



PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Iulian VEGHEȘ, Vera ULARU

Faculty of Journalism, University of Bucharest, Romania

Abstract: *In this paper I will present how online communication has influenced public relations. Because of online communication, organizational communication had to adapt to new technologies and new communicative medium. At the same time I present a model dedicated to analyzing organizational online communication derived from specificities of online communication..*

Keywords: *public relations, online public relations, communication flows.*

“There is a revolution taking place all around us. Those who believe the information age is just about technology are missing the point. This revolution is about communications.”

Larry Weber

1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet is the mass communication channel the general public had the fastest access to since its occurrence and which has been adopted by them accordingly. The large number of users has led to a continuous evolution and development of this global network of computers, this virtual world. The Internet brings along outstanding business opportunities and meets the necessary conditions for both individuals and organizations have the possibility of a mass communication almost impossible to imagine before, for costs which are significantly lower than of the other media. The Internet exceeded the threshold of 2,100,000,000 (Internet World Stats, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>) users in 2011 (approx. 30.3% of the world's population), so that almost every individual organization can find and target its own online target audiences. Increasingly more companies have become aware of this fact and strive or contemplate communicating with them through the online communication channels. A significant number of companies have their own websites now and make use of

the Internet to communicate to their relevant target audience.

2. ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS: STATUS

The authors of most papers written about this new way of corporate communication limit themselves to describing the emerging means of communication, that is to say, the new online media. They list several recommendations about how we should communicate, see netiquette, blogtiquette, but, unfortunately, the scientific background is overlooked most of the time. Some authors attempted to capture the differences occurred in mass communication between the traditional communication channels and the ones available on the Internet, and use this differentiation as starting point for sketching the newly emerged means of communication.

The significant changes in the communication possibilities and in the occurrence of the practical possibility for an organization to communicate directly with its audiences made the famous US PR practitioner, Don Middleberg, conclude that “no industry has been affected more

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permanently and positively by the digital revolution than public relations” (Don Middleberg, 2001).

Although PR specialists have already started to use the Internet more and more as a communication media, thus gaining experience in this area, they still are in need of a “consistent and complete concept” Zerfass and Fietkau assert (Zerfass, Fietkau, 1999:6).

Speaking about the influence of the Internet on business undertakings, Lord Chadlington, Chairman of the Board of International Public Relations, Plc, used to say in one of his presentations that all the organizations could communicate globally using the Internet to reach their relevant audiences with gushing easiness (Chadlington, Lord, 1999:6).

Another supporting argument for using the Internet as communication tools was the possibility of communicating easily with the press, by way of various media, from emails to the websites where many organizations posted their press releases or various pieces of news about their current operation. A study online media agency “News aktuell“ (part of DPA) revealed that 57 % of the journalists spend more than two hours every day browsing the Internet on work purposes (Luenenbuerger-Reidenbach, Petersen/Wagensonner, 2000:14)

The empiric studies of newsaktuell proved how important the information available on the Internet is for journalists (Luenenbuerger-Reidenbach, Petersen, Wagensonner, 2000: 14). “Media in Cyberspace” study (Don Middleberg, 1999) showed that more than 90% of the editors (that is to say leaders of opinion) use the Internet for research, although the perceived reliability of the Internet is overturned by the one of the traditional media (Schweiger, 2000:50). “Journalisten 2000” (Kamenz, Jahn, 2000:24-25) study further supported a genuine interest for communication over the Internet among journalists (in terms of both interactions and content) with organizations of concern.

Kent and Taylor (2002) speak about the unique opportunity the Internet offers organizations to listen to their audiences. They refer to the interactivity over the Internet as the “dialogic relationship” to give the best

possible description to the communication relationship which ought to exist within the online communication. Petter Alexander Gustavsen and Elspeth Tilley (2003:10) had a look at the interactivity of the websites and concluded that only 25% of sites under review place big or very big emphasize on this component part of communication.

The idea of engaging into a dialogue with the audience is further supported also by Cooley (1999) who thinks that communicating on the Internet does not mean only to reach your target audience, but also to engage into dialogue therewith. In his research on the online communication carried-out by The US Fortune 500 companies, Cooley highlights that the interactive capacity of the Internet is used only in part and seldom, at the same time (Colley, 1999).

The interactive nature of communication is a key element in the online public relations, Robert Marston (2003:8) believes. Underlining the importance of this element, Zerfass and Fietkau (1999) define the online public relations as interactive public relations.

One of the most important empiric researches on online public relations carried-out in Germany belongs to Martin Eichholz, who analyzes the online corporate communication for the first 100 companies in terms of revenues in Germany. This study shows that “The main target of the online PR activities is to foster the image of the organization – 96%, followed by the concern for improving communication – 82%, as well as supporting the communication processes– 82%“ (Eichloz, 1998:53).

