The PR Pyramid: Social media and the new role of Public Relations in organizations

A Pirâmide das RP: Os media sociais e o papel das Relações Públicas nas organizações

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between social media as tools used by public relations professionals and as part of the daily lives of organizations' stakeholders, identifying emergent practices in public relations and confronting new perspectives, both professional and academic, on public relations functions and on its role within organizational communication.

Departing from the agreement shared by academics and professionals on a profound shift in public relations as a consequence of the increasingly widespread, intense and frequent use of social media, this paper intends to clarify the nature and terms of that shift. Two perspectives are confronted: one of them is focused on emergent professional practices and regards social media as tools at the disposal of the PR professional; the other is broader in scope and views social media as a contextual factor that influences both the stakeholders' behavior patterns and PR practices, thus redefining the role of public relations within organizational communication. The paper presents results from an exploratory study whose goal was to identify a conceptual framework for understanding the impact of social media on public relations.

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A relevant case study was identified, presenting the solution found by TAP, the Portuguese airline company, to deal with communication crisis involving the social media and to successfully manage social media use as a complementary communication channel. TAP's social media presence is managed through an articulation of public relations, marketing and customer support where public relations assume a pivotal role. Drawing on this case study, we propose the PR pyramid as a theoretical model that redefines the role of public relations as the orchestrator of the consistent, coherent and integrated communication that is demanded by the contemporary digital context.

Keywords: Public Relations – Social Media – Organizational Communication – Integrated Communication

Resumo

Este artigo explora a relação entre os media sociais como ferramentas usadas pelos profissionais de relações públicas e como parte da vida quotidiana dos *stakeholders* das organizações, identificando práticas emergentes em relações públicas e confrontando novas perspetivas, tanto profissionais como académicas, sobre as funções das relações públicas e o seu papel no âmbito da comunicação organizacional.

Partindo da concordância entre académicos e profissionais sobre uma mudança profunda nas relações públicas como consequência da utilização cada vez mais generalizada, intensa e frequente dos media sociais, este artigo pretende clarificar a natureza e os termos dessa mudança. Duas perspetivas são confrontadas: uma foca-se em práticas profissionais emergentes e vê os media sociais como ferramentas à disposição dos profissionais de RP; a outra é mais abrangente e concebe os media sociais como um fator contextual que influencia tanto o comportamento dos *stakeholders* como as práticas de RP, redefinindo o papel das relações públicas no âmbito da comunicação organizacional. Este artigo apresenta resultados de um estudo exploratório cujo objetivo foi a identificação de um enquadramento concetual para a compreensão do impacto dos media sociais nas relações públicas.

Um estudo de caso é identificado como relevante para o desenvolvimento do enquadramento concetual pretendido, apresentando a solução encontrada pela TAP, a companhia aérea portuguesa, para lidar com situações de crise envolvendo os media sociais e para gerir com êxito a sua utilização. A presença da TAP nos media sociais é gerida através de uma articulação das relações públicas, do marketing e do apoio ao cliente na qual as relações públicas assumem um papel crucial. A partir deste estudo de caso, propomos a pirâmide das RP como um modelo teórico que redefine o papel das relações públicas como o orquestrador da comunicação consistente, coerente e integrada que é exigida pelo contexto digital contemporâneo.

Palavras-chave: Relações Públicas – Media Sociais – Comunicação Organizacional – Comunicação Integrada

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Social media and public relations

Digital technologies have become pervasive and ubiquitous in contemporary daily life. Recently, social media have drawn attention due to exponential growth in users in increasingly shorter periods. In addition, social media, which were primarily devoted to communication and sharing within one's personal networks of relationships, are currently also *locus* of professional interactions.

Profound social changes as an effect of digital technologies, or as a result of the interaction between digital technologies and users, are acknowledged by several macro-sociological theories such as Gidden's structuration theory (1991), Bauman's liquefaction concept (2000) and Castells' network society theory (2005).

