Social Media's Function in Organizations:

A Functional Analysis Approach

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Abstract:

System theorists believe that organizations that function as an open system have a greater chance of survival than organizations that function as a closed system due to the exchange of inputs and outputs between the organization and its publics. Public relations researchers have proposed adopting a dialogic approach to public relations where interaction between the organization and its publics are mutual, which is the underpinning to an open systems approach. This paper posits that organizations can function within an open systems approach to public relations by employing social media. Adoption of a functional approach is a fruitful way to look at the social functions various social media serve in the system of organizations and their publics. Research has considered the gratifications publics receive from social media; however, limited research has considered what social media do for the organization-public relationship system. It has been argued that organizations also have psychological and social motivations; therefore, applying a functional analysis approach might be a good of way determining what functions social media serve in the organization-public relationship system. Four functions are proposed in which social media may serve the system: maintenance of organizational identity, opportunity to build relationships with publics, ability to control issues management, and the chance to promote social corporate responsibility. Understanding social media's role in the system can help practitioners identify the functions that may contribute to an open systems approach to public relations and ultimately an organization's survival.

Keywords: Functionalism; Issues Management; Organizational Identity; Public Relations; Relationship Building; Social Corporate Responsibility; Social Media; Uses and Gratifications

Résumé:

Les théoriciens du système croient que les organisations qui fonctionnent dans un système ouvert ont davantage de chances de survivre que les organisations qui fonctionnent dans un système fermé en raison des échanges des entrées et sorties entre les organisations et leurs publics. Les chercheurs des relations publiques ont proposé d'adopter une approche dialogique aux relations publiques dans lesquelles les interactions entre les organisations et leurs publics sont mutuels, ce qui est sous-entendu dans l'approche du système ouvert. Cet article soutient que les organisations peuvent fonctionner au sein d'une approche de système ouvert pour les relations publiques en employant les médias sociaux. L'adoption d'une approche fonctionnelle est une manière féconde d'étudier les fonctions sociales que les différents médias sociaux servent dans un système des organisations et de leurs publics. Les recherches ont considéré que les gratifications que les publics reçoivent des médias sociaux; cependant peu de recherches ont tenu compte de ce que les médias sociaux font pour la relation de système organisation-public. Des chercheurs ont avancé que les organisations ont aussi des motivations psychologiques et sociales. Par conséquent, appliquer une analyse fonctionnelle peut être une bonne manière de déterminer quelles fonctions les médias sociaux servent pour la relation de système organisation-public. Quatre fonctions sont proposées: le soutien de l'identité organisationnelle, l'opportunité de construire des relations avec les publics, l'habileté de contrôler les problèmes de gestion et la chance de promouvoir la responsabilité sociale corporative. Comprendre le rôle qu'ont les médias sociaux dans un système peut aider les professionnels à identifier les fonctions qui peuvent contribuer à une approche de système ouvert aux relations publiques et à la survivance de l'organisation.

Mots-clés: Construction de relation; Gestion des enjeux; Fonctionnalisme; Identité organisationnelle; Médias sociaux; Relations publiques; Responsabilité sociale des entreprises; Usages et gratifications

Introduction

Public relations is a communication process focused on building relationships, upholding image, minimizing reputational threats, managing crisis situations, and ultimately supporting organizational survival (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012; Heath, 2001; Lubbe, 2004; Theunissen & Noordin, 2012). Organizational survival depends on many factors but system theorists believe that organizations that function as an open system have a greater chance of survival than organizations that function as a closed system (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1982). Open systems are responsive to environmental changes through the exchange of inputs and outputs (Cutlip,

Center & Broom, 2000). Further, open systems adjust and adapt to change through mutual understanding and two-way communication (e.g., Baskin & Aranoff, 1988; Lubbe, 2004). On the other hand, closed systems do not respond to environmental change (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000).

In the past, public relations practitioners have functioned as if organizations were closed (Dozier, 1990). Bell and Bell (1976) described such public relations practitioners as simply "functionaries" who attempt to manage image with no regard to the dynamics of changing organizational environments. As public relations theory states, an organization is connected to its environment through publics (Patel, Xavier & Broom, 2005) so understanding the changes within the publics' environment can be crucial for organizational survival. Understanding these changes thus lends itself to a dialogic model of public relations that focuses on the negotiation of exchanges of ideas and opinions (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

The dialogic approach to public relations emphasizes exchange, reciprocity, and mutual understanding. Dialogic denotes a "communicative give and take", where the process is open and negotiated between an organization and its publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Because the focus on the dialogic model is to promote communication between the organization and its publics, the model aligns itself well with an open systems approach. Organizations operating within an open systems approach can adjust and adapt to counteract or accommodate environmental variations; therefore, both the organization and its environment changes. Furthermore, relations between the organization and its publics are evolving because of reciprocal feedback.

