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'This is a stage': A study of public relations practitioners' imagined online audiences

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ABSTRACT

Public relations (PR) practitioners are among those cultural intermediaries who privilege symbols, products, and communication rituals in society. Through interviews (n = 26) and analysis of practitioners' Twitter accounts, this study considers how members of this field identify their personal social networking site audiences and how these behaviors are implicated in the performance of their online identity. Findings indicate practitioners feel pressure to use personal social media in accordance with field-constrained norms and that an "occupational publicness" pressure requires them to be visible online outside of the workplace. The persistent specter of public criticism from audiences and the prioritizing of organizational interests above their own self-expression limits performances of PR practitioners' authentic selves online.

1. Introduction

As creative media workers, public relations (PR) practitioners play a central role in the creation, modification, and symbolization of cultural meaning in our global economy (Edwards & Hodges, 2011). Public relations is one of the cultural intermediary professions (along with journalism, marketing, and advertising) in which practitioners privilege certain consumer behaviors, artifacts, and attitudes in society (Bourdieu, 1984; Edwards, 2012). PR practitioners contribute to the development and maintenance of societal rituals and symbols by promoting their organizations and serving as an official interface between their organizations and the various groups that interact with their organizations (Edwards, 2012; Witmer, 2006). This work is embedded within an occupational culture that is influenced by the subjective meanings of individual practitioners and broader socio-cultural factors (Hodges, 2006).

Of central concern to this study is that PR's occupational culture has largely been overlooked in scholarly considerations of cultural intermediary work (Edwards, 2012). This is an oversight as the personal media habits of practitioners are implicated in one of the five moments in the circuit of culture, regulation (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). That is, media use among PR practitioners is part of an institutionalized system of professional identity formation within the field and certain norms in the field regulate occupational practice (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). This regulating behavior is an important contextual factor in the production of culture. Specifically, the attitudes and media choices of practitioners and field-preferred norms can be indicative of practitioners' approaches to role performativity on behalf of organizations and communicative competence (L'Etang, 2011). Recent research has indicated that PR practitioners utilize non-organizational affiliated social networking accounts to create, share, and curate content for audiences that include a mix of personal and professional audiences (Bridgen,

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2011; Fawkes, 2015). We extend this conversation by examining how PR practitioners define their social network audiences and what guides their decisions to share and curate content outside of their formal work roles.

2. Literature review

PR's occupational culture has been shaped by the emergence of networked technologies such as social networking platforms and smartphones. Internet users (regardless of their profession) are increasingly integrating non-work and work-related communication activities into their media use patterns throughout the day (Emarketer, 2016; Vitak, 2012). Social networking sites and mobile devices that allow users to readily connect to these platforms are available to such an extent that the gaps between one's personal and professional networks have become harder to separate (Vitak, 2012). This gives rise to context collapse, where the affordances of social networking sites contributes to the "flattening out of multiple distinct audiences" into one " singular group of message recipients" (Vitak, 2012; p. 451). In attempting to cope with context collapse, one must "negotiate self-presentation to different professional audiences such as managers versus peers, colleagues versus clients or business partners, and members of various organizational units and job functions" (Ellison, Gibbs, & Weber, 2015; p. 113).

These broader technology-related shifts have critical implications for PR practitioners' behavior both in and out of the workplace. Public relations practitioners use social media outside of their formal workday to further their organization's mission and particular campaigns, develop new skills, and advance their own career and personal brand (Bridgen, 2011). Both Bridgen (2011) and Fawkes (2015) have suggested that the demonstration of professional expertise extends well beyond traditional work hours in this field. Even when PR practitioners communicate about work through their personal social networking accounts outside of their official organizational roles, they still act as informal social mediators on behalf of their organization (Himelboim, Golan, Moon, & Suto, 2014). Thus, PR's occupational-practitioner culture is characterized by blurred public-private boundaries in a way that privileges organizational interests across time and personal spaces (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2015).

L'Etang (2011), Pieczka (2002), and Sriramesh and Vercic (2011) are among those who have emphasized the need to deconstruct and explore PR's occupational culture and the performances and rules that form the foundation of PR in practitioners' in-work and their out-of-work roles. However, the processes involved in navigating between these realms via social media for this group of creative media workers have not been fully explored. To help explain how practitioners navigate between these realms, we briefly consider the literature regarding impression management.

