

ABSTRACT

BRAMLETT, REBECCA BRICK. Using Social Media for Public Relations in Higher Education: A Case Study. (Under the direction of Alyssa Bryant Rockenbach.)

This qualitative case study uses multiple sources of data to explore how a media services office at a small public university uses social media, particularly Facebook, for public relations. The study found dialogic communications theory and dialogic public relations theory as useful theoretical lenses but identifies a need for adaptation of the theories or creation of new theory to better explain and guide social media use for public relations in higher education. Results have significance for higher education practitioners due to the increased expectation for colleges, universities, and public relations professionals to utilize new technologies such as social media. The case study provides examples and suggested best practices for social media use in higher education public relations. The case study also reveals the need for a better classification of what constitutes successful social media use for higher education public relations and the need for the creation of assessment tools to measure these efforts.

Using Social Media for Public Relations in Higher Education: A Case Study

by
Rebecca Brick Bramlett

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

Higher Education Administration

Raleigh, North Carolina

2012

APPROVED BY:

Alyssa Bryant Rockenbach
Committee Chair

Joy Gayles

Audrey Jaeger

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband, Matt, for his unwavering support and patience throughout my graduate studies, and to my son, Myer. I would not have been able to devote the time and energy to my studies if it weren't for their support and understanding.

BIOGRAPHY

Rebecca Brick Bramlett received her Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from the College of William and Mary in 2001. This thesis is submitted to fulfill a requirement for a Masters Degree in Higher Education Administration from North Carolina State University, expected in 2012.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my advisor, Alyssa Bryant Rockenbach for her guidance and support throughout my graduate studies. I also thank Joy Gayles and Audrey Jaeger for their contributions to my work as members of my thesis committee. Further thanks go to the additional faculty members and instructors in the College of Education at North Carolina State University who have contributed to my masters studies: Paul Umbach, Kathryn Moore, Nancy Fire, and Sue Wasiolek. Finally, I acknowledge my parents who instilled in me a passion for learning and an expectation for excellence in my work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem and Purpose	2
Research Questions	4
Theoretical Framework	5
Methods	6
Significance of the Study	7
Delimitations and Limitations	8
Definition of Terms	8
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature	12
Higher Education Institutions and Social Media	13
Public Relations and Social Media	15
Dialogic Communication Theory	18
Dialogic Public Relations Theory	21
Studies on Internet Strategy Framed by Dialogic Theory	28
Summary	30
Problem and Research Questions	30
Chapter 3: Methods	32
Introduction	32
Study Design and Research Paradigm	32
Sample Selection	35
Data Collection	36
Interviews	36
Document review	37
Observations	38
Content Analysis	38
Data storage	39
Data Analysis	39
Researcher Role and Assumptions	41
Ethical Considerations	43
Trustworthiness	44
Summary	45
Chapter 4: Findings	46
Describing the Case's Background and Environment	47
Office creation through merging of print and web communications	47
Collaboration with university relations office	49
Identifying staff responsibilities and recognizing professional backgrounds	51
Communicating internally through a collaborative network of support	52
Internal perceptions of success and expertise	55

Using Online Media to “Tell the Story” and Communicate with the Public	56
Social media communications strategy to inform, connect, and engage constituents	59
Determining and posting content that furthers office mission and supports goals	61
Communicating and interacting with the public	64
Using personas: tapping into the fun side of social media	66
Review of Facebook content	67
Assessing the Value and the Risk of using Social Media	73
Value	73
Risk	76
Minimizing risk of social media through strategy and a comment policy	77
Assessing Effectiveness	80
Summary	81
Chapter 5: Conclusion	83
How the Institution uses Social Media	83
Viewing Findings through Dialogic Communications and Dialogic Public Relations Lens	86
Theoretical Implications	90
Practical Implications	92
Limitations and Implications for Further Research	97
REFERENCES	100
APPENDICES	107
Appendix A. Interview Protocol	108
Appendix B. Content Review Protocol	109
Appendix C. Observational Protocol	111

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1 Summary of Responses to Office’s Facebook Content in One Month	70
Table 4.2 Summary of Dialogues Conducted with Office on Facebook in One Month .	71

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Figure 1. Conceptualization of online communication utilizing Dialogic Communications Theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998) and Dialogic Public Relations Theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Dialogic communications principles guide the strategy employed on the internet tool. Dialogic public relations principles guide the actual communication using a dialogic loop 24

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The increase in the use of social media tools by both individuals and organizations is indisputable. One hundred percent of higher education institutions included in a recent study were using social media tools for some purpose (Barnes and Lescault, 2011). Arguably, the most popular social media site is Facebook. According to Facebook (2011), there are over 750 million individual users on Facebook and over 900 million organizational pages, groups or events. The average user has 130 friends and is connected to 80 organization pages, groups, or events (Facebook, 2011). Half of the active individual users of Facebook visit the site daily. In 2010, Facebook took the lead over search engine sites for time spent online in the United States, accounting for just over 12 percent of all time spent online in the U.S (comScore, 2011). Another popular social media site, Twitter, has over 200 million registered users who are posting 155 million “tweets” (short posts of content of 140 characters or less) a day and is growing at a rate of 460,000 new registrations a day (Twitter, 2011).

Because social media sites are continuing to see increased use by individuals and organizations, it is imperative for public relations and communications practitioners in higher education to monitor the growth of social media, understand how the public is using them, and determine how to incorporate social media sites into their public relations strategy. Many administrators and practitioners in higher education are already utilizing social media in a variety of ways to enhance their work. Research is needed in this area to better explain social media use in higher education, to create new theory or building on existing theory, and

to determine effective strategies and assessment tools to review social media use in higher education administration.

This case study explores how one institution of higher education is using social media for public relations and how social media has been incorporated in the public relations strategy of the institution.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose

Public relations professionals are becoming more accustomed to the use of social media as a communications tool. Many technological advances, like social media sites, are being adopted and used by public relations professionals because the sites provide a variety of new opportunities for them to interact with the public on behalf of their institution (Curtis et. al., 2010). Students, alumni, and other constituents use the sites and expect to see their favorite brands using them as well. They look to social media for news, events, sports, entertainment, a sense of community, a connection, and memories. Social media users are not just posting personal information on sites, but they are also using social media sites to gain important information about higher education institutions, particularly for admissions and maintaining connections as alumni (Fusch, 2011). With increasing technology, the general public expects institutions to be on the forefront, using up-to-date technological tools in a fast-paced manner. If they don't observe their institutions using social media the way they want them to, their respect for the institution may falter and they may look to other sources of information to meet their needs. A popular conceptualization of using social media for this purpose is called the "groundswell ... a social trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other, rather than from traditional

institutions like corporations” (Li & Bernoff, 2008, p. 9). The “groundswell” can threaten institutions such as colleges and universities as constituents take strength from each other and no longer need to go directly to the institutions for support, information, or a sense of involvement or community. Social media sites have taken the marketing and information-sharing power from the institution and put it in the hands of the public. Because of this, a popular and respected social media blogger said:

If you work in marketing, public relations, advertising, customer service, product development, or any discipline that’s motivated, shaped, and directed by customers, peers, stakeholders and influencers, monitoring and in some cases, participating in online conversations is critical in competing for the future. (Solis, 2008)

Institutions and institutional representatives need examples of, and guidelines for, successfully adding social media to their public relations strategy because:

- a large and ever increasing number of people are using social media and expect to find information about every brand they care about on the site;
- they need to be able to employ best practices and effective strategies at their institution;
- explanations are needed for how and why social media is a part of the institutional public relations strategy;
- justification is needed if staff time, energy, and financial investment is devoted to the effort.

One particular example of when these four points are particularly relevant is when a crisis event occurs on an institution’s campus. Through social media, the public is playing an

increasing role in the spread of information during crisis events, which has implications for crisis management, response, and communications (Palen, 2008). Because of the viral nature of social media sites and this phenomenon, communications are spreading more rapidly, to a broader audience, and under less control of institutions. Research has shown that in the wake of a campus crisis, traditional media outlets were more likely to use “citizen generated content” through unofficial technological sites in their reporting than official information or statements from the institution (Wigley & Fontenot, 2010, p. 189). This signals that if institutions are not utilizing social media in their public relations strategy, they run the risk of losing control of the messaging related to their institution, particularly in times of crisis.

Looking beyond crisis communications and into more general communications, there is no research on how an organization has used social media to engage its constituents or to create dialogue (Kent, 2010). The literature on higher education and social media provides little information on the use of social media sites for higher education public relations. This study will benefit public relations officials at institutions of higher education by providing a relevant case study related to their work. This case study can be cited as an example of how one institution uses social media for public relations. The study can also serve as an example of research that assesses the usefulness of dialogic communications theory and dialogic public relations theory as frameworks for assessing the use of social media in higher education public relations. Practitioners can use this research to help shape their future public relations strategies as they relate to social media.

