firms are not measuring the impact of social media practices even though most agree that public relations practitioners should measure who is talking about their organization or their clients' organizations in these outlets.

The data collected from the universities showed that no formal social media curriculum has yet been implemented; however, most departments are moving in that direction. The primary and secondary data gathered for this project can aid universities in preparing their communications students for their careers.

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## **Introduction**

Because “Americans have tripled the amount of time they spend on social networking and blog sites” from just one year ago, many companies have taken notice and are beginning to plug themselves into these outlets (Nielsen). As noted by Bill Tancer (2008), the general manager of global research at Hitwise, the world’s leading online competitive service, social media have replaced pornography as the number one use of the Internet. Because of the increasing popularity of these new technologies, it is important to examine the impact they have on the public relations practice. According to Paul Gillin (2008), senior fellow, Society for New Communications Research, social media are giving rise to a new style of communications that is characterized by conversation and community. It is important to understand these new channels of communication in order to effectively utilize them as a means to communicate with the public as well as to know what implications they may have for the public relations practice. In order to implement these tactics effectively, it is equally important for journalism and public relations programs on college campuses to provide relevant curriculum for its future practitioners.

## **Problem**

Due to the rise in social media use among consumers around the world, there has been an increase in the use of social media as tactics for many public relations practitioners. Because this new form of communication is growing at such a rapid pace, it is important to analyze the impact social and other new media have on the overall public relations practice as well as how universities are incorporating this new media into their curriculum.

The purpose of this thesis is to discover how public relations practitioners in the Fox Cities are using social media; the impact and implications this new media have on the public relations profession; and how public relations professionals value these new media as a means to communicate with the public.

Secondly, as the implementation of social media grows in the public relations workforce, it is important to determine whether universities in Wisconsin are keeping pace with this ever-growing phenomenon and offering adequate curriculum for its students.

## **Literature Review**

### *What Are Social Media*

When many people think of social media, they think of Facebook and Twitter. However, social media do not just include social networking sites, but also blogs, forums, message boards, photo sharing, podcasts, RSS (really simple syndication), search engine marketing, video sharing, Wikis, social networks, professional networks, and micro-blogging sites (Wright and Hinson, 2009).

As stated by Wright and Hinson (2009) and reported by the International Association of Business Communicators, “more than half of all Internet users have joined a social network, social networks have become the number one platform for creating and sharing content and nearly 75 percent of all Internet users have read a blog” (Young, 2009).

Although social media are impacting the way many organizations communicate and more and more people are becoming active with these new channels, the definition of what social media encapsulates is undetermined due to the rise of many different forms. No two people are defining this media the same way.

### *How Social Media are impacting the Public Relations practice*

According to Larry Weber (2009), as stated by Wright & Hinson (2009), “The communications world is dramatically moving in a digital direction and those who understand this transformation will communicate much more effectively than those who do not.” Public relations practitioners are in the business of communicating with publics and therefore must understand this transformation in order to communicate effectively. However, due to the fast-paced growth of social media, it is difficult for these professionals, as well as the universities training future professionals, to keep current.

Blogs, for example, are increasing in popularity because they give independence from traditional editors and media gate keeping (Pavlik, 2007). The use of blogs as a means to gather information is increasing as well as the posting of blogs to better position oneself in the eyes of the public. In the past, public relations practitioners were responsible for packaging content and then distributing it to the media in hopes of being published. Today, practitioners are still responsible for packaging the content; however, they are now able to publish the content themselves through blogs, social networks and other online media outlets. Practitioners still send information to the traditional media, but they are now also able to talk directly to the public, view the public's responses, and act accordingly. For example, when a consumer tweets about a bad experience, the company can view these comments and respond immediately to provide more direct service to its customers.

