Public relations, education, and social media: issues for professionalism in the digital age

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Abstract

It is an exciting time for Public Relations practitioners, academics and students. Social Media promises new ways and means to reach target publics and professional practice is to take advantage of Web 2.0 technologies which support social media and make User Generated Content possible. However, it is also a time for caution and reflection. The widespread use of the term “spin doctoring” in mainstream media as a catchall descriptor for Public Relations demonstrates lack of respect. Whilst the media can, to some extent, be blamed for Public Relation’s poor image the industry itself must also own a large share of responsibility where it privileges words over action and relies too heavily on communication asymmetry. Traditional communication channels have supported such approaches. Social media can too and clearly is being used in such a fashion. Social media is being used simply as another communication tool rather than being understood for the unique ways in which it can impact on organisation-public relationships. If educators have responsibility for developing professionalised graduates – as opposed to just vocationally competent graduates – they must give careful consideration to the way in which students are introduced to social media at a time of growing scrutiny of the role and value of Public Relations. Adoption of social media into a Public Relations curriculum must be acknowledged as complex and educators must develop curriculum around social media which is sensitive to issues associated with professionalism.

Keywords: social media, public relations, relationship building, spin, disruptive innovation

Introduction

The adoption and use of social media for Public Relations presents a timely opportunity for educators to revisit how they teach the discipline. At the same time it is important to consider the impact that different approaches to the teaching of Public Relations theories and models have on students’ and graduates’ perceptions about the nature and role of Public Relations as a communication
profession. The professional status of Public Relations is clearly suffering and in many quarters is synonymous with spin. As Professor Jim Macnamara of UTS says “…the term ‘spin’ is increasingly being applied to Public Relations generally” (2010, p.307).

The issue of spin has surfaced increasingly in 2010. High-profile Australian corporate communication specialist Sue Cato has been described in various media forums as a “spinner”, and as a guest panellist on the ABC’s Q&A she was introduced as “a spin doctor” (ABC, n.d). In a blog entry titled ABC should declare on Gunns at The Age online website, the writer said in relation to Sue Cato’s appearance on Q&A: “And having somebody involved in the dark arts [Public Relations] is always revealing.” Macnamara, quoting Eric Louw of the University of Queensland, provides yet another reference to Public Relations as a “dark art” (Louw, 2005, p.297, cited in Macnamara, 2010, p. 307). Those who doubt such views are widespread are encouraged to perform a Google search using the key words public relations spin. The search results will provide many other examples buried within headlines of online news, reportage, blog posts, online forums, and elsewhere discussion, commentary and opinion-sharing takes place.

Whilst not a new idea, the perception of Public Relations as spin is somewhat ironic for a profession charged with, amongst other things, the task of solving organisational image building but which cannot resolve its own bad image. One view is that the bad reputation of Public Relations is the fault the media. Bowen states that “News media tend to be unaware of or ignore the other functions of Public Relations, particularly the managerial roles that more experienced practitioners frequently enact” (2009, p.403). In this context much of what constitutes Public Relations practice is hidden and unseen by the media and the general public. This is hardly surprising because day-to-day Public Relations tasks, whether at the technician or managerial level, are not obviously newsworthy except to those immediately involved. What the media do see is the end product of Public Relations or more specifically media relations endeavours often in the form of press agentry (Bowen, 2009, p.404). This becomes problematic when media rely on or reproduce Public Relations output to entertain and titillate audiences in an effort to maintain market share (and sustain advertising revenue); as Hajer points out “…media, and television in particular love drama” (2009, p. 40).

If media thrives on drama to hold onto audience, organisations will tend towards adopting risk averse Public Relations strategies to limit their potential to become the focus of drama, and use persuasive communication as a means by which to control public debate around contentious issues. In such a context it is easy to see why Public Relations practice tends towards spin and why relationship asymmetry becomes a comfortable default strategy. However, when persuasion targeted at priority publics becomes a means to reinforce and legitimise the organisation’s world view as it seeks to protect its image, and
in some cases its very existence, the organisation runs the real risk of losing support from the audiences and publics upon which its real legitimacy rests in the longer-term. Rigid adherence towards asymmetrical Public Relations becomes untenable when “The message, or words, rather than the organisation’s actions, are of most importance” (Hagan, 2007, p.422). A telling example is found in the following quote from an ABC online news report on recent US congressional hearings sparked by the British Petroleum (BP) oil-spill crisis in the Gulf of Mexico. Executives from some of the world’s largest oil companies were called to report to Congress on their readiness to deal with a similar crisis. Landers wrote “ExxonMobil has revealed its emergency response plan includes 40 pages on dealing with the media and only nine on dealing with an oil spill”(16/06/2010, para 5).

