The Role of Social Networks as a Research Medium in Public Relations Activity

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Abstract

In this article, the authors defend the thesis that social networks have a significant role in public relations (PR) activity, apart from their traditionally proven theoretical and practical efficiency as a communication tool, as well as a medium for the development of the subsequent analytical work of the PR specialist. Subject of the study is the relationship between social networks and research activity in PR. Object of the study is advantage of social networks as a research medium in which valuable information is shared between the participants in the communication process. The paper reveals essential role of the analysis of social networks data and the possibility to follow trends, to take into account public attitudes and expectations, to prepare and make decisions for follow-up, and generally the organization’s communication policy to be based on data-driven PR.

Keywords: social networks, public relations, PR research, data-driven PR.

1. Introduction

The advantages of online communication in the modern information society are indisputable and are becoming the subject of professional discussions and research. One of these is the global access to information, which allows the construction of datasets. Billions of people from all continents are online and communicate with each other through network connectivity – by March 2019, they are 55.6% of the planet’s population (Internet Worlds Stats, 2019). This connectivity is possible thanks to Internet access and the increasingly active use of social networks and the social media.

Jan Van Dijk (Van Dijk, 2006: 6-7) notes that social networks supported by media networks are available at all public levels and subsystems. The author also shares the view that the combination of social and media networks “will create a very strong new infrastructure for our society” (Van Dijk, 2006: 39) characterized by fragmentation of the public sphere and a growing number of subcultures communicating thanks to new media.

The new communication tools significantly influence the realization of many and different professional activities, change the traditional communication techniques and models and create new ones. This determines the need to know and explore the processes that take place in the online environment.

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2. Social networks – The epicenter of online communication

In our modern world, networks dominate. They become the nervous system of society and build an infrastructure that can have a greater impact on our whole social and personal lives than the construction of road infrastructure for goods and people in the past (Van Dijk, 2006: 2).

The founder of the idea of the network society is one of the world’s leading social researchers – Manuel Castells. He describes the increasing rates of innovations and unusual transformations taking place in society, analyzes the processes of globalization and the emerging new economy, society and culture. “As a historical trend, dominant functions and processes in the Information Age are increasingly organized around networks. Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes of processes of production, experience, power, and culture” (Castells, 2000: 500). Their capabilities are used to varying degrees in different countries, different cultures, and heterogeneous organizations. Numerous applications are being developed to meet different goals.

The social networking theory examines social relationships through the nodes’ prism and the relationships between them. Nodes are the individual actors within the network, which can be both separate individuals and organizations or companies. Social networks have an influence and attitude towards different social processes, including the dissemination of ideas and tastes, the formation of public opinion, the organization of civil processes. This is due to the fact that the change in one node influences those directly connected with it, and they, in turn, move it through their relations and relationships with others.

Online social networks as a nature and way of functioning are no different from the classic understanding of network building among users, sharing common interests and realizing an interaction. They are “web-based services that allow individuals to: (1) construct 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. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Researchers use the theory of social networks to explore relationships and factors affecting their formation in the family, social groups, companies, organizations, and even nationwide. Maintaining good relationships with publics is a key priority in PR – especially nowadays, when people are mostly online and, to a great extent, this is their social life.

Social networks and social media are two terms that have become widely used in our vocabulary in recent years as terms describing the trends in online communication development. In many cases, they are used as synonyms, but there are actually differences between them.

Social media is a consequence of the development of technology and web space. “They are an interactive site which content is determined by the participants themselves. In addition to using the published content, each user has the opportunity to edit, add, comment, and evaluate it” (Angelova, 2017: 12). The content that is published in social media is created by the users themselves and has different forms – text, photo, video, graphics, presentation, etc.

Some major differences between social media and networks are expressed in the following:

(1) The way of communication. Social media is a platform for broadcasting (posting) content that other users can comment on and share, thus promoting the organization or brand. The function of social media “is similar to that of a communication channel in the sense of traditional media. They are a system that spreads information “to” others but uses web-based and mobile technologies to make the message an interactive dialogue ... In social networks, the focus is on the act of participation
through which people of common interest can interact and so build relationships with other members of the community” (Petkov, 2011). The basis of social networks is the conversation and, depending on the subject, the connections between people with similar interests, views, life and professional experience could be developed.