#### *How Public Relations Practitioners Are Actually Using Social Media*

A study conducted by Wright & Hinson (2009) sampled the use of social media among 574 public relations practitioners across the United States. The study asked basic questions regarding the importance practitioners felt certain social media had on the overall communication and public relations efforts of their organization (or their client's organizations) and how important these practitioners felt social media should be. Other questions included which social media these practitioners personally use for gathering general news as compared to gathering news related to the public relations field.

Search engine marketing was considered the most important, followed by blogs, social networks, video sharing and forums or message boards. Photo sharing and social bookmarking, which are used to store, organize, search and manage web pages, were considered the least important.



### *Social Media Use in the Classroom*

Because of social media's rapid climb in the recent years, universities have not been able to integrate the new technologies into their curriculum. No research has produced any evidence of universities trying to implement this phenomenon into their journalism or public relations programs. Gaining this information through primary research will be very important in this study.

## **Methods**

Analyzing what impact social media have had on public relations practices requires tapping into the knowledge of those in the field. To do this, a survey was created and distributed to public relations professionals in the Fox Cities through the use of the NEW (Northeastern Wisconsin) PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) chapter directory. The 19-question survey focused on the attitudes these professionals held regarding how social media have affected their work, how they are actually using social media, what value they place on social media, and the challenges they face when implementing such tools. The survey included questions modeled after a study conducted by Wright and Hinson (2009) that are detailed in "An Updated Look at the Impact of Social Media on Public Relations Practice."

The surveys were distributed via e-mail to 77 NEW PRSA practitioners; 30 percent responded. The online survey was created through a Survey Monkey account. An e-mail reminder was sent two weeks after the survey was distributed to encourage more participation.

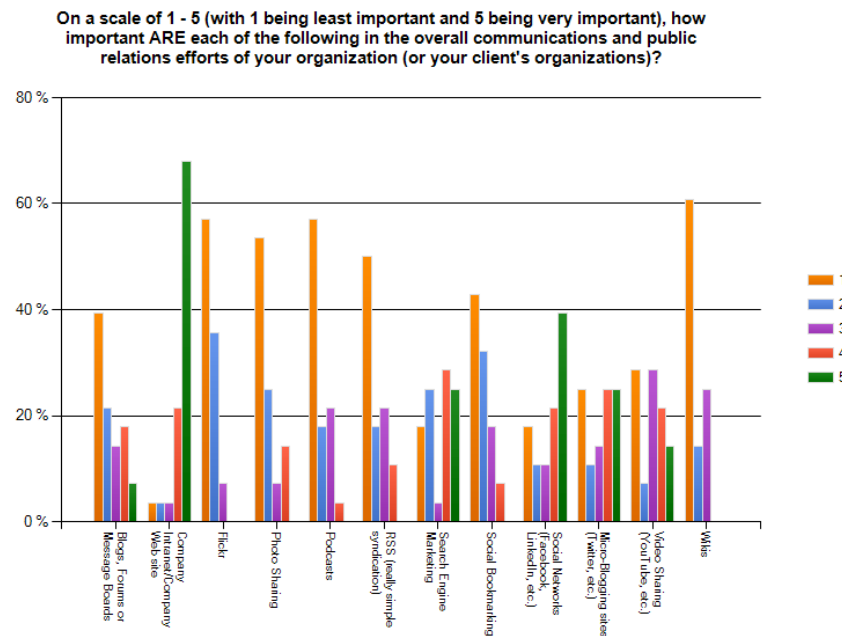
The data collected were then compared to the results found in a national survey (Wright and Hinson, 2009).

Also, a survey of selected Wisconsin universities (UW- Eau Claire, UW-Milwaukee, UW-Madison, UW-River Falls and UW-Whitewater) journalism department chairs was completed to analyze the university's curriculum and to determine whether social media are currently being integrated into their journalism or public relations courses. The questions also probed the universities to see if they are planning on adding courses regarding social media in the future. These surveys were distributed via e-mail.