Research Questions

This case study asks:

- How does one institution of higher education use social media for public relations?
- Does this institution's use of social media for public relations reflect the theories of dialogic communications and dialogic public relations?

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes theories from public relations literature. The theory of dialogic public relations is well rooted in the literature of communications and public relations (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The field of public relations is increasingly discussing and using social media to meet public relations goals and missions (Curtis et. al., 2010; Taylor & Kent, 2010; Diga & Kellerher, 2009). Thus, it would be useful to the practitioners in higher education public relations to advance research that uses the theories of dialogic communications and dialogic public relations to study how higher education institutions are using social media. Therefore, this research is grounded in the theories of dialogic communications and dialogic public relations.

Dialogic communications theory describes how multiple parties communicate in a way that creates mutual recognition and understanding. It assumes that successful public relations and communication can be built and maintained through mediated relationships (Kent & Taylor, 2002), like those on social media sites, if the organization applies the dialogic communication theory's principles of the "dialogic loop," the "usefulness of information," the "generation of return visits," the "intuitiveness/ease of the interface," and the "rule of conservation of visitors" in their social media strategies (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Kent and Taylor (1998) have successfully applied this theory to the use of the internet for

public relations. A further description of both the theory and its application is provided in Chapter 2.

Dialogic public relations theory explains how public relations can create solid relationships between organizations and the public through the principles of mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment (Kent & Taylor, 2002). More detail on this theory is provided in Chapter 2.

This case study sought to determine if the theories of dialogic communication and dialogic public relations are suitable for explaining and guiding the future use of social media for higher education public relations.

Methods

This study explored the use of social media, in particular the site Facebook, by a central media services office on one university campus, as well as that office's representatives' descriptions of that use, activities related to that use, and guidelines informing that use. The units of analysis in the study were documents related to the institution's social media strategy; interview responses from institutional public relations staff; observations of the public relations staff; and the content posted (including tangible results such as feedback and interaction statistics with other site users) and activities employed on social media by the institutional public relations staff. The case study was bound to one office within one institution in order to get a clear and descriptive review of the case.

Significance of the Study

Any organization that has a public constituency, especially one that has multiple stakeholders, needs public relations. Institutions of higher education need to maintain positive public relations and therefore must be responsive to constituents. An institution needs the ability to inform and effectively communicate with its public. In order to operate and continue to keep all stakeholders satisfied, there must be positive relationships. Public relations promote two-way communication and building relationships. Social media sites provide a new, unique technology for a different way to communicate, which creates more opportunities for communication and relationship-building between institutions and publics (Wright & Hinson, 2008).

Social media sites cannot replace more traditional media outlets for public relations, but they cannot be ignored. They can be reviewed and utilized as part of a comprehensive strategy. Constant review and monitoring of the use of social media can help determine the most effective way for institutions to add social media to its public relations strategy in a useful and effective manner. In order to do this, scholars should continue to contribute data and research about social media, and public relations professionals should continue to monitor that data in order to make strategic decisions on how to coordinate social media in their work (Taylor & Kent, 2010).

This study fills a gap in the higher education, social media, and public relations literature while examining a topic that is increasingly of interest to a variety of disciplines, including and beyond higher education and public relations. The sheer popularity of social

media sites demands attention from institutions with public constituents, as the public expects institutional brands that they are familiar with to be present on social media sites.

As a case study, the themes and trends that emerged from this analysis serve as a reference for practitioners and a basis for future research in the topics of social media for use in higher education public relations. It also advances ideas about how to implement social media strategy for higher education public relations and how to define its success and value. The case studied may also become an example of best practices for other institutions to follow.

Delimitations and Limitations

A delimitation of the study was that, as the researcher, I was not immune to biases given my knowledge of the institution included in this study and its social media practices. I am responsible for social media efforts for my department at a peer institution of higher education and have professionally studied the popular, professional literature regarding the research topic for years. I recognized my biases and opinions not supported by peer-reviewed research and kept them separate from the data analysis in the study.

This research is limited in scope by the relatively short time frame in which this study was conducted. In addition, case studies are inherently limited by the fact that they describe just one case which could lead to improperly drawn conclusions, and the validity and reliability is inherently tied to the researcher's ethics and self-awareness (Merriam, 1998).

Definition of Terms

In the Oxford Dictionary (2011) online, social media is defined as “websites and applications used for social networking.” Social media sites are “driven by user-participation

and user-generated content” (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009, p. 103). A social medium is a communication “channel that allows for two-way interaction and feedback” (Kent, 2010, in press, p. 645). Kent (2010, in press) suggested seven defining features of social media: moderation (editorial oversight and maintenance), interactivity (allowing for communication and feedback), interchangeability (offer similar services and benefits), propinquity (ability to create closeness between two users which can aid in relationship development), responsiveness (having threaded dialogue), spontaneity, and dialogue. For this study, the term social media refers to online sites, programs, or outlets that allow individuals and/or organizations to maintain profiles or sites and maintain interaction with one another.

Examples of popular social media sites are Facebook and Twitter. Facebook is a popular social networking site that was founded in early 2004 and has grown substantially since then. Facebook allows users to connect with individuals, businesses, groups, organizations and other community features all in an online environment. Users can share personal information, photos, videos, links to other units of information, and more. Facebook “profiles” are accounts for individual people and “pages” are accounts for businesses, institutions, and organizations. Twitter is a microblogging site which allows users to post “tweets, short pieces of content (140 characters) that can include links to photos, videos, or other online content.

Other social media sites include YouTube for video sharing, Flickr for photo sharing, Tumblr for blogging, LinkedIn for professional networking, and many more. A “blog” is an online journal, or web log, of content posted by an individual for personal or business

purposes, or by individuals on behalf of organizations. Some blog software, like Tumblr, also has social networking capabilities for bloggers to interact with each other. The act of publishing content in Facebook (or other social media sites) so that other individuals and/or organizations can see the content as well as interact with it through comments or other actions is called “posting,” and the content itself is the “post.”

Finally, for the purposes of this study, I define “communication” as the act of maintaining a fluid, back-and-forth dialogue between two or more parties and “public relations” as the act(s) of maintaining a favorable relationship between an organization and the public, which can be accomplished through communication. It is important to note that when exploring social media, public relations, and communications, the terms and the concepts often get intertwined and occasionally used interchangeably. All three can describe concepts, theories, practices, strategies, offices, and professions. Their meanings and definitions as they relate to what they are describing can vary depending on the source. However, for this study I view communication and public relations as actions, communications being an action that can contribute to the broader action of public relations, and social media being tools that can help conduct each action.

The following chapter will review the relevant literature on the topics of social media use in higher education, in particular how social media is used for public relations in higher education. Chapter 3 will describe the methods of this case study in more detail, including the study design, framework, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 describes the findings from the research. Chapter 5 summarizes those findings in relation to the theoretical

framework of the study. Further, that chapter will present implications from the findings for both theory and practice, as well as for further research.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Technology advances rapidly. Technologically savvy students, faculty, alumni, and friends of higher education institutions expect institutions to keep up with such advances, including the maintenance of state-of-the-art facilities and resources and the utilization of a multitude of online programs and platforms. The use of social media by departments campus-wide is becoming more prevalent as a result of customer and industry expectations. This study examines how one university uses social media to fulfill its strategic marketing, communications and public relations mission. This chapter will review literature to establish a foundation for the study and identify a theoretical framework.

Social media “experts” are all over the internet, blogging and on social media sites, and are looking at social media from many disciplines including business, education, psychology, sociology, technology, and more. There are theories of organizational models for businesses and institutions using social media (Petroff, 2011; Owyang, 2010a; Owyang, 2010b). These theories based in organizational management, sociology, and communications exist in professional, but not scholarly, social media literature that could relate to how higher education institutions use social media for public relations, but they need to be studied further and strengthened through scholarly research.

The peer-reviewed literature on the use of social media by institutions of higher education is increasing now as social media use is becoming more prevalent and of more interest to higher education administrators. However, because it is a relatively new subject and research is only beginning to emerge, I also reviewed public relations literature, specifically that which focuses on the use of the internet for public relations. Here I find the

theories of dialogic communication and dialogic public relations which I identify as my theoretical framework for this study. There is a need in the literature for more research that examines the use of social media in higher education public relations and applies dialogic communication theory and dialogic public relations theory principles to see if the use of social media successfully accomplishes an institution's public relations objectives.

