

## Social Media: Uses and Opportunities in Public Relations

A Review Article by

*Marcia W. DiStaso*

Pennsylvania State University, United States

*Tina McCorkindale*

Appalachian State University, United States

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***Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies***

By Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff

United States: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2011. 332 pp.

ISBN: 9781422161982.

***Measure What Matters: Outline Tools for Understanding Customers, Social Media, Engagement, and Key Relationships***

By Katie Delahaye Paine

United States: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011. 252 pp.

ISBN: 9780470920107.

***Engage! The Complete Guide for Brands and Businesses to Build, Cultivate, and Measure Success in the New Web***

By Brian Solis

United States: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011. 316 pp.

ISBN: 9780470571095.

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### Introduction

Social media are defined as “any tool or service that uses the Internet to facilitate conversations” (Solis, 2011: 21). Since 2005, Wright and Hinson (2012) have looked at the use of new and social media in their annual studies. Their findings indicate dramatic changes in the field of public relations in that the changing technology has empowered professionals to strategically communicate with internal and external audiences. The importance of social media to the field of public relations cannot be underscored, and is essential for the operations of many organizations:

“Embracing social media is no longer a strategic business option, but a necessity, and a huge opportunity” (Argenti, 2011: 1).

In today’s digital world, social media have become an increasingly important communications channel for building a connection between companies and the public. Unfortunately, despite the vast potential social media bring, many companies seem focused on social media primarily as a one-way promotional channel and have yet to use them effectively.

Through online interviews, DiStaso, McCorkindale, and Wright (2011) found the most common challenge for public relations professionals who had yet adopted social media was accepting the lack of control and not knowing what people might say or do. While this lack of control still exists, most companies have come to terms that it provides more advantages than disadvantages. In fact, Barnes, Lescault, and Andonian (2012) found that the use of social media continues to increase. In a longitudinal study of Fortune 500 companies, they found that the use of Twitter increased 11% since 2011 to 73% adoption and Facebook increased 8% to 66% adoption, with an 8% decrease in the number of companies with neither social media (from 31% to 23% in 2012). Also, they found that in 2012, 28% had blogs, 62% were using YouTube, and 2% were using Pinterest.

Much research exists in an effort to help companies learn how to best handle social media. In fact, the need to help companies navigate social media led to the establishment of the Social Science of Social Media Research Center available through the Institute for Public Relations. This site provides research overviews about social media with practical implications. In addition, there are a variety of books about social media. The primary academic book that most researchers reference about social media is Duhé’s (2012) *New Media and Public Relations*. Now in its second edition, this book paves the way as an edited volume focusing on a variety of social media topics. Though there are many books about social media, this review article discusses three more popular selections.

*Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies* (Li & Bernoff, 2011), *Measure What Matters: Outline Tools for Understanding Customers, Social Media, Engagement, and Key Relationships* (Paine, 2011), and *Engage! The Complete Guide for Brands and Businesses to Build, Cultivate, and Measure Success in the New Web* (Solis, 2011) are three books aimed at helping public relations professionals seize the opportunity social media provide. Each of the books has received excellent reviews and is often used as a required reading in public relations and social media classes in universities.

In *Groundswell*, Li and Bernoff describe what the groundswell is—“a social trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other instead of from companies” (2011: xi)—what to do about it, and how to use it to succeed. Case studies based on consumer data are used to demonstrate how companies use social media. In *Measure What Matters*, Paine provides a step-by-step guide for a variety of measurement topics such as building a list of influencers, determining which outlets matter, and reducing the impact of crises. In *Engage!*, Solis addresses the importance of social media to organizations. He sees using social media to engage the public as an imperative tool for companies and hopes his book will serve as a manifesto for success. All aspects of social media are discussed and directions are provided for a variety of topics such as attracting influencers, adapting to needs, and creating a space customers trust. It is important to note that this book also mentions *Groundswell* and Paine’s Measurement Program Checklist.