## Results

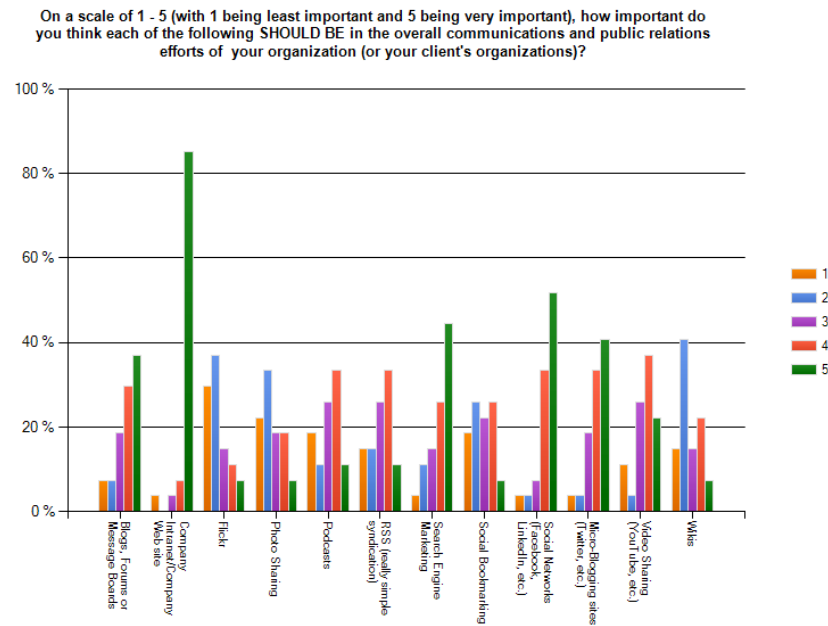
### *Survey of Public Relations Practitioners*

#### GRAPH 1. How important Social Media are in overall communication



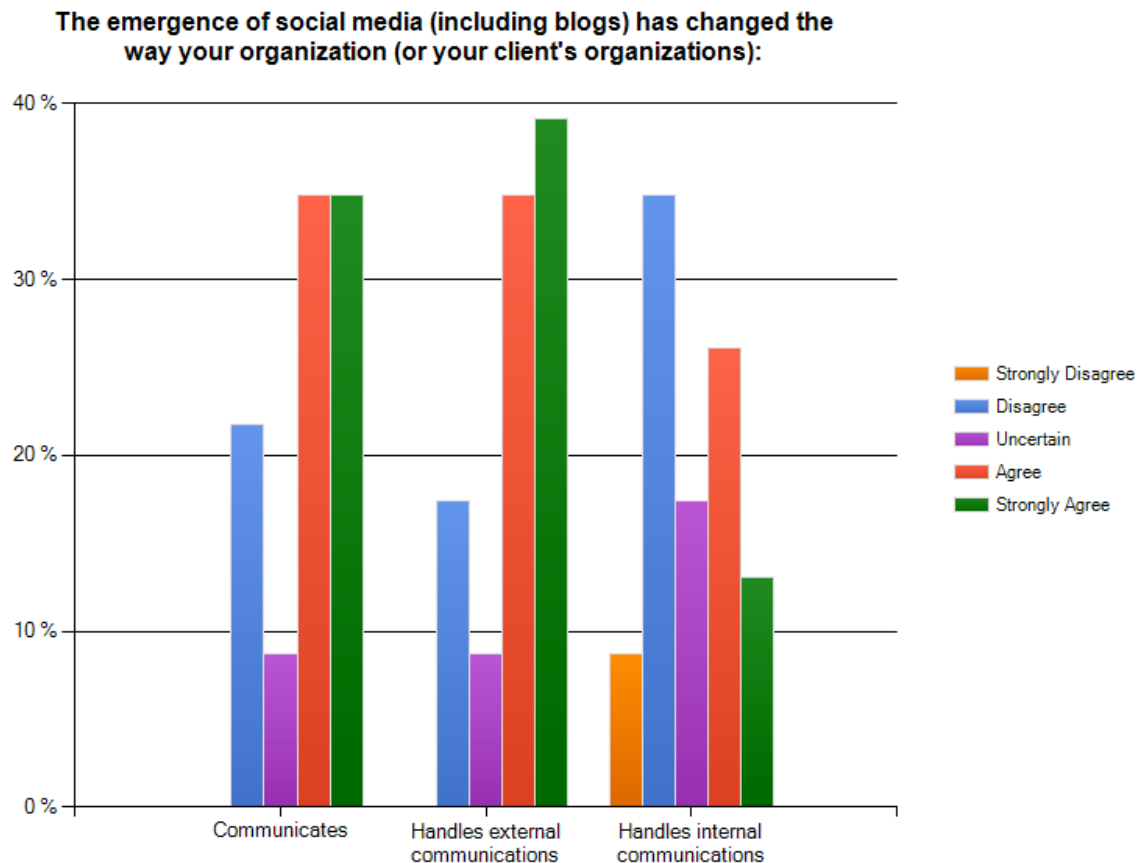
When asked how important certain social media channels are to participants' organizations, nearly 70 percent of respondents believed that the use of their company intranet/company website was very important. Social networks came in second with 40 percent of respondents indicating it being of high importance. Wikis proved to be least important according to 60 percent of respondents. Flickr, photosharing, podcasts and RSS Feeds were also deemed not at all important to respondents.