Recent public relations scholarship has focused on the notion of dialogue and social media (e.g., Briones et al., 2011; Henderson & Bowley, 2010; Yang, Kang & Johnson, 2010). The research suggests that organizations engaged in social media may encourage practitioners to promote dialogue and two-way conversations as opposed to past approaches of one-way monologues (Mersham, Theunissen & Peart, 2009). Further, research suggests that practitioners will need to adapt and adjust to the flow of information and opinions being shared in this dynamic environment (Ibid). Based on these findings, this paper posits that organizations engaging in social media and embracing its inherent dialogic nature can function more easily within an open systems approach to public relations.

Social media are described as a collaborative environment focused on the exchange of content (Universal McCann, 2008). This environment is unique in the fact that the organization and its publics can be both a sender and/or a receiver of information. Social media have changed the nature of everyday communications by providing a platform for individuals and organizations alike to engage with each other in a dynamic, synchronized, and multidirectional dialogue that represents varied voices. This type of environment is adherent to an open systems model because the organization provides output and receives feedback from its publics; thus, the organization and its publics collect varied pieces of information while engaging in dialogue. According to Kent and Taylor (1998), fostering dialogue is critical for organizations using Internet applications (e.g., social media). They state that Internet applications can be used as tools that help facilitate relationship building between organizations and their publics in order to improve responsiveness to publics' needs. Organizations are able to adapt and adjust quickly based on what they learn from their publics through the two-way, synchronized environment social media offer. Therefore, the public is seemingly satisfied as the organization is taking what it learns and adapts and adjusts accordingly to satisfy the publics' needs. In turn, the organization is also satisfied because its needs are met by the opportunity to learn first-hand its publics' interests and opinions.

Drawing upon Wright's (1960) functional analysis approach to communication systems in this paper, the author argues that the approach is a fruitful way to look at the social functions social media serve in the organization-public relationship system. Recent research has applied a more traditional functional analysis approach (i.e., uses and gratifications model) to determine the psychological and social motivations of why publics are using social media. However, limited research has been conducted on what social media do for the entire organization-public relationship system. Organizations also have psychological and social needs (Ibid); therefore, applying a functional analysis approach might be a good way of determining the functions social media serve the system comprising organizations and their publics simultaneously engaged in the social media environment. Social media may serve several functions for the organization-public relationship system and knowing these functions enables the system to adapt and adjust to its external environment, which can ultimately contribute to the survival of the organization.

Social Media

Social media have forever changed the way we communicate, interact, share, and ultimately conduct our relationships with family, friends, co-workers, politicians, news media, celebrities, and companies alike. Social media are unique platforms that encourage active participation in the creation, development, and dissemination of information (Universal McCann, 2008).

Social media can be described as a fusion between sociology and technology, altering communication from monologue (one to many) into dialogue (many to many), and transforming people from content readers into publishers (Universal McCann, 2008). As stated:

> The second incarnation of the Web (Web 2.0) has been called the "Social Web", because, in contrast to Web 1.0, its content can be more easily generated and published by users, and the collective intelligence of users encourages more democratic use.
>
> (Boulous & Wheeler, 2007: 2)

Shirky states that because social media are "flexible enough to match our social capabilities" they are responsible for the rise of the "new ways of coordinating group action" (2009: 20). He goes on to say that social media have "radically altered" the way groups communicate, assemble, and manage one another. As such, division lines are fading between the content providers and content consumers as the consumer also is assuming the role of information provider (Giurgiu & Barsan, 2008). Social media applications include social networking sites, video sharing sites, blogs, message boards, virtual communities, massively-multiplayer online games, and instant messaging (Bulik, 2008).

Organizations that engage in social media have the potential to transfer into an open systems public relations model because both the organization and its publics become content creators and consumers of online content. If the system is already engaging in an open systems approach through other means, the author proposes that social media have the potential to enhance the openness of the system because of the dual creator ability and the synchronicity of the unique environment.

