The Professional Roles of College Athletics Communicators: Relationship to the Usage and Perceptions of Social Media

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On October 11, 2011, the University of California, Berkeley's athletics department played host to Social Media Day (Cal Athletics, 2011). The event allowed fans to interact with Cal coaches and student-athletes by participating in a live online chat and by posting questions on Facebook and Twitter. The event is one of numerous recent examples underscoring the prominent role social media now plays in communication between sport organizations and their key publics. As social media has grown more influential, the nature of public relations practice has changed dramatically. A non-sport specific survey of public relations professionals in 2009 indicated that 68% of respondents felt the emergence of social media had changed the way their organizations handled external communications (Wright & Hinson, 2009). The influence of social media in sport may be even more profound. As one industry executive has observed, “(t)he very nature of sports makes it a perfect fit with the principles of social media” (Imbriano, 2010).

One of the conceptual tools that has contributed to our understanding of public relations is a roles typology characterizing the activity patterns of practitioners within their organizations. The typology distinguishes between several managerial roles and a technical role (Broom & Smith, 1979), and it has served as the theoretical background for multiple studies, including several focusing on college athletics (Ruihley & Fall, 2009; Stoldt, 2000; Stoldt & Narasimhan, 2005). The purpose of this study is examine the relationship between social media and organizational roles in college athletics, and in particular how the organizational roles of college athletics communicators relates to the use of social media on the job and perceptions regarding social media.

Relevance/significance of the topic: Social media usage by online adults in the U.S. has grown from 8% in 2005 to 65% in 2011 (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011). The growth in social media use has both provided new opportunities and presented new challenges for organizational communicators. A 2009 survey of public relations professionals indicated that 72% agreed that social media enhanced the practice of public relations and 83% agreed that social media was impacting organizational transparency (Wright & Hinson, 2009). The same survey reported that 84% of respondents agreed that social media has forced organizations to respond more quickly when criticized.

Review of relevant literature: Social media has been defined in the following way: "Social media describes the online tools that people use to share content, profiles, opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives and media itself, thus facilitating conversations and interaction online between groups of people. These tools include blogs, message boards, podcasts, micro blogs, lifestreams, bookmarks, networks, communities, wikis, and v-logs" (Solis, 2007). Since 2006, Wright and Hinson (2009) have annually conducted research assessing the impact of these new technologies on the overall field of public relations. In doing so, they have utilized a questionnaire that asks respondents to indicate the extent to which social media has changed the way their organizations communicate, the amount of time they spend working with social media, the impact of social media on public relations practice, and more.

Broom and Smith (1979) originally conceptualized a public relations roles typology consisting of three management-related roles—expert prescriber, communication facilitator, and problem-solving process facilitator—and a technical role. Professionals generally play multiple roles within their organizations, but they tend to have a primary role they enact more often than others. Subsequent research revealed that when practitioners reported their organizational activity patterns, high correlations existed among the three management-related roles (Broom, 1982). In other words, practitioners practically thought in terms of two primary roles—manager and technician. The Broom roles typology has been utilized in studies of the current and ideal roles of college athletics communicators (Stoldt, 2000), expertise of college athletics communicators in various tasks (Stoldt & Narasimhan, 2005), and perceptions of college athletics directors regarding the roles of their public relations staff (Ruihley & Fall, 2009).
Purpose/objectives: As stated, the purpose of this study is to assess how the organizational roles of the college athletics communicators relate to social media. Specific research questions to be addressed include the following:

1. What differences exist between managers and technicians in regard to the amount of time they spend working with social media?

2. What differences exist between managers and technicians in regard to their perceptions of whether social media has changed the way their organizations communicate?

3. What differences exist between managers and technicians in regard to their perceptions of the impact of social media on public relations practice?

Methodology: Working in partnership with the College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA), a professional organization with more than 2,700 members, we will administer a Web-based survey to college athletics communications professionals. The survey will be conducted between Nov. 30, 2011 and Jan. 11, 2012. The CoSIDA staff has agreed to assist us by sending blast e-mails to its full professional membership soliciting survey responses. Three appeals will be sent over the six-week period with respondents being directed to the Web-based survey.

The survey instrument consists of the questionnaire utilized by Wright and Hinson (2009) in studies of public relations professionals in broad settings. Several survey items have also been added to the social media questions, including six items regarding the organizational roles of respondents based on Broom’s (1982) typology. Each of the six items lists a roles-related task—either managerial or technical in nature—and asks respondent how often they engage in each activity on a 1 (never) to 7 (always) scale.

We will determine the primary organizational role of each respondent by comparing the mean scores for the frequency in which they engage in managerial and technical tasks. Once the primary role of each respondent has been identified, we will make comparisons between managers and technicians in regard to their social media usage and perceptions.

Discussion/implications: Given that we have yet to secure survey data, it is not possible to discuss survey results in this proposal, but such discussion will be included in the conference presentation. We anticipate the study will have implications for both practitioners and academics preparing future professionals, as it will enhance our understanding of how the organizational roles of college athletics communicators relate to advances in communication technology.