Higher Education Institutions and Social Media

Many industry practitioners in the fields of higher education, business, marketing, communication, information technology and science, and the emerging field of social media itself, are writing and publishing non-refereed works about effective use of social media in higher education. These publications include countless blogs, white papers, special reports, newsletter and magazine articles, and non-fiction books. The amount of published information on the topic of social media is overwhelming, especially when the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the information are unclear. A simple search on amazon.com for books about "social media" returns over 150,000 results, which is twice as many as a search for books on "higher education" and three times as many as a search for books on the "internet," which is especially striking when you consider the relative age of each topic and the amount of time authors have had to research and write on the subjects. Beyond books, there are innumerable blogs and self-proclaimed social media "experts" and consultants on the internet with personal theories and suggestions on how to use social media effectively. This is not to suggest that some of this work is not founded in data and does not provide useful information, but it is important to use caution when referencing these works as they have not been held to scholarly publishing standards.

Fortunately, in the past few years, there has been an emergence of scholarly research on social media use in higher education administration. Studies examine social media use in enrollment management, student affairs, teaching and learning, and public relations (Wankel & Wankel, 2011). The higher education literature that explores social media for public relations focuses on event “amplification” (publishing event information on social media outlets in real time) (Osborne, 2011) and athletics (Weaver, 2011). This research showed that the use of social media should match the needs and the goals of the organization and that “social media tools should be deployed in concert with relevant traditional communications in ways that genuinely speak to and connect with potential or identified [event] attendees” (Osborne, 2011, p. 187). Weaver (2011) suggested that athletic administrators, coaches, and communicators, should always consider social media as part of their outreach strategy, though the tools they use should depend on available resources, audience, and desired outcome. “Social media is a great vehicle for controlling your message, as long as you are clear in your own mind first what the message is (Weaver, 2011, p. 198). She recommended having policies and procedures in place and recommends posting content frequently that is interesting, relevant, and engaging. While the focus on social media use for events and athletics in higher education is not directly relevant for this study, Weaver’s (2011) overall recommendation for a defined strategy for the use of social media is relevant to practitioners who want to use social media for higher education public relations, which was evident in this case.

Public relations literature includes studies on the use of social media outlets specifically during crisis events on college and university campuses (Palen, 2008; Wigley &

Fontenot, 2010). This research showed that social media content informing the public about a crisis event tends to be generated by individual users and other traditional media outlets and not the institutions themselves. This suggests that institutions could improve their crisis management efforts through the utilization of social media sites.

Institutions of higher education are using social media for marketing and communications (Reuben, 2008; Fusch, 2011), alumni relations (Shaindlin, 2010; Fusch, 2011; Wankel & Wankel, 2011), strengthening the institutional brand (Slover-Linett, Stoner, & CASE, 2011), teaching and learning, and institutional advancement and development (Fusch, 2011). Again, this research often promoted the utilization of guidelines, policies, and purposeful strategy when it comes to using social media. However, these results are limited by the fact that they have not been published in peer-reviewed, scholarly publications.

It is evident that higher education institutions are utilizing social media for a number of purposes. Future research needs to be conducted through scholarly research methods and published in peer-reviewed publications in order to provide valid and reliable information to higher education administrators and practitioners. Therefore, for this study, a review of the literature on public relations and communications through the internet was also in order.

Public Relations and Social Media

Public relations literature contains work that specifically cites the use of social media by organizations for public relations purposes and predicts its growth in the future (Neff & Denison, 2008; Stewart, 2008; Nail, 2009; Curtis et. al., 2010). Students studying public relations are socialized through professional organizations and literature to assume that they will use social media in their public relations career (Taylor & Kent, 2010). Public relations

professionals who used social media more frequently than others perceived their own power in their professional field and organization to be greater than their colleagues (Diga & Kellerher, 2009). Thus, it is evident that professional socialization of public relations practitioners promotes the use of social media in their work.

The internet in general has had an effect on the field of public relations. Public relations professionals who do not adapt and utilize new internet technologies will suffer in their profession because the general public is embracing it more and more, and because professionals from other industries are taking on similar work (Christ, 2005). The internet plays an important role in public relations as an expected and primary source of information, for brand management and image, for establishing credibility and trustworthiness, for producing one-way communication and targeted and customized messaging, and for producing calls to action (Christ, 2005). Beyond one-way communication, social media is built around “a central tenet of dialogue: the value of the individual” (Kent, 2010 in press, p. 649) and social media sites, like web sites, with devoted efforts, can be used for dialogic communications (two-way and mutually understood) and public relationship building (Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002).

Public relations professionals believe that social media has the potential to increase two-way communication and actual dialogue between organizations and their public constituents, thus improving relationship building strategies (Wright & Hinson, 2008). Public relations professionals are more likely to use social media in their work if they view it as credible (Curtis et. al., 2010). Wright and Hinson (2008) found that while public relations professionals don't think social media is equal to traditional media outlets in terms of

accuracy and credibility yet, they do feel that new media compliments their traditional media efforts and enhances their work while changing the way their organizations communicate. This suggests a general consensus among public relations professionals that, despite the challenges that increased social media outlets create for their work, social media also provide opportunities to improve two-way communications with publics and strengthen relationship-building.

It is evident that public relations professionals are aware of the potential that social media has for their work, but there is not enough research yet that analyzes how public relations practitioners are using social media and if it adequately helps them meet their public relations mission and goals. More peer-reviewed research needs to be conducted on how organizations and publics are actually utilizing social media to increase two-way communications and relationships (Kent, 2010 in press; Wright & Hinson, 2008). “There are no research results or anecdotes about how an organization used social media to engage its publics and develop new mission or vision statements; neither are there articles about how to use social media to create a place of genuine dialogue” (Kent, 2010 in press, p. 655). According to Kent (2010, in press), social media is more than just a monologic communications tool, but it has to be used properly and intentionally by public relations professionals to ensure it is used as a dialogic (two-way) tool, so more research needs to be done here in order to guide the practice. He suggested further research on how to improve social media strategies, how to measure success, how to integrate new media strategies with traditional media strategies, and how social media can best serve public relations. This study

reviewed how one institution is utilizing social media in its strategic communications and public relations mission, as Kent (2010, in press) suggested is needed.

Dialogic Communication Theory

Kent and Taylor (1998) cited Botan's (1992) definition of public relations as "the use of communication to negotiate relationships among groups." They presented the theory of dialogic communication as a theoretical framework from which to study the process of relationship building between organizations and their public constituents specifically through internet strategies. They presented five principles (dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of returned visits, intuitiveness/ease of interface, and role of conservation of visitors) that build relationships through internet technologies. These principles are explained in more detail below. Kent and Taylor (1998) stated that internet strategies, especially websites, have become important tools for public relations professionals for disseminating and gathering information. They argued that despite the fact that internet communications are not face-to-face, which could be seen as a creating distance for communication, they can actually diminish that distance for many by connecting geographically separated parties.

Kent and Taylor (1998, p. 325) proposed further study of dialogic communication, described as "any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions," for public relations based on the popularity in public relations literature of a two-way symmetry model of communication and the fact that it is a process that results in dialogic communication. Later, similar research stated:

Dialogue occurs when individuals (and sometimes groups) agree to set aside their differences long enough to come to an understanding of the others' positions.

Dialogue is not equivalent to agreement. Rather, dialogue is more akin to intersubjectivity where both parties attempt to understand and appreciate the values and interests of the other...Dialogue rests on an acknowledgement of the worth of the other as well as a willingness to "continue the conversation" – not for purposes of swaying the other with the strength of one's erudition, but as a means of understanding the other and reaching mutually satisfying positions. (Kent, Taylor, & McAllister-Spooner, 2008, pp. 8-9)

Kent and Taylor (1998) traced dialogic communication theory to the work of Buber and Kant who described communication as ethical and centered on the goal of communicators understanding each other as they build a relationship, cooperating even if they disagree. Kent and Taylor (1998) stressed the importance of the communication process and the communicators having a mutual understanding of each other, regardless of agreement. Using this definition of dialogic communication, they stressed the importance of making a distinction between monologic (one-way) and dialogic (two-way) communication using the internet. They caution that the internet is effective in monologic communication but must also create a "dialogic loop," communication back and forth between the communicating parties, in order to effectively become a tool for public relations (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 326).