In contrast to media and television, social media does not need to create ‘drama’ to engage audience attention and elicit participation. Communicators using these channels do not face the constraints of ratings-focused news editors and media bosses beholden to shareholders and chasing advertising dollars. Whilst traditional media outlets are populating social media channels in an effort to remain competitive and maintain their share of the audience, much of the communication within social media is driven by non-corporate users in the form of User Generated Content (UGC) which Kaplan and Haenlein describe as the “…sum of all ways in which people make use of social media” (2010, p.61). Communication and UGC via social media is messy and the direction and flow of content cannot easily be controlled. Just as media outlets are finding new ways to operate within a social-media communication environment, so too must Public Relations practitioners find ways to engage with target publics on issues of local, national or global importance. This paper argues that how Public Relations educators overlay Public Relations theory across social media channels currently in use (and for channels as yet unknown) will have an important impact on how today’s Public Relations students develop their approaches to ethical and professional Public Relations practice and whether or not Public Relations will remain an occupation accused of “spin doctoring”.

**Public relations – occupation or profession?**

Public Relations practised as spin does not demonstrate the ideals associated with professional practice. While it can be debated whether Public Relations is a profession, it does exhibit characteristics of professionalisation (Wright & vanSlyke Turk, 2007, p. 573). Public Relations literature demonstrates a history of ethical discourse surrounding Public Relations practice which has contributed to the emergence and evolution of Public Relations codes of practice. Many nations have established Public Relations associations. For example, the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) in the United Kingdom. Associations such as these seek to guide and regulate the practices
Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal, Vol. 11

of their members. Many of these same associations accredit Public Relations education programs, which confers status and infers quality. And there is evidence of industry associations articulating the altruistic nature of Public Relations which distinguishes an occupation from a profession (Flexner, 1915 & Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; cited in Wright & van Slyke Turk, 2007, p.572). These are all important hallmarks of professionalisation.

However, Public Relations will fail to consistently demonstrate professionalism if it is practised as a hegemonic institution predicated on unequal or manufactured power in organisation-public relationships as a means of survival. One way to avoid accusations of hegemony is for Public Relations practitioners and educators to be more involved in social media and social networking in order to gain a genuine understanding of communication within these channels and the nature of the social contracts which govern their use. Spaulding describes the social contract in the following way: “A social contract is an implicit or explicit agreement to give up rights for other benefits such as power and social relationships” (2010, p.39). Social media, it is argued, provides Public Relations with the tools needed for restoring the balance of communicative and relational power in organisation-public relations as well as providing a new way of conceiving the role and purpose of Public Relations.

In a recent news release, Nielsen’s Online Business Research Director Melanie Ingrey (TNC,15/03/2010) was quoted as saying:

Incredibly, nearly nine in ten Australian Internet users (86%) are looking to their fellow Internet users for opinions and information about products, services and brands, and Australia’s engagement with online word of mouth communication is going to increase in coming years as social media plays an increasingly important role in consumer decision making.

It is possible to extend this to say that social media will increasingly facilitate and shape construction of meaning around issues of social, political and economic importance beyond mere marketing decisions. And, in this context, individuals will forge unknown and unexpected connections within these spheres; connections which may not easily be predicted. Consumers of social media (who will be variously audiences and publics) are recognised as “… active participators in the creation of meaning” and “…’producers’ as well as ‘receivers’ of the media” (Creeber, 2009, p.19).

Not only will target publics and activists be able to participate in social media word-of-mouth conversations around products and brands, these same publics will also be empowered by social media to take the output of Public Relations activities and reproduce messages (either altered or unaltered) for their own ends and to influence outcomes. Reproduction may be a function both of the delivery system and content; but either way it presents a challenge to a more traditional paradigm of Public Relations as a message-shaping and control function of debate delivered via mass media. This is not to say that all control
Public relations, education and social media

will be lost in all circumstances – rather control will be reduced to moments in communication exchange when it is an organisation’s turn to talk within the context of debate and negotiation around issues of public importance.