Organizations can benefit from leveraging the participation of their publics in this new environment. For example, users' comments can aid in evolutionary product development through suggestions, opinions, and preference, which may have the power to outpace product

development in traditional models (Giurgiu & Barsan, 2008). Furthermore, these suggestions, comments, and preferences provide organizations with rich, unfiltered data directly from their consumers, which aids in the development of future products that directly meet consumer needs and wants (Singh & Cullinane, 2010).

Furthermore, social media can amplify the power of publics to influence one another through electronic word-of-mouth, which can result in the social diffusion of opinions about an organization (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In turn, these opinions may positively impact an organization's image, reputation, and relationships with key publics (e.g., Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Singh & Cullinane, 2010). Gillin (2007) states that building and maintaining strong consumer relations through social media allow companies a chance to engage with their customers in a whole new way—akin to a system of "conversation". This means creating a dialogue between a company and its customers where useful information is exchanged so that both parties build and benefit from the relationship (Ibid). As a result of the dialogue, loyal consumers can transform into passionate and outspoken brand and business advocates (e.g., Swedowsky, 2009; Wong, 2009).

In addition, consumers may benefit from the participatory environment social media have to offer. First, by providing opinions, comments, and suggestions about products, consumers can get the products that they want and need (Singh & Cullinane, 2010). Second, consumers can be up-do-date with organizational information and gain knowledge of product attributes and sales promotions (Hyllegard et al., 2011). Lastly, social media give consumers a voice to share experiences relative to product satisfaction/dissatisfaction, which may lead to strong brand loyalty and increased patronage (Ibid).

In sum, the ability to foster dialogue within social media applications allows an organization's publics to provide opinions and preferences and an opportunity to highlight their needs to the organization (Hyllegard et al., 2011; Singh & Cullinane, 2010). In turn, this allows the organization a chance to adapt and adjust based upon its publics' needs (Gillin, 2007; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Singh & Cullinane, 2010). This give and take environment is the fundamental underpinning of an open system public relations model that has strong potential to contribute to an organization's survival.

Functional Analysis

Individual Level

According to Wright (1960), functions, as intended in the theoretical paradigm, refer to the consequences of certain routine, regular, and standardized components of communication. He theorized that the functionalist paradigm provides a useful framework for the classification of documented consequences of mass communication activities for individuals, groups, societies, and cultural systems. Research documenting the consequences of mass communication activities through a functionalist paradigm for individuals has been widely conducted through a uses and gratifications lens.

The uses and gratifications approach states that audiences actively seek out media in a goal-directed way that provides them with the means of gratifying a wide variety of needs (LaRose, Mastro & Eastin, 2001). The approach attempts to explain how people use media, to understand motives for media behavior, and to identify functions or outcomes that stem from needs, motives, and behavior (Katz, Blumer & Gurevitch, 1974). Further, the uses and

gratifications approach assumes that people can identify why they make their media selections (Ibid). Four motives of why people use media in general have been identified by McQuail (1983)—information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment.

Researchers have begun to consider the varied motives of why individuals use social media, and have suggested the following reasons: seeking information, building social capital, communicating with others, connecting with others, following others' activities, engaging in social networking, sharing identities, seeking entertainment, managing mood, and fulfilling needs for self-expression and self-actualization (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2006; Joinson, 2008; Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2006; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Shao, 2009).

Scholars have also considered the uses and gratifications obtained by individuals who engage with social media platforms produced and maintained by corporations. A recent study conducted by Sicilia and Palazon (2008) looked at why consumers use Coca-Cola's Spanish virtual community. The scholars conducted interviews with the virtual community creators, participated as members in the community, and analyzed information and opinions in forums and chats. They concluded that the members of the community visit the site for three reasons: functional value, social value, and entertainment value. Accordingly, they concluded that social media strengthen the bonds between individual users and between individuals and brands.

Even though Wright (1960) theorized the functional paradigm as applicable to the larger systems level (i.e., organizations, society and cultural systems), much of the functional research is grounded at the individual level through the uses and gratifications framework. It was Wright's hope that future researchers would combine the two perspectives and study the role of mass communication and interpersonal communication within a system. Based on this, this paper extends the uses and gratifications approach to the organization level previously theorized by Wright to a functional system that includes organizations and their stakeholders, specifically engaged in social media. Because of the interactive nature of social media where the organization (mass communication) and the stakeholder (interpersonal communication) produce and consume content, this environment is ideal to bring together the two communication orientations.