(2) Purpose. In social networks, this means creating a group of fans or followers to form an online community and maintain a relationship with this community. While in social media the goal is to promote the organization and interaction.

(3) Content. The main difference between social media and social networks is that “social media” (blogs, Wikipedia, YouTube) create authoring content while the main function of social networks is to communicate between users and share content such as text, photos, links, and videos (Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn) (Vankov, 2014: 52).

(4) Time and effort. Some social media provide tools for preparing the text and publishing it on a certain day and at a particular time, similar to traditional media of pre-written articles or recorded shows. However, in social media special attention and time are required in social networks for the realization of each interaction (conversation, contact). Social media and social networks enable individuals, private and public organizations, public authorities to reach a global audience. They allow the communication process to overcome geographic and time constraints and to deploy for the sake of greater efficiency.

3. The significance of research in the activity of the PR specialist

There is a definite diversity about the nature of Public Relations. The present article will basically emphasize the definition developed by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). The definition was initially adopted in 1982 by the National Assembly, and has the following form: “Public relations helps the organization and its publics to adapt mutually to each other” (Public Relations Society of America [PRSA], n.d.). In 2011 and 2012, PRSA conducted a process of confirming or updating this definition by engaging its members. The modern definition was crafted after a year of research and public voting and has the following form: “Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (PRSA, n.d.). This definition puts the focus of the understanding of the PR activity on the two-way interaction between the organization and its audiences based on the strategic approach to communications. We will examine the process of research as a part of PR communications.

Research is, in essence, a means of gathering information whose analysis leads to the emergence of a certain empirical knowledge of the object under study. Social medium research helps to realize three important tasks (Mateeva, 2002: 135):

(1) To diagnose the state of society at a given moment and the current problems in it;

(2) To predict its development – the emergence of new phenomena and processes;

(3) To explain the social technology of happening events.

In PR activities, surveys are a valuable information resource of importance on a managerial level. In addition, they outline a picture of three key components: past, present and future. In other words, they can relate to past events and lead to causal links that help illuminate the current situation and outline trends. Specific surveys can be planned and implemented to meet the needs of the organization as well as the needs of public management – this depends on the field of realization of the PR specialist. Above all, however, research stems from the current state of change and processes in the society. The latter is an uncontrollable factor that can become an
asset for an organization if it is known, predictable and, to a certain extent, guided – this is achieved with knowledge systematized by research.

In their activity, a PR specialist can use the research in several areas that are related to their specific roles and functions in the organization:

1. Synchronizing short-term and long-term organizational goals with public expectations – the PR specialist transforms the “voice of the community” into their inner conscience and transforms it into an alarm system that guides the organization’s activity. Regular research or secondary data analysis is needed to adjust the organizational clock to the dynamics of public expectations.

2. Analysis of the situation – a research database can be used to define the starting position. This is important to further outline the path and fix the endpoint that the PR specialist wants to reach.

3. Identification of the organization’s communication needs and preparation of programs and plans – when the PR specialist refers to data and factual circumstances, they would more reasonably present to the management their proposal for a future campaign and effectiveness of the results.

4. Measuring the results of communication campaigns and undertaking corrective actions – studying the dynamics in the attitudes and opinions of key audiences before, during and after the activities within the campaign. Research data supports the flexible approach of the PR specialist.

5. Preparation of analytical reports which may also contain targeted recommendations and guidelines for improving the communication policy of the organization and its effect on internal and external audiences.

6. Archiving evidence from monitoring the media environment through which access is made to key audiences in the PR activity – maintenance and enrichment of this archive can be achieved through the techniques of press clipping and media monitoring. Accumulation of information enriches the organization’s “memory” and can always be beneficial to its future work – for example, when the retrospective analysis is made by rethinking past events, achievements, and facts that are reflected in the media and made publicly available.

7. Knowledge of the internal organizational environment through its research – the subject of this study can be the internal communication and the organizational climate, the human resources motivation, the crisis factors in individual units or the organization as a whole.

