Public relations and social media: Deliberate or creative strategic planning

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\textbf{A B S T R A C T}

The subject of the presented exploratory study is the strategic planning of the daily professional activities of managers in social media (SM). Is this planning deliberate, or emergent? Are the strategies prescribed, or creative? To what communication logics must professionals adapt their practices? Following the sociology of uses studied in the approach to SM appropriation in the field of corporate communication, these questions are tackled through a qualitative, descriptive approach. The dual objective is to describe the actual professional practices of SM managers and compare them to the theories found in the literature. To do this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 managers active in SM in North American organizations. During these, practices emerged for which the standards were not always prescribed.

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1. Introduction

Creating and keeping relationships of trust with one’s audience is at the heart of the professional and academic activities of public relations. How are these strategic activities planned in social media (SM) in order to gain such trust, and continue to earn it over the long term? We might first question whether these activities are planned as a part of a global communication plan, or whether they emerge from daily practices. Is the planning deliberate, or emergent (\textit{Mintzberg and Waters, 1985})? Is it prescribed, or creative (\textit{De Certeau, 1990})? Does presence in SM require using elements of both trends at once? To what communication logics must public relations professionals adapt their practices in SM? What strategies should be adopted?

These questions are addressed through the SM appropriation approach, emerging from the sociology of uses and studied in the field of corporate communication. This epistemological position allows this phenomenon to be studied from the point of view of the user or, in this case, public relations professionals. What interests us is to understand the strategic process and whether it is planned (or not), or a bit of both, of SM managers in their daily SM appropriation practices to reach their communication objectives. What are these objectives: to inform, entertain, or inspire confidence? What strategic approach should be developed to gain this confidence? How should ideally symmetrical and two-way conversations be brought about (\textit{Grunig & Hunt, 1984}) by developing “building mode” strategies established from a planned process, or by employing “dwelling mode” strategies which emerge from daily practices?

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This study discusses the digital practices of public relations professionals through a descriptive qualitative approach. To do this, we used semi-structured interview techniques with 12 SM strategists active in North American organizations. They allowed us to analyse the SM appropriation practices by professionals through their planning and to observe how these effective practices could be compared to those prescribed in the scientific literature.

2. Theoretical issues and markers

Conceptualizing a “theory of practices” has always been a project dear to the father of the appropriation approach, De Certeau (1990). Although he was never able to fully realize it, he at least laid the foundations. Other researchers have continued their work in this vein. Chia and Holt (2006) also emphasize the difficulty of studying daily professional practices, as well as the importance that they play in any communication strategy. As early as 1985, Mintzberg and Walters tackled the question and showed the nuances between deliberate strategies integrated in the strategic corporate plans of organizations and emergent strategies created reactively on the ground, without having been previously formulated in the planning phase. Despite the undeniable relevance of this work in management, research conducted by Chia and Holt (2006) emphasize the fact that Mintzberg’s work does not explore, or does not elaborate on how a series of repeated and coherent actions can emerge from what one might call a “strategy.”

This is what Chia and Rasche (2011) attempt to demonstrate by making analogue links with De Certeau’s approach. According to them, a strategy can emerge from unintentional actions. To do this, they emphasize how, through a reconceptualization of the concepts of agency and action, it becomes more realistic to consider that a series of non-deliberate actions can still be strategic, despite the fact that they are integrated in posteriori to the overall strategic planning. To do this, they call upon two key concepts, building mode and dwelling mode, which they define as follows:

De Certeau is making a vital distinction between two different outlooks and their associated modes of engagement and knowing that we label here the “building” and “dwelling” worldviews. In building mode [...] actor has first a need to “construct mental representations and models of the world prior to any practical engagement with it” (Ingold, 2000; 178 cited in Chia & Rasche, 2011; 38). In a dwelling mode, decisions and actions emanate from being in situ and occur sponte sua. Here, the efficacy of action does not depend upon some pre-thought plan of action but results from internalized predispositions that facilitate continuous timely and ongoing adjustment and adaptation to local circumstances (2011: 39).

Thus, building mode is characterized by actors guided by predefined goals, which results in joint efforts to achieve them. On the other side of the spectrum, there is the dwelling mode perspective, which is characterized by actions aimed at overcoming immediate obstacles. According to research conducted along the Strategy and Practice angle, researchers continue to subscribe to the building mode strategic model, which is dominant in organizations. As for De Certeau, he rather emphasizes the necessity of incorporating not just a single planning model, but rather both thought patterns in uses, thus promoting a more comprehensive understanding and view of the strategies (Chia & Rasche, 2011).