Systems Level

Social media create an exciting, groundbreaking time for researchers and provide new opportunities to study media user motivations. However, social media also provide researchers with the opportunity to not only study individuals but also different systems within the environment to see how the phenomenon is impacting these systems. Social media have disrupted several systems, specifically the organization-public relationship system, which in turn has redefined the system. As more individuals and organizations engage in social media, researchers need to understand the new system to learn how it is functioning and contributing to overall organizational survival.

Organizations may find social media performing important functions for their stakeholders individually, but social media may also be performing important functions for the organization-public relationship system. As Wright (1960) noted, functional analysis can be applied at the systems level. Therefore, the organization-public relationship system comprising the organization and its stakeholders can also be looked at through a functional lens. The foundation as to why individuals are using social media has been described as entertainment, information seeking and information dissemination, social interaction, escapism, diversion, and

play (e.g., Joinson, 2008; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Shao, 2009; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). However, it is unclear what functions social media serve at the systems level for organizations and their stakeholders combined as one system. This paper suggests that functional analysis, the underpinning of uses and gratifications research, would be a workable framework from which to study social media within the organization-public relationship system.

According to Merton (1957), functionalist theory considers the needs of society and of individuals to explain social practices and institutions. "Society is viewed as an ongoing system of linking working parts or subsystems, each making an essential contribution to continuity and order" (McQuail, 2005: 97). Organizations, individuals, and the media can each be seen as one of these subsystems working together within the larger system. As one subsystem changes (i.e., individuals adopting social media), another subsystem is affected (i.e., organizations); therefore the system as a whole (i.e., organizations and their stakeholders) adjust and adapt in order to achieve continuity and order (i.e., homeostasis).

Functional analysis was first proposed by Merton in 1957 and later proposed by Wright (1959) as a way to study mass communication. Functional analysis is primarily concerned with the consequences of standardized, patterned, and repetitive social phenomena (Merton, 1957). That is, "functional analysis focuses on examining those consequences of social phenomena which affect the normal operations, adoption and adjustment of a given system: individuals, subgroups, social, and cultural systems" (Wright, 1960: 606). The object of analysis must be standardized (i.e. patterned or repetitive) in order to apply a functional approach (Merton, 1957). Social roles, institutional patterns, cultural patterns, culturally patterned emotions, social norms, group organization social structure, and devices for social control may be appropriate objects of analyses (Ibid). Wright (1960) considers media to be a suitable object for analysis within a functional approach due to their patterned and repetitive use. He proposed various ways of studying functional analysis; however, the approach pertinent to this study is to consider the effects of new methods of communications on a system.

Today, as more individuals and organizations adopt and use social media, the argument can be made that using social media has become a patterned and repetitive phenomenon and therefore suitable for a functional analysis inquiry. In addition, the argument can be made that social media's interactive state, where both the organization and its stakeholders contribute content and feedback, has serious and profound consequences for the system, as organizational stakeholders have not before had an opportunity to communicate with organizations as freely. Because of this, it is important to understand what this interactive capability does to the system. More specifically, understanding if the functions in the interactive environment of social media contribute to a more open system for the organization-public relationship system, researchers can better understand if social media aid in an organization's survival.

Even though functional analysis was proposed in the late 1950s by Merton and applied to mass communication by Wright in 1960, it may be an appropriate theoretical approach to take when determining how social media serve the organization-public relationship system because functional analysis is key to studying the changes strategic populations undergo when major modes of communication change. This suggests that functional analysis is a fitting approach to study changes in the organization-public relationship system resulting from the use of social media.

Social Media and Organization-Public Relationship System's Functions

Research has seen an increase in studies focused on the adoption of social media applications by public relations practitioners (e.g., Jin & Liu, 2010; Sallot, Porter & Alzuru-Acosta, 2004; Taylor & Kent, 2010; Toledano, 2010; Venter, 2010). Additionally, research has focused on the role social media have within an organization's public relations strategy (e.g., Briones et al., 2010; Liu, Austin & Jin, 2011). Even though research in public relations is beginning to examine the social media phenomenon, researchers have yet to explore the functions social media may serve the organization-public relationship system. Since social media are dependent upon two-way communication, it is important to explore both sides of the interaction within the system of an organization and its publics who engage in social media. It is simply not enough to study social media and the individual functions received for an individual or an organization. Research needs to strive for additional understanding of the functions received at the systems level, that is, organization-public relationships engaging in social media.