However, within the academic field of public relations, most authors have been more focused on the particular and concrete changes that the social media as alternative or complementary communication tools have introduced in the daily practices and tasks of the PR professional. Literature abounds on specific strategies and practices for concrete social media such as the most used Facebook (Levy, 2010; CIPR, 2012) and also Twitter (Israel, 2009; Micek, Micek and Whitlock, 2009) and YouTube (Evans, 2010; Scott, 2010). Other

contributions approach social media in general but are equally focused on their conceptualization as tools whose specificities require whether adaptations of the most common PR practices such as press releases, media kits or publicizing, whether brand new practices such as 24/7/365 availability or mastering editing and publishing software (Bratton and Evans, 2008; Hay, 2009; Brogan, 2010; Halligan and Shah, 2010; Wilcox and Cameron, 2010).

Contiguous scientific fields such as marketing, organizational communication and organizational theory present broader perspectives on the effects of social media on communication, organizations and society in general. More recently, these broader approaches can also be found among public relations' academics.

The main consequences of the proliferation of social media identified within these broader approaches are the complexification of organizations themselves and their context (Davis, 2009; Cornelissen, 2011), as well as the blurring of boundaries between the organizations and their exterior (Miller, 2009; Cheney, Christensen, Zorn and Ganesh, 2011). Davis (2009) highlights the increase of information circulating in digital networks, resulting in organizations having to struggle to get their stakeholders' attention in an environment cluttered with messages and stimuli. The possibilities of empowerment that social media provide to their users, who are becoming prosumers (Castells, 2005; Tapscott and Williams, 2006) or produsers (Bruns, 2008) able to mass self-communicate their own contents (Castells, 2009), are one side of the coin, meaning that the other side is a severe loss of control of the organizations over their communications. This loss of control is considered by many as the main problem that social media pose to organizations and to PR professionals in particular (Postman, 2008; Scott, 2010). This argument is the main grounding for authors who relate social media and a change from the traditional asymmetric models of public relations to more symmetric practices and models (Kunsch, 2003; Solis and Breakenridge, 2009; Scott, 2010; Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012). Although the public relations practices of many organizations still rely on asymmetric and linear communication models and processes such as creating and publicizing information (e.g. press releases, press conferences, advertising campaigns, sponsored actions), without considering feedback or the relevance of this information to its publics, and these asymmetric communication models are appealing to organizations because they seem to enable them to control the messages publicized

through the mass communication media (i.e. press, radio and television), they are no longer suitable to emergent communication practices enabled by interactivity of social media. Furthermore, some communication professionals are beginning to question the accuracy of press releases, while the internet and social media provide them the tools to thoroughly scrutinize the information publicized by the organizations. Thus, the technological characteristics of social media as tools and their increasing pervasiveness and ubiquity as contextual features of our daily lives require more symmetry in public relations and organizational communication in general. However, others (Edwards and Hodges, 2011) point to the fact that organizations are collecting massive amounts of information about their clients (and other stakeholders) through social media – the so called big data – thus arguing that this should be taken into account when considering the power balance between organizations and clients.

The more particularized approaches (Breakenridge, 2012; Theaker and Yaxley, 2012), focused on the adaptations required in public relations practices and also on the emergence of new original practices, both according to social media technological features and usage patterns, although apparently innovative, do not represent a paradigmatic change in the nature of public relations. The strongest argument regarding this notion of paradigmatic change is the shift from an asymmetric communication (and relationship) between organizations and stakeholders to a more symmetric one, but this is still a debatable proposition, as discussed above.

Miller (2009), arguing that public relations are assuming a preponderant role in organizational communication due to the fact that social media are related to more frequent communication crises, is no longer focused solely on public relations themselves but on their relationship with other types of organizational communication. Cornelissen (2009) also suggests that the blurring of boundaries between organizations and stakeholders results in the same blurring between marketing, public relations and internal communication, contributing to the widening of functions of each and also the overlapping among them. These observations are the departure point to a reflection on the changes in the nature of public relations, besides its concrete professional practices, brought about by social media.