## GRAPH 2. How important Social Media should be in overall communication



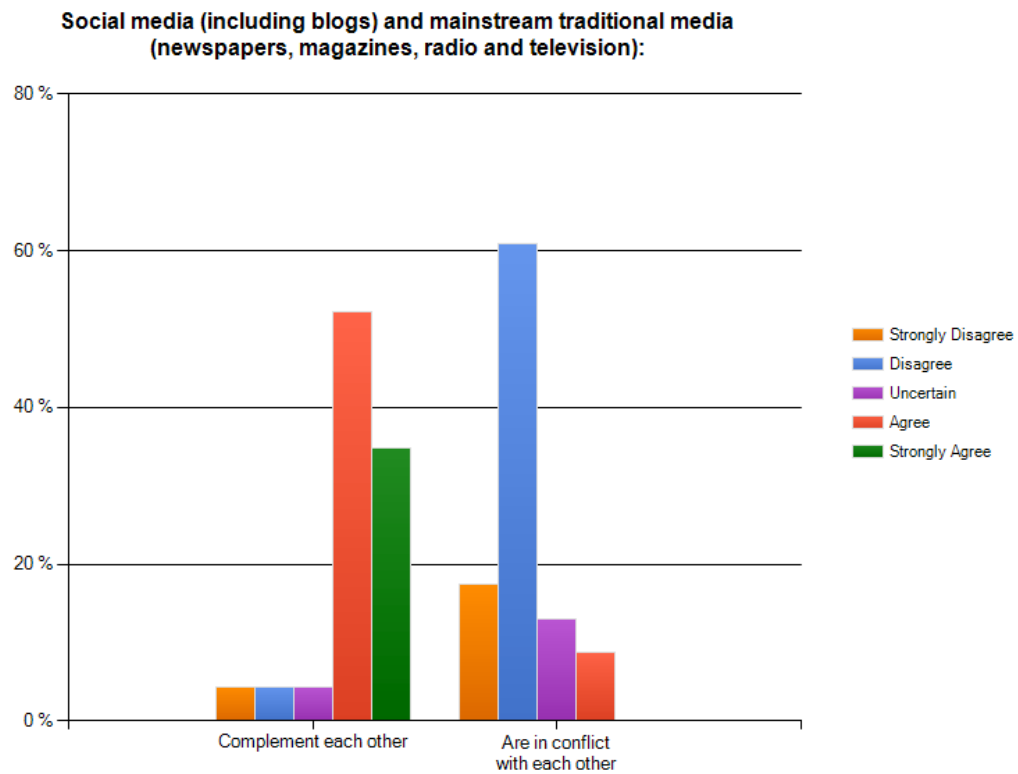
When asked how important certain social media channels should be to participants' organizations, 85 percent still felt that the company intranet/company website should be considered most important. Social networks followed with 51 percent, search engine marketing with 44 percent and micro-blogging (Twitter) increased in importance to 40 percent.