This overall strategic vision, necessary for any planning, reflects in part the concept of “organizational ambidexterity” developed by Bodwell and Chemak (2010) which they define as follows: “ambidexterity refers to how an organization ‘wears the hat of the job it does today while at the same time “wearing the hat of the job it will do tomorrow”’ (2010: 196). In other words, organizations must leverage their existing skills daily, while continuing to explore new possibilities. By basing themselves on their current strengths, they will be able to “see” new opportunities, thus stimulating organizational change. This will, in turn, enable them to anticipate threats and reduce the risks of these changes. To support this plan from an ambidextrous vision, the authors propose the scenario planning method. It requires three key skills: detection (sensing), appropriation (seizing), and reconfiguration (reconfiguring). This way of predicting, appropriating, and reconfiguring daily actions could thus allow enterprises to integrate new professional planning practices which will facilitate adaptation to organizational changes.

Once the planning of the organization’s practices has been completed, it must be integrated to an overall vision. Whittington (quoted in Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seyd, 2007) probed the “manufacturing” of strategies by taking into account three elements: praxis, practices, and practitioners. According to him, the “manufacturing” of a strategy is found at the confluence of these three concepts, which are intrinsically interconnected. These notions inspired Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) who asked the following questions. Who is the dominant strategist or practitioner? What does the strategist do, and at what organizational level are the key analyzed practices present? And finally, on what theoretical basis are these practices based? These are the themes of this exploratory study from the epistemological standpoint of users, namely SM managers. Here are first some theoretical markers.

3. Strategic planning in 3 levels

From Maslow’s Pyramid, which integrates the needs for trust, attachment, and collaboration of an individual, Ertzcheid, Faveral, and Guéguen (2010) propose a strategic planning model applicable to SM. It consists of 3 hierarchical levels: (1) Developing the organization’s trust capital by working on its identity and reputation through transparency and active listening; (2) Developing a sense of attachment and transparency in order to bring out ambassadors for the organization, who will become vectors to diffuse the organization’s ideas; (3) Aggregating a community around a common project based on the nature and the objectives of the organization, for example, associating the organization with a social cause, aim for the co-creation of content, promoting a particular lifestyle, etc.

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However, the authors nonetheless nuance their remarks with regards to attaining the three levels: they can only be adopted by organizations in SM under certain conditions. First, they emphasize that organizations depend on their SM objectives: for example, do they want to inform, entertain, or inspire (Burch, Wilson, & Parker, 2013)? They emphasize that reaching these strategic levels also depends on the nature or scope of activities of the organization, as well as the level of engagement of its community (for example, do they interact on platforms, do they feel close to the products or services, etc.). Finally, the authors remind us that organizations must also take into account the human and financial resources at their disposal. This may make it difficult, or even unnecessary, for some organizations to reach all three levels if they do not have teams dedicated to SM, adequate monitoring tools, a dynamic community, or a realistic budget.

In all cases, it is imperative for any strategic planning of organizational activities in SM to create and maintain trusting relationships with its audience, which is the primary mission of public relations professionals (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Maisononneuve, 2010). And in SM, one of the ways of establishing these relationships is to manage the “conversations market” (Balagué & Fayon, 2012). However, above all, community managers must be credible in order to create these relationships in an authentic and transparent manner (Charest & Bouffard, 2015; Ott & Theunissen, 2014; Charest, Lavigne, & Mounouni, 2015). To carry out these relational activities, professionals draw up some prior realistic, precise, and measurable objectives in accordance with their target audience as well as their information and communication needs (Frick, 2013). Who are these professionals, who develop these plans and manage relations in SM? “Public relations lead most of these activities, but human resources are a close collaborator”, confirmed Neill and Moody (2015: 109). Once the objectives and target audiences have been well defined, the managers then tackle the planning of strategies, including those for monitoring and for content.

3.1. Monitoring strategies

Since the advent of SM in the mid-2000s, a large literature has been arguing for the benefits of paying attention to the particulars of an organization: its brand, products, and services offered. Doing such a monitoring helps build relationships and react quickly to positive or negative comments, whose impact could have important effects on the reputation of the organization, especially in crisis situations (Bloch, 2012; Charest & Doucet, 2014; Libaert., 2010). Although it is easier to manage information on internal organization platforms, approaching other communities to interact with different internet users is also recommended (Boussicau & Dupin, 2013; King, 2012). Given its many benefits, elaborating monitoring strategies by listening is inevitable (Balagué & Fayon, 2012).