Broader approaches which conceptualize social media not as tools but as contextual and structuring features of contemporary society offer more grounding to the notion that public relations are undergoing a paradigmatic change, both as a professional area and as an academic field. Li and Bernoff (2008) suggest the term groundswell to describe the exponential growth of both the number of users and the scope and depth of effects of the social media. Also, Qualman (2009) highlights that social media are not a fad, and therefore it is unavoidable for organizations to deal with social media as a structuring feature of their environment and of themselves. Tapscott and Williams (2010) claim that we are living in a macrowikinomics, as the effects of social media are felt not only in economy but in all spheres of society.

Concerning organizational communication, several authors emphasize the need for greater coherence and consistency in communications, required by the increasingly information-cluttered environment and by the multiplicity and complexity of the communication channels available for organizations, including social media. The concept of integrated communication has been suggested to describe the coordination and articulations between traditionally different organizational departments and/or functions, such as marketing, communication and public relations, which often communicate the same issues (or different aspects of the same issues) and share the same targets. This increasing need for consistency is grounded on the assumption that multiple and diversified yet coherent ways of communicating will result in a more consolidated organizational image and reputation.

Cheney *et al.* (2011) describe integrated communication as follows:

> "[…] 'integrated communication' is the notion that organizations, in order to establish their presence and legitimacy in the marketplace, must communicate *consistently* across different audiences and different media. By coordinating and aligning all messages from the organization (including visions, strategies, and identity themes), organizations pursuing integrated communication hope to create a unified impression of what the organization is and what it stands for" (Cheney *et al.*, 2011: 126).

Kunsch (2003) argues that a new organizational communication mix is needed in order to incorporate, in an integrated manner, new communication tools and practices. The author

highlights the role of public relations in organization communication arguing that this new communication mix should be strategically integrated and interactive although centered in public relations in order to promote mutual benefits for the organization, its different stakeholders, the public opinion and the society in general. Kunsch describes integrated communication as a "[…] philosophy that drives the convergence of different areas and enables synergetic action." (Kunsch, 2003: 150), adding that "[…] corporate communication, marketing, public relations and internal communication are joined in an organizational communication mix" (Kunsch, 2003:150).

Breakenridge's (2008) concept of PR 2.0, although apparently focused on the impact of the technological features of social media on public relations practices, is presented as a shift in the mindset of the PR professional rather than in the professional practices. In addition, this shift in mindset is precisely from an asymmetric relationship with the stakeholders to a more symmetric interaction, from publicizing to conversation.

Having confronted these two perspectives present in the literature – one more focused on technological features and PR practices, the other more focused on contextual factors and PR conceptualization – this paper aims to empirically explore how Portuguese organizations are dealing with social media, adopting a grounded theory approach (Berg, 1989) in order to identify a relevant conceptual framework of analysis for understanding the impact of social media on public relations. From an exploratory collection of data, a case study is selected as the focus of a deeper empirical research. This case study presents the PR pyramid developed by TAP – the Portuguese airline company – as a construct with potential to be further explored, tested and theorized. In the PR pyramid, public relations become the coordinators of an articulation with other organizational departments and functions, specifically marketing and client support, as a successful way of successfully dealing with social media.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design and methods

This empirical research intends to contribute to the analysis and understanding of the problematic discussed above, namely determining if Portuguese organizations are dealing with social media within a technology-focused perspective or according to a broader

conception of social media as a contextual factor; and also identifying a relevant conceptual framework for understanding the impact of social media on public relations.

This research project is characterized by a longitudinal nature, accompanying the adoption and use of social media by Portuguese big organizations since the beginning of 2011. The research design encompasses an initial exploratory phase and a posterior phase of deeper explorations of the relevant preliminary results. This design includes different methods, both quantitative and qualitative, according to the goals and requirements of each phase.