Kent and Taylor (1998) asserted that public relations practitioners can create relationships between organizations and their public constituents though the internet if they

incorporate five dialogic communications principles in their internet strategies for public relations. First, creating a “dialogic loop” involves providing a method for publics to reach out to the organization in a way that also allows the organization to respond. For example, a website having an email address or web-based form for a user to submit questions or concerns to the organization which would then be followed up with a response to the inquirer from the organization. This requires trained and dedicated public relations staff to monitor and respond so that the “dialogic loops” are completed in a timely manner with quality communication. Second, the principle of “usefulness of information” suggests that the organization must provide useful and relevant content for the public constituent so that they find value in the communication and so that content exists that addresses the reason the constituent initiated the online contact. Providing useful information is a way to address the needs of the public as well as inform them of the organization’s goals so that the communication is informed. Third, the principle of “generation of return visits” refers to the need for internet sites to give public users a reason to return to the site again in the future. This includes frequently updating information as facts and reality change, as well as consistently providing new content and opportunities for users to communicate with the organization. Fourth, not only should sites provide useful information and the opportunity to connect, but those need to be easily accessible and user-friendly. This refers to the “intuitiveness/ease of the interface.” While image and branding are important, internet sites should first and foremost be easy for all visitors to use so that they can actually access the useful information and dialogic opportunities, stay on the site, and want to return to the site in the future. That desire for public constituents to want to return to the organization’s

internet site is what is referenced by the final principle, the “rule of conservation of visitors.” The site should not have many web links that take users to other sites. Links that do exist to navigate the page internally should be organized and easy to use and should follow a clear path on the site.

Kent and Taylor (1998) provided these five principles of dialogic communication for public relations practitioners to follow in order to successfully use the internet in their public relations, communication, and relationship building efforts. “Dialogic public relations strategy seeks to create lasting, genuine, and valuable, relationships with its publics and should not operate merely as a propaganda, marketing, or advertising tool” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p.330). While they did not discuss social media at the time because it was virtually non-existent, these principles of dialogic communication for public relations strategy on the internet can apply today to the use of social media.

Dialogic Public Relations Theory

Kent and Taylor (2002) updated their work from 1998, this time creating a theory of dialogic public relations, again rooting the concept of dialogue in theories of philosophy, communication, and psychology. They credit a dissertation by Pearson (1989) for being the first to suggest dialogue as a public relations theory. Kent and Taylor (2002) cited a recent shift in public relations theory from managing public opinion to managing relationships with publics, further forwarding their work in dialogic communications. Kent and Taylor (2002) presented dialogic public relations theory which explains five principles required for creating successful public relations. First, the principle of “mutuality” refers to recognizing the relationship between the organizations and the public. Through mutuality, both parties

recognize that they are linked, that they have individual realities and positions which are equal in value, and communication is collaborative. Next, “propinquity” refers to the unpredictable and time-sensitive nature of communications between organizations and publics. Organizations should consult publics in relevant matters and vice versa.

Communication should be about the present with an acknowledgement to the communicating parties’ shared past and the future. Engagement should be meaningful, not contrived. Third, “empathy” refers to the organization’s understanding of public “goals and interests.” It includes creating a supportive, encouraging, and confirming environment for dialogue that includes both local and global publics. Fourth, “risk” refers to an organization being willing to communicate with its public on their public’s terms regardless of being vulnerable or the possibility of unpredictable outcomes. This includes the “recognition of strange otherness,” an acceptance and valuing of the other communicator because they are different and unique. Finally, the principle of “commitment” refers to how far the organization is willing to go to conduct dialogue and create relationships. Organizations must be genuine in their efforts, committed to the conversation, and committed to the mutually satisfying interpretation and understanding of what is being communicated.

According to dialogic public relations theory, these five principles must be employed in the communications process between an organization and their public in order for the organization to successfully build relationships with their public. While strategic utilization of dialogic public relations theory requires time and resources on the part of the organization, it pays off because it creates more trust, engagement, and satisfaction among their public constituents.

Kent, Taylor, and McAllister-Spooner (2008) continued to assert like Kent and Taylor (1998) that using dialogic communication as a theoretical framework from which to study public relations will overcome challenges associated with symmetrical communications theories. They suggested that benefits exist for organizations that utilize dialogic communications in their public relations strategies and recommend that organizations commit resources to the efforts. Social media resources could be valuable in this effort, just as other internet strategies have been. The interactivity of the internet makes it ideal for organizations to dialogue with their public constituents (McAllister & Taylor, 2007). Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) stated that the increased use of the theory of dialogic communication and relationship building in public relations merges well with the increase in the use of the internet by organizations. The same could be said now with the increased use of social media sites.

Dialogic communications and public relations theories explain how institutions can create a dialogue with their public constituents in order to conduct two-way communication which supports mutual understanding and relationship building. This differs from monologic, one-way communications where institutions simply publicize or market their information without creating genuine dialogue or building relationships with their public. Social media sites promote connections and provide a new avenue for institutions to engage with their public to create meaningful communications opportunities and build relationships. Therefore, while examining a case of how an institution of higher education is using social media for public relations, this study used the lens of dialogic communications and dialogic

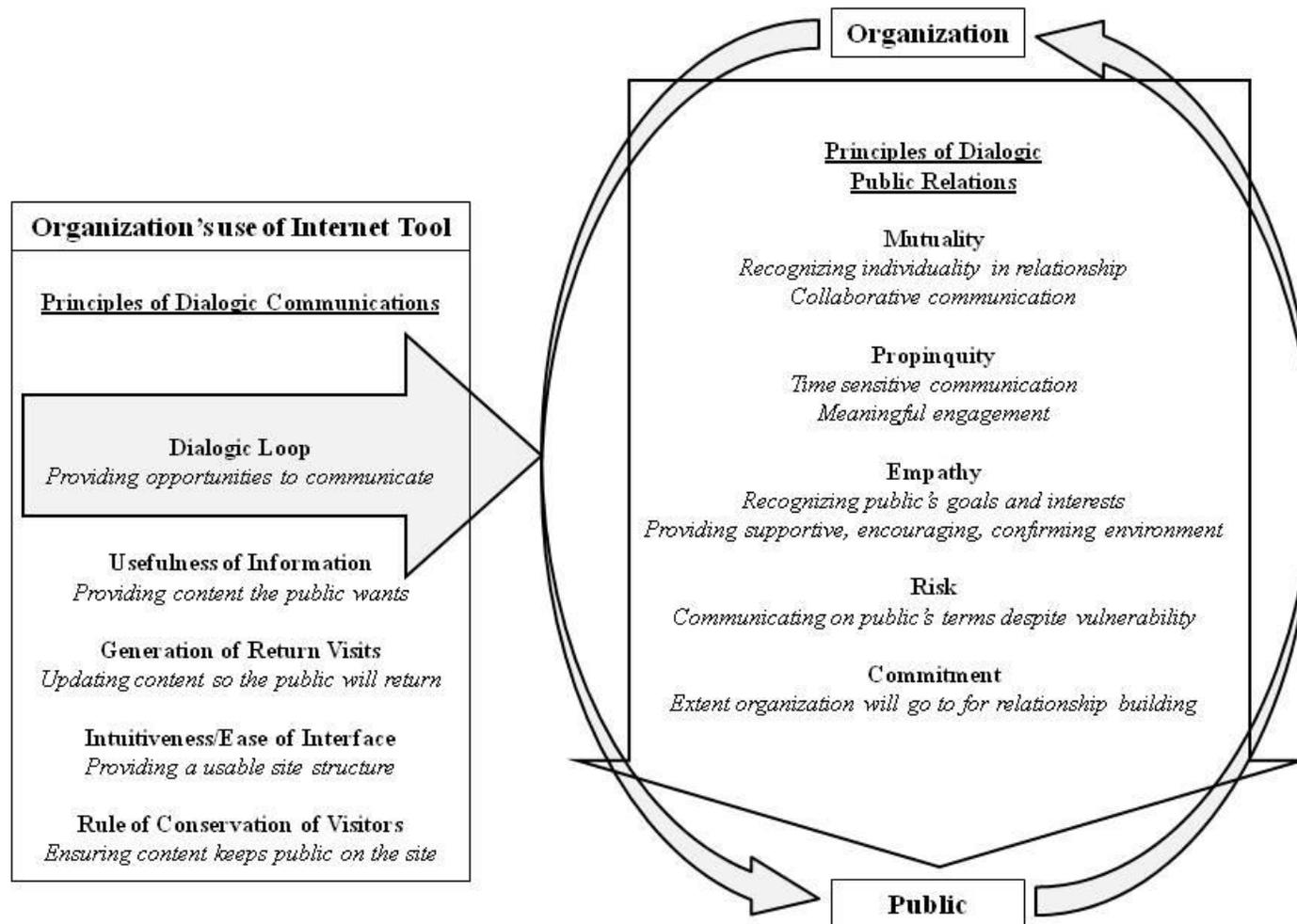


Figure 1. Conceptualization of online communication utilizing Dialogic Communications Theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998) and Dialogic Public Relations Theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Dialogic communications principles guide the strategy employed on the internet tool. Dialogic public relations principles guide the actual communication using a dialogic loop.

public relations in order to determine if the theories were useful in describing one institution's communications and public relations through social media.