Importantly, a listening strategy differs from the “push” strategy which has been favoured by companies for several years. In this sense, it allows for interaction with different audiences to elicit first the “conversations market” (Balagué & Fayon, 2012) to then start a process that emphasizes the sale of products or services. The listening strategy is thus part of an interactive communication logic arousing the commitment of internet users, that is to say, a logic that promotes interactions between community members and organizations. The cycle of the conceptual model developed by Peterson (2006) is designated according to the 4 “I”s and includes the following 4 indicators: involvement, interaction, intimacy (or affinity) and influence. It is the sequencing of these 4 actions that represents the full internet user engagement cycle on platforms, and that organizations must try to develop in order to spark conversations with their audiences. Peterson explains the 4 “I”s as follows: involvement leads to better interactions; this promotes intimacy between an organization and its audiences, that is to say, the affinity between them. It is in this way that, ultimately, the organization will be able to attempt to influence its community in a favourable manner towards a product or service.

In order to develop an effective listening strategy in SM, Fayon and Alloing (2012) propose several steps: establishing the objectives that will guide the monitoring (for example, the image desired by the company), the message to be disseminated, the targets, and the time given to conduct the monitoring and geographic scope; defining the keywords for research and follow-up by implementing alerts using Google Alerts, Gigalert, or Social Mention; clearly identifying platforms and quantitative and qualitative sources of influence; putting these sources under surveillance by putting in place RSS feeds. The authors stress that it is in the analysis stage that the organization will see the extent of its visibility in SM, as well as what the opinions about it are. They also note that these steps form a cycle that must be repeated once the presence strategy is established.

Thus, the listening strategy, which should be a new culture to be acquired by organizations in order to arouse the “conversations market, assumes that new technologies, and particularly the Internet, make it possible to invent new ways of sharing knowledge faster. It is therefore important to listen to the conversations that take place on social platforms and analyse them in order to stay abreast of public opinion and, through this, to recruit collaborators, or even create partnerships with influencers.

It is also important to include the monitoring of influencers in this strategy. Who is speaking? What are they saying? What is their profile? Given the importance of influencers and opinion leaders on the Web, they deserve attention before addressing content strategies.

3.2. Influencers in social media

According to Heiderich and Maroun (2014) an influencer or leader in SM is someone who participates in the content and conversations on various platforms by providing added value to a connection, service or product in which he/she claims to have knowledge. The authors stress that such influencers gain influence in a network by responding to a need for
information and communication in an interested community. From the work conducted by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955/1955)[Katz and Lazarsfeld, 2008][2008], we already know that leaders enjoy socio-economic conditions that are higher than average, that they travel a lot, and that they exert influence on the decision-making process of their network. However, in the work conducted by Heiderich and Maroun (2014), it is rather the fact that leaders bring added value and have an expertise that they want to share with their network that ensures that they have influence. This broadens the notion of influencers when it is adapted to SM. Still, it is necessary for content to be relevant and recognized by the community.

Once the monitoring strategies have been elaborated and influencers identified, organizations can then proceed to develop content strategies.

3.3. Content strategies

Like the development of a good monitoring strategy, it is imperative to first identify the objectives and targets in order to develop relevant content strategies. For example, the organization must transform marketing objectives into content objectives, and identify the type of community desired. Organizations must also favour certain platforms likely to meet, not only the objectives and targets of the organization, but also the interests and information and communication needs of their audiences.

To develop a relevant content strategy and optimize online presence, Wilson (cited in Frick, 2013) proposes three key factors, which he calls the 3 ‘C’s: created content, curated, content, and commissioned content. This means that the organization must first itself create content; that it can then add comments to content created by other sources; and finally, that the organization can offer content developed in collaboration with influences, which give added value to this same content.

According to the author, maintaining a balance between the 3 “C”s is important; all while keeping in mind the resources and objectives of the organization. To do this, he suggests creating a content matrix in order to organize and plan the content. This matrix determines what content to share, how often, and in what format.

