



## Research in brief

# Multi-method analysis of transparency in social media practices: Survey, interviews and content analysis

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## ABSTRACT

With the decline of public trust in corporate America, organizations must consider ways to improve their relationships with key publics. One of the best strategies to build trust is through engaging in transparent communication (Rawlins, 2009). The increase in the popularity of social media has brought both challenges and opportunities for organizational transparency. This study used multiple methods to explore whether public relations professionals believe they are using social media to communicate transparently, to investigate how social media can be used to improve transparency along with its benefits and challenges, and to identify how transparency is used in social media campaigns.

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## 1. Introduction and literature review

The 2009 report from the [Arthur W. Page Society and the Business Roundtable Institute](#) on the dynamics of public trust in business looked at the crisis of transparency in business. In it, they call for a new kind of dialogue as “trust becomes increasingly crucial to business and society” (p. 6). To accomplish this, they suggest companies embrace and welcome transparency. According to [Holtz \(2009\)](#), “Transparency is the degree to which an organization shares information its stakeholders need to make informed decisions” (p. 2). [Rawlins \(2009\)](#) identified transparency as having three important elements: being truthful, substantial or useful; having participation of stakeholders; and being objective, balanced and accountable. This includes a range of behaviors such as trusting employees to communicate with publics and communicating company information that helps others understand what the company does and why.

Given that social media are defined as “anything that uses the Internet to facilitate conversations” ([Solis & Breakenridge, 2009](#), p. xvii), they are tools that can be used to build relationships through open dialogue internally and externally, providing both opportunities and challenges ([DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011](#)). In fact, in their 2010 study, [Wright and Hinson](#) found that most (81%) public relations professionals believed that social media offered organizations low-cost ways to impact organizational transparency.

It is widely understood that social media can help organizations increase transparency. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to use multiple methods to explore the concept of transparency in organizational use of social media. The following three research questions are posed.

RQ1: In what ways do public relations professionals believe they are using social media to communicate transparently?

RQ2: In what ways do public relations professionals feel that transparency can be improved in organizational social media use?

RQ3: In what ways do organizations incorporate transparency into social media campaigns?

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## 2. Method

This study utilized three separate methodologies, a survey, in-depth interviews and a content analysis. Together the three methods provided a way to triangulate data on the use of transparency in social media. The survey sample was 315 corporate communicators in for-profit companies listed on the *Fortune 500* and 150 corporate communicators in non-profit companies listed on the *Forbes 200*. Transparency was assessed by adapting Rawlins' (2008) organizational transparency construct into four measures of social media transparency.

The second methodology was Web-based interviews conducted with 12 public relations professionals in March 2010. Eight of the interviewees worked for non-profit organizations while four worked for for-profit companies. Of the eight non-profit participants, five were in management and three were associates, while all four of the for-profit participants were in management.

The third methodology was a content analysis of award winning social media campaigns from the 2009 Society for New Communications Research (SNCR) Excellence in New Communications Awards. Starting in 2007, SNCR began honoring "corporations, governmental and nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, media outlets and individuals who are innovating the use of social media, ICT, mobile media, online communities and virtual worlds and collaborative technologies." In 2009, 62 campaigns were given awards. After removing the cases that were categorized as international, governmental, academic and media, the size of the final sample for the study was 44. The transparency variables used in the survey (as adapted by Rawlins, 2008) were coded in the content analysis. Two coders were trained on the codebook and, first, coded 10% of the sample for intercoder reliability. They, then, independently coded the rest of the sample. Using Holsti's method, the reliability ranged from 88% to 95%, which is considered moderate to high.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Survey

The first method, the survey, was used to answer research question one which asked about how organizations use social media to communicate transparently. A total of 68 public relations professionals completed the survey (37 from for-profit companies and 31 from non-profit organizations). Although this number is not enough to speak to the population, it does provide insight into the topic, and the results aided in developing the interview questions and content analysis codesheet. Most of the respondents (71.4%,  $n=45$ ) worked in management positions or higher. Only six respondents had worked in public relations less than two years, 26 had two to ten years, 27 had ten to 30 years and four had 30–40 years. Fifty four percent of the respondents were females ( $n=34$ ) and 46% were males ( $n=29$ ).