The fact that one cannot simply ignore the communication abilities of the Internet was visible also in the famous case of the Intel processor which returned a computation error at the fifth digit after coma. Although the initial decision was no action, following the numerous reactions triggered by the knowledge of this error on the Internet, the company eventually decided to call back the processors form the market and replace them.

In this context, the increasing interest towards the online communication activities, as flagged in the studies carried-out by Thomas L. Harris, describing the client

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expectations from the PR companies, is explainable. Thus, if back in 1998 only a low 8% of the organizations declared they were interested in the PR companies being capable of making a contribution to the communication on the Internet, in 2003 this figure went up to 44%, which is a more than significant increase (Harris, 2002 and Harris, 2003).

3. ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS – THEORETICAL APPROACH

Stefan Wehmeier (2001:1-2) said, in one of the summaries of the status of the theoretical background available in the field, that big gaps were found in the scientific research of the ePR, starting from the very absence of a definition of this field in practice. Is it a new area? Is it just another development of the traditional public relations? Doesn't it bring along anything new, but a new environment? There are many questions answers have been searched for, but not always in a very successful manner.

The bulk of the current papers in the field of online public relations are concerned with the practical side, presenting/describing the possibility of embedding the new technologies into the internal and external corporate communication (Fuchs, Moehrle, Hartwin, Schmidt-Manwede and Zerfass, Fietkau).

The knowledge in this field relies on some empiric studies and very few theoretical analyses, which have been built scientifically consistent, but quite concise and only partially researched. The online public relations are said to be unsystematically and insufficiently researched. Stefan Wehmeier (2001:1) used to write in one of his works about public relations on the Internet that they “remain an undefined domain”. Martin Eichlotz (1998:53) shares this opinion and calls the online PR an “unresearched subject”. Defining the term appears as a difficult task to accomplish because of the fact that the theoretical aspects of mass communication should be materially altered and completed, respectively, so that the online mass communication becomes part and parcel of an overarching theoretical construction of communication. These

challenges made most of the theoreticians elude giving an accurate definition.

Although well-know authors, such as for instance Shel Holtz, Don Middleberg, James L. Horton, Matt Haig or Gregory Sherwin and Emily Avilla did get involved in defining the concept, these attempts are rather solitary. Most of the approaches have generally limited to describing the communication tools available in this field. Nevertheless, there are some attempts of giving a definition to this new area.

Dieter Herbst pleads that “online public relations represent communication through technical channels with the target groups in and via the Internet.” (Herbst, 2001:25). This definition reappears in Oenicke's work (1996:63), while Zerfass and Fietkau state that: “The public networks of computers used as media and although having, on one hand, mass communication features, allow, on the other hand, for a two-way direct and private communication. This seeming antagonism is explained by the interactivity phenomenon” (Zerfass, Fietkau, 1999:39).

Stefan Wehmeier speaks about an integrated communication and attempts to explain the current shortcomings in the definition of the terms by integrating several communication activities – advertising, marketing, public relations (both internal and external) and journalism – into the online communication. For this reason, Wehmeier proposes calling the entire online communication activity as “online relations” (Wehmeier, 2001:12).

Felix Friedlaender (1999:84) thinks that: “Online PR is a component part of the public relations, aimed at building relations with the relevant target audiences by way of and using the Internet-specific communication tools and, consequently, of specific means and measures”.

The specifics of the online public relations root in the features of the online communication: interactivity, the multimedia nature of the message, as well as the global scope of the mass communication (Veghes, Grigore, 2003:31). At the same time, today's organizations have the possibility of

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communicating directly with the target audiences.

The communication tools (website, email, discussion groups, forums, chat, Intranet, Extranet, etc.) of the ePR (online public relations) have been tackled by various experts. Among them we list: Shell Holtz (1999), Matt Haig (2000), James Horton (2001), Dieter Herbst (2001), Frank Hertz (1999), Gregory Shelwin, Emily Avila and Matějček Karina (1997). Felix Friedlaender (1999), Martin Eicholz (1997), Ulla K. Bunz

(1998) approached the implementation and results of applying the new technologies in empiric researches.