This study envisioned the theories of dialogic communications (Kent & Taylor, 1998) and dialogic public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002) as processes that work independently of one another, but concurrently, which is why I chose to use both as the theoretical framework for the research. As conceptualized in Figure 1, as an organization carries out an internet strategy for public relations, it utilizes the principles of dialogic communications, as they all relate to the actual use of the internet tool. As it utilizes the principle of the "dialogic loop" within the internet strategy, which is the principle of dialogic communications that is specifically related to the act of communicating, it can also utilize the principles of dialogic public relations within that communication, which are all related to the act of communicating.

The conceptualization in Figure 1 is meant to show the overall process of communication between an organization and its public as the organization is using an internet tool (website or social media) for public relations. According to Kent and Taylor (1998) in order to have successful dialogic (two-way) communication with its public, the organization must employ all five principles of the theory of dialogic communications as they use an internet tool. This is shown in the left side of Figure 1.

The principle of "usefulness of information" explains that the internet tool must provide useful information to the public, information they are coming to the internet to seek from the organization. For higher education public relations, this would likely be news about the institution. The principle of "generation of return visits" refers to the need for the

organization to consistently update information and content on the internet tool in order for the members of the public to continue to return to the site for more information. An institution of higher education would want to consistently post new content about news and events at the institution. The principle of “intuitiveness and ease of interface” refers to the need for the organizations internet site to be easy to use for the general public. Members of the public should be able to find and navigate the internet site easily in order to find the information they are looking for quickly and without frustration. The “rule of conservation of visitors” explains that the design and content of the internet site should be such that users, as they are clicking through the sites features and navigating the content, are not taken away by links to other internet sites. The content and links ideally keep the public on integrated parts of the internet site so they continue to view all the information provided by the organization on its own site. Finally, the principle of the “dialogic loop” explains that the organization must provide the public with ways to communicate with the organization directly on the internet site. For example, an institution of higher education’s public relations office can provide an email address or comments form on the site so that the public can communicate more directly with the organization. The presence of this ability to communicate provides the opportunity for dialogic communication to occur. Once the organization is contacted by the member of the public, they can respond and begin to have a communication experience, a dialogue, which enables them to improve their relationship.

Once the dialogic loop is generated and the organization and the member of their public are communicating, I believe that their ability to carry out successful public relations (maintaining a positive relationship) hinges on their ability to carry out the principles of

dialogic public relations theory in their dialogic loop of communication. This is what is further conceptualized in Figure 1. On the right side of Figure 1 the dialogic loop is depicted as communication back and forth between the organization and the public, with the principles of dialogic public relations theory being enacted within the loop. Here, as the organization provides communication and information to the member of the public, they convey the principles of mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment.

The organization conveys “mutuality” when it recognizes the constituent’s individuality and unique relationship with the organization. An institution of higher education could do this by recognizing each member of its public based on their unique relationship with the institution (alumni, student, parent, multiple affiliations, and more). The organization conveys “propinquity” when it shares time-sensitive content online, such as news and events, and does so in an engaging way that encourages constituents to communicate back. An institute of higher education might share news about recent research findings that benefit the public, or event information about Homecoming. In both cases the institution may also attempt to engage the public by asking them to respond about the news or event in some way. The organization uses the principle of “empathy” if it provides support, encouragement, and confirmation in its communication with the public, and when it recognizes the public’s goals and interests, even if they are different from the organization. This could be particularly relevant for a college or university when it communicates with a constituent who is upset about something at the institution or in need of customer service. The organization displays “risk” when it communicates on the internet and provides means for communication on the internet with its public because by doing so, the organization is

communicating on a public platform, on the public's terms, or at least not necessarily on the terms of the organization. For example, an institute of higher education would have no control over what an angry alumnus or student might say in the public communication forum offered by an online comments form. Thus, the institution is running the risk that negative things may be said on their internet site, but this principle assumes they accept that and use it to their advantage by communicating back, with "empathy," to improve the public relationship. The final principle of "commitment" is shown by the organizations willingness to use the internet site(s) as a way of building relationships. It shows the extent to which they are committed to building positive relationships by new means and tools.

For my study, I am paying particular attention to just a few of the principles in the theories of dialogic communications and dialogic public relations. First, I primarily review to see if and when a "dialogic loop" is created, and when one is, whether or not the organization is conveying the principles of mutuality, propinquity, and empathy. I focus on these four because I assume and confirm with my findings that the other principles are more related to internet tool itself, in this case the social media site, Facebook, or are inherent based on the commitment to the strategy of using the internet tool for public relations. While I analyze my case in respect to all ten principles from the two theories, I spend most of my focus on the four just listed: dialogic loop, mutuality, propinquity, and empathy.

Studies on Internet Strategy Framed by Dialogic Theory

Research has successfully used Kent and Taylor's (1998) principles of dialogic communications for public relations strategy as a framework from which to study the internet communications strategy of organizations or institutions.

Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) found that websites for activist organizations weren't fully reaching their potential for two-way communication because they failed to create a "dialogic loop" or influence return visits to the site. Kang and Norton (2006) correlated university web content with institutional characteristics and claimed this revealed the potential for these websites to serve as strong public relations tools. They concluded that while institutions have been able to make this connection and use websites for sharing information, they have not been as good at using the website for two-way communication or dialogue. Similarly, McAllister and Taylor (2007) found that while community college websites were easy to use and provided useful information, they were not successful in keeping visitors on the site or enabling dialogue between the site visitors and the institutions. McAllister and Taylor (2007) asserted that no matter how successful institutions are in fulfilling some of the principles of dialogic communication as described in Kent and Taylor (1998), if they don't create interactions between the institution and its publics, they are not reaching their full potential for dialogic communication or relationship-building.

Researchers who have used Kent and Taylor's (1998) principles for dialogic public relations strategy on the internet in their research found them to be useful as a framework and suggest further research using the concepts. Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) suggested future research on how publics communicate with organizations online and how the internet can be used as a two-way communication tool for relationship building. Kang and Norton (2006) suggested further study to review how university social media sites enable institutions to fulfill their public relations mission. McAllister and Taylor (2007) suggested that institutions improve their use of internet strategies to encourage more communication through their

internet sites in order to better provide public relations services. Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) principles for dialogic communications and public relations strategy on the internet is an ideal framework from which to study how higher education institutions utilize social media for their public relations work, just as it has been used by these researchers to study higher education institutions' internet strategies.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the literature of higher education and social media usage, public relations and social media, dialogic communications theory, and dialogic public relations theory. It found that there is an abundance of public information on social media in general, and how it is being used by institutions of higher education. While there is some scholarly work on how higher education institutions are using social media, there is not a suitable theory specifically in higher education or social media literature to guide further research on higher education social media usage specifically for public relations. In the public relations literature, there is research on how public relations practitioners can use both the internet and social media in their strategies, including some research with a focus on higher education. Much of this research has been grounded in the related theories of dialogic communications and dialogic public relations, which are suitable frameworks for further study on the use of social media in higher education public relations.

Problem and Research Questions

Existing literature calls for research that studies the use of social media in higher education public relations which is grounded in the theories of dialogic communications and dialogic public relations strategy on the internet. This study contributes more information to

the field about how one higher education institution is using social media for public relations as well as determines if theories of dialogic communications and dialogic public relations on the internet adequately explain the process. Specifically, this case study asks:

- How does one institution of higher education use social media for public relations?
- Does this institution's use of social media for public relations reflect the theories of dialogic communications and dialogic public relations?

Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

Public relations practitioners in higher education are increasingly interested in utilizing social media in their public relations strategies, and they are seeing increased demand to do so from both their supervisors and their public. The fields of Public Relations and Higher Education are both accepting and emphasizing the growing need for utilization of new technology in their respective fields. However, there is little research for practitioners to reference in order to glean best practices for successfully implementing social media in public relations practice. This case study examines an institution that has implemented social media in its public relations strategy using dialogic communications theory and dialogic public relations theory as a lens. The purpose of the study is to contribute to the higher education literature, providing an example of the use of social media for public relations in higher education, and to determine if that use is adequately explained by dialogic communications theory and dialogic public relations theory. This chapter will describe the design of the study, including how the sample was selected, how the data were collected and analyzed, the researcher's role and assumptions, ethical considerations, and methods for ensuring the study's reliability and validity.

