

USING **WEBLOGS** in public relations education

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The author gratefully acknowledges PR bloggers Kami Huyse (Communication Overtones) and Constantin Basturea (PR Meets the WWW) for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.

As of April 2007, more than 70 million blogs have been produced on the World Wide Web, with more than half of them still active, and about 120,000 new blogs are created every day (Sifry, 2007). One study found that 8 percent of U.S. Internet users keep a blog, and 39 percent, or 57 million adults, read blogs (Lenhart and Fox, 2006). Large agencies like Edelman, Hill & Knowlton, and Burson-Marsteller have entered the blogosphere (Ziegler, 2006) with varying degrees of commitment and success. All signs indicate that blogs are a significant force that public relations practitioners and scholars must reckon with. In fact, the latest report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) emphasizes the importance of technology, noting that students must learn to adapt to changing technology and to understand its societal ramifications. It also encourages educators to use technology to maximize their own effectiveness as instructors. This paper, therefore, begins to address a need for educators by discussing the use of blogs in the public relations curriculum.

Weblogs "are very easy-to-manage websites," according to Cook and Hopkins (2006). "This ease of use allows you to post your ideas and opinions often and without using up too much time." Blogs allow authors to link to other media content almost effortlessly, including video, audio, and other content (Flatley, 2005). There are many kinds of blogs, including personal, political, corporate, and mainstream media blogs (Spannerworks, 2006). Blogs can also be topical, as in the more than 600 that focus on public relations and communications (Basturea, 2007). On any blog, each post has its own URL, so individual items can be easily located by search engines, and anyone can subscribe to a blog's RSS feed so that new posts are automatically sent to interested readers. Blogs are just one landmark on a broader social media landscape: wikis, podcasting, Second Life, and social bookmarking sites, for example, are also changing the ways that people communicate. However, this essay focuses on ways that public relations educators can use the most popular format, blogs, to inform their teaching.

Although many blogs operate as private journals, social media can foster participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectedness (Herring et al., 2005; Spannerworks, 2006). By encouraging participation from everyone who is interested, blogs can make anyone a content producer. They encourage participation by asking for comments and votes, and they encourage information-sharing by linking to content produced by others. Communication is not one- or even two-way, but can move in many directions. Communities build around shared interests, and communication is expected to be transparent and authentic. This means, for example, that after an item is posted it should never be deleted (although additions and corrections are welcome if identified as such), and a public relations person should always reveal a connection to a client or employer when posting or commenting on a blog. (Consult the Word of Mouth Marketing Association's "10 Principles of Ethical Contact by Marketers" [n.d.] for more detail.)

Public relations in this environment is so different that some have designated it "PR 2.0," which implies that a new or second-generation practice has emerged. Others dispute this claim, arguing that at most social media create opportunities for a more mature, rather than entirely new, public relations (for more on this debate, see the discussion at Global PR Blogweek, 2004). Regardless, the implications of social media for public relations practice are astounding. What once seemed like idealistic concepts to teach our students, such as "symmetrical communication" (Grunig, 2006) and "collaborative

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MONOGRAPH 73
Fall 2007

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decision-making” (Heath and Coombs, 2006), suddenly become far more realistic. As Michael Ryan (2003) points out, Web technology can be used to facilitate dialogic communication, including “allowing users to ask questions, express concerns, pass along opinions, and praise or complain about products and services” (336). Blogs, and other social media, allow individuals to do all of these things without waiting for an organization to request it.

This essay examines three areas in which blogging can enhance teaching and learning in public relations. First, students can learn about blogging in order to prepare them for careers in public relations. Second, blogs can be used as resources to help students and faculty engage in dialogue about current issues in the practice. Finally, blogs can be a topic of research for anyone interested in public relations scholarship and practice, from undergraduates to tenured faculty members.

Learning How To Blog

To join in the conversation, students must first learn the how-to’s of blogging. Josh Hallett, whose firm specializes in social media, tells companies that when it comes to blogging, “you only learn by doing” (Hallett, 2005). Robert French, an instructor at Auburn University, was the first public relations educator to ask his students to maintain their own blogs throughout the semester as a class requirement (Joly, 2005), and the Auburn students have become well-known in the online PR community for their proficiency in social media.