2.1. Impression formation and the imagined audience

The notion that people present their personal identities to audiences through their words and actions can be traced back to Goffman (1959). People create a face for each social interaction and actively engage in impression formation among their audiences (Goffman, 1959). Identity performance, which can shape one's social relationships, is continuous and subject to ongoing change. In performing one's self to others, the actor habitually monitors how audiences are responding to this presentation (Goffman, 1959). Networked technology such as social media provides a platform for social interaction and links the individual to various online audiences (Papacharissi, 2012). Against this backdrop, social media have created many layers of "publicness" to one's identity expression (Baym & boyd, 2012). PR work includes a greater degree of publicness than ever before because of the availability of social media for personal and professional use.

Goffman's work has informed several notable studies and commentaries in the public relations literature about impression management and role performance. Fawkes (2015) found that through the impression management process, PR practitioners put effort into preserving one's personal and others' "face" or self-image to the public. Additionally, Johansson (2007) observed that organizational identity and organizational relationships with stakeholders are co-constructed through interactions between PR practitioners and organizational stakeholders. Through these interactions, the PR practitioner has an expected role performance as both an organizational spokesperson and as an individual citizen (Bridgen, 2011). This suggests a link between the performance of the PR practitioner's public identity and the performance of the organization's public identity (Himelboim et al., 2014; Johansson, 2007). In response, practitioners consistently shift between public and private identity expression (Fawkes, 2015).

Given their privileged role in the circuit of culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2007), PR practitioners are a key group to examine when it comes to audience-defining behaviors and impression management. Our study considers how PR practitioners identify their social network site audiences and how this selection regulates the presentation of their multi-faceted role identities. In an attempt to extend the discussion about the blurring of PR practitioners' identities across time and online spaces (Bridgen, 2011; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2015), we sought to answer the following research question:

> In the context of enacted audience selection, how do occupational norms regulate PR practitioners' use of social networking sites for non-institutionally affiliated purposes?

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3. Methodology

3.1. Method overview

Two sources of data were collected and analyzed for this study. In-depth interviews with 26 PR practitioners in a mid-sized Northeast United States city were conducted from August 2014 to July 2015. Interviews explored why participants joined a social network and why they followed someone on social media. Also included in the interview protocol were questions about how respondents understood their audiences, such as: 'Who do you imagine reads your social media posts?' and 'Please describe a scenario or example in which you adjusted what you posted on a social network because of an audience consideration.' Semi-structured interviews were selected to inquire about individuals' behaviors, while leaving open the potential for flexibility in the conversation (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). An initial analysis of interview transcripts indicated that Twitter was an occupation-preferred platform because of the focus on sharing news. To understand practitioners' experiences in entirety and their lifeworld (Hodges, 2006), we subsequently analyzed their posting behaviors on Twitter.

3.2. Participant characteristics

On average, participants had been with their current organizations for 5.5 years at the time of the interview. Sixteen women and 10 men were interviewed. Twelve respondents worked either as independent practitioners or for agencies. Fourteen respondents worked in-house for firms in the entertainment, health, education, and financial services industries. Eight were non-managers, while 18 were managers.

3.3. Data collection

Interviews were conducted by the first author either in respondents' workplace (n = 23) or in coffee shops that were quiet at the time of the interview (n = 3). All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed. Respondents were assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Interviews averaged 51.9 min in length. In-person interviews in one city allowed for ease of access to respondents, which facilitated data collection.

The transcribed interviews consisted of 210,989 words on 401 single-spaced Microsoft Word pages. Following the interviews, 24 respondent Twitter accounts were examined (one respondent's tweets were private, and one respondent's account could not be located). For those respondents who were active on Twitter (n = 11), we reviewed their first 100 tweets of 2016. For those who were not as active (n = 13), we analyzed up to 100 tweets over a multi-year period (though some had not even shared 100 tweets at all). This resulted in 2,131 reviewed tweets. The inclusion of multiple data sources "reduces the likelihood of the researcher making misleading claims or writing a superficial analysis" (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; p. 351).

3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis occurred in three phases via the social constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). In accordance with this grounded theory approach, the first author wrote researcher memos at the conclusion of each interview (Charmaz, 2006). Memos outlined the list of social networking sites that each respondent reported using and an initial description of how respondents determined their audiences for social media messages. The first author analyzed these memos as data were collected. The second phase of analysis occurred when each author conducted a line-by-line review of interview transcripts, which generated the initial categories of "pressures" and "responses." During this analysis phase, we each coded the important words and groups of words that were relevant to the research question (Charmaz, 2006). Each author identified these codes on their own and then codes were jointly reviewed during three intensive sessions as a means of co-constructing meaning from the data (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). The third phase of analysis involved a final review of interview transcripts, examination of respondents' tweets, and refinement of the initial categories. The third round of analysis and axial coding generated the new category of "personal reflection."