The exploratory phase studies a sample of 15 Portuguese organizations present in social media, randomly selected among members of the Portuguese Association of Organizational Communication (APCE). Relevant agents of each organization were interviewed in order to get more information and re-defined the questions to be addressed on the second phase of the research. Interviewees were mostly from marketing, communication and public relations departments, and they were asked their opinion on the general impact of social media and their particular effects for organizations and public relations. They were also questioned about their organizations' presence in social media and the way they manage it, as well as about their assessment of social media as PR tools. Each interview consisted of 12 predetermined questions. Most interviews were performed face-to-face, with the exception of two who expressed preference for answering via email. The face-to-face interviews were semi-structured, following the 12 question script but also offering total freedom of expression and reasoning apart from the questions themselves. All interviews were transcribed and organized in analysis tables according to the main issues discussed. The main categories created were the following: 1) social impact of social media; 2) effects of social media for organizations; 3) effects of social media for public relations; 4) presence in social media; 5) use and management of social media; and 6) assessment of social media as PR tools.

Subsequently to this exploratory phase, a relevant case study was selected for further exploration: TAP, the Portuguese airline company. The criteria underlying this selection were the following: it is one of the organizations which has been present in social media for a longer time (since 2009); the organization is present in three different social media (e.g. YouTube, Facebook and Twitter); and the presence of this organization in social media and

its management has been considered successful by the organization itself and several stakeholders such as clients, investors, mass communication media and social media experts. Following Yin's (2003) guidelines on case studies, a longitudinal approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative study consists on the content analysis of TAP's Facebook fan page, being Facebook the social media were the presence of this organization is stronger. The *corpus* of the content analysis was TAP's Facebook fan page, accessed once a day from August 2nd to September 2nd 2012. The categories analyzed were: 1) number of likes; 2) information content; 3) promotional content; 4) responses to comments; and 5) time to respond to comments. The qualitative study encompassed interviews to three relevant agents identified: the heads of the public relations, marketing and client support departments, also with a longitudinal character as the same interlocutors were also interviewed in two different moments in time. The first two were interviewed twice, in October 2011 and in July 2012, and the latter was only interviewed once, in July 2012. The first interview consisted on a repetition of the script applied in the exploratory study, and the second interview was more focused on TAP's strategies and practices concerning social media. The second interview followed a script of 10 predetermined questions, but also following a semi-structured flow. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face and, as the previous ones, transcribed and organized in analysis tables according to the main issues discussed. The main categories created for the second interview were: 1) TAP's presence in social media; 2) TAP's management of social media; 3) evolution since October 2011; 4) crisis situations; and 5) the role of public relations concerning social media and the organization.

3. Results

This paper only reports on the findings resulting from the exploration of TAP's case study. The presentation of the results is organized according to the quantitative and qualitative methods applied.

3.1. The quantitative study

In this section, the results from the quantitative study, based on the content analysis of TAP's Facebook fan page are reported. These results show the main functions that TAP

conducts through its Facebook fan page, as well as the different types of communication present and the varied strategies followed by the organization to engage with clients and deal with crisis.

We found a high frequency of publications on TAP's Facebook fan page, namely an average of two publications per day (including Saturdays and Sundays). These publications are a combination of information, photos Desk (TAP destinations) and promotions. Most fans tend to be active, attributing "likes" to several publications and commenting. On our second day of content analysis, TAP's Facebook fan page counted 4.206 fans, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 1: Number of "likes"

Source: TAP's Facebook fan page

Concerning comments, we point out as an example the photograph of one of its airplanes published by TAP on August 24th. This publication resulted in a large number of comments about the aircraft itself and a comment about flight delays, to which TAP answered as Figure 2 shows. Preventing a possible attack to its reputation, TAP answered in 15 minutes.

Figure 2: Comments[4]
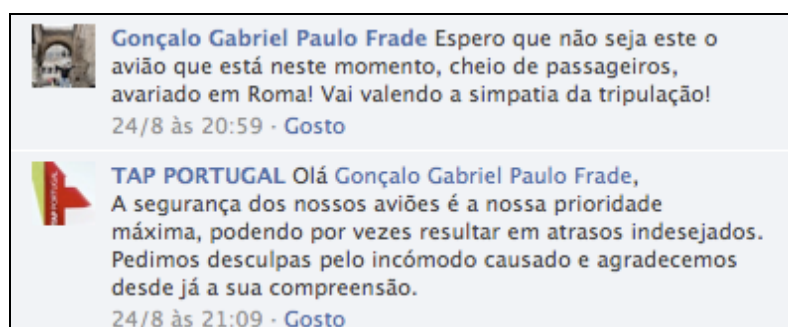
Source: TAP's Facebook fan page

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[4]"Gonçalo Gabriel Paulo Frade: I hope this is not the plane that is currently full of passengers, broken in Rome! At least the crew is friendly!