In order to establish relevant content strategies, Ertzcheid et al. (2010) also recommend observing the habits of potential users. Essentially, this amounts to asking questions about them before implementing a strategy. Are they willing to commit to the level of involvement desired by the organization? What is the critical mass of targeted internet users given the organization’s value proposition? And in this age of information overload, what added value will Internet users gain from the information disseminated by the organization? All of these questions must be considered in advance by the organization to develop content strategies likely to adequately meet the information and communication needs of their target audiences.

Finally, as communication researchers interested in the study and analysis of the professional practices of SM managers, and given our avowed interest in collaborating for the development of a “theory of practices,” it is necessary to observe and describe the daily professional practices of SM managers by looking at the ways in which they appropriate these new communication tools. How do they plan their professional activities overall, and what part of their daily activities leave room for the emergence of new uses? If so, are any of these use considered and reintegrated in their strategic monitoring and content planning in SM? What strategic planning level do they target? Furthermore, by drawing upon theories and concepts identified in the literature coming from the sociology of practices, we are interested in comparing these theoretical concepts to the actual practices of professionals. Here then is the empirical approach which we have adopted to carry out this research project.

4. Results

4.1. The evolution of practices

When comparing the use of SM made by organizations when they began their involvement with the one that is made today, we can see a certain refinement of the practice. Indeed, some organizations initially launched themselves in SM in a rather experimental manner: “Before 2010, there was no written strategy […] We started to open accounts everywhere, without having a strategy” (participant #8), “There was a pretty summary plan for SM integration. It was at a minimum” (participant #5). For others, however, it was events in the news that awakened a sense of urgency in some organizations to engage in a more formal manner. For example, a professional union was quick to join its audience in SM immediately after the publication of a piece of legislation which directly affected its members.

Conversely, some organizations reported having entered SM in a more planned way. For a government organization preparing its launch in SM, it was necessary to have a prior strategy developed for each audience and platform (participant #7). She took the time to study what other organizations were doing in the same field internationally in SM. In fact, this practice was also used by a professional union and by an organization in the field of public transport. Recommendations were made for each of the platforms, taking the shape of a comparative audit. However, we can see that, even if the organizations demonstrate a level of ease with the use of Facebook and Twitter, the use of specialized platforms still requires some effort.

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3 Methodology and participant profile are presented at the end of the paper.
4.2. A presence for every platform and every audience

In general, we can observe that the use of platforms is not distinguished by specific goals, but rather by the audiences. These are known in an overall sense, but their profile is not clearly defined. In fact, only one participant stated that he targets a homogeneous group of internet users. We should note that this distinct group has emerged from the initiative of the group members, and not from that of the organization.

Content is customized for each platform, which is in its turn aimed at one or more defined audiences. In general, participants testify that each platform has its own personality and specific type of content. One participant added that one of the strengths of his organization in the financial sector is that it has developed a “portfolio of presence” (participant #4). In the same vein, we note that the practice of duplicating content across several platforms is less and less frequent.

4.3. Content planning

The use of an editorial calendar is an invaluable tool to plan publication in SM. Not only does it allow for a better preparation, it also helps balance the content across sectors and thematic areas. For example, an organization states that roughly the first third of its publications deal with advice content, the second with the actions of the organization within the community, and the last with major business activities taking place during the year (participant #4). In fact, this last aspect was raised by more than one participant. It is not uncommon for SM to be integrated to communication and marketing campaigns, as is emphasized by a professional working in retail: “We are really managing a 360 [degree] campaign and integrating SM within it” (participant #1).

In the same spirit of integrated campaigns, some organizations stated that they were seeking the participation of other departments to create content. Among other things, this allows for certain subjects to be explored further by leveraging the expertise of colleagues from other sectors and, through this, to tailor content to topics identified by customer service.

4.3.1. Two-way communication

Surprisingly, the practice of two-way communication does not seem to be automatic, and is often limited to answering the comments of internet users. One of the participants explained that, at the moment, her organization had not yet achieved two-way communication, which she was beginning to explore (participant #7). Another agreed, adding that it was part of their plans and that the establishment of ambassadors as well as the use of experts on their platforms might allow it. She explained that, for now, her organization contented itself with answering comments and having reasonable delays for answers (participant #10).

4.3.2. Organizational ambidexterity

While it is important to plan content and have an editorial calendar, it is also wise, especially in the era of the participatory web, to adapt “to the vagaries of current events” (participant #2) and to unforeseen events. For example, in the case of the professional union, when the SM team sees that members have published substantive and solid content, it keeps this information in reserve for possible publication and journalists (participant #12). For this organization, “comments provide grist for the mills of solutions.” In short, such practices, which include both planned and reactive content, show that the organization has developed a certain organizational ambidexterity, as argued by Bodwell and Chermack (2010).