The potential for open and democratic communication within social media platforms means that achieving the level of control over the message currently facilitated by traditional communication will need to rely on manipulative or unethical practices such as astroturfing. Astroturfing is the practice of presenting fake support for an issue or organisation as though it were genuine grassroot support (Demetrious, 2006, p.104). Manipulation can also occur when, for example, public relations tactics make a deliberate attempt to hide from public scrutiny organisational agendas or identities, where revealing either one might sway public opinion away from organisational goals and establish resistance to the same. The use of social media in such fashion would simply be supporting Public Relations as spin.

So how we choose to treat social media within a Public Relations curriculum is directly related to how we understand professionalism and indeed our goals for advancing the status of Public Relations as a profession – rather than simply an occupation.

Social media as disruptive innovation

Although normally applied to technology-based manufacturing, the concept of disruptive technology provides an instructive paradigm for conceptualising social media and its adoption into Public Relations education. Disruptive technologies are those which “… disrupt established products and markets …” (Garrison, 2009, p. 444) and which change existing organisational practices, processes and values (Christensen & Overdorf, 2000; Garrison, 2009). Sustaining technologies, contrasted with disruptive technologies, are characterised by technologies which maintain the status quo enabling organisations to market to or service, existing stakeholders (Christensen & Overdorf, 2000). Social media supports active participation and collaboration between self-selected users; unlike traditional mass media channels and static web sites which cater to and foster passive audiences with little or no expectation of dialogic interaction. Kent (1998a, p.32) says “Dialogic communication requires open channels of communication and a commitment on the part of organisations to value the ideas of publics.” Dialogic communication is not simply controlled two-way interaction between an organisation and its publics - where interactivity is treated as transaction – rather it seeks to support an organisation-public relationship predicated on ‘query’ and ‘response’ (Kent & Taylor, 1998) which may well extend beyond a single instance of communication. Further the nature and direction of queries coming from individuals within target publics may be a result of interactions they have with other individuals in their social networks (and via social media) and not just the organisation.
The nature of the existing relationship between an organisation and its key constituencies is an important point; the adoption of disruptive technologies does not seek to preserve relationships in their existing form, quite the opposite, disruptive technologies mean change. In the manufacturing context “Disruptive innovations create an entirely new market through the introduction of a new kind of product or service, one that’s actually worse, initially, as judged by the performance metrics that mainstream customers value” (Christensen & Overdorff, 2000, p. 7). So from a Public Relations perspective social media, as a disruptive innovation, should be regarded as a way to establish new forms of relationships with newly conceived stakeholders. Certainly the increasing use of the internet and social media by users to facilitate discussion around products, brands and organisations indicates that disruption has already taken place and the nature of the organisation-public relationship is substantively altered. Persisting with traditional approaches to the teaching of Public Relations relationship building within social media environments seems ill founded.

The recent campaign by Greenpeace to raise awareness of Nestle’s complicity in the destruction of orang-utan forest habitat in Indonesia to make way for palm oil plantations is a good example of social media as disruptive innovation. Greenpeace created an advertisement for Nestle’s Kit Kat intended as a parody of advertisements for this highly recognised brand. Their advertisement shows a male office worker having ‘a break’. He unwraps what looks like a Kit Kat chocolate bar, but which is a set of orang-utan fingers. His office co-workers look on appalled as he breaks a finger off; despite it spurting blood he happily munches away. There was no escaping the meaning behind the visual metaphor. Importantly, the case demonstrates how social media can be used by active publics to subvert carefully orchestrated image and brand building on the part of an organisation pursuing its own goals with a traditional and clearly limited focus on existing priority publics and markets. This case also demonstrates the speed with which negative publicity can spread through social media.

The video, initially posted by Greenpeace on YouTube, was also taken and uploaded by other YouTube community users and generated widespread comment across social media platforms; comment was both positive and negative towards Greenpeace and Nestle. Despite reports of Nestle’s unsuccessful attempt to have the video banned for alleged copyright infringement the video remains available and its dissemination has moved well beyond Nestle’s control or indeed that of Greenpeace. An ABC online news article reported that “Nestle tried to get Greenpeace’s video withdrawn from YouTube, but Mr Campbell says that only boosted the number of posts online worldwide” (Breen & Staff, 18/05/2010, para 13). The Greenpeace advertisement, and the publicity generated by social media conversation has resulted in organisational change; Nestle has announced it will attempt to purchase palm oil from sustainable sources which do not support the deforestation and the destruction of wildlife habitats (Nestle, 15/04/2010).
So why did it take Nestle so long to recognise the need for change? And what role did their Public Relations team and advisors play? Had Nestle recognised the disruptive potential of social media and been active participants in debate and dialogue around environmental sustainability they may well have averted the Public Relations disaster which followed the Greenpeace campaign.