This paper proposes four functions in which social media may serve the organization-public relationship system based on current research in the public relations literature: maintenance of organizational identity, opportunity to build relationships, ability to control issues management, and the chance to promote social corporate responsibility. This paper takes the current research a step further and discusses the role each function may have on the organization-public relationship. The following section presents these ideas.

Organizational Identity

Today's business world has become increasingly complex and competitive. As a result, organizations must attract and retain publics both internal and external. In order to maintain publics, organizations need to maintain strong organizational identities (e.g., Bartel, 2001; Foreman & Whetten, 2002), that is, a strong sense of whom they are (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

Moore and Sonsino state that organizational identity "refers broadly to what members perceive, feel and think about the organization" (2003: 191). Gioia, Schultz, and Corely (2000) suggest that organizational identity is dynamic, precarious, and unstable. Gergen and Davis (1985) state that organizational identity is a social construction that derives from repeated interactions with others. The interaction consists of a feedback mechanism where organizational audiences have the opportunity to express opinions and impressions of the organization (Gergen & Davis, 1985). Many scholars agree that the creation and maintenance of a strong organizational identity may be critical to organizational survival and success (e.g., Albert, Ashforth & Dutton, 2000; Fiol, 2001; Gioia Schultz, and Corely, 2000; Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Haslam, Postmes & Ellemers, 2003; Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Pruzan, 2001).

Drawing upon Gergen and Davis' (1985) definition of the feedback mechanism within organization identity, this paper suggests that social media can serve as the feedback mechanism within the system. Social media, through the feedback mechanism, allow organization stakeholders a chance to provide their preferences, opinions, and thoughts about the organization to help construct organizational identity. Due to social media's interactive environment, where publics have the opportunity to contribute and shape an organization's identity by producing content more frequently and more openly than ever before, organizations have an invaluable opportunity to learn, adapt, and adjust and ultimately enhance their identities to align with the public's feedback. Because of the ability to interact, it seems as though social media may help

organizations and stakeholders create and maintain a strong organizational identity. Stakeholders who have a vested interest in an organization's identity may engage more heavily in electronic word-of-mouth, which may result in positive organizational outcomes (e.g., loyalty, increased purchase intention). These positive organizational outcomes can directly influence organizational success and ultimately survival (e.g., Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; Kowalczyk & Pawlish, 2002).

Building Relationships

Managing corporate identities contributes to positive corporate images and reputations, which eventually leads to better relationships between organizations and their stakeholders (Balmer & Stotvig, 1997). As discussed, Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed the concept of dialogic relationships to inform how organizations build relationships with their publics via the Internet. To them, dialogic relationships are formed by the exchange of ideas and opinions. Thus, dialogue between the parties in the relationship needs to occur so that the parties can "see the other" or "experience the other side" (Buber, 1970). Leeper (1996) states that dialogue helps the organization-public relationship bond because it identifies the needs of both parties and can help resolve the concerns of both parties.

Kent and Taylor (1998) originally considered five key principles of relationship building online via dialogic communication: 1) dialogic loops, 2) usefulness of information, 3) generation of return visits, 4) ease of interface, and 5) conservation of visitors. Researchers state that although these principles were originally intended for organizational websites, the essence of each principle still holds true for other online venues (e.g., social media) to build relationships by employing dialogic communication (Briones et al., 2011).

Since social media involve the process of collaboration and interaction online where dialogue is crucial to its existence, the author agrees that social media can serve the function of building dialogic relationships between the organization and its publics. Social media help establish emotional connections between consumers and organizations, which in turn can foster strong consumer relations (e.g., Gillin, 2007; Swedowsky, 2009; Wong, 2009). With social media, publics can quickly and efficiently assess their feelings regarding an organization, which can enable them to feel confident about the authenticity of the relationship formed with an organization. Additionally, through interactions, organizations can establish authentic relationships with their publics by determining needs, wants, and concerns and working toward resolving these. In sum, organizations and their publics have the opportunity to create and disseminate content through social media that can help authenticate their relationships.

