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Report 2:

Social Media Impacts in BP's Gulf of Mexico Disaster

- Q. Social media is changing the practice of media relations. Discuss, with reference to MCC559 readings, public relations scholarship and a case study of your choice.

Social Media Landscape



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper begins by highlighting trends in the public relations (PR) field that were also observed during BP's gulf of Mexico ecological disaster (refer to Appendix I for the case study). Media relation (MR) correlations are made and hence dependency on it by PR practitioners is brought into light. There is a focus on the changing mediascape throughout the paper and BP's innovative tackling techniques become self-evident. The changing nature of news in the digital age brings into topic how the social media is changing the way MR practitioners handle crisis situations like BP's.

2.0 PR TRENDS

“I’ve been in the PR business a long time, and while the technologies have changed the techniques remain the same,” explains Polly Elmore (Washington Post publisher, of PR Works LLC). “I think PR is going through a resurgence because PR embraces social media now”. (Betz, 2011, p.32)

In the last decade no incident had as much focus on public relation activism as the Gulf of Mexico disaster of 2010. BP’s licensed drilling rig exploded in fire which resulted in 17 injured, 1 missing reporter, and a blowout preventer intended to prevent release of crude oil failed to activate. BP imposed a quick ‘hush’ and liability protection measure by ensuring their public relations staff abided by procedures that: "No statement shall be made containing any of the following: promises that property, ecology or anything else will be restored to normal." (Weber & McClam, 2010)

The following points, as highlighted by Betz (2011), illustrate some existing PR trends that were also evident during BP’s media campaign:

- Relationship remodelling – BP underwent through a two year program lenient to producing and establishing relationships following the disaster. This entailed building connection to publics and communicating on a regular and consistent basis.

- Techniques remain the same – like always, time remained the most pressured commodity during BP's PR ordeal. PR staffs were well acquainted with news networks so it was not hard for representatives to approach media channels that gave them a more favourable coverage first.
- PR is less expensive – Unfortunately for BP the fact that the publicity reviewed and relayed by PR practitioners was in fact detrimental (and tarnished the company's name) did not attribute to positive coverage. PR practitioners in BP had the task of conveying a message to the public that the disaster situation was operating in a semi-controlled medium.
- Photography is crucial – the trend remained that photographs were a crucial expense. BP was able to solicit professional photographs that portrayed its efforts to control the disaster in a manner that was appealing to the public.
- PR is about finding media opportunities – BP operated this disaster as an opportunity to display its crisis handling skills to the world, and it managed to keep abreast of new oil spill technologies in its attempt to contain the biggest oil spill incidence occurring offshore to date.

Nowadays the PR practice has been moving in trend that a practitioner must think more like a journalist. This includes a knack

of developing news sense and still adopting the conventions of a news narrative (Young, n.d.). PR practitioners are now fully aware of the benefits that proactive MR efforts can bring (ie: decreased advertising expenditures through increased awareness of key publics). In addition the inclusion of media catching techniques, as well as traditional media pitching, expanded BPs PR to secure news coverage in desired outlets (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010).

Agenda setting research has further shown that PR practitioners can benefit their organization through proactive MR relations efforts (ie: BP allowed chosen news networks to board helicopter flights that captivated the scenery from dramatic angles) (Waters et al., 2010).

BP, in a pre-emptive strike, identified and told a story which for the greater part resonated with accepted news values. Nowadays journalism privileges objectivity in a manner that aligns with organization's PR practitioners desires. There is a trend of PR placing an emphasis on persuasion derived on specifically selected truths (Waters et al., 2010). There is generally a shared characteristic of topicality and the difference is partiality, but still both sides can show a lack of self-awareness (Waters et al., 2010).

Traditional MR is fading with the identity of influences, or 'mavens'. The internet was utilized as a news or media aggregator during BP's scenario, and this trend is not likely to change as is foreseen (Young, n.d.). Cho, 2006, (as cited in Waters et al., 2010, p.245) found that "public relations practitioners have varying amounts of power in their

interactions with journalists; however, to maximize that power, practitioners must assess the relationship status with journalists". BP also had a track record of being covered by a variety of publishers in relations to past news stories, and thus a further examination can be drawn as to how a journalist was influenced for setting a particular agenda/topic for each of the news presses (Water et al.).