### GRAPH 3. Social Media's affect on Communication



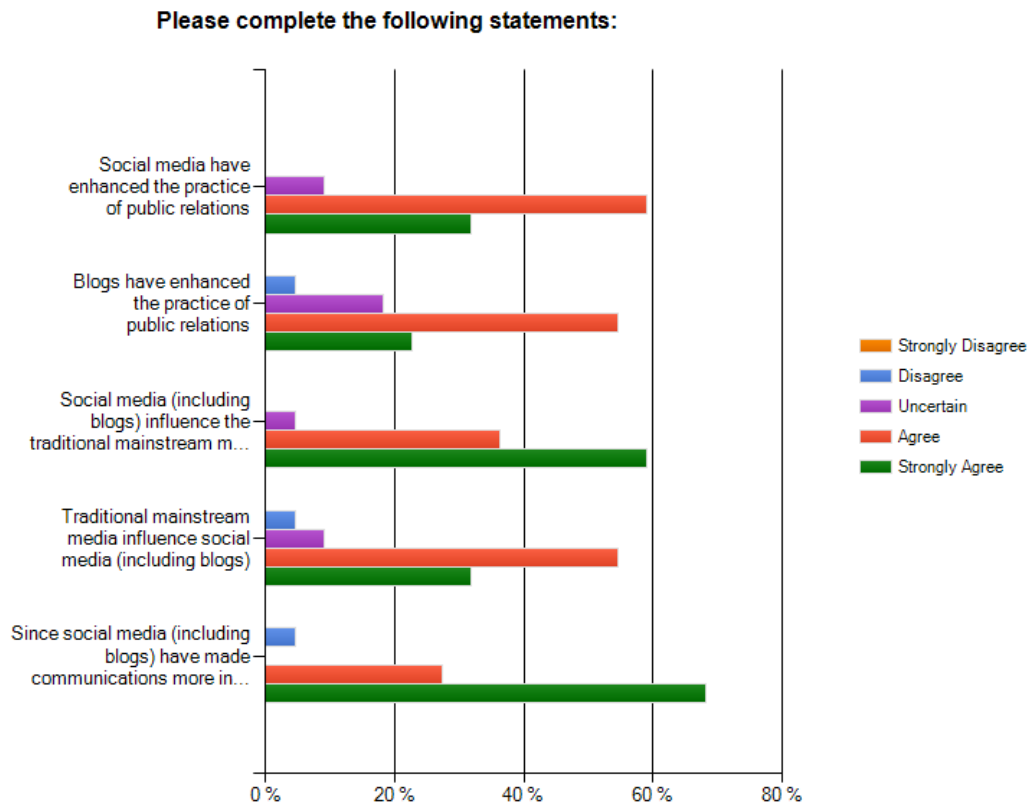
Nearly 70 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that social media have changed the way their organization communicates. Nearly 75 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that social media have changed the way their organization handles external communication. Thirty-five percent of respondents disagree that social media have affected their internal communication, but 40 percent either agree or strongly agree that it has.