The role of measurement and media analyses in the communication sphere was a focus in a survey of PR News and Public Relay in November 2017. One of the key questions in this survey is about the decision-making process and the use of data. A majority of respondents at the level of directors (74%) agreed that data quality is not always reliable. “72% of VP-level and above communicators said they have good data only sometimes, but the quality is not consistently reliable. Only 25% of respondents in this group said they are always prepared with accurate data they can trust” (Goldstein, 2017). The survey also shows the tendency that professional communicators spent more time in 2017 on media analysis and intelligence than in 2016.

The professional PR activity is increasingly associated with the use of data as a powerful tool. In this respect, Keyana Corliss emphasizes that data is critical to planning future communications endeavors (Corliss, 2017). Kevin McCann defends the same statement: “The evolution of modern PR tracks the evolution of the internet. As technology gives us more data about everything related to our publics, PR must be there to understand it in real time, and act on it” (Tisch, 2018). In conclusion, PR technology has to be more data-driven.
PR specialists in Bulgaria plan and conduct research on specific topics related to their professional commitment to topical issues of society. An example in this respect is the study dedicated to young Bulgarians and the communication of charity (Christova, 2017). A total of 895 Bulgarian students from the 12th grade were interviewed on a sample basis. Evelina Christova – a researcher – points out the trend towards enhancing the usability of online communication channels and at the same time reduction in the reading of a paper source. However, according to the quoted study, communication about charity is the most important personal contact – the respondents say they learn about a particular campaign through face-to-face communication. There is also a negative trend on charity: young people show a great deal of skepticism about the motives and the end result of charity.

There has been a positive tendency in recent years to study PR practice itself in Bulgaria. A good example in this respect is the study on the topic of “PR specialists and journalists as professional communicators (2010-2016)” (Zlateva & Spasov, 2016). It is a logical continuation of the European study “Professional Communicators (2008-2010)” with authors and initiators Roland Burkart and Jürgen Grimm of Vienna University, Austria. In the second Bulgarian study, conducted with the support of the Bulgarian Public Relations Society, 299 professional communicators participated, of which: 234 were PR specialists and 65 were journalists. The questionnaire focused on the strategic handling of information and the evaluation of individual activities in relation to information exchange between PR specialists and the public. The assessment is made by experts through a six-tier scale, ranging from “totally denying” to “totally accepting” a specific statement. The processed results from the issue of the strategic information handling indicate that the majority of professional communicators accept (36.57%) or fully accept (35.82%) the thesis that through consistent and complete transparency an organization can have a lasting success. Targeting the flow of information on time and in the right direction is of decisive significance to the effectiveness of the PR activity. “The research has been providing the base of preparation for the development of PR strategies and campaigns ...This is and a mandatory element takes its stand on accomplish a control and evaluate to the effectiveness of communication policy” (Stefanova, 2010: 111).

4. Social networks as a research medium in the PR activity

The research in PR activities is related to the practice of social empirical research. It is not by chance, though, that Svetlana Saykova (Saykova, 2015) stresses that the emergence of different social networks has a progressive influence on the intensity of the exchange of information between the participants. This is also a prerequisite for new opportunities in organizing, summarizing and analyzing information produced in social networks. The researcher also points out the accelerated development of a new direction of social empirical research, which can also be called a new social technology – the so called Groundswell. For this concept, there is still no commonly accepted definition, but its specific content is a fact. Saykova briefly links it to “enhanced information exchange between participants in the social networks of the Internet” (Saykova, 2015). In the book Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies, the authors also describe this phenomenon as follows: “...a social trend in which people use technology to get the things they need instead of companies” (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2012: 76). Obviously, the process of mutual sharing of valuable information between participants in the social networking process is important here. The nature of this information can be different, specific, and it depends on the interests of the communicators – economic, social, political, etc.

Social networks focus on the attention and active participation of individuals with similar interests and needs for information exchange. Such focusing in itself can be seen as a natural filter of the people and problems under research. This from a scientific point of view is rather related to limiting the scope of the empirical study. In terms of PR practice, however, it may be beneficial, as blitz surveys or pilot studies that are not characterized by representativeness
receive a fertile soil in the face of social networks. In this connection, the cases of consolidation of the mass interest are first and foremost through the social networks due to extraordinary or significant social events in the Bulgarian society. There are many examples in this regard related to a variety of problems. For example, silent vigils in large cities in Bulgaria in memory of the murdered journalist Viktoria Marinova, organized in October 2018. The power of social networks is not only in bringing people together about a cause or idea, but also expressing a civic position that leads to concrete actions by the authorities. In 2012, a group of citizens was organized through Facebook, which, with its real protest actions, blocked the center of Sofia for several days and provoked a veto of the President on legal amendments aiming at creating relaxed conditions for investors in the construction of tourist facilities in the Bulgarian mountains.