4. Results

Findings reveal that PR practitioners' behavior on their personal (non-institutionally affiliated) social networking accounts is shaped by several audience-related occupational pressures and reflection about the potential impact of their posts on their organization's and personal reputations (Fig. 1). Participants indicated that they felt expectations to use their personal social media accounts to demonstrate expertise to peers and clients and to maintain a visible online presence to complement their presence in their organization's physical communities. With these pressures, PR practitioners may limit the frequency to which they post, and multiple respondents reported engaging in activities to curtail their individual expression when they do post. Using language that speaks to Goffman's (1959) notion of impression management, Jeremiah, a manager in the arts industry, put it this way: "It is tough because you almost have to give away a little bit of your personal life and your identity on social media in order to fit the role." Discussed below, three core factors highlight the relationship between occupational norms and the presentation of the PR practitioner's authentic self online.

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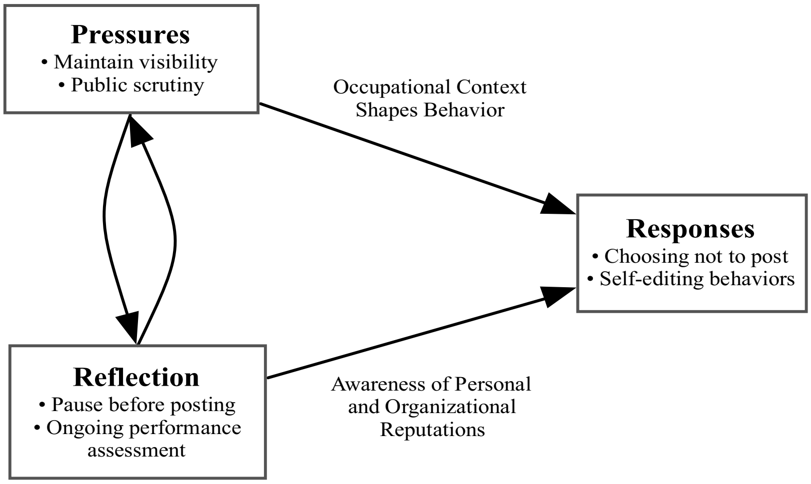

Fig. 1. Factors that describe PR practitioners' use of personal social networking sites.

4.1. *Recognizing the pressures to perform*

Across age, industry, and amount of professional experience, respondents reported feeling a significant expectation to be visible in online spaces. To this point, practitioners perceived a pressure around what is best understood as "occupational publicness," where they are expected to perform an occupational-limited authentic self to audiences outside of the workplace and where they are expected to adopt multiple social networking tools for professional development. Whitney, who was a PR manager for a large corporation at the time of the interview, addressed this expectation: "I should be there, I need to know how it works, I need to know what's happening for me." With pressure to be engaged online once the workday ends, respondents believe that audiences within and outside of the PR industry are constantly judging their performance.

4.1.1. *Maintain visibility*

PR practitioners are often responsible for posting to their organization's social media accounts on behalf of their clients. This, combined with the regular act of communicating to external audiences such as the news media, enhanced the belief among respondents that they are consistently in the public's eye and are constantly expected to promote their organizations. Supporting prior research (Bridgen, 2011), respondents reported feeling professional expectations to use their personal social media accounts outside of standard work hours. Reflecting this idea, Mariah, a manager at a non-profit organization, used language that resonated with many of her peers: "PR is an industry that never turns off, so I feel like to some extent that is a pressure factor that requires you to be online." Yet nine respondents specifically indicated that they wanted to remain out of the public eye on their personal accounts. Even though they may prefer otherwise, PR practitioners perceive an expectation that they must maintain an active online presence via their personal social networking accounts.

Twenty-two respondents manage their organization's or their agency's client-affiliated social network accounts; those who did not have this access still reported feeling an obligation to learn how these platforms work in case future client-driven usage needs arise. Said Elaine, who works in higher education: "You need to know what these are to make better decisions about what you are going to use." The consequences of not using social platforms included a failure to develop professional skills and a loss of key intelligence about peer and community decision-makers.

4.1.2. *Audience judgment*

The occupational publicness obligation related to a second perceived performance pressure. In addition to expressing an overriding interest in being visible in the field and a need to be knowledgeable about emerging social networking platforms, respondents frequently indicated that working in the field subjects them to constant audience scrutiny. Thus, the presentation of self and sharing and curating of content is performed with high sensitivity to critiques from multiple audiences. Paul, a prominent practitioner in the market, encapsulated this idea with language that also resonated with Goffman: "This is a stage . . . you've chosen your profession and you have to choose your words." The relationship between personal media use and occupational culture is seen in a follow-up comment from Paul, who has more than two decades of experience in the field: "You've got to know who your audiences are and if I can control who my message is going to, all the better because I think most communicators should be doing that." Practitioners are expected to conform to the standard industry approach in public relations of strategically linking messages to designated targeted audiences even when they post to their personal accounts (Witmer, 2006). If this professionally oriented role is not performed on one's personal accounts, then there is a risk of public criticism.