Study Design and Research Paradigm

Qualitative research takes place in the natural setting of the participants and the experience being studied; involves the researcher as the main instrument for data collection and analysis; utilizes many different sources of data; analyzes the resulting data inductively, going from the detailed data to overarching themes; focuses on the experience of the

participants; evolves in design as the study progresses; often utilizes a theoretical framework; and interprets the broad picture of the participants' experiences and assigned meanings (Creswell, 2009, p. 175-176). Qualitative case study researchers acknowledge that their data and analysis is subjective (although this is removed as much as possible through efforts to enhance trustworthiness), that "knowledge is socially constructed," and that readers will make their own assumptions and conclusions through the accounts presented by the case study researcher (Stake, 2005).

Case studies are common in the field of education research (Merriam, 1998). A case study is both the "process" of how data are collected as well as the "product" that is a result of the research (Stake, 2005, p. 444). The case study approach has roots in psychology, law, medicine, and political science and was the best approach for my study because I studied one institution within the "bounded system" of higher education and I provide an in depth look at one institution (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). One of the defining features of a case study is that it focuses on one case that has boundaries based on certain characteristics of the case, and provides an overall description or understanding of that case (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005). Because I explored a situation that has not been studied in depth yet, I focused on one case in order to begin to explore and describe the actions of one institution using social media as part of its public relations strategy. Because "social media" can encompass an overwhelming number of websites and types of web activity, I specifically focused on one institution's use of the most popular social media site, Facebook, for my content analysis. Case studies are appropriate for research asking "how" questions (Merriam, 1998) and my primary research question asked, "How does one institution utilize social media for public relations?" I

provide a “rich, thick description” of the case, an important feature of case studies (Creswell, 2007, p. 209; Merriam, 1998, p. 29).

As suggested by Creswell (2007), my study gathered multiple sources of data such as observations, interviews, documents, and Facebook posts. My data analysis describes the case and themes that emerged as I analyze the office’s use of Facebook, as well as how the individuals interviewed described their use of social media for their work. This was an “instrumental” case study, where I have one issue of focus (the use of social media for public relations by a higher education institution), and I focused on one “bounded case,” that is, one institution (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). The purpose of an instrumental case study is to explore that case “mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” (Stake, 2005, p. 445). I accomplished both purposes with this case study by exploring how the institution is using Facebook in public relations and ultimately drawing conclusions about the application of dialogic communications theory and dialogic public relations theory to higher education public relations through social media.

A case study can be both descriptive and interpretive at the same time (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) describes that a case study can describe the case, especially if little literature exists on the subject, and in addition, a case study can be interpretive, in that it assesses how a theoretical framework is either supported or challenged by the findings. This study serves dual purposes in that I described how the institution is using Facebook for public relations using dialogic communications theory and dialogic public relations theory, in order to see if dialogic communications and dialogic public relations theories are appropriate frameworks to use while studying the use of social media. This case contributes to the

literature and provides a basis for further research, a common strength of case study research (Merriam, 1998).

Sample Selection

I purposefully selected to conduct my research at a small public university on the East Coast. I refer to the institution by the pseudonym, Richards College. Purposeful selection is used to identify the best participants in order for the researcher to fully understand the case being studied (Creswell, 2009). Utilizing purposeful sampling allows the study to “...purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 122). The goal of purposeful sampling is to isolate a case that can teach the researcher the most about the overarching issue or subject and provide the most opportunities for an engaging study (Stake, 2005).

There is one office at Richards College that is responsible for the main university social media accounts. For the purposes of this study I call the office by a pseudonym, Media Services. Media Services uses social media sites for, among other things, public relations. I purposefully selected this office and this institution based on their active use of social media for public relations. This institution made an organizational change in order to create the office of Media Services with the intended use of implementing a social media strategy. Media Services has implemented a social media strategy for public relations and their social media efforts are recognized in higher education communication circles by their peers and national awards. Because of this intentional strategy, the active use of social media, and the national recognition, I felt this case would provide the most opportunities to teach me about how an institution is using social media for public relations. The participants

of this study were three of the staff members responsible for social media strategy, content, and posting from Media Services. In this study I refer to the participants by the pseudonyms Angela, Barbara, and Carol. In order to gain access to the office, I sought permission from Angela, the department director, and individuals responsible for the social media strategy and efforts, Barbara and Carol.

In order to gain trust and confidence I used my professional credentials and a personal connection to the institution. I utilized my familiarity with the institution as an asset rather than a liability. I provided personal information and my professional experience to the participants to justify my interest in their work and the research topic, and to validate my status as a graduate student researcher. I maintained their confidence and trust by remaining professional and adhering to all protocols and guidelines set by my research proposal and IRB approval, including informed consent and debriefing at the end of the study.

Data Collection

I collected multiple forms of data including interviews, documents, online content, and observations (see Appendices A, B, and C for data collection protocols). Using multiple forms of data is important for triangulation and ensuring validity (Creswell, 2007).

Interviews.

Interviewing is a “basic mode of inquiry” (Seidman, 2006). Through their responses to my interview questions, participants were able to share their stories and make meaning of their work through language, which allowed me to better understand their experience using social media for public relations (Seidman, 2006). Interviewing multiple staff members responsible for the office’s social media activity allowed me to understand their collective

experience (Seidman, 2006). Per Creswell's (2007) suggestions, my interview protocol included 8 open-ended questions (see Appendix A). The introduction included information relating to confidentiality, consent, purpose of the study, length of interview, and a review of the study's purpose. The interview questions attempted to reveal information related to my research questions.

The interview questions explored the participants' explanation of the mission of their office; their description of the office's use of social media, including their responsibilities; a description of how the office communicates with the public using social media; their interpretation of the value and risks of the office's use of social media; and some discussion of the office's policies and procedures for using social media. The interview protocol included closing notes reminding me to thank the participants and share plans for the data analysis and results of the study.

Structured one-on-one and group interviews were recorded and transcribed, and I also took interview notes. The interview participants were three employees in the office who are responsible for social media strategy. Interviews were held in an office and a conference room, both quiet, private places. The combined interviews lasted approximately two hours total. I transcribed, reviewed, and coded all interview data.

Document review.

As a part of each interview, I requested access to any documents related to the public relations mission of the office or that are policies or procedures for Media Service's use of social media. Examples of documents I sought included policies and procedures manuals for university representatives on social media use, descriptive manuals for how to post social

media content, and plans or strategy documents for determining social media content. These types of documents were all available through the office's website. I reviewed and coded documents found on the office website (see Appendix B for protocol).

Observations.

Prior to and between interviews, I observed staff interactions as an outsider. I was also fortunate to observe some Facebook content creation and a posting process. My observational protocol allowed me to observe and record these activities with both descriptive and reflective notes (see Appendix C).

Content Analysis.

I reviewed the office's Facebook content on the institution's main Facebook "page" for one month, the month in which I also conducted my interviews. I followed the live content during the time I was interviewing so that I could address any content posting questions as they arose. Because this was public content, I did not need explicit permission to review it, but I addressed it in the IRB process (see Appendix B for the Content Review Protocol). I chose to review the Facebook content as opposed to content on other social media sites used by Media Services, such as Twitter, Flickr, or YouTube, due to the fact that Facebook's format provides the best opportunities for Media Services to create a "dialogic loop" and communication with their public. The structural nature of Facebook is such that the principles of Dialogic Communications Theory are almost entirely provided for the institution by Facebook, so their actions can primarily enact the principle of the "dialogic loop," and Facebook's structure gives the public the opportunity to engage with the institution in that way.

Data storage.

I audio recorded the interviews on a recording device and took interview notes using my Interview Protocol (see Appendix A) and in a notebook. I recorded observational information on my observational protocol (see Appendix C) and in a notebook. I reviewed the office's policies and procedures documents and Facebook content and notes were recorded on copies of the documents, transcripts of the online content, and on the protocol document (see Appendix B). I stored my electronic files in one file location on my laptop computer and also stored a back-up copy on an external hard drive kept in my home. I masked the institution's and participants' names in my stored data using pseudonyms. Any non-digital documents or printed content is stored in one binder and all journaling is kept in one notebook which is kept with the binder.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2007), the process of data analysis in a case study should include a detailed description of the case, including descriptions of the people involved, the site and setting of the case, and all events and activities surrounding the case. Ideally, this description is presented chronologically, or at least acknowledges time frames if it is not presented chronologically. Creswell (2007) also stated that analyzing multiple sources of data in case studies is helpful to provide a full, overall description of the case. Therefore, I collected multiple sources of data from multiple people and documents related to my case. My findings describe all of these sources of data and use the sources to provide a full picture of the case and the setting.