TAP Portugal: Hello Gonçalo Gabriel Paulo Frade. The safety of our planes is our top priority, and can sometimes result in unwanted delays. We apologize for any inconvenience caused and thank you for your understanding"(Authors' translation).

Figure 3 highlights TAP's effort to articulate its presence in different social media, referring on its Facebook fan page to its 7.747 Twitter followers (most from Brazil).

Figure 3: Articulation with social networks

Source: TAP's Facebook fan page

The actions which caused more engagement were games. Figures 4 and 5 present TAP's game "Test TAP's History", occurring from August 6th to 10th, which counted 1105 participants on the Facebook fan page and significantly increased the number of page likes.

Figure 4: Game

Source: TAP's Facebook fan page

Figure 5: Game results

Source: TAP's Facebook fan page

Regarding communication crises, Figure 6 shows a statement about an upcoming strike presented on July 4th. There were 71 comments about the publication and 332 likes.

Figure 6: Crises[5]

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[5] "Strike announced by pilots' union was cancelled.
The strike which was scheduled between July 5th and 8th and August 1st and 5th was canceled by the Pilots' Union. Following the cancellation this strike, all TAP operations will be normalized" (Authors' translation)

Source: TAP's Facebook fan page

Finally, we highlight strategies used to gain more followers, posting in English (thus appealing to foreigners) and emphasizing the presence of Portuguese celebrities on occasions like the Olympics or Euro to publicize the brand on Facebook.

Figure 7: Post on the Portuguese soccer team flying with TAP during Euro 2012

Source: TAP's Facebook fan page

3.2. The qualitative study

This section presents the results from the qualitative study conducted. The interviewees were André Serpa Soares, head of the public relations department, Gilda Granja Luís, head of the marketing department, and João Santos, head of the client support department.

Concerning the first interview, consistently with the results from the exploratory phase, all the interviewees agreed that social media have a profound social impact in all social spheres. About the effects of social media for organizations, Gilda Granja Luís referred to the importance of engaging with clients in social media, offering them value-added benefits in comparison to other points of contact. Specifically on public relations, André Serpa Soares highlighted the loss of control of the PR professionals in social media conversations, but argued that the way of regaining part of this inevitably lost control is engaging in conversations with stakeholders via social media. João Santos argued that having 15 employees to answer questions submitted by Facebook users in 15 minutes is a plus for customer service, as well as for the entire organization.

About TAP's presence in social media, the first experience was in 2009, when a flashmob was performed on Portela airport to celebrate Christmas. This flashmob was later posted on YouTube by the TAP marketing department and soon became viral, as TAP had a more conservative image and the flashmob was perceived as completely unexpected. The video was viral for a while, watched by over 2 million on YouTube, and it contributed positively to reposition TAP as a younger and fresher brand (the video was actually part of a rebranding process started in 2005). Following this successful experience, TAP's marketing department decided to create a Facebook fan page. This page was often updated with promotions and product information, being mostly an alternative and complementary marketing channel, but it did not gather many fans or motivate frequent participation.

TAP's use of social media changed drastically in March 2010, during the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland, when most European companies were unable to fly to several destinations because of the spreading of volcanic ash. As TAP's call centre was clogged with calls asking for information on flights and delays, many clients turned to Facebook looking for answers to their questions. At the time, the marketing department, unable to respond, articulated a mixed team with the call centre to deal with this crisis, under the supervision of the public relations department. This solution was a win-win situation, as clients were able to see their questions answered and the organization was able to answer several clients with the same question at the same time, in a simpler and less time-consuming way than via telephone.

Less than a year later, the second interview showed an evolution from the early TAP's trial-and-error approach to social media to a consolidated strategy. André Serpa Soares presented the idea of the PR pyramid, showed in Figure 8, to describe the management of TAP's Facebook fan page.