Issues Management

A crisis can severely impact organizational performance and can have adverse consequences regarding organizational reputation (Coombs, 2012). Even though the definition of a crisis states that it is unpredictable (Ibid), public relations practitioners strive to identify and become aware of potential situations through issues management. Cutlip, Center, and Broom define issues management as "the proactive process of anticipating, identifying, evaluating, and responding to public policy issues that affect organizations' relationships with their publics" (2000: 17). They argue that the main role of issues management is early detection of potentially threatening issues to the organization and mitigation of issues through early strategic response. Coombs (2008)

states that crises online can be more troublesome due to their unpredictable nature and the quickness in which information can spread.

Social media can accomplish an issues management function for the organization-public relationship system. The opportunity to research and identify public policy through social media is available for organizations by monitoring and observing interactions between publics and organizations. Organizations can also detect threats by proactively asking for their publics' opinions and attitudes about certain issues. Since social media are dialogic in form, as well as instantaneous, organizations can monitor their publics' attitudes and opinions fairly quickly and adjust and adapt accordingly as appropriate.

Additionally, social media keep publics informed with critical information, which can reassure them of the position the company is taking and potentially lead to stronger bonds within the organization-public relationship system. Further, research has found that social media provide emotional support to organizational publics that enable publics to band together as well as with the organization. (e.g., Choi & Lin, 2009; Stephens & Malone, 2009). Taken together, issues and concerns that may arise can be mitigated through social media for organizations and publics by capitalizing on the ability for both parties to create and disseminate content and emotional support if needed.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility is increasingly important in the management of business/society relationships (Coombs, 2008). Corporations are finding themselves increasingly subjected to public scrutiny and demands for corporate responsiveness (Andriof, Waddock, Husted & Sutherland, 2002). The public relations discipline is center stage in promoting corporate social responsibility. According to Soukupová, Dušková, and Bakić-Tomić (2008), corporate social responsibility is a concept whereby organizations not only consider their impact on society but consider themselves to be a part of society. Heath (2006) states that corporate social responsibility requires organizations to go well beyond the organization's narrow self-interest by exceeding stakeholder expectations. Furthermore, he states that organizations must purposefully plan, manage, and make choices that benefit society even if the choices conflict with an organization's guiding interest.

Social media can be used within the organization-public relationship system as a function to promote the mission and value corporate social responsibility plays within an organization's strategy as well as an opportunity for stakeholders to promote their corporate social responsibility interests. Organizations can use social media to alert their publics about events, campaigns, and endeavors focused on social corporate responsibility. However, and more importantly, organizations can interact with their publics through social media to learn and find out about what is most important to them so the organization knows where to act and respond to make the most positive impact for their stakeholders as well as humanity. Furthermore, publics can help develop the organizations they care about, and identify with, through their input efforts, which may aid in organizational survival.

Conclusion

Organizations have a greater chance of survival by functioning under an open systems approach to public relations. An open systems approach to public relations calls for "purposeful sensing of

the environment to anticipate and detect changes that affect organizational relationships with publics" (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000: 243). Organizations that engage in social media have the potential to function under an open systems model of public relations due to the interactiveness of the environment where stakeholders can readily contribute content and feedback.

To demonstrate the point of how social media can support an open systems approach to public relations, a uses and gratifications approach should be taken to understand why stakeholders are using social media. However, researchers need to extend research to include queries about the functions social media serve the organization-public relationship system. Wright (1960) proposed that mass communication systems have social and psychological needs and therefore can be examined from a functionalist approach via a uses and gratifications framework.

This paper extends the uses and gratifications model to the organizational level, as suggested by Wright (1960), to involve the organization and its publics as a functioning system interactively communicating through social media vehicles and to determine the social functions social media serve the organization-public relationship system. It is important to apply a functional analysis to the organization-public relationship system engaged in social media because it will provide insight into social media's role as a communication device that works toward the integration, continuity, and sustainability of the system. Identifying social media's role in the system can help public relations practitioners understand the functions that are occurring in the social media environment that contribute to an open systems approach to public relations and ultimately an organization's survival.

This paper proposes several functions social media may serve the organization-public relationship system including maintenance of organizational identity, opportunity to build relationships with publics, ability to control issues management, and the chance to promote social corporate responsibility. Organizations that are aware of these potential functions are able to adapt and adjust to their external environment and therefore operate under an open systems approach to public relations.

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