Now more than ever, social media are believed to enhance the practice of public relations (Wright & Hinson, 2012). Identifying the right ways to use and measure social media were the

main concerns and challenges identified by the participants in a study conducted by DiStaso, McCorkindale, and Wright (2011). Each of the books in this review article addresses this, and specific attention is paid to using social media for dialogue and strategy, as well as measuring social media. Therefore, this review article focuses on these important social media topics.

## **Engagement**

Engagement tends to be used interchangeably with other terms. Public relations research may consider engagement to be a “dialogue” or an “interaction with an organization” to help build relationships. Engagement is the focus of Solis’s book that mandates “monologue has given way to dialogue” and organizations must “engage or die” (2011: 2). In addition to referencing engagement, Li and Bernoff also reference “talk” or “conversation”. Compared to the other authors, Paine does not address engagement as often because the focus of her book is on measurement. However, she highlights its importance, and says the term now “means everything from the number of times that a visitor returns to a site, to the number of comments on a corporate blog, to the number of retweets on a Twitter stream” (2011: 79).

Solis specifies how important it is to engage in two-way communication with stakeholders through both listening and engaging in conversations on social media sites, which, he emphasizes, is everyone’s responsibility. He also dispels the myth that only one department has a responsibility for managing social media. While Solis’s book includes several social media platforms typically ignored in the literature such as Flickr, blogs, and podcasts, most of his book is focused on Twitter and Facebook. Part of what Solis considers to be engagement includes conversations between a community and an organization.

Solis emphasizes that conversations are “meaningless without substance, insight, collaboration or a helpful exchange that offers mutual satisfaction” (2011: 23). This is an important point that is frequently violated in social media. Organizations often include meaningless posts on their social media cases for the sake of engagement without a consideration as to the helpfulness or mutual satisfaction of their stakeholders. Solis believes insights can help organizations reveal specifically how and when to engage. Solis spends time in the “Rules of Engagement” chapter emphasizing the importance of developing policies to help foster engagement.

Li and Bernoff focus more on the “how-to’s”, so it is stronger than the other books in terms of suggesting the creation of online or social media communities for stakeholders to post and discuss. One issue, though, is online communities may be both time-consuming and costly, and not practical for many organizations. Li and Bernoff’s Chapter 6, “Talking with the Groundswell” provides specific suggestions for how organizations can both talk to and engage with the groundswell. For example, one section offers suggestions as to how videos can become conversations. Based on this example, they consider a conversation to include people posting comments section or sharing with others. However, this definition may not truly define engagement because individuals who share and view videos may not have any relationship with the organization. Li and Bernoff do point to specific channels such as Twitter, and how dialogue is the best way to engage on this type of site.

Paine provides three reasons as to why engagement is critical for organizations. She states that engagement helps build relationships with customers, promotes the brand, and improves products. She offers a chart and description of five hierarchical levels of engagement ranging from the basic click-throughs, unique visitors, and likes to the highest level of trial and

purchase advocacy. She indicates how important it is to measure and evaluate the level of engagement of customers to help inform decision-making and strategy in the organization.

Li and Bernoff as well as Solis primarily focus on customers, and do not give as much attention to other important stakeholders, such as investors and the media. Li and Bernoff consider community members (which may include customers) and Solis frequently mentions employees. While in some areas, Paine primarily focuses on customers, she also talks about a broader spectrum of stakeholders who may include influencers, media, and the community, all of whom received a chapter devoted to them in her book.

## Strategy

Using research to develop strategy and using social media strategically is one of the connecting threads of all three books. Paine's book ties in the importance of research in guiding strategy, and she mandates that companies must not rely solely on their gut instinct to make decisions, but must instead use data to drive their programs. Solis, too, emphasizes the importance of collecting data and drawing insights to help create a social media strategy. Li and Bernoff suggest that research helps organizations understand and segment stakeholders for developing strategy. Their "Social Technographics Ladder" places social media users in categories depending on what they do online, ranging from inactives and spectators (those who read, listen, and watch but do not participate) to users such as creators and conversationalists. These categories help organizations target messages and develop strategy-specific tactics.