As a disruptive technology, social media demands change not only in practice, but also change in organisational values, and process. So for example, Public Relations professionals must seek to become ‘active participants’ and to develop the social media skills which enable them to take part in conversations in which meaning is constructed – particularly where issues are contentious and divisive. They must rethink communication as a process – particularly in the context of relationship building and control. And as the Nestle case demonstrates social media does have the potential to either force or facilitate democratic approaches to Public Relations, which suggests the need for values change and a rejection of asymmetry as a default position in relationship building.

**Are public relations educators ready for social media?**

Nestle is not the only organisation to receive criticism for their transgressions and failure to account for wider community and stakeholder needs. But the seeming naivety with which such organisations pursue belief in their ability to control public debate and opinion in the face of social media is surprising given the growing number of cautionary tales.

This begs the question – are educators similarly unprepared to recognise the potential for change and disruption to Public Relations practices? The point here is not to fall into the trap of a form of educational ‘endism’ claiming all Public Relations practice, process and values are changed for all time. Macnamara sensibly points out in relation to emergent media that we need to look for ‘trends’ and ‘implications’ and to consider these broadly in the context of “…counterbalancing as well as emergent forces” (2010, p. 105). So as educators our role is to interpret change for students and adapt curriculum accordingly such that they are able to situate social media within Public Relations effectively. Quite what ‘effectively’ means is not yet clear but this paper does argue that educators do have an important role to play.

Bowen (2009) published findings from a two-year research project designed to ask “are Public Relations educators doing any better in communicating the core competencies, responsibilities, knowledge requirements, skills and abilities of the discipline, and the Public Relations major?” Although the study was limited to a single university in the United States and may not be generalised, the findings are no less important. What Bowen’s research and article suggests is that educators may own a significant share of responsibility for Public Relations’ bad image and goes so far to conclude that “Public Relations educators and professionals are undermining their own credibility and the future credibility of the field” (2009, p.409).
A key argument presented by Bowen appears to be that educators are not making explicit to students the “… very purposes, activities, and ethical principles involved in Public Relations” (2009, p.409) which can happen when curriculum focuses too heavily on the technical rather than managerial functions of Public Relations. And perhaps where they do make these explicit does curriculum (both within units of study and across a degree major) and assessment provide strong enough links for students to make connections between practice, ethics and organisational transparency, or are they delivered as discrete units of learning such that students are left to make their own connections (if at all)? Teaching practices which support Public Relations as an inherently hegemonic institution, whether intentional or not, will ultimately have the effect of disempowering relational partners where graduates reproduce hegemonic behaviours learned in the classroom in the workplace and will perpetuate the idea that Public Relations is synonymous with spin.

Viewed in this context the adoption of social media into a Public Relations curriculum is complex; it should not simply be about the transmission of a relevant set of skills such that students focus on learning how to use different social media channels (though it is argued this would be an important component of any Public Relations curriculum). Nor should its inclusion simply be framed as yet another tool in the communications arsenal which can be employed to reduce threat, take advantage of opportunity, or solve problems. Students must learn to understand why and how social media modifies professional practice and process, and how organisational values may, and ought to be, influenced by social media. Public Relations theory and practice as it applies to social media is underdeveloped. This is understandable given the comparative newness of social media, but it does present educators with a problem.

**Approaches to social media adoption in undergraduate public relations**

It is interesting to look at how social media is included within existing course and/or unit structures, although it is beyond the scope of this article to address this matter in any depth. Social media within undergraduate Public Relations degree majors, for example, is being handled differently by institutions. This suggests that there is no clear consensus on how social media ought to be embedded and treated within Public Relations curriculum. In this one senses a degree of ambivalence around social media but also enthusiasm for its inclusion and recognition of its importance.

At the time of writing, according to the PRIA website, 17 Australian universities had either gained PRIA accreditation or were in the process of seeking accreditation to deliver Bachelor degrees with Public Relations majors. Drawing on publicly available online handbooks and course/unit information it was found that social media has been integrated into Public Relations education but that approaches to situating social media within courses and units
Public relations, education and social media

was not uniform across all listed Universities. Of the 17 universities seeking accreditation, six could be identified as offering units within majors which appear to be specifically devoted to social media, new communication or digital technologies; six appear to embed social media within generic Public Relations units adopting a technology focus, a communication focus or a combination. In relation to the remaining five universities it was either impossible to retrieve unit information or unit descriptors made no special mention of social media, new media, or digital communication technologies (which is not to say these universities have not included social media in their Public Relations curriculum).