Creswell (2007) further described data analysis in terms of the following overall steps: preparing and organizing data; reducing data into themes by way of coding; presenting data through discussion and visual representation. While preparing and organizing my data, I also followed the suggestions of Miles and Huberman (1994) which include: writing personal notes and reflections in margins of my field notes; drafting summaries; writing memos; searching for patterns and themes; searching for recurrences of codes and counts of codes; searching for relationships, contrasts, and comparisons.

Creswell's (2007) discussion of data analysis is more detailed and he proposed a conceptualization of data analysis as an interrelated spiral though which steps are made in a circular fashion. The researcher moves through the steps and revisits steps as they all work together. First is what I have already described – data collection, then data management. Next in Creswell's (2007) data analysis spiral is the process of reading through the data, memoing, reflecting, and creating notes and questions. I performed multiple reviews of my data, for overall understanding, and then for further exploration of themes for coding. It was important for me to do a lot of ongoing memoing, reflecting, and reviewing so that I didn't get overwhelmed when my data collection was complete, and in order to capture immediate thoughts and responses to my research experiences.

It is important for qualitative case studies to be organized into key themes and issues overall, for both data analysis and clarity (Stake, 2005). After reading and reflecting, I moved on to the next step in the data analysis spiral: describing, classifying, and interpreting the data. I used open coding. Following Creswell's (2007) suggestion, I used categorical aggregation, a collection of instances in the data to establish themes and patterns. I did not

use any principles or concepts from my theoretical framework during the coding process. I let codes emerge completely on their own from the data. I did not want to bias my interpretation of the data by using the codes generated from my theoretical framework in fear that it would restrict my description and analysis of the data that emerged. I wanted to be sure I was accurately interpreting the participants' experiences and meanings without trying to make them fit into predetermined codes based on the theories. Only after a complete review and analysis of the data through open coding did I begin to compare and analyze the data using the theoretical frames of dialogic communications theory and dialogic public relations theory. Primarily, I wanted to focus on establishing patterns within the data in order to best describe the case and allow for naturalistic generalizations (Creswell, 2007).

I concluded the study with an overall description of how the institution uses Facebook for public relations, analyzing that use as it relates to the process described by dialogic communications theory and dialogic public relations theory. I discussed the implications of the findings for other institutions of higher education that are using, or seeking to use, social media for public relations. My findings included quotes from my participants in order to provide a rich description. The goal of the final report was to describe the case I studied in a way that readers could experience and interpret the case in their own way, beyond my own description and interpretation (Stake, 2005).

Researcher Role and Assumptions

As a practitioner at a large public research university, I am responsible for the management of multiple social media accounts on behalf of my office for alumni development. I have taken a professional interest in how institutions of higher education can

put social media tools to use. I am also a personal user of social media and follow the activity of higher education institutions on social media sites. This means I have personally and professionally explored the topic through popular cultural literature and businesses that brand themselves as experts in the social media field. I used this familiarity with the topic to gain access to the office, build rapport, and gain trust of the participants, but I had to be careful not to let it influence results. Creswell (2007) suggested not sharing personal experiences with participants because it endangers “bracketing” and jeopardizes the participant’s full responses (Creswell, 2007, p. 142). I had to deal with this issue during my interviews and attempted not to share personal experiences or thoughts during the interviews.

I acknowledged that I have opinions and biases about the type of strategies institutions can and should use on social media. I have personal biases about how institutions of higher education should be using social media platforms for public relations, about which institutions I think are doing it well or not, and about what is and isn’t a valuable use of time and resources for institutions using social media. I do think it is a valuable use of time and resources for institutions to incorporate social media into their public relations strategy and there are institutions that are engaging their public audiences well. I had to confront these biases so that I could remove them from my data collection and analysis, especially since they are based on anecdotal evidence.

I appreciate Peshkin’s (1988) description of how he could identify when his “subjective I’s” were informing his work. He was cognizant of moments throughout his research when his subjectivity appeared. It was helpful to keep this in mind as I performed

my study. It was nearly impossible to remove the knowledge and opinions I have gathered on my research subject though my profession, but I recognized and acknowledged them.

I also had to confront any biases I had as a result of a relationship I have with the institution I studied and tried to be aware of any biases in my data collection and analysis. I maintained professionalism and practiced “bracketing” to remove any personal bias (Creswell, 2007). For my positionality throughout the research, I avoided sharing any personal thoughts, opinions, or examples during my interviews or observations, as Creswell (2007) recommended.

Ethical Considerations

As researchers, we are not inherently entitled to or guaranteed the knowledge we seek. Our work should always be guided by ethics. The value of the knowledge created by our work does not trump the value of the safety of our participants (Stake, 2005). We must be aware of potential risks to our participants and constantly re-evaluate them throughout the course of our work as our study progresses.

There could have been risk to the personnel I interviewed if they revealed, and I reported, information or attitudes that put their employment status, job security, or job satisfaction at risk. It was also possible that I could have uncovered unethical or inappropriate policies or procedures that could've been viewed as risky to the institution. Therefore, I used pseudonyms for the participants and the office name so that none were at risk of having their professional or institutional reputation judged or perceived based on the results of my data analysis. The institution risked being assessed negatively in relation to their social media usage. The individuals might have risked their employment status, job

satisfaction, or professional relationships if their contributions to the study were perceived negatively by the institution or their colleagues and supervisors.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study is a result of my engagement in the field, triangulation of data sources, detailed planning, adherence to plans, detailed documentation with thick description, and intense review, reflection, and honesty. All of these methods are recommended by Creswell (2007). Triangulation is “using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (Stake, 2005, p. 454). The use of triangulation ensures that multiple realities are recognized and accounted for (Stake, 2005). I assigned pseudonyms for the participants for their employment protection as well as their comfort. I gave participants the opportunity to review the complete interview transcription as part of my data analysis to ensure their perspectives had been represented and interpreted accurately (member checking). I also sought the guidance and review of my advisor and committee to ensure validity. Reliability was ensured by recording the interviews, taking detailed field notes, and conducting multiple reviews of the data.

Generalizability of data and results from qualitative studies is not intended or expected the way it is in quantitative studies (Creswell, 2009; Stake, 2005). “Damage occurs when the commitment to generalize or to theorize runs so strong that the researcher’s attention is drawn away from features important for understanding the case itself” (Stake, 2005, p. 447). Instead, the goal is to gain and relay a deep understanding of the case and describe the case in such a way that similar cases can be identified and compared. Rather than generalize the findings from this one case to others, the case can serve as a basis for further research that

will encompass other cases, either similar or different, in order to expand data and results on the subject.

Summary

This chapter described the methods of this research project, including the qualitative design, purposeful sample selection, multiple forms of data collection, coding and data analysis process, researcher role and assumptions, ethical considerations, and how I achieved trustworthiness and validity in my work. The two following chapters will include a detailed review and summary of the findings, an analysis, and conclusions drawn from the research.

Chapter 4: Findings

For this study I utilized multiple sources of data including: interviews with office staff (names used here are pseudonyms), review of the office's Facebook content, review of the office's social media strategy and policy documents, and an observation of a content posting activity. The data collected from each source were reviewed and analyzed independently. Findings from the interviews and the documents were coded for themes. Facebook content was reviewed and analyzed for type of post, amount of interaction generated, and type of interaction generated.

The findings are now further organized and discussed in this chapter by overall themes and categories. I explain the unique background and environment of the office including its structure, mission, relationship to peer offices and institutions, the staff of the office, how the staff describes the office's use of social media, how they describe their communication with their public audience through social media, what they perceive the values and risks of social media to be, and how they measure the effectiveness of their efforts. I also review of the office's Facebook content and evaluate the extent to which it supports what was described by the participants.

For the purposes of this study, pseudonyms are used for the institution, Richards College, the office, Media Services, and the participants, Angela, Barbara, and Carol. Angela is the director of the Media Services office and Barbara and Carol are staff members responsible for social media strategy and posting.

Describing the Case's Background and Environment

Office creation through merging of print and web communications.

Media Services, as an office, is relatively new and young in its name and role. The office formed in January 2010 when a print communications and publications office merged with an information technology web team. The web team was already exploring the use of social media, including blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and this merger allowed them to expand their social media use. Prior to this merger, other than the office of University Relations' news efforts, there was not a unified, campus-wide marketing effort and there was not an official social media strategy. As a part of this merger, it was determined by campus administration that this new office would take on the responsibility of the campus-wide social media strategy as part of an overall strategic marketing plan for the institution. The merger of the two offices allowed for the team to collaborate and evolve. It allowed for the integration of their expertise and strategy.