4.4. Influencers

Targeting influencers is a practice common to almost all interviewed participants (10/12). The sophistication of the techniques used to identify them varies: some participants prefer brainstorming, while others have sought input from their colleagues in other sectors of the organization to target experts and important people in the industry. Still others make a directory of individuals who have taken a position on a given theme, while others observe individuals within their organization who take a position on an issue (internal influencers). One participant even conducted an ethnographic research in SM.

Although nearly all participants have confirmed that they have targeted influencers in their practices, only a few professionals stated that they had currently integrated these same influencers in their SM strategy. One of the organizations which had integrated this strategy approached leaders and organized a tour with internet users from a foodie community (participant #8). Another, for its part, leveraged influencers internally to test its new product before its official launch (participant #4). A third identified (tagged) influencers in publications in order to stimulate exchanges between them and the organization.

4.5. Strategic levels

All of the organizations interviewed reached the first level, namely “to optimize the feeling of confidence in the organization by working on its identity and reputation” (Ertzcheid et al., 2010: 70). As a concrete way of reaching this strategic level, a participant from a public organization plans to use LinkedIn to have an online presence and to present the organization as
being a good employer. A participant from an organization in the financial sector, meanwhile, stated that to establish a link between members and consumers, a relationship of trust must first have been created.

All of the organizations that we interviewed also stated that they had a strategy for the second level, namely to “develop a sense of attachment, to the point of causing the emergence of ambassadors for the organization, as vectors for the distribution of its ideas” (Ertzcheid et al., 2010: 83). One of the participants in the study stated that it is important to have a core group of mobilized employees “who believe in it and who disseminate information in their own networks” (participant #6). Another participant agreed with this. In his organization, many employees have a LinkedIn account and do not hesitate to communicate content. According to this participant, these individuals play the role of internal influencers (participant #5).

As for the third level, namely “to aggregate a community around a common project, delineated around different degrees of involvement of the community with regards to the organization” (Ertzcheid et al., 2010: 102), about half of the organizations stated that they had reached this level. One participant shared that the SM department collaborated with human resources in order to deploy an ambassadors program for SM internally (participant #5). Another SM professional, this time in the field of health, spoke explicitly of a common project, that all of his audiences are together for life, in order to promote health (participant #11). Finally, an organization involved in transportation created a hashtag and joined forces with other organizations to promote a green lifestyle. In this way, the conversations were more numerous and the networks of all of the organizations were used, thus giving greater reach to their content (participant #8).

4.6. The 4 “I”s of community marketing

With regards to involvement, the organizations that we interviewed attach great importance to shared content: whether in its relevance, integrating calls to action, the frequency of its publication, added value, format (video, photos), the fact of being adapted to the audiences of different platforms, and its personalized tone. In addition to the content, one organization stimulates involvement by focusing on the active presence of its President with their audiences in SM (participant #8). Finally, live tweeting is another way of getting involved: during annual meetings, events related to the organization, prize awards, etc.

Daily actions applied by the interviewed organizations to interact with their audiences are rather simple: asking questions, asking for retweets, responding to both negative and positive comments, asking for people to be identified on certain publications, asking for photos to be shared, and launching contests. One participant noted that the wording of publications, which invited people to act, stimulated interaction with their community through online customer service: by building on a personalized and human tone and signing answers with the initials of the employee who responded to the request of the internet user (participants #4 and #8).

Intimacy, or affinity, was a less integrated approach by the interviewed organizations. In fact, only four of them stated that they integrated it as part of their strategy. One organization stated that having publications signed by the employees responsible for customer service changes the tone of conversations enormously. We really have a closeness with people (participant #4). Another organization shares its daily schedule, publishes its employees’ typical days, and asks for testimonials from its community with regards to its services: photo sharing, fun or symbolic events (participant #8). Still another made itself a part of the National Hockey League fever by incorporating the colors of the Montreal Canadiens team to their visuals in SM. This organization has also created a Facebook page for its mascot (participant #10).

In terms of influence, one of the organizations stated that it was influential in that it followed best practices, are good at what we do, have a good structure and a good way of working (participant #8). Another organization stated that the fact of adapting to seasonality and the lifestyle of people allowed it to have an influence in SM (participant #5). Criteria such as primary source of content, expertise, and personality were confirmed, but not expanded upon, by several organizations.