While Li and Bernoff as well as Solis focus primarily on best practices for use, both mention the potential consequences of blindly entering into the social media arena. As Li and Bernoff point out, "Creating and implementing a social strategy is hard, primarily because there are few precedents and role models to follow" (2011: 73). Even though Li and Bernoff and Solis feature case studies from clients, it is obvious that there are still many "trial and error" stories despite the fact that their client's tactics may be guided by strategy. In Chapter 4, "Strategies for Tapping the Groundswell", Li and Bernoff profile a client who wanted to start a community because their competitor did, but the client could not really tell the authors why. They suggested a "POST" strategy or a framework for developing a plan—People, Objectives, Strategy and Technology—that should be core to the planning process.

Similarly, Solis offers examples of how clients are implementing and leveraging social media by taking advantage of their community nature. His "Social Media Compass" in Chapter 21 is a value system that helps define program activities with the center of the compass focused on the brand and the public, platforms, and emotions centered on it. With the completed social media compass, organizations can move onto the social media plan outline, which helps develop the overall strategy.

Li and Bernoff view entering the social media arena as a fundamental shift in how organizations relate to their stakeholders. They contend the groundswell is unstoppable and to move forward, companies must determine what works best for them. Even though some of their suggestions seem obvious, major organizations violate the principles the authors espouse. Additionally, too often companies will start social media accounts without thinking through the potential consequences or how they will incorporate it across the entire organization. Li and Bernoff as well as Solis emphasize that companies do not determine the use of a social media site, but rather in most cases, it is determined by community.

Paine asserts that what really matters to businesses is building relationships with their stakeholders. She states that social media are an important component in this process. Her book focuses on how research is necessary to guide strategy. In Chapter 2, "How to Get Started", Paine offers 10 questions every communications professional must be able to answer such as "What are your objectives?" and "What is important to your audience?" that can help inform strategy. She demonstrates multiple techniques for measuring relationships, events, and outcomes that are necessary components of an organization's social media strategy.

Both Solis' and Li's and Bernoff's books appear to be geared toward large organizations. While SMBs may find some components and discussion of strategy useful, these organizations may not have the resources to fully develop a dream strategy replete with a full research profile. Even though Paine discusses some expensive measurement programs, her book also talks about inexpensive ways to monitor and lends a chapter to nonprofits and higher education to aid them with measurement techniques to guide strategy.

## Measurement

According to Paine, a "confluence of circumstances has pushed measurement and metrics onto the priority lists of business people everywhere" (2011: 3). Essentially, measurement helps companies save time and money, allocate budget and staff, understand the competition, strategically plan, identify desired outcomes, and reveal strengths and weaknesses. All three books start with the seminal understanding that a brand is what the public perceives it to be.

While each of the three books covers measurement, it is the main focus of Paine's book, although only Chapter 5 is specifically devoted to social media measurement. Solis also includes measurement to a small degree throughout the book as Li and Bernoff do. Li and Bernoff also address research that is necessary to understand and segment stakeholders as part of an effective social media strategy.

Li and Bernoff's Chapter 5, "Listening to the Groundswell" discusses the importance of listening online. They outline the ways companies listen through surveys, focus groups, and syndicated research such as Nielsen. However, they caution that it is unlikely that a company's target audience will take part in research and that by design these methods simply seek answers to questions and may not tap into consumer insight.

By moving beyond typical research methods, Li and Bernoff suggest that companies should listen to the groundswell. This means that companies can pay attention and analyze the comments in social media. This can provide a wealth of information about a company, but the sheer volume of content can be overwhelming. Similarly, Paine commented that just because everything can be measured does not mean that it should all be measured.

Li and Bernoff suggest that companies have two options for measurement. The first is for companies to establish their own community because they can serve as engaged focus groups that are easy to monitor. The other option is to hire a company to monitor all social media and send a nice neat summary report. However, these two solutions may be too simplistic, and inappropriate for some organizations.