One of the necessary conditions for the success of a communication campaign is the knowledge of the audience, of its expectations, needs and desires and, accordingly, the formation of relevant messages in the public space. Social networks provide statistics that can serve to better define the audience profile. Through this information, it is possible to target in terms of geography, consumer behavior, interests, demography and even place of work. Typical for social networking users is that they are open, they show in the online environment who they are, what they like, what their favorite people and activities are, what they think about them, etc. This makes it possible to refine the audience to which the communication message is addressed. The use of these data allows building an image of the organization that meets the expectations of the audience and the goals set in the strategy for its development.

Online communication provides real-time feedback and maintains direct contact with the public, which is an important component for assessing the effectiveness of communication activities. While traditional media communication uses different media channels, communication with the social networking mediator does not exist; the PR specialist directly transmits the messages to the audience. This provides an opportunity to create feedback through the exploration of the cognitive or emotional user responses.

According to the large-scale European communication monitor 2018 (Verčič, Moreno & Verhoeven, 2018), one of the top 3 strategic issues in the field of communication management is coping with digital evolution and the social network, 36.8% of the surveyed are around this assertion. As a challenge to professional communicators, the speed of information flow and volume is also outlined – 32%, as well as the use of large databases – 22.8%. These future trends, which the monitoring outlines, should signal to PR specialists that it is necessary to consider channeling the capabilities of social networks as a communication channel on the one hand and on the other hand to use as a research environment.

A recent survey of Bulgarian practice specifically related to the use of social networks as an information gathering environment was conducted on the basis of the country’s presidential elections in 2016. The purpose of the study was to determine whether candidates used their Facebook profile as an online communication tool and political discussion with the electorate. The conclusions highlight the tendency for the posts in the presidential candidates’ profiles to be subject to a strict “storyline”; to contain opinions and views on current political life events. The practice is to use social networks to share text, photo, or video content that reflect voter meetings, TV shows, interviews, or other public appearances (Angelova & Hristova, 2018).

In today’s information society, many other professional activities, as well as communications, are based on data. According to Keyana Corliss, “As the profession becomes more data-driven, it becomes clearer that holistic data is better than siloed data... It’s an amazing tool for PR professionals when used right. Still, we have to do a better job understanding our data. And that doesn’t just mean number crunching. As with anything, the human factor makes a difference” (Corliss, 2017). Information plays an important role in modern society and is its most
valuable resource, but the dataset itself cannot solve problems, what is significant is the context of information, setting up data interconnections and analysis on key issues.

The rapid development of mass media, unlimited possibilities for content creation, time and geographical non-limitations in the ways of disseminating and obtaining information provided by information and communication technologies give new opportunities and fields for the realization of a number of professional activities.

5. Conclusion

PR as a communication activity is heavily influenced by the dynamics of social processes and global communication, which generates an instantaneous flow and information exchange, creates and reflects a new and different culture. For the effective work of the PR specialist, feedback and analysis of the information obtained from it are essential. Interactive cooperation through network media and communication through them leads to building and expanding social relationships in society that have their own specificities.

The role of research in the PR sphere is indisputable and is reinforced by the value of the information resource it provides. This requires an organization to focus on daily content tracking that reaches key audiences and the general public. On the other hand, information from research already conducted in a specific field should be sought and subjected to a secondary analysis with the clear idea that they may not coincide fully with organizational research needs, but they are still a guiding base.

PR social networking research can optimize processes by identifying the organization’s goals toward specific online audiences; developing short-term and long-term online communication programs, and measuring their impact.

The importance of research in the work of a PR specialist is mainly related to the perception they give, to the medium, the problems and possible solutions, future prospects and opportunities for development. “Data-driven PR is a whole new breed of public relations... Data-driven PR gives you the ability to base your actions on solid research and have real results you can report” (Data driven PR, n.d.). This is the basis of professional communication actions in the online environment and a prerequisite for better results.

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