3.0 THE CHANGING MEDIASCAPE

Social media such as Web 2.0 have caused a tremendous impact on the nature of MR. This new media has been cited in numerous studies as the 'fourth media revolution', and thus makes correlation to the birth of 'e-democracy' and to the transformation of the public sphere in a process that proves to be a change of journalism as we used to know (Macnamara, 2010). Pessimists view this trend as causing a 'digital divide' which will leave those impoverished and without access to the new media at a great disadvantage (Macnamara, 2010).

Web 2.0 has already begun to appear, and we already are beginning to see BP's involvement through various interactive online sites. It is understood that BP will utilize these new channels as a transport mechanism to regain its advantage after the Gulf of Mexico disaster. News channels have emerged on a variety of mechanisms with new interactive options; such channels include (O'Reilly, 2005):

- Your computer screen;
- on your TV set;
- on your car dashboard;
- on your mobile phone;
- handheld game machines; and
- even fridges and microwave ovens!

O'Reilly (2005) also cites 'Web 2.0' as a process of creative online innovations, ie:

<u>Web 1.0</u>		<u>Web 2.0</u>
DoubleClick	-->	Google AdSense
Ofoto	-->	Flickr
Akamai	-->	BitTorrent
mp3.com	-->	Napster
Britannica Online	-->	Wikipedia
personal websites	-->	blogging
evite	-->	upcoming.org and EVDB
domain name speculation	-->	search engine optimization
page views	-->	cost per click
screen scraping	-->	web services
publishing	-->	participation
content management systems	-->	wikis
directories (taxonomy)	-->	tagging ("folksonomy")
stickiness	-->	syndication

There are also rising concerns of privacy over the unveiling of Web 3.0, which is already being constructed, with features that further media and public communication (Macnamara, 2010). Web 3.0 postulation is still guesswork, but it does promise to contain a technological breakthrough in either web programming or physical improvements in modern equipment (Nations, 2012). Nations (2012), lists the following as some likely scenarios of what 'Web 3.0' might look like:

Web 3.0 as a marketing term – Companies with 'buzz' appeal may surface. BP is currently considering plans to revamp their website so that it may captivate to additional segments of the market through integration of web networks (Youtube, Facebook, & Twitter combined).

The artificial intelligent Web 3.0 – ie: AI learns to separate good from bad in social bookmarking. Essentially improved programming technology may be able to predict customer's actions ahead of time with greater accuracy.

The Web 3.0 semantic web – The concept that information can be stored in such a manner that the computer can understand it as well as a human.

The world wide virtual Web 3.0 – This incorporates ideas of virtual and graphical worlds.

The ever-present Web 3.0 – ie: technology integration that makes the internet always available in our lives.

3.1 SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECT ON PUBLIC RELATIONS

Six months after BP's gulf of Mexico disaster, BP had already accrued approximately 19,000 Twitter followers, 48,000 Facebook fans, and about 3 million Youtube hits (Magolnick, 2011). BP's media success is debatable and hence reputation management becomes a key facet to be explored (Magolnick, 2011). It is imperative, however, to establish the means to handle online comments and provide feedback in this social age (Magolnick, 2011).

3.1.1 HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECTS PUBLIC RELATIONS

As was witnessed in the BP scenario, lack of knowledge does not excuse a company's legal liability for any damages that may accrue (Magolnick, 2011). Negligence of social media jeopardizes a business's public perception and can have legal consequences, or worse, the public may take power and take over the organization's brand image (Magolnick, 2011). BP is still facing legal action over the disaster and its reputation has been tarnished by local residents nearby the spillage area.

Eric Bryant, of Gnosis Arts, as cited in Skerik (2011), quotes:

PR outcomes have shifted. Marketing and PR are not as distinct as they once were – social media spillover has blurred the lines. The internet brought the worlds of marketing, PR and sales close together – uncomfortably so for some,” he notes. “The outcomes are different – lead-gen and prospecting. Social media has changed the outcomes people expect – and people expect more.