Solis provides greater depth and direction for measurement, but Paine's book provides the most extensive content on measurement and covers the topic from an introduction to measurement through how nonprofits or higher education can use measurement. Paine's book focuses on many aspects of measurement beyond its use with social media, but little is discussed without mentioning social media. For example, the chapter about measuring relationships with

communities talks about collecting mentions of a company in blogs, Twitter feeds, and Facebook pages.

Both Paine and Solis advocate for focusing on corporate goals and objectives when determining what to measure. This helps to keep the research focused and appropriate. Paine provides how-to guides such as how to build a list of top influencers and how to measure crises and trust.

When measuring social media, companies need to differentiate between controlled and uncontrolled content. The content on controlled sites like a company's Facebook page are easier to measure, but much conversation takes place in uncontrolled social media. Paine is the only one who suggests the difference with measurement. For uncontrolled content, Paine suggests setting goals, identifying publics, using benchmarks, defining key performance indicators, and the value of selecting the proper tool. Both Paine and Solis discuss how to measure engagement and the importance of doing so. As Solis stated, "[m]easurement is the key to relevance and future success" (2011: 272), but it is useless unless companies act on what they learn.

## **Conclusion**

As noted in the three books, conversations are taking place on social media whether the organization is present or not. Strategy, though, is important for all organizations to consider, and the decision to enter the social media space must be supported throughout the entire organization.

With time, digital will be a part of every company's communications strategies. However, since this day has yet to come, it is important to reflect on what is missing or could use improvement in the current social media landscape. While each of the books in this review article, along with other books and research on social media, provides a nice overview of how to navigate social media, there is no mention of ethics. In some cases, and as presented in some academic research, asking people to engage with an organization without a benefit to both parties may raise ethical questions. In addition, given the importance of ethics in the field of public relations, this is a much-needed area of focus.

Replete with case studies and client-specific scenarios, popular trade books also should incorporate more academic research to support their findings. Academic research independently emphasizes the benefits and impact of engagement, strategy, and measurement on organizations, which would make the authors' claims more robust. Most of the books feature their specific clients, which may not apply to others and may lend itself to a telescopic view based only on that authors' experience. Because of the nature of case studies, what may work well for one organization may not work as well for another; hence, including independent research would be beneficial.

It would also be beneficial for the books to provide more direction for companies seeking to operate authentically and transparently—since both are great challenges. While each of the authors acknowledges their importance, little direction is provided for companies seeking to communicate authentically or transparently.

Finally, while much research has looked at engagement and all three books in this review article covered this topic, many companies are still missing the mark on what true engagement is. Challenging followers to post ten comments in a row or to click "like" if they saw snow does not engage a community properly. It is important that companies move past simple counts to look at the best ways companies can ethically and strategically engage key stakeholders.

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## About the Reviewers

Marcia W. DiStaso, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of public relations in the College of Communications at Pennsylvania State University. Her research has been published in *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Review*, *Public Relations Journal*, *Journalism Studies*, *Mass Communication & Society*, in many books, and through the Institute for Public Relations. She is an Arthur W. Page Center Senior Research Fellow, Chair of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Financial Communications division, Chair-elect of the PRSA Educator's Academy, Co-Chair of PRSA's National Research Committee, a board member for the International Public Relations Research Conference, and an Associate Editor for the Social Science of Social Media Research Center.

Tina McCorkindale, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of public relations at Appalachian State University. Her research has been published in *Public Relations Review*, *Public Relations Journal*, *Journal of New Communications Research*, *Journal of Hospitality and Leisure Marketing*, *Feedback*, in several books, and through the Institute of Public Relations. She serves as the Chair for the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Educators Academy, Co-Chair of PRSA's National Research Committee, a board member for the International Public Relations Research Conference, and an Associate Editor for the Social Science of Social Media Research Center.

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