Most participants indicated that their companies had used social media in the past year (91%,  $n=62$ ). Of those that had used social media, all but two expressed using it to communicate transparently. The majority of respondents indicated that they used social media *to communicate about what the organization does and why* (81.3%,  $n=48$ ,  $M=4.14$ ,  $SD=1.166$ ). The second most common use of social media for transparency was using it *to provide information that is useful for others to make informed decisions* (68.4%,  $n=39$ ,  $M=3.82$ ,  $SD=1.269$ ). This was followed by 35.1% of respondents indicating that they used it *to communicate how decisions affect others* ( $n=20$ ,  $M=2.98$ ,  $SD=1.232$ ) and 31.6% reported using it *to be accountable for actions* ( $n=18$ ,  $M=3.05$ ,  $SD=1.109$ ). Although not all the respondents were maximizing social media to communicate transparently, 55.9% felt that social media were important for their company's strategy ( $n=33$ ) and 34.5% indicated that social media were effective in achieving their company's goals ( $n=20$ ).

### 3.2. Interviews

The interview data were used to answer research question two about ways that transparency can be improved in organizational social media. Overall, the 12 interviewees felt that social media were tools for "enhancing transparency" but that it works best as part of a full communication program. When asked how companies could use social media to improve the transparency of communication most said that they could be used to provide an opportunity to be a part of an open conversation. As one said, "Social media lets [SIC] organizations bring the conversation out of the shadows; it's inherently more transparent because it's public and searchable. It's also, by its very nature, less formal in tone which enables companies to speak with authority as human beings, not just as faceless institutions."

Overall, most interviewees felt that they had benefitted more than they had been challenged by social media. The list of benefits included things such as extending the research to audiences they did not have access to before, receiving more feedback, testing marketing strategies, engaging people so they feel like a part of the organization, and increased awareness of causes and organizations. The challenges identified included not having enough staff or resources to fully implement what they need or want, measuring "anything of value," being careful not to violate industry policies, and prioritizing the tools so staff can use their time most efficiently.

**Table 1**  
Social media technologies used in award winning campaigns.

Social media technology	Percentage of campaigns that used the technology
Blogging	73%
Twitter	50%
Video	34%
Facebook	32%
YouTube	21%
LinkedIn	14%
Wiki	11%
Video Blogging	11%
Podcasting	11%
Flicker	5%
MySpace	0%

### 3.3. Content analysis

The content analysis was used to answer the third research question about the ways in which organizations incorporate transparency into their social media campaigns. To do so, the study first looked at the use of the transparency and second looked at the use of specific social media and new media technologies. The analysis of 44 social media campaigns indicated that the dimension of transparency found most often in these award winning social media campaigns was *to provide information that is useful for others to make informed decisions* (48%). Trailing behind were the other three dimensions: *to communicate about what the organization does and why* (16%), *to communicate how decisions affect others* (14%), and *to be accountable for actions* (11%). The types of social media most often used in the award winning campaigns were blogging (73%), Twitter (50%), Facebook (32%). A full list of the social media and new media technologies can be found in Table 1.

## 4. Discussion/conclusions

This study examined the use of transparency in social media, and it found that the public relations professionals in this study feel strongly about the value of social media. The respondents reported that they were most likely to use social media to let people know what their companies do and why as well as to provide information that is useful for others to make informed decisions. A content analysis of award winning social media campaigns suggested that the dimension of transparency most commonly used in these campaigns was providing information that is useful for others to make informed decisions. Additionally, social media were found to be used as a tool to help organizations be accountable for their actions and to communicate about how organizational decisions affect others. Public relations professionals felt that social media created a platform for open dialogue with publics that encouraged interaction and raised unexpected topics that helped strengthen the relationship.

While the content analysis supported the survey's finding that social media are often used to provide information that helps others make informed decisions, there was a discrepancy between the two methods around one of the dimensions of transparency – communication about what the organization does and why. In the survey, the public relations professionals felt strongly that they used social media for this purpose; however, the content analysis of top social media campaigns did not find this. This was partly due to the fact that although many campaigns in the content analysis communicated what the organization was doing, few explained why they were doing it. As Rawlins (2008) clarified, simply providing information does not guarantee transparency. Rather, an organization achieves transparency by communicating to improve understanding. As organizations develop social media campaigns and design communication for transparency, they should consider the degree to which they are disclosing the motivations for the organization's actions.

### 4.1. Limitations

This study had a number of limitations including the samples of the survey and content analysis. The response rate for the survey was low, suggesting that results should be regarded cautiously. Also, the sample analyzed in the content analysis was the population of award winning campaigns. It is likely that these campaigns have specific characteristics that the award-granting organization was looking for, and the campaigns may not represent the best of public relations communication. However, this sample does offer some insight into how campaigns are being constructed.

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