Business2Community, as cited in ‘How social media has changed public relations’ (2011), highlights 5 ways that social media has left its mark on the PR industry:

1. It's a two-way street (ie: interaction and feedback)
2. Constant engagement (ie: 24-hour communication)

3. Increased demand for digital pros (ie: embracement of new technology)
4. Navigating the new landscape (ie: enabling reach of vaster audiences)
5. The ever changing definition of success (ie: long term approaches for greater returns.

There are also online service centers that facilitate the job of journalists by establishing a link to a professional PR database for request of information, products and sources (Magolnick, 2011).

3.1.2 PUBLIC RELATIONS AND PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

Today's social media leave little room for corporations to get away with the goal of solely maximizing profits. The media furor established around the gulf scenario left BP with little alternative but to exercise public responsibility, often referred as corporate social responsibility. As Seitel, 2004, (as cited in Stone, 2005) pointed out:

More and more, companies and other organizations acknowledge their responsibilities to the community: helping to maintain clean air and water, providing jobs for minorities, enforcing policies in the interests of all employees, and in general, enhancing everyone's quality of life. This concept of

social responsibility has become widely accepted among enlightened [emphasis mine] organizations.

With the advents of social modern media, organizations, and their management are more in the public eye, image becomes a key focus for PR practitioners to address (Stone, 2005). Henceforth, PR professionals ought to maintain constant vigilance of potential difficulties that could result (Stone, 2005) – this can be accomplished through screening of public feedback through online sources. It is thus seen that if a correct media captivating tact is employed, like putting an emphasis on donations to causes in afflicted communities, organizations like BP can be deemed to be acting under the means of ‘public responsibility’.

Still working, still committed

Through initiatives from tourism support to environmental grants to community service work across Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida, BP is committed to helping the Gulf Coast with continued recovery and restoration. Iris Cross, General Manager, External Relations, for BP's Gulf Coast Restoration Organization, provides an update on BP's ongoing work in the Gulf of Mexico region since the 2010 oil spill. *(BP website – <http://www.bp.com>)*

Whether such acts help an organization more financially is questionable, but there are more important motives and it is hoped BP in the future will place them on top of the list when the question is asked, ‘what is our responsibility to our publics’ (Stone, 2005)?

4.0 MAIN ONLINE MEDIA SOURCES

The term 'weblog' was generated in 1997 and later got revamped to 'blog' by 1999 – it really existed since 1995. The first online social network was 'sixdegrees' which also was established in 1997 whilst online chat has been in use since 1980/88. Google celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2008 and podcasting in 2010 (Macnamara, 2010).

Skerik (2008) highlights 'Twitter' and 'Facebook' as being the primal communal online media sources, however, a few more are highlighted below:

Facebook – On facebook users are not only able to affiliate themselves with people but they may become fans of business and brands they like. Companies this way are able to interact with their audiences but in the case of BP this backfired as activist sites have been made against BP for its handling of the crisis in the gulf of Mexico [ie: Facebook; Make British Petroleum (BP) PAY for the Gulf Coast Oil Spill].

Blogs and discussion forums – These are another great way to pursue personal interests online and bringing issues into an objective perspective. Interaction occurs online through pages that serve as a post notice board with room for post-it replies. There are many BP related blogs located throughout the internet and skill arises in utilizing your web search engine to locate a topic and forum of your interest.

Twitter – Here you may follow postings from specific people. It gives PR practitioners room to choose what media editors to follow. BP has its own Twitter agency located @BPGlobalPR.

LinkedIn – This network allows business professionals to affiliate with each other and it has the extra added blog function to communicate news events and networking options. Individuals are also able to subscribe to company's profiles – BP has a LinkedIn listing.

PR consideration – Considering the vast array of media platform sites it may seem like an overwhelming task to think where PR can focus their resources – this job becomes a lot easier when you begin to think where your audience is. Skerik (2011) clearly states that making time for real-time PR practice requires a shift in priorities and resource allocation.