For faculty members new to the blogosphere, a less ambitious project can still benefit students. For example, I experimented with asking students to use blogs for PR research. Students entered a keyword of their choice into a blog search engine (blogs are indexed on popular search engines like Google.com, but search engines like Technorati.com and Blogsearch.google.com specialize in blogs and are updated almost instantaneously). They then wrote about how their findings might be relevant to a practitioner. The assignment illustrates for students the broad range of content that can be found in blogs—mine found everything from thoughtful commentary to pornography—and forces them to consider problems relating to blog monitoring. A second experiment involved creating a class blog for a section of Public Relations Campaigns. I set up the blog so that only members (in this case, the students) could post on it. Each student was required to post at least five times during the semester, either by commenting on one of my posts or by starting a new discussion. The topics were initially tied to whatever the teams were working on that week, such as focus groups or selecting a campaign theme. It took time, but eventually the students took over the blog to discuss issues important to them, including graduation and job searches. The collaborative nature of their discussion exemplified to me the promise of social media. One business school instructor found similar collaboration developed when she used team blogs to facilitate a group project (Flatley, 2005).

Students should also confront legal and ethical issues relating to blogging. “It’s the casual, conversational, anything-goes nature of the blog that makes it so appealing to blog writers and readers—and so potentially dangerous to business” (Flynn, 2006: 9). Potential problem areas for PR practitioners include disclosure of trade secrets, pay per post, privacy and confidentiality, defamation, and copyright infringement (for a lengthy discussion of legal and ethical issues in business blogging, see Flynn, 2006). For this reason, experts recommend that organizations, including public relations agencies, have blog policies for their employees. Hill and Knowlton’s policy (“Code of Practice,” 2005-2006) is one example that can provide the basis for a class discussion.

Additionally, students must learn to consider the blogosphere as a public space. One of my Campaigns students posted a comment negative to his team’s client without thinking about who might read it. Such thoughtlessness can have serious consequences. Potential employers often search for a job applicant’s name on the Web, and a number of interns have found themselves in hot water after blogging about work (Bahney, 2006). In fact, a small number of bloggers have been fired (or, in Internet parlance, “dooced”) for online activities (Flynn, 2006). Still, practitioners have identified several benefits of corporate blogging, including building an organization’s profile, revealing expertise, and networking (Cook and Hopkins, 2006). These benefits can also apply to individual bloggers, many of whom have gotten job offers based on their blogs, if they think of a blog as

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part of their professional portfolio (on British PR students who have benefited from blogging, see Young, 2006).

Blogs as Classroom Resources

Blogs can also be used as resources to get students and faculty engaged in dialogue on industry issues. I have required students to post on blogs about public relations, resulting in comments on industry scandals, education, and social media, to name just a few topics. The students are sometimes hesitant to post comments on blogs hosted by practitioners for fear of saying something “stupid,” but they are forced to learn about and form an opinion on current events within the industry, and they must consider how to present themselves in a public forum. Prior to making this assignment, the instructor should discuss blog etiquette, including how to pitch bloggers, so that students don’t inadvertently offend anyone. For example, it is considered rude to type in all capital letters, swear, or intentionally insult another person.

Likewise, blogs can serve as resources for faculty. I maintain a blog, Teaching PR, which I occasionally use to seek advice on assignments, discussion topics, and even curriculum issues. This discussion has been incredibly fruitful. For instance, when I asked, “What do students need to know?” I received comments from practitioners and an educator suggesting topics for my PR Foundations seminar. I also scan the blogosphere for things I can do to improve instruction. One instructor from the UK developed a blogging policy for his students that has become required reading for mine (Bailey, 2006). I also regularly read about 115 blogs (this is manageable because of RSS feeds that are organized by an aggregator service) to keep myself updated on current issues. Based on this information, I have developed class discussions about everything from an anti-stroturfing campaign that originated in Sydney, Australia, to the introduction of the social media news release in the United States. Finally, a number of professional organizations have also entered the blogosphere, offering posts about current events, research and practices (see Basturea, 2006b).

When I started monitoring blogs, I was surprised to find that the number of PR faculty who maintain a blog is extremely low. In fact, some practitioners have despaired about this dearth in their blogs. As of May 2006, only about a dozen such blogs had been identified globally (Basturea, 2006); I have since found 18 English-language (listed below), and new ones are created every day. Hosting a blog is simple—and cheap. Anyone interested in starting a free blog can create one at Blogger.com or Wordpress.com, or at PRblogs.org, Auburn University’s service for student and educator blogs. Free aggregator services include Google.com/reader, Bloglines.com, and Newsgator.com. Be forewarned, however, that blogs take time; one survey of successful bloggers found that almost half saw the time commitment as a major drawback to blogging (Barnes, 2006).