#### GRAPH 4. Relationship between Social Media and traditional media



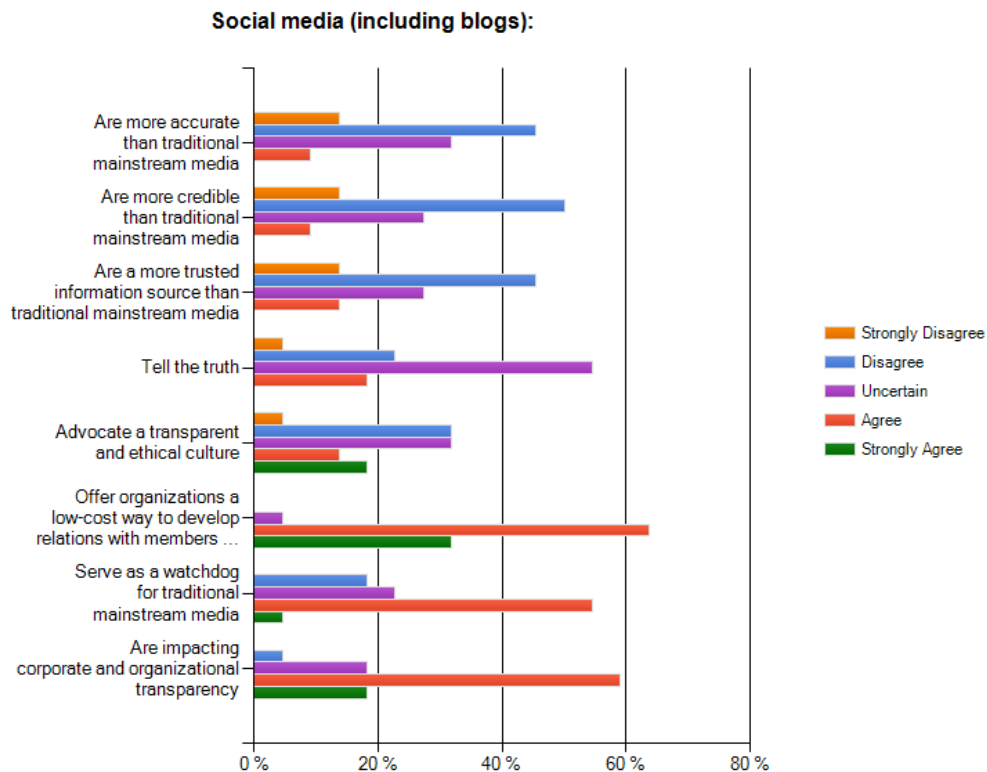
This chart indicates that more than 75 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that social media and traditional media should be used congruently; nearly 60 percent disagree that they are in conflict with each other.

## GRAPH 5. Opinions about Social Media



- All respondents agree or strongly agree that social media have enhanced the public relations practice.
- Nearly 80 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that blogs have also enhanced the public relations practice.
- Thirty-six percent of respondents agree that social media have influenced mainstream media and more than half strongly agree.
- More than half of respondents agree that mainstream media influence social media, while 32 percent strongly agree.
- Nearly 70 percent of respondents agree that social media have made communication more instantaneous.

**GRAPH 6. More opinions about Social Media**



- More than half of respondents viewed social media as less accurate than traditional media.
- More than half of respondents disagree that social media are more credible than traditional media.
- Most respondents do not view social media as trusted news sources.
- Respondents disagree or are uncertain about social media being truthful.
- More than 70 percent of respondents believe that social media do not advocate a transparent or ethical culture.
- Seventy-five percent of respondents agree that social media offers a cheap way to develop relationships with members of the public.
- Nearly 70 percent of respondents agree that social media serve as a watchdog for traditional media.
- More than 75 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that social media are impacting corporate and organizational transparency.



## GRAPH 7. Opinion of Social Media compared to traditional media



This graph indicates that higher expectations are placed on traditional media to be honest and accurate. All respondents feel that mainstream media are expected to be honest. When referring to social media, respondents' answers were more variable – nearly half disagreed or were uncertain.

### *Other Survey Findings*

When respondents were probed about the amount of research being conducted on their social media efforts, a staggering 90 percent of respondents do not believe that a research or measurement study has been conducted regarding what employees are saying about their organization via blogs. Another 65 percent of respondents don't believe research has been conducted about what members of other publics are saying about their organization via social media. However, more than half of respondents agree that public relations professionals should measure the amount of information being said about their organization and nearly 40 percent strongly agree with this statement.