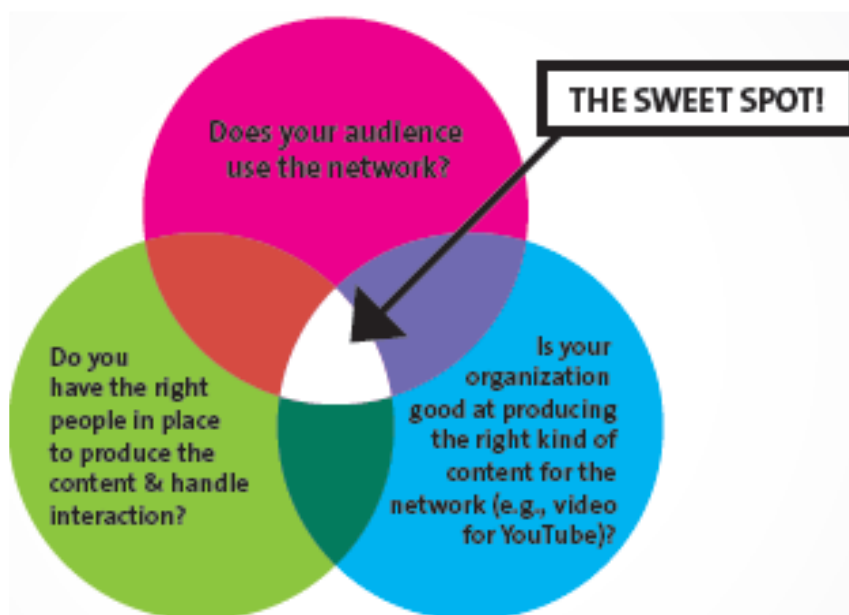


Figure 1: Selecting social networks; the sweet spot (Skerik, 2011)

4.1 HOW NEWS IS BEING AFFECTED

User profile is broadening and evolving and hence terms like 'national' and regional are losing their significance (Page, n.d.). BP, as a source of the media during the disaster, is at a positional advantage when it comes to partial control of first-handed news (Khodarahmi, 2009). The online presence of news is constantly changing and several years ago newspapers were only just experimenting with websites whilst worrying about giving their content for free (Page, n.d.).

“Most ‘nationals’ include podcasts, video, blogs, message boards and forums” (Page, n.d., p.2).

The PR learning process never stops and some old skills related to the media industry are prone to becoming obsolete (Khodarahmi, 2009). MR industries require great communication skills – communication is an art and a science, an art because it creates and delivers purpose (Khodarahmi, 2009). Hence, evaluation of an organization and its performance become crucial parameters in maintaining good MR (Khodarahmi, 2009).

5.0 CONCLUSION

Historical evidence suggests that hybridization of media outlets will continue to exist (Macnamara, 2010). When radio was commercialized in the 1920s the new audience created coexisted with newspaper readers without conflict – the same happened with TV in the 1940s (Macnamara, 2010). The theoretical advents of Web 3.0 technology are yet to fully surface but it remains a certainty in due time.

The growing insurgence by the public in light of the BP scenario showed the great impact modern social media can do to disseminate information to publics and at a great pace. It is true, however, that journalism privilege objectivity so that it aligns with the desires of PR practitioners. The concept of ‘e-democracy’ proposes a change of journalism in contrast as to what we used to know. This may bring conflicts with aspects of the ‘digital divide’ as impoverished nations may in turn miss out on this fantastic media bonanza that only developed nations can afford.

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APPENDIX I:

Case Study: Oil spill summary of events

GULF OF MEXICO

A summary of events Thursday, June 24, Day 65 of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill that began with the April 20 explosion and fire on the drilling rig Deepwater Horizon, owned by Transocean Ltd. and leased by BP PLC, which is in charge of cleanup and containment. The blast killed 11 workers. Since then, oil has been pouring into the Gulf from a blown-out undersea well.