4. CHANGES IN THE PR ACTIVITIES WORK-FLOW DUE TO THE LARGE-SCALE USE OF THE INTERNET

4.1 Communication flow in public relations prior to occurrence and spreading of the Internet:

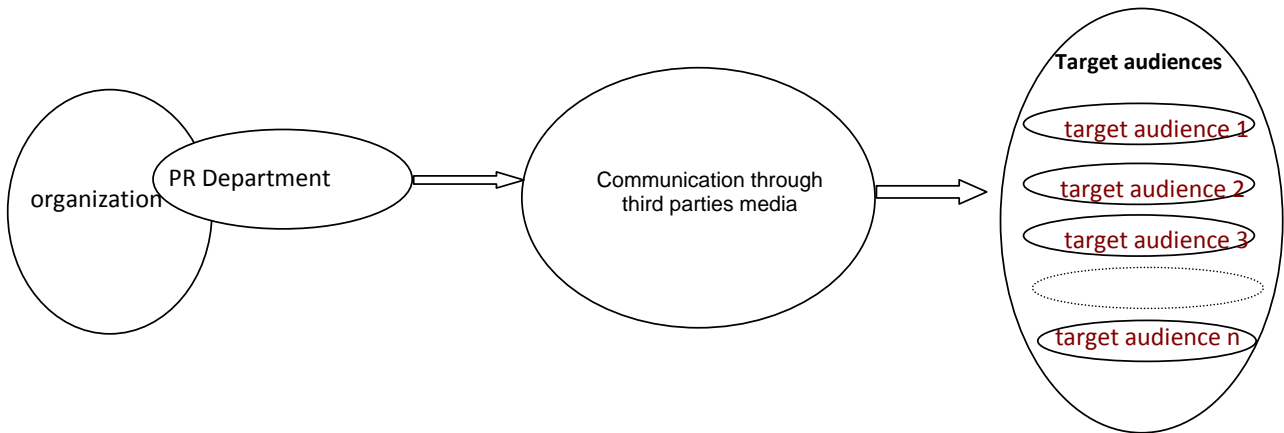


Fig.1. Communication flow in public relations

Communication flow in online public relations:

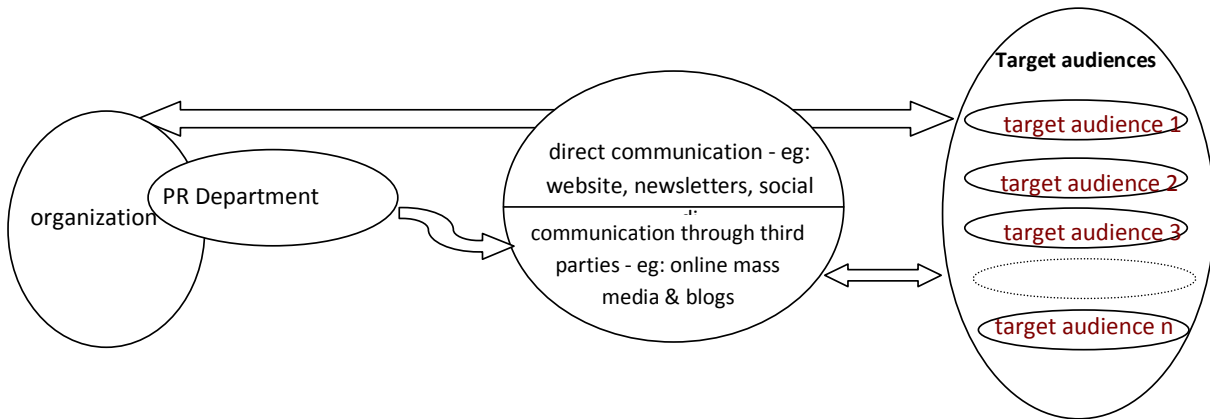


Fig.2. Communication flow in online public relations

5. MODEL PROPOSED IN THE ANALYSIS OF THE ONLINE CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

Building on the main features of the online communication: interactivity, digitalization, real-time, hyperlink capacity, real-time and

multimedia, we propose below a model for the analysis of the online corporate communication.

5.1. Online communication models.

Online communication was historically subject to various attempts of classification. They regarded either the synchronicity of the

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communication or the actors involved in communication or the type of confidence a certain type of communication it would generated among the audience.

A. **One to many.** It is the standard communication model (the classic mass communication theory was built on) in which a sender conveys his/her message to a mass of recipients through a communication channel. This model is still encountered including in the online public relations for two reasons: limitations of the channel used (for instance, email) or the use of the online media in a similar manner with the traditional mass communication channels (due to ignorance or comfort). An example could be the static website (difficult to update – demanding intervention of the technical staff even for the slightest change – eg. web programming) of an

organization which published on the Internet the online version of its presentation leaflet and targeted neither any use of interactivity whatsoever (to create the technical premises for a two-way communication with the potential online audience) nor setting the premises to facilitate updating information in a short time (by developing a dynamic website able to ease this endeavor).