4.7. Monitoring

Monitoring in SM can cover a myriad of topics and analytical elements. Beyond simple monitoring, some participants told us that they pay particular attention to people who comment on their organization: “Who writes about us? How often?” (participant #1), “Does this person have a wide reach? Is this person credible?” (participant #3), “How many followers does this person have? Are they an influence?” (participant #8). For a participant responsible for SM for an international event, this initial analysis of comment sources on the platforms of organizations allows for the identification of warning signs in order to avoid a crisis (participant #3). In the same vein, one participant stressed the importance of specifically monitoring “everything that comes from major influencers” (participant #12). Not only should an eye be kept on the publications coming from the accounts of public figures, it is also important to stay abreast of developments in the news.

On the other hand, it is important to mention that SM is also an invaluable tool for competitive intelligence. It allows professionals to analyse the ways in which competing organizations present themselves in SM, the identity of their audiences, as well as to discover innovative practices on the Web.

4.8. Evaluation and monitoring reports

Although monitoring is a broadly consensual practice among all participants, the creation of a monitoring report is not uniform among all of the studied organizations. Depending on the dynamism of the issues affecting the organization, its
environment, and its level of severity (development in the news, crisis management, staging an event using SM for customer service), the creation of reports can be made daily, weekly, monthly, or simply on occasion. For some organizations, these reports are harmonized with those of customer service. They include data on client satisfaction and recurring questions from internet users. In the same vein, an organization in the field of insurance checks whether trends in SM have had a resonance in other areas of the company (participant #5). This practice not only allows the organization to improve its digital communications, it also allows all of its sectors to take the pulse of the audience.

4.9. Summary of results

We can see that organizations have increasingly refined their SM practices. Indeed, the majority perform upstream planning for their strategies of presence in SM. Overall observed trends show that interviewed organizations reach the first two levels of community strategies (Ertzheid et al., 2010) and that the third level, which requires a greater level of engagement on the part of the community, is only reached by half of the organizations. In fact, when it comes to the 4 “I”s of the engagement cycle, we can see that it is intimacy, or affinity, which is the least appropriate for the interviewed organizations. Interaction, meanwhile, comes down to practices that are still far from symmetrical two-way communication.

Finally, most of the organizations conducted monitoring prior to their integration in SM, by focusing on what was being said about their enterprise and what it was doing in its field. We see less and less duplication of content between platforms: instead, each has content adapted to its target audience. However, despite the fact that organizations have general goals for their presence in SM, specific objectives for each audience and platform remain to be developed.

5. Conclusion and points for consideration

This exploratory study, conducted using the approach of SM appropriation by professionals active in SM in North American organizations, has helped to describe the effective practices of 12 strategists and to compare them, in particular, with those described in the literature issuing from the sociology of uses.

First from a descriptive angle, the results show an evolution of the practices of SM managers, whose role is entrusted to public relations and human resources professionals. This evolution is confirmed by the overall strategic plans for SM integration deployed by all interviewed strategists, as well as by the establishment of overall objectives for their presence in SM, even if there are still efforts remaining to be made with regards to specific objectives. Indeed, the results show that managers no longer improvise their presence in SM, as was the case during the appearance of these new media in the mid-2000s. They increasingly better integrate these new tools for strategic purposes by adapting them to their different audiences.

The most significant trend in the evolution of this practice is the integration of influencers, which is a strategy that was confirmed by almost all of the interviewed managers. Although they have not yet all integrated this strategy to their daily practices, we can nonetheless see a general willingness among the managers to use influencers in SM as catalysts with the goal of interacting with their audiences in order to better adapt content according to their needs. This practice of managers is likely to contribute to better results in terms of two-way communication with audiences and thus, to reaching this higher strategic level in SM, namely that of aggregating a community around a common project. That being said, organizations must make adequate investments in human, financial, and material resources if they wish to achieve this organizational objective in SM, and if it is suitable for their field of activity. This raises questions that deserve additional attention.