CAP

A cap was back in place on BP's broken oil well after a deep-sea blunder forced crews to temporarily remove what has been the most effective method so far for containing some of the massive Gulf of Mexico spill. Engineers using remote-controlled submarines repositioned the cap late Wednesday after it had been off for much of the day. It had captured 700,000 gallons of oil in 24 hours before one of the robots bumped into it late in the morning. Bob Dudley, BP's new point man for the oil response, said crews had done the right thing to remove the cap because fluid seemed to be leaking and could have been a safety hazard.

GUSHER

While the cap was off, clouds of black oil gushed unchecked again at up to 104,000 gallons per hour, though a specialized ship at the surface managed to suck up and incinerate 438,000 gallons. The oil-burning ship is part of an armada floating at the site of the rogue well some 50 miles off the Louisiana coast and the scene below the surface is no less crowded. At least a dozen robotic submarines dangle from ships at the surface on mile-long cables called "umbilicals," with most of the undersea work taking place within a few hundred yards of the busted well.

OILED FLORIDA

In Florida, thick pools of oil washed up along miles of national park and Pensacola Beach shoreline Wednesday, as health advisories against swimming and fishing in the once-pristine waters were extended for 33 miles east from the Alabama line. "It's pretty ugly, there's no question about it," Florida Gov. Charlie Crist said. The oil reeked as it baked in the afternoon heat on a beach that looked as if it had been

paved with a 6-foot-wide ribbon of asphalt. Park ranger Bobbie Visnovske said a family found an oily young dolphin beached in the sand in the Gulf Islands National Seashore on Wednesday. Wildlife officers carried it into shallow water to revive it. They later transported it to a rehabilitation center in Panama City, about 100 miles to the east.

MORATORIUM

The Obama administration seeks to resurrect a six-month moratorium on deepwater drilling. The Justice Department filed court papers asking U.S. District Judge Martin Feldman to delay his ruling overturning the order to suspend drilling on 33 wells and stop approval of any new deepwater permits. Several companies, including Shell and Marathon Oil, said they would await the outcome of any appeals before they resume drilling. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said he would issue a new order within the next few days. He said it may allow drilling in areas where reserves and risks are known and is likely to include criteria for when the ban would be lifted.

DUDLEY

The man who inherited the Gulf oil spill response from BP's embattled CEO said Wednesday that Americans have been too quick to blame his company for the environmental disaster now in its third month. "I'm somewhat concerned there is a bit of a rush to justice going on around the investigation and facts," BP PLC managing director Bob Dudley said after touring a New Orleans wildlife conservation center where oil is cleaned from sea turtles. The Mississippi native said BP has been unusually open about making its internal investigation public and shared information that no other company would.

NORTH SEA

Britain, home of BP headquarters, said deep-sea exploration will continue in North Sea oil fields off Scotland despite safety concerns raised by the Gulf spill, the country's energy minister said Thursday. Energy Secretary Chris Huhne told an energy conference in London that regulation is strong enough "to manage the risk of deep-water drilling." Britain announced this month it was doubling the number of inspections carried out at North Sea oil rigs following the Gulf disaster.

WORST-CASE ESTIMATE

The current worst-case estimate of what's spewing into the Gulf is about 2.5 million gallons a day. Anywhere from 67 million to 127 million gallons have spilled since the April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon rig that killed 11 workers and blew out the well 5,000 feet underwater. BP PLC was leasing the rig from owner Transocean Ltd.

WASTE DISPOSAL

A leaky truck filled with oil-stained sand and absorbent boom soaked in crude pulls away from the beach, leaving tar balls in a public parking lot and a messy trail of sand and water on the main beach road. A few miles away, brown liquid drips out of a disposal bin filled with polluted sand. BP PLC's work to clean up the mess from the worst offshore oil spill in U.S. history already has generated more than 1,300 tons of solid waste, and companies it hired to dispose of the material say debris is being handled professionally and carefully. A spot check of several container sites by The Associated Press, however, found that's not always the case.

BROWN PELICANS

More than five dozen brown pelicans rehabilitated from the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico take flight in Texas. The 62 pelicans arrived on Coast Guard cargo planes Wednesday and were taken to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge about 175 miles south of Houston. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other groups released the pelicans and one northern gannet. Wednesday's release was the largest to date since the offshore oil rig exploded April 20.