B. **Many-to-many.** This new communication model, emerged together with the birth of the Internet, was first mentioned by Morris, Ogan (1996:2) back in 1996, when the Internet had approximately 25 million users (about 1% of the number of users in 2012) in one of the first attempts to bring some structure and framing into the online communication.

Table 1. Types of communication

Type of communication	synchronous	asynchronous
one to one	Yes	Yes
one to few	Yes	Yes
one to many/many to one	Yes	Yes
many to many	No	Yes

This classification is pretty accurate, but, probably given the relatively recent coming out of the Internet at the time of its development, it led the authors into thinking that many to many communication on the Internet could only be asynchronous. Many to many communication can be also synchronous

today, for example in both video/audio communication in chats/video-conferences, as well as in network gaming.

As the delimitation from few is relative (as there is not clear criterion to distinguish between few and many), in my opinion, an accurate classification would look as follows:

Table 2. Types of communication: an accurate classification

Type of communication	synchronous	asynchronous
one to one	Yes	Yes
one to many/many to one	Yes	Yes
many to many	Yes	Yes

C. **One of many**

This model of communication is encountered particularly in the social media, where the sender is no longer considered and treated as an institution, that is to say an

amorphous actor of communication. The sender of the message, which is simultaneously also a recipient, is only one of the many senders/recipients involved in the communication process and for the

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communication actor to be accepted in the existing communication group, he/she has to behave like a group member, submit himself/herself to the rules of communication shared by all. This means adaptation to the discourse of the group in question and acting/communicating/interacting at the same level and in the same manner with the other communication actors.

This way of communicating within a group, as a simple member of such communication group (for instance of group on a social network) is a new communication model, that is to say the so-called “one-of-many” model. This model is technically and as manner of sending/receiving the message, a sub-model of the many-to-many model, but, since we deal with specific changes of approach, discourse and interactivity – and, given that we shall tackle this model as part of the corporate communication through social networks - we shall treat this sub-model individually.

5.2 Synchronous/Asynchronous Communication. Morris & Ogan (1996, pg. 42) refer but vaguely to the idea of synchronous/asynchronous – an approach we can find later on in the work of many researchers. Generally, they consider that if the time between the issuance of two messages by different senders within communication is short, then we can speak of a synchronous communication. What does short time mean? How long should be the time between the issuance of the two messages by the two senders for the communication to be asynchronous? As this relativity and lack of explanation of the terms do not support a solid classification and construction, I propose below a more accurate approach of the synchronous and asynchronous communication.

In order to explain, we shall first talk about what does asynchronous communication mean: it is that type of communication which allows the actors involved in the communication process issue messages simultaneously. As the parallel in oral communication – when a group of people can

talk at the same time and express their opinions. This is synchronous communication.

In this context, unlike many of the classifications attempted on this topic – the online synchronous communication is represented by 3 types of audio/video communication – (in chats/online conferences) and video games – which allow several participants act visibly (in fact, sent messages) for the other participants, at the same time.

Asynchronous communication in which the actors involved issue messages in turn towards the other actors. For instance, we shall first hear/see the message of one sender and then of another one, etc.

From this perspective, communication based on text/image/link sharing in social networks, discussion forums, blogs, content and ecommerce websites, email, FTP – stand for examples of asynchronous online mass communication.

5.3 Direct/Indirect (through third parties) Communication. **Direct communication** means direct sending of the message between the sender and recipient (audience) without using another recipient/sender to resend the message to eventually reach the audience. This is one of the key benefits brought along by online communication in corporate communication, thus allowing direct sending of the messages to the target audiences.

Indirect (through third parties) communication represents sending of the information from the sender to the recipient (audience) via an intermediate communicator. The intermediate communicator takes-over the information, adapts it and sends it further to the audience.

A conclusive example of direct communication is the piece of news published on Nikon website (www.nikon.com) about the launch of a new professional photo camera, which thus reaches directly the audience interested and who accesses the nikon.com website.

One of the ways whereby this information can be communicated indirectly to audiences is represented by the traditional distribution of the press releases to the media agencies,

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which, if found of relevance and interest for their own audiences, are processes and further sent to the audiences. In this case, the information undergoes changes and reaches the target audiences truncated to a certain extent. Another way of indirect communication (specific to the online) is the bloggers taking-over the information about the release of the new photo camera from the nikon.com website and conveying it further to their audiences (which include some of the audiences targeted also by Nikon communication).

It thus becomes obvious that, in respect of sending the information as unaltered as possible, the organizations should favor direct sending of information, because they can thus control better how and what audiences the information sent by the issuing organization reaches.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Application of the aforementioned methods allows us to look at the online corporate communication from multiple angles, which further accommodates a more comprehensive description of the phenomenon from a cultural, functional and historical perspective to an equal extent.

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