From a theoretical perspective, the fact that managers increasingly plan their activities in SM upstream and that they remain attentive to the “vagaries of current events” by integrating these practices to the overall strategic plan shows an ambidextrous trend in practice (Bodwell & Chernack, 2010). We should remember that this concept is characterized by the building mode thought process, which means that a group of actors guided by predefined goals participates in common efforts in order to reach objectives. On the other hand, we find the dwelling mode thought process, which is characterized by actors who aim to overcome immediate obstacles. This method of predicting, appropriating, and reconfiguring daily actions represents the very heart of the “manufacturing” of a strategy which allows enterprises to integrate new professional planning practices and thus facilitates adaptation to organizational changes. The integration of these two planning methods is here joined by de Certeau’s approach, which stresses the necessity of integrating these same two methods in order to promote a more global view and understanding of strategies.

In fact, the results of the study show this tendency on the part of managers to better plan the integration processes and their objectives for their presence in SM by developing increasingly well-articulated monitoring and content strategies aimed at their audiences. Although the process is not yet completed, especially at the level of specific objectives, the results nonetheless show this trend of improved planning all while remaining open to daily actions emerging from the audiences on the platforms of organizations.

5.1. Points for consideration

Questions persist at the conclusion of this study. First, can the resources available for SM be a hindrance to the ambitions of an organization? Indeed, it may be difficult for an organization to achieve its communication objectives if it does not have a dedicated team for SM, adequate monitoring tools and, of course, a realistic budget. In addition, with Facebook's new
algorithm, organizations must increasingly pay in exchange for visibility. And yet, not all organizations deploy the necessary resources, which raises the following question: are SM still the “poor cousin” of communications?

With regards to the formatting of algorithms, we are also entitled to ask: are there other more creative ways to address the constraints of this new environment? For example, could a collaboration between different organizations that would stimulate exchanges with the same key word (hashtag) increase the visibility of different types of content? To this effect; let us remember that collaboration represents one of the fundamental values of Web 2.0. By assuming that this SM appropriation and collaboration practice between managers would become increasingly integrated into daily practices; could these exchanges potentially stimulate two-way communication; which is still currently very simplistic?

In addition to this collaborative practice which remains to be explored, it could also be beneficial for organizations to further integrate the strategic trends observed, namely to identify and use influencers. This strategy is still not fully implemented in current practices, especially for organizations with fewer resources. However, it could be a potential solution to improve two-way communication between organizations and their audiences.

Finally, although this data on influencers emerged from interviews with professionals, we must admit that it is very poorly documented in the literature. Given the importance of integrating influencers in an overall strategy in SM, further research on these communicative vectors should be made in order to further document the practices, and even continue the conceptual work necessary for the development of a “theory of practices.”

Notes for the readers

Note 1. methodology

The proposed methodological process is intended as a descriptive qualitative approach to the professional practices of public relations in social media (SM). It has two objectives: (1) describe the strategic planning of the professional practices of SM managers; (2) compare the theories prescribed in the literature with actual practices in social media. Please see details and participant profile at the end of the article.

To do this, we employed semi-structured interview techniques with a sample consisting of 12 active SM managers in North American organizations. They were selected from local networks and through a “snowball” process. The following issues were discussed: strategic planning methods in SM; monitoring activities on different platforms; the process of identifying influencers; the description and involvement of their communities; and finally, the qualitative and quantitative measuring tools of their objectives. In addition, the human, material, and financial resources allocated to SM were also discussed. These questions allowed us to analyse the appropriation practices of SM by professionals through their strategic planning, as well as to observe whether or not these practices contribute to the achievement of communication objectives with their audiences in the new 2.0 media ecosystem. And finally, the study compares the practices of professionals with those identified in the scientific literature.

Note 2. participant profile

Our recruiting process allowed us to interview 12 SM managers. The organizations represented were both public and private, and their fields of activities were varied: retail, public administration, sporting events, finance, insurance, education, and transport. To be eligible, the professionals had to meet the following criteria: (1) have a university education; (2) have managed at least 3 platforms (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, Instagram, etc.); (3) have at least 24 months of experience on SM; and (4) currently hold a management or professional position in SM.

The period of identification of the managers took place from December 1st to December 23rd, 2014. The participants were contacted by e-mail. The pre-test and semi-structured interviews took place between January 5th and February 18th, 2015 and lasted an average of 60 min. Because of the small number of changes which it brought to the interview grid and the wealth of information which it contained, the pre-test was integrated to the body of data.

The interviews took place in the offices of the participants, through videoconferences, or in the office of the Observatoire des médias sociaux en relations publiques of Université Laval (OMSRP). The software used consisted of Photobooth, Debut, and a tape recorder. The recordings were kept confidential according to the ethical standards of Université Laval. The data collected was subject to a content analysis.

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References


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