It is also suggested that closer examination may uncover a lack of uniformity in the application of terms, concepts and models to describe and define social media and communication practice within a social media environment and Web 2.0 context. If this is true then it represents a problem if educators are not able to clearly articulate this emerging field of practice to students. Certainly within professional literature writers are acknowledging the uncertain or inconsistent use of words and terms such as social media and Web 2.0 (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, Macnamarra, 2010 ). Kaplan and Haenlein see Web 2.0 as “… the ideological and technological foundation …” (2010, p. 61) which enables creation and sharing of UGC through social media applications. They point out that UGC is collaborative and changing; it is not “published”, rather it is evolutionary. This idea alone is challenging to Public Relations practice reliant on “published” communication since published suggests a degree of immutability and therefore control.

The aim here is not to resolve issues of definition. Rather to make the point that how we define social media and allied terms, and in what context, has important implications for how we make connections between existing Public Relations theories and models. As a set of technologies and applications – Web 2.0 and social media – might easily be reduced to mere channels of communication. But if we look to more complex definitions and explanations we are able to tap into a richer vein of ideas in terms of how we might situate social media and social media use and collaboration within practice. Certainly, O’Reilly’s view of Web 2.0 as a means by which to “harness the collective intelligence …” (2005) suggests more for facilitating technologies than mere asymmetry and has significant implications for the treatment of relationship building as a Public Relations function.

Making sense of organisational self interest and persuasion

If defining and situating social media within curriculum is problematic, how ought the more intangible matters which dog Public Relations practice in a social media context be tackled? Within organisations the Public Relations function takes responsibility for creating image and sustaining reputation: aspects closely bound to the representation of organisational self-interest. The degree to which organisations ought to be free to pursue self-interest is contested, especially
when formalised organisational self-interest and stakeholder self-interest do not align (as in the Nestle case). Relationship building is presented as a means by which organisations can resolve or manage such problems.

Problematising self-interest does not necessarily require a subservient positioning of organisational self-interest as critics of Grunig’s two-way symmetrical model of Public Relations might argue (Grunig, 2001). But self-interest does take on an ugly demeanour from a pluralistic perspective where the goal is to employ persuasion in order to win, rather than earn, cooperation in order to maintain organisational legitimacy. It seems important then that we revisit how we teach relationship building in the age of social media – especially given that even in a traditional sense, organisation-public relationships can be a vague concept (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997) tending toward the instrumental (Kent, 2008b). In an age of social media-mediated communication, both self-interest and relationships have the potential to be realised as different because of the influence of social media as a moderating and mediating influence on communication.

Relationships are constructed between actors in unique situational and environmental contexts and as such they differ in terms of duration and complexity. However, despite these factors relationships can be said to demonstrate common characteristics and these commonalities have provided educators with a framework for introducing students to organisation-public relationships. Hon and Grunig identified six relationship elements: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship, communal relationship (1999, p.3) and more recently Jahansoozi (2006) identified “dialogue” and “transparency” as important relationship antecedents whilst noting that these had not received significant attention within Public Relations literature (2006). Characteristics such as these are useful for students and educators providing an effective framework for developing an understanding of relationships and for the planning and evaluation of relationship-building activities in practice.

However, Bourdieu points out that as relationships become more ‘impersonal’ they “… become more purely ‘economic’ …” (1990, p.115). This is an illustrative statement. Traditional mass media do not support interpersonal communication directly. Public Relations communication as practised via traditional mass media channels has the potential to disembody and disenfranchise faceless publics; to be impersonal. In this context publics are homogenous sets of segmentation variables, classified not as they might wish or might even recognise, but defined in a way which aligns with the organisation’s self-interest embodied in objectives. Kept at arm’s length (by virtue of the inability of traditional media channels to facilitate dialogic exchange) the individual remains unknown and, it is posited, so is their self-interest as well. Kent points out that despite the recognition of the importance of dialogue in Public Relations generally and specifically to relationship building that “…
relatively little has been done with the concepts and theories of dialogue since Kent and Taylor’s (1998 & 2002) essays” (2008b). Failure to build dialogic communication into practice supports impersonal “economic” relationships and privileges organisational self-interest over stakeholder self-interest providing fertile ground for spin. Public Relations practitioners should beware that danger.