The threat of this criticism idea surfaced with Antoinette, an arts PR manager: “You can’t post anything that is really stupid because people are going to think, ‘What the heck? How does she get her job?”’ Victor voiced frustration with this context. In his late 20s, Victor runs several client accounts for his agency, often posts to his own networks, and has volunteered his social media skills to support a non-profit group. Yet he has also encountered criticism for something as basic as a typo in a post: “To a fault I think people have gotten obsessed with finding the mistakes in our field. I mean the online world can be a really ugly place.” These pressures demonstrate the socialization and knowledge-building pressures of PR’s practitioner culture (Hodges, 2006).

4.2. *Reflecting on their performances*

Against this backdrop, PR practitioners think carefully about what they post on social networking sites and how this influences both their personal reputation and their client’s reputation. The pressures felt by PR practitioners prompted several respondents to state that they engaged in a deliberative process before sharing content. Lisa echoed several respondents’ comments with the following scenario:

> I was going to post a fun photo or something but it made me take [a] pause because you realize that you are broadcasting to everyone. I think it forces people to be more cognizant of what it is they are doing.

From this perspective, it is evident that Lisa thought carefully about what she shares, as she was aware about the public nature of her posts. Edward, who works in the sports industry, indicated that he is an “outlier” because he does not use social media much when he is not at work. Like other respondents, he acknowledged the field’s expectations that he *should* be online, but stated, “I [am] just more comfortable sort of being able to lay low and under the radar.” He addressed how his professional orientation shapes this approach:

> Sometimes I’m an over-thinker. That’s just a PR thing because you always try . . . to think about the worst-case scenario or how are people going to interpret that. So [I’m] very careful about the wording of things.

Before practitioners even share content, it appears that they first consider the nature of what they were posting and they make sure that what they post will be favorably viewed by audience members. In this respect, the lines between personal and professional begin to blur and the performance of the authentic self becomes secondary to the performance of the organization. To this point, only five respondents used variants of the common phrase “these tweets are my own” in their Twitter profile descriptions. According to Mariah: “You have got a brand that is not personal and professional brand: There is a brand.” Elaine, a practitioner in higher education who has a Twitter account solely for publishing client-related posts, added:

> We interact with so many people and we are out all the time. Sometimes you need to step back and have some private regroup time, rethink time, whatever you want to call it.

This taking a ‘step back’ occurs before PR practitioners decide to share content and as part of an ongoing reflection about how the self is performed online.

4.3. *Engaging with audiences online*

Regardless of their approach to managing these audience categories, PR practitioners consistently felt pressure to add clients and peers as friends to their personal social networking networks. With these audiences identified, respondents engaged in some form of online behavior, often either passively posting or self-editing their identities.

4.3.1. *Passive engagement*

In response to role pressures and reflection, practitioners engaged in several behaviors that limit the demonstration of what they felt was their true selves and they frequently described self-editing behaviors. As PR practitioners’ professional and personal audiences merge, there is an expectation that they share content that will be perceived as useful to a broad range of people. However, to make a post relevant to a wide audience takes time and careful deliberation. Said Lisa, who works in finance: “I’m not really a proactive poster. It’s a time factor. Writing a post and sharing it takes a lot from me to find something completely compelling to share.” Echoing Lisa, Mariah stated that active engagement on social media has become a thing of the past: “It is not even dialing back. I just choose not to post at all.” In another example, Victor, a digital media manager, indicated that he will frequently scroll through posts but will not actually post after work. With these cases, participants passively engage with their personal social media audiences out of habit. Our post-interview analysis of participant Twitter accounts revealed that nine respondents had posted fewer than 20 tweets during the first 140 days of 2016, with four not posting at all in 2016 at the time of our review.

4.3.2. *Active engagement governed by self-editing behaviors*

For those who post, there is often a tension between wanting to be self-expressive and a worry that a post will reflect poorly on their organization. Said Theresa, “A part of you wishes that you could express how you feel but then you think about the possible repercussions.” Added Maureen: “I might have strong opinions one-way or the other personally, [but] I

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have to remember that I am representing not just myself." Fourteen participants indicated that they disengage from political discussions and four mentioned that they would not use their personal social media sites to discuss religion.