Conducting Research on Blogs and Bloggers

Finally, blogs are becoming an important topic for research on public relations. “By allowing unprecedented access to corporate information, technology bestows on researchers interested in the field of corporate communication a rich vein of information to mine on virtually any subject” (Argenti, 2006: 366). The same can be true of political communication, social movements, and other areas of public relations practice. PRD members such as Kaye Sweetser of the University of Georgia (Trammell, 2006) and Lance Porter of Louisiana State University (Porter, Trammell and Chung, 2006) are conducting research to develop an understanding of the role of blogs in public relations. Walter Carl of Northeastern University, together with John Cass of Backbone Media, Inc. and a class of undergraduate students, conducted a “Blogging Success Study” to determine what makes a blog successful (Carl and Cass, 2006). Because blogging appeals largely to a younger demographic (Universal McCann, 2006), the topic is often attractive to students, both graduate and undergraduate; this may well be a subject that faculty will increasingly encounter in project proposals.

Problems to Consider

Despite its potential to create both symmetrical communication and opportunities for collaborative decision-making, not every experience in the blogosphere is ideal. As Peter

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Smudde wrote in *Public Relations Quarterly*, "From a public relations standpoint, blogs can be a blessing and a curse" (Smudde, 2005: 35). Participating in the conversation requires an individual or organization to cede at least some control to the "audience"—a term that is problematic given that anyone can be a producer or consumer on the Internet. Some people will disagree with an individual's opinion or a company's course of action, and the blogosphere can bring a harsh spotlight of criticism onto a client, agency or individual. For instance, when it was revealed that Edelman, a major player in the PR blogosphere, had sponsored a "flog" (fake blog) for its client, Wal-Mart, a storm of controversy ensued (Gogoi, 2006).

Anonymity can cause another problem. More than half of the bloggers in one survey report writing under a pseudonym (Lenhart and Fox, 2006). Anonymity can be used for good, as in the case of a woman who posts updates about the situation in Baghdad (see <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com>), but more frequently it is used for ill. "Trolls" are people who intentionally try to disrupt a community by posting inflammatory and insulting comments; within the public relations community, the anonymous author(s) of the blog Strumpette is considered a troll. This blog is frequently ignored in the PR blogosphere—even when it was featured in the *Washington Post* (Kurtz, 2006). Such episodes offer opportunities to discuss credibility, transparency, and authenticity in the classroom.

Conclusion

Blogs and other social media have created exciting opportunities for public relations practitioners and for PR educators. Using blogs in the classroom not only teaches students about a new form of communication, but also allows students and teachers to engage in dialogue about the field. In addition, social media provide a rich new area for public relations research as we learn more about the possibilities—and problems—of symmetrical communication and collaborative decision-making via the World Wide Web.

RESOURCES

Primers on Social Media

http://www.spannerworks.com/fileadmin/uploads/eBooks/What_is_Social_Media.pdf

<http://www.shiftcomm.com/downloads/pr2essentials.pdf>

<http://leehopkins.net/downloads/CookHopkins-SocialMediaWhitePaper.pdf>

Links to PR Educators' Blogs (English-Language)

<http://prstudies.typepad.com/weblog>, Philip Bailey, Leeds Metropolitan University

<http://www.wom-teach.blogspot.com>, Walter Carl, Northwestern University

<http://smuccpaclass.blogspot.com>, Nina Flournoy, Southern Methodist University

<http://www.auburnmedia.com/wordpress>, Robert French, Auburn University

<http://stirpr.wordpress.com/>, Derek Hodge, Stirling University

<http://tkell.blogspot.com>, Tom Kelleher, University of Hawaii at Manoa

<http://prosintraining.blogspot.com/>, Kelly Matthews, University of Oregon

<http://rossmonaghan.prblogs.org/about>, Ross Monaghan, Deakin University

<http://gr-pr.blogspot.com>, Tim Penning, Grand Valley State University

<http://leverwealth.blogspot.com/>, David Phillips, Bournemouth University

<http://lespotter001.wordpress.com/>, Les Potter, Towson University

<http://loyalistpr.blogspot.com/>, Kerry Ramsay, Loyalist College

<http://teachingpr.blogspot.com>, Karen Russell, University of Georgia

<http://classact.prblogs.org/>, Gary Schlee, Centennial College

<http://toughsledding.wordpress.com>, Bill Sledzik, Kent University

<http://dummypit.wordpress.com/>, Tom Watson, Bournemouth University

<http://greenbanana.wordpress.com/>, Heather Yaxley, Bournemouth University

<http://publicsphere.typepad.com/mediations>, Philip Young, University of Sunderland

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