Ethical practice and altruism were identified earlier as characteristics of a profession. Whilst there is little debate about the need for ethical practice, the nature of altruism in the context of Public Relations practice is more difficult to understand. In one sense Public Relations is not an inherently altruistic profession in all situations – there is no requirement that it ought to be – and there is nothing unethical in adopting the position that the Public Relations function ought to deliver something advantageous to the sponsoring organisation or that it serves an economic function. But approaching Public Relations from an inclusive relationship building perspective, rather than just an image or reputation management function to protect an economic position, makes it more difficult for organisations to put to one side for organisational expediency the idea that Public Relations is always only about the economic when it professes to also be about relationship building. This is worth considering given Christensen and Cheney’s point that “Whereas the raison d’être of most private organizations is still the generation of profits, they often justify their existence in other terms” (2000, p.248).

Understanding relationships from the perspective of Bourdieu provides a useful starting point for approaching and understanding the potential for social media to be disruptive especially within the context of complex relationships. Relational complexity is necessarily a characteristic where organisational self-interest clashes with public self-interest on issues of social, political or economic import. Further, acceptance of social media as disruptive provides an opportunity for Public Relations practitioners to be honest and more transparent about the ultimate goal of their organisation’s Public Relations in the pursuit of organisation-public relationships and so avoid the need to rely on spin.

**Conclusion**

Communication tasks and managerial functions which fall under the broad umbrella of Public Relations are the means by which organisations seek, maintain and justify legitimacy (Wærass, 2009) which is defined as “… the right to exist and conduct operations” (Metzler, 2001, p. 321; cited in Wærass, 2009, p. 310). Conceiving Public Relations in this light elevates its role and recognises it as an important organisational function; but it is diminished in value when perceived as, or performed as, spin. Further, Public relations practised as spin is inconsistent with the ideals of professionalism, and in particular ethical practice and altruism. Whilst educators cannot be held solely accountable for poor public relations practice or media representations of public relations as spin, educators
do bear responsibility in the preparation of professionalised graduates who are able to practise effective and legitimate public relations.

In contrast to traditional mass media channels, social media facilitates synchronous and asynchronous two-way communication fostering high levels of audience engagement and privileging users with more control over communication and ultimately the relationships they choose to pursue. Unlike traditional media channels, social media channels exhibit capacity for dialogic rather than just transactional relationship building. Organisations operating within contestable environments characterised by risk – or where their right to operate is subject to challenge (reasonable or not) – must recognise that it is qualities such as these which make social media disruptive and requires more than a naive or superficial adoption of social media for public relations. Additionally, the disruptive nature of social media will challenge and require adaptation of public relations process, practice and values.

Therefore this paper concludes that social media provides a timely opportunity for rethinking approaches to the teaching of core public relations theory. Bringing relationship building to the fore and privileging it along with economic and other organisational imperatives makes it possible to better understand the role that social media can and ought to play within Public Relations and Public Relations education. This view enables social media to be treated as more than just a set of communication technologies.

Whilst social media has been embedded within some undergraduate Public Relations majors in Australia there is an absence of research to suggest why universities adopt different approaches to integrating it into Public Relations curriculum. If social media technologies are embedded within units such as media relations, crisis and issues management, or campaigns for example, it is conceivable that students will not have space within the curriculum to learn about the unique characteristics of communication mediated by social media technologies. Equally, teaching students about social media platforms with a focus on technology and function to serve vocational outcomes (‘how to’ units of learning) may create misunderstanding around the role and nature of social media in Public Relations.

Whatever route is taken, integrating social media into Public Relations education should be driven by an ethical communication and relationship building paradigm which recognises these technologies as inherently disruptive, and dialogic. The dialogic limitation of traditional mass media means that social media for Public Relations must be taught differently. Adopting an altered approach will enable educators to help students conceptualise social media communication technologies as tools of consequence rather than ends in themselves. As Carey warned: “Because we have looked at each new advance in communication technology as an opportunity for politics and economics, we have devoted it, almost exclusively, to matters of government and trade, We have rarely seen these advances as opportunities to expand people’s powers to learn
and exchange ideas and experience” (2009, p.27). Thus social media properly conceived represents an opportunity to rethink the nature of Public Relations; its role in society and its impact on how organisations might use public relations to enable them to help organisations be good and effective citizens.

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