Taking the notion of limited self-performativity further, self-editing became a means for PR practitioners to express their own views without consequence. Several respondents described opening a browser, typing up a passionate post, and then deleting the message after they thought more about the degree to which the content of their message aligned with their audience. Mariah, who mentioned that she has significantly reduced the amount that she posts to her networks, demonstrated this self-censoring: "Sometimes I'll open Facebook up and start to post something and be like 'Yea, nobody really cares' or 'I don't really care for people to know this. Why am I posting this?'" A story from Jeremiah, who is with a non-profit organization, demonstrated what is at stake with self-editing. He recalled feeling frustrated by a local company's poor customer service and wrote several iterations of a harsh tweet to be directed at the company. However, the tweet ended up being "vaguely angry about them, which could have been way worse. But we have somewhat of a relationship with them." As with other respondents, Jeremiah was concerned about hurting his organization through a controversial social media post even though his handle does not mention his organization.

These self-editing behaviors fit a central observation of this study that self-limiting performances on social media are common for PR practitioners who often feel as though they are under consistent public and peer scrutiny because of their occupation.

It should be noted that, although not a central finding, we did observe that a small number of PR practitioners in this sample employed self-limiting behaviors that extended beyond self-editing. Three junior-level practitioners specifically described masking their identities on social media. For example, Sharon, a PR coordinator for a non-profit organization, stated that she removes her name and her employment information from all of her social media accounts, aside from LinkedIn. Two other practitioners indicated that they felt more freedom to post under agency accounts than with their personal accounts. For these three practitioners, masking their identities provided an additional way to constrain what part of their identities were revealed on their social media accounts.

5. Discussion

Expanding Baym and boyd (2012) to the practice of public relations, this study highlights how social media are forcing a reconsideration of what it means to be public in an occupational context, how this group connects with audiences, and the formation of publics and counter-publics in digitally- mediated spaces. Our study reveals that PR practitioners navigate shifting personal and professional boundaries in venues that are open to consistent public and peer observation and that it is not just one's personal reputation that is at risk with a problematic post. Organizational and professional priorities strongly dictate personal posting behaviors. This gives rise to an "occupational publicness" pressure, where PR practitioners are compelled to demonstrate ongoing occupational competence via their personal social networking accounts even as they desire to limit their use of these tools outside of the workplace. These practitioners are either well known in their local communities, or they are the official voices of their organizations through their organizations' social media accounts. Occupational pressures add another layer of publicness beyond official work duties when it comes to PR practitioners' expected use of non-client affiliated social networking accounts.

The ritual of impression management in PR extends well beyond the workplace and includes self-editing and occasional avoidance of the very tools that are required for their jobs. Evidence from this study supports the observation by Fawkes (2015) that PR practitioners struggle to integrate their official versions of their work role with their daily non-work role experiences. Extending this, we argue that there is a struggle not only between official work roles and one's day-to-day experiences on the job; there is also a struggle between what practitioners perceive as their "official" offline personas and their day-to-day experiences outside of the workplace. These pressures to constrain self-expression and privilege one's employer involve more than just content creation: Audience selection is a regulated behavior in this field. This has the potential to reshape one's social relations not only in mediated venues but also in face-to-face encounters. Given the profession, the potential for public scrutiny and criticism partially dictate how friendships are maintained.

This is not to suggest that social media is avoided at all costs. Even as practitioners are expected to be personable and are expected to occasionally discuss non-work interests on Twitter and Facebook, there is a fine line that they approach. As our first interviewee put it, PR practitioners may have to give away a little bit of their personal life and identity on social media in order to fit a certain role.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the pressures, reflections, and response behaviors that help PR practitioners navigate between the personal and professional realms online. In a career that is often described as intense and creative, practitioners often believe that their non-work time should be spent either developing new skills or dealing with the audience-driven expectation that they perform their authentic selves in a way perceived as highly networked, professionally competent, and personable. This shift grants further power to audiences in that practitioners give up some personal creativity in light of potential audience expectations. Any misstep that occurs on one's personal social media accounts has the potential to be met with criticism from one's peers, one's employers, an array of organizational stakeholders, and random audience members. The result is that practitioners may resort to passive, lurking behavior, or will outright hide their identities. That only five respondents'

Twitter profiles indicated 'these tweets are my own' speaks to how practitioners' identities have been subsumed to their organizations. They simply acknowledge that the organization comes before their personal views. It is not just that social media have added more layers of publicness; role performativity in online spaces outside of the workplace has now become an occupational and constrictive requirement for members of this profession.

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