Figure 8: The PR Pyramid
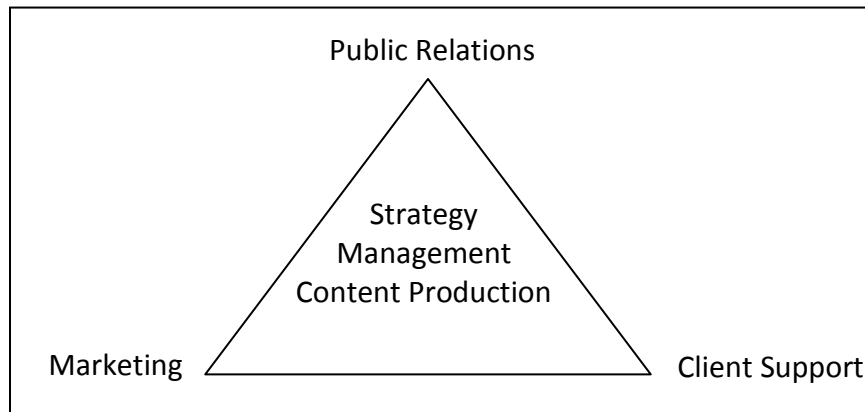
Source: Interview with André Serpa Soares

The contents in the page are autonomously introduced by a dynamic articulation of marketing, public relations and client support, considering that looking for specific information is the most frequent action performed by the Facebook fans in TAP's page (TAP's call centre now has a specific *Facebook Team*). However, public relations occupy the top of this pyramid, as the responsibility of answering the questions that the others are unable to answer falls under their management. Besides, whenever a crisis situation arises, public relations immediately gain control over all the contents posted, centralizing information and concentrating the decision making power in what concerns social media. This second interview also revealed a change of perspective concerning public relations and social media from a more tool-focused and trial-and-error approach to a broader perspective on the interdependencies between social media and organizations and a more strategic view of public relations' new pivotal role in organizational communication.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper highlights the consistency between a broader and more strategic approach to social media that is being proposed by several authors (Kunsh, 2003; Breakenridge, 2008; Cheney *et al.*, 2011) and the case study explored, which stands out for presenting an

approach to social media that has brought concrete benefits for the organization, such as positive images and reputation, successfully dealing with communication crisis (such as the volcanic ash situation but also others as strikes and the possibility of privatization of the company), and a better management of time and calls in the call centre.

Considering the current context of global crisis, organizations have been focusing and taking maximum advantage of the online media at the expense of other existing means of communication, hoping that it will increase the visibility of the organization, improve the knowledge of customers without making large investments, prevent or answer to negative criticism from customers, and reduce the sales cycle. However, consistency among all communication channels is needed in order to achieve these goals.

This paper also argues that the PR pyramid has the potential to become the foundation of grounded-theory developments, as we believe that TAP's experience, strategy and conceptualization can be further explored, tested and developed as theoretical model of social media strategy that is applicable to other organizations and that is also a relevant conceptual framework for fully comprehending the impact of social media on public relations. Furthermore, this model highlights the preponderant role of public relations as the orchestrator of organizational communication, showing that public relations are undergoing a profound change that goes beyond practices and techniques. As a consequence of the interactions between social media, organizations and stakeholders, public relations are emerging as more than one type of organizational communication, and assuming a crucial strategic role in assuring the articulation of all types of organizational communication, as well as the desired and required consistency, integration and coherence in a communication mix.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH

Concerning future work, we indent to follow two different lines of research. On the one hand, we are setting up an observatory of the use of social media by organizations – SocialOrg – in order to monitor the impact of social media on organizations, communication and the market and also to indentify case studies and promote benchmarking. This project is already in course but still at a very early stage. We have already a group of organizations

which intend to join the observatory and we are applying for funding. On the other hand, we also intend to further explore the concept of the PR pyramid discussed in this paper. We aim to continue accompanying TAP's case, to find out whether similar solutions are being followed by other organizations, to further explore the potential of the PR pyramid as a conceptual model, and also to test its correlation to the successful use and management of social media by organizations.

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