PLUMES

A federal report confirms what independent scientists have been saying for weeks about the Gulf oil spill: Undersea oil plumes extend for miles from the ruptured well. The report may help measure the effectiveness of spreading chemicals to break up the oil. Government researchers released a summary Wednesday of water sampling conducted last month near the undersea gusher. It describes a cloud of oil starting around 3,300 feet deep up to 4,600 feet deep and stretching up to 6 miles from the well. Levels of oil and gas within the cloud are significantly higher than concentrations closer to the surface. The Environmental Protection Agency says there's been no significant harm to sea life, but marine scientist Vernon Asper of the University of Southern Mississippi says the levels are enough to kill fish.

DEATHS

Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen says two contract workers helping with the Gulf of Mexico oil spill cleanup have died. Neither death appears to have a direct connection to the spill. Allen said Wednesday in Washington that one man was killed by what investigators later called a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Allen said the other worker's death involved swimming. He would not provide more details.

AQUARIUM-DEAD GULF

A new exhibit at an aquarium in Iowa had intended to showcase the beauty of the Gulf of Mexico. Instead, it will be void of life to underline the environmental impact of a massive oil spill in the ocean basin. The 40,000-gallon aquarium at the National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium in Dubuque, Iowa, was supposed to have been teeming with sharks, rays and other fish. Two smaller tanks were to show a seagrass bed and coral reef. Instead, says executive director Jerry Enzler, the main tank will hold water and artificial coral, with window stickers that look like oil.

COMMISSION

The House has approved legislation that would give subpoena power to the presidential commission investigating the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Rep. Lois Capps, a California Democrat, said that Americans want answers from those responsible for the spill, and subpoena power will ensure "no stone goes unturned." The vote Wednesday was 420-1, with Republican Rep. Ron Paul of Texas casting the only no vote. President Barack Obama has appointed the seven-member commission to investigate the spill.

SUBPOENAS

The House Judiciary Committee on Wednesday subpoenaed BP claims documents, after its chairman said the company has not complied with requests to provide information on its payments. The committee's voice vote showed bipartisan agreement for Chairman John Conyers' efforts to release claims information to the public. The committee also voted, 16-11, to approve a bill eliminating limits on the amount of money that vessel owners had to pay for deaths and injuries. The bill would let family members collect payments for non-monetary damages such as pain and suffering. Introduced by Conyers, D-Mich., the bill was sent to the full House, where it will be considered along with other legislation resulting from the oil spill.

POLITICS

In need of political momentum, Democrats are exploiting Republican Rep. Joe Barton's startling apology to BP for its treatment by the Obama administration, launching a steady, low-budget campaign of fundraising appeals, a pair of television commercials and Web ads. Little more than four months before midterm elections, party officials appear to be testing ways to maximize the gain from a comment that ricocheted across the Capitol at a furious pace last week, and that Republicans deemed significant enough to force Barton to recant.

MESSAGE MANAGEMENT

To a nation frustrated by the Gulf oil spill, BP's attempts at damage control have sometimes been infuriatingly vague. But from a legal standpoint, that's exactly the point. With the company facing more than 200 civil lawsuits and the specter of a Justice Department investigation, saying the wrong thing could expose BP to millions of dollars in damages or even criminal charges for its executives. Inside the company, experts believe, there is a natural tension between public relations people who want BP to project a positive image and lawyers who don't want to be boxed into a corner. It's a balancing act with billions of dollars — perhaps even BP's survival — at stake.

SUMMIT

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer is urging the White House to hold a summit with East Coast governors and local officials to ensure they are prepared if oil from the Gulf spill makes its way up the Atlantic coastline. Hoyer, a Maryland Democrat, made the request in a letter to President Barack Obama on Wednesday. Computer models show that the oil could enter the Gulf's loop current, go around the tip of Florida and up the coast.

Source (Associated Press) –

<http://www.sanduskyregister.com/gulf-mexico/2010/jun/24/oil-spill-summary-events>

Chronology of news events –

<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2011/s3163595.htm>