When respondents were asked what should be measured in regards to social media, all respondents agree or strongly agree that content being said about organizations should be analyzed as well as the impact this communication has on influentials or opinion leaders and the impact on attitudes, opinions or behaviors of current and potential customers.

When respondents were questioned on the amount of time spent dealing with social media, more than half of respondents indicated that they spend 1 – 10 percent of their time on social media. More than 75 percent of respondents also indicated that no one employee is dedicated solely to implementing social media. Respondents also indicated that social media are used to communicate mainly with current (68 percent) and potential (55 percent) customers and the news media (68 percent). Currently, more than 75 percent of respondents also use social media to see what people are saying about their company as compared to their competition and the industry.

## *Survey of Wisconsin Universities*

### UW Madison

Currently at UW Madison, social media are addressed in an introductory and a multi media course. Madison does not have a separate public relations program and therefore its strategic communications curriculum addresses these issues. Madison avoid over-specializing its curriculum and therefore the integration of an exclusive social media course does not seem likely. The university is currently in early stages of a curriculum review and may later choose to add more social media into the current curriculum.

### UW Milwaukee

Currently at Milwaukee social media are briefly addressed in the media graphics and publication design courses. The university is not currently taking any major steps to offer social media, but may decide to add more to current classes.

### UW Oshkosh

Currently, social media are taught in courses where the professor finds it relevant including advertising media; public relations techniques; advertising copy, layout and production; and the advertising and public relations competition courses. A stand-alone course is also in the works and will be offered in Spring 2011. Social media are predicted to become a part of most courses in the near future.

### UW Whitewater

Some curriculum is currently being implemented regarding social media at UW Whitewater. UW Whitewater also hosts various independent social media summits to

educate students and community on the uses and benefits of social media. Currently, the university is a step ahead because it offers a Social Media Optimization (SMO) course. The university is also in the process of adding more social media curriculum to its Organization Communication curriculum.

## **Discussion**

The survey of public relations practitioners in the Fox Valley uncovered some interesting results. A discrepancy between the use of certain new media and their perceived value was revealed. For example, there was an inconsistency between the use of blogs as compared to their value. According to 40 percent of respondents, blogs are viewed as an outlet that should be important in an organization's communication efforts; however, only 7 percent of respondents view this media outlet as an important facet in their own organization's communications efforts. Most social media outlets that were deemed as not very important to the respondent's organization's communication efforts were regarded as important or very important when their value was questioned. For example, 40 percent of respondents felt that social networks are very important to their actual communication efforts, but this number rose to 52 percent when social networks value was questioned.

Second, the survey made it evident that social media have changed the way organizations communicate. More than half of respondents believe social media have changed the way they communicate overall nearly 75 percent of respondents believe that social media have changed the way they handle their external communications. Surprisingly, more respondents disagreed that social media have changed they way their company handles internal communication, even though nearly 70 percent of respondents ranked their company's intranet and website as the most important channel of communication for their organization indicating that the more established social media outlets are better used.

Results also uncovered that social media are viewed as less accurate, credible, trusted and truthful than traditional media by more than half of respondents. However, nearly 75

percent of respondents feel social media are a low cost means to develop relationships with members of the public. This finding indicates that social media are an important means to communicate, but because the communication isn't viewed as credible it may be difficult to make messages on this medium to be viewed as such.

The survey also showed that public relations practitioners feel that social media and traditional media work together more than against each other and they interchangeably influence one another. Social media are an effective tool for communicating and redistributing news from traditional media sources. With that said, it makes it even more apparent that social media can quickly influence the public's perception on certain issues and thus needs to be held as accountable as traditional media sources, again raising the question of credibility.

Another surprising discovery was made through this survey – public relations practitioners are not measuring what is being said about their organizations even though they believe measurement is important. More than 90 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that public relations practitioners should be measuring the amount of communication being disseminated about their organization and/or analyze the content of what's being communicated about their organization via social media. However, 64 percent of respondents have not measured what strategic public have communicated about them via blogs or other social media and only 36 percent have. All respondents agreed that public relations practitioners should also measure the impact this information has on influentials, opinion leaders and the behaviors and attitudes of consumers.

Finally, time spent using social media is very minimal and no single employee is responsible for the implementation of social media campaigns. Because of the newness of

social media, it is hard to convince employers of its true value or even more, its time commitment. Social media are about engagement and interaction, unlike many other forms of media. A measurement for the return on investment on social media is still being sought and therefore many do not see social media as a justified public relations expense.

The results from surveying select Wisconsin universities revealed that social media have not been completely integrated into public relations and/or communications college curriculum. However, all universities that were surveyed do briefly discuss social media in their current courses. UW Oshkosh and UW Whitewater seem to be the farthest along when it comes to integrating social media into their curriculum. Both of these universities either are taking major strides to incorporate social media into their public relations or communications curriculum or have already done so. Madison is currently undergoing a curriculum review, but is unsure if social media will ever be stand-alone curriculum due to the universities avoidance of over-specialization. Milwaukee is currently not taking any major strides to teach social media use or implementation because the university is currently understaffed.

## Recommendations

After conducting a survey of public relations practitioners and select Wisconsin universities, three recommendations can be made to aid future research. Each recommendation surfaced after a particular trend became evident during the research process.

Because social media are viewed as untrustworthy, inaccurate and not credible, it is recommended that more research should be conducted on those using these new media outlets, especially those who publish blogs. Another track would be to investigate how to raise credibility – perhaps through code or oversight. Brian Solis and Deirdre Breakenridge (2009) state in their book *Putting the Public Back in Public Relations*: “with the rapid rise of blogs, calls for standards and reform are firing in from the journalism industry, as well as the people, companies, and brands affected by sloppy, overly opinionated, misleading, hostile, biased, motivated, or incentivized blog posts” (59). Many people believe that like journalists, bloggers should be held to the same standards for the content they post online; however, this topic is very controversial because social media are fueled by opinions. Currently, no organization is in place to govern the blogosphere and therefore individual organizations have formed to hold personal standards for ethics in blogging (Solis and Breakenridge, 59).

Because of the controversial nature of this topic, a recommendation would be for a credible organization to form a bloggers code of ethics. This organization would then give its seal of approval to certain blogs and these blogs would bear this symbol in order to inform the public of its attainment of high ethical standards.



Another significant trend was found through research that led to the second recommendation. The survey of public relations practitioners found that these professionals are not measuring what is being said about their company or organization via blogs or social media; therefore, it is recommended that researchers develop a measurement. Many public relations practitioners do not understand social media's ROI and therefore these professionals do not know how to begin measuring the results of such programs. Solis and Breakenridge (2009) state "to measure success, we must determine what success looks like in this new environment" (248). Social media have changed public relations metrics, but the system is still the same. Solis and Breakenridge (2009) also inform us that "because Social Media is rooted in conversations, participation, and engagement, it introduces new trackable elements into our formula for determining ROI and success: conversations or threads by keyword; traffic; leads or sales; calls to action; engagement; relationships; authority; education and participation; perception; and registrations, membership, and community activity" (250). The growth of social media have led to the production of numerous resources that can be used to assist in the measurement of social media campaigns. It is recommended that public relations practitioners in the Fox Valley tap into these resources and begin taking appropriate measure of their social media efforts.

The final recommendation drawn from this project is that Wisconsin universities should implement stronger curriculum that better prepares future public relations professionals to use, implement and measure social media. After surveying select Wisconsin universities, it became clear that they are lacking courses in this area. Although some universities are taking steps toward integrating this curriculum into public relations

and communications programs, it is important that all universities across Wisconsin begin offering this curriculum to future public relations professionals.

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