This merger was a strategic decision that involved significant change for the institution and had an impact on staffing in that a few positions were eliminated. According to Angela, "this seemed like the most logical thing ... and it was a big decision ... the CIO was involved in all the decisions ... it wasn't ideal for him but he knew it was the best thing." Angela's statement confirms that the campus leadership was behind and in support of this organizational change and specifically had a goal of increased social media presence for the institution. Changes like this are not easy to implement at public universities which are notorious for being bureaucratic, slow-moving, and organized in silos. However, the forward thinking leadership at this institution saw the necessity for social media marketing and

communications at the institution. They also saw value in a combination of web strategy and print strategy teams, uniting through their shared communications and marketing responsibilities. This leadership, including the president, a vice president, and the departmental director, put a strategy in place for the institution that prepared the institution to be able to use new social media technology as it evolved.

Web strategy and web communications have changed quickly over time, and the leadership at Richards College saw the need to adapt to those changes. Despite the challenge of merging the two offices and staff members having to cope with the transition, the staff members I interviewed described the merging of the two offices as essential and explain that it seems vital now for their ability to set a unified communications and marketing strategy for the institution. According to Barbara, the merger was “absolutely essential for Richards College.” She further explained that “it was a huge success” and she “almost couldn’t have imagined it any other way ... We were really lucky that we had a President that got it, which was a huge backing in it, and somebody with enough drive to make it happen, ‘cause [sic] it’s not easy.”

Through the interviews conducted for this research, I found differing opinions from participants about other institutions and whether or not they are structured the same way Media Services is. Angela felt their office had been behind their peers in terms of progress, social media strategy, and using current technologies, which she expressed when she said, “I think in my experience in going to different conferences it always seemed like we were behind.” However, Barbara felt they were leading their peers in this operational model and had become an industry leader. She recalled going to a conference and feeling like “rock star

at a thing, it was so bizarre,” because she was being asked how they got their administration’s backing and how they created their office. She interpreted from this that “it’s certainly the net goal in what people would like to have on their campuses.” In general, they seemed uncertain about how other institutions are structured to accomplish this work but agreed that industry peers had expressed admiration for their structure and praised the institutional leadership at Richards College for being strategic and creating this structure.

Collaboration with university relations office.

Media Services provides communications and web strategy for the institution, but is not the official University Relations office. University Relations is a separate office that falls under the same overarching administrative umbrella as Media Services. While Media Services provides creative web and print communication strategies for the institution, the University Relations office provides the news releases and serves as the official spokespeople for the institution. However, while Media Services is not the official news service for the institution, they still play an important public relations role and use various media to do it, including social media. The offices were described as “sister departments ... we work closely together ... there’s a lot of coordination between the two” (Angela). This statement represented discussion of how the offices are separate but work together frequently. Representatives from each office meet regularly in order to coordinate messaging and determine strategy for sharing or supporting each other’s content. In some instances, office representatives jointly manage marketing and communications efforts, like the institution’s YouTube channel. The management of the rest of the overarching social media accounts for the institution, and thus the overarching social media communications strategy, falls under

Media Services, not University Relations, although University Relations does maintain social media accounts for institutional news services. The concept of collaboration and cooperation between the two offices was a theme that repeated throughout my interviews. Barbara explained, “There’s a lot of collaboration and cooperation” between offices, and Carol indicated, “it’s not a competition ... it’s collaborative rather than competitive.” It was noted by those I interviewed how important it is for these two offices to work together to promote the institution and provide public relations, and not get in the way of each other, “scoop” each other’s work, or communicate anything that the other office would disagree with. They try not to overlap their content. Instead, they prefer to share and support each other’s content.

One important point that Angela noted in the interviews was that the University Relations is “responsible for the emergency communications on campus.” Richards College’s campus-wide communication plan outlines that all other institutional sources of communications or media are to follow the lead of the University Relations office in an event when emergency communications are necessary. When it comes to emergency communications, “we don’t want to say something we shouldn’t” (Angela).

Media Services was more popular in social media channels than the University Relations channels providing news services, as measured by the number of followers of the social media accounts. Because of this, University Relations asks Media Services to share their news content through social media with the intent of that content reaching a larger audience:

Because there is a lot of stuff that they post that we don’t, you know, and obviously we try not to scoop their news stories or the emergencies, but there are things we’ll,

they will ask us, because we have a larger audience, that there's something that's really important to Richards College and um, "can you help us get this out?"

(Barbara)

Identifying staff responsibilities and recognizing professional backgrounds.

Angela, Barbara, and Carol define the "management" of Media Services' social media accounts as posting the content, monitoring the responses to the content or out-of-the-blue contacts from the public, and engaging with the existing online communities of which they are a member on each social media site. Additionally, they include the internal management of their social media content aggregator that is hosted on their webpage. There is no single person responsible for the entire social media strategy in this office, according to Angela, "we share it." It is deliberately managed by a team of approximately five staff members, with additional members occasionally rotating onto the team who share the responsibility. Angela explained, "We have a core group of us, and then we rotate somebody new from the office into it ... to try and bring in some fresh opinions, you know, regularly, too." However, a lot of the day-to-day content posting and communicating responsibility falls to Carol, as explained by Angela, "it's probably a larger percentage in Carol's job than anyone else's". The team shares the responsibilities of strategy, decisions, determination of proper wording and phrasing, and determination of posts. There is a lot of teamwork, strategy, and bouncing ideas off of each other so that decisions don't fall on one person. Carol explained, "It's nice to bounce ideas off of, you know, oh 'do you think we should respond to this' or 'how do you think we should respond to this'?" The team provides a multitude of opinions and experiences which helps meet the internally identified need for

content posters to fully understand the institutional environment, culture, and community in order to post effectively.

Generally, the staff has web backgrounds, not public relations, communications or marketing backgrounds. When asked about their professional backgrounds, amidst laughs from the group Barbara explained, “None of it is marketing and communications!” Angela and Barbara were on the web team before the office was created through the merging of the web/information technology (IT) office and the print publications office. Carol interned with the office in an IT role. All three described their path as an evolution from web work to the inclusion of social media roles as the IT industry has changed due to changing technology. As Angela explained of their work in social media, “there was a lot of self teaching.” Carol described the evolution as a result of personal use of social media and an interest in the work professionally, “I kind of wedged myself into the social media group.” The other two described their evolution into the work as something that was born of a presumed necessity due to the increased attention social media was gaining in their professional industry. Barbara explained, “We’re the opposite story because I did not personally use social media ... until I started working here where it became my job to have a Facebook page and to know how to use these tools.”

Communicating internally through a collaborative network of support.

Media Services hosts a professional social media users group on campus for all campus communicators who are using social media in their work. This includes students and student groups. At any given time, and depending on the meeting time and agenda, the group includes anywhere from 20-160 individuals of varying interest and involvement. The need

for and existence of this group shows the increase in professional expectations for the use of social media for campus communicators. It creates an internal group for these colleagues to network with and share resources. Angela explained, “it’s great to share ideas there.” For many campus-wide staff members doing this work, it is only a portion of their job duties. According to Barbara, “they wonder if they’re on the right path, are they even doing this right.” The existence of this supportive, professional group enables them to receive the benefit of other people’s expertise and experience. Media Services staff feels they have a responsibility to guide and support other social media users on campus. Angela described that “it’s a support group.” They find that many group members seek advice, guidance, or feedback on their social media strategy for their individual area.

It’s been an opportunity, too, because not all offices, or the folks in an office who are responsible for social media for their department, where, say, it’s 10% of what they do for their entire, say, you know, the Government office, whereas in, in this office it’s part of our mission. So we’re off going to conferences and things like that, so we’re able to bring that back and sort of disseminate it to the campus that wouldn’t necessarily be able to otherwise get that kind of information. So it’s been a service in that aspect too for us, and other people, not just our office, that bring their ideas and present information that they’ve learned elsewhere. (Angela)

Media Services feels it is a positive thing that multiple offices on campus have a social media presence because it is important to have specialized, expert voices sharing their own content. The group provides an outlet for a “regular exchange of ideas ... which ... helps and encourages offices to stay active with what we’re doing in social media” (Barbara).

Media Services does not try to control these other users on campus. They don't think that sort of control is possible or effective. Barbara described a question that has come up in their professional networks:

“How do you rein in and manage all these different voices that are out there?” and I think our response is, “you don't” ... if we didn't have all of these voices out there sharing this content, you know, there's no way we would know all of that content to share.

Media Services prefers working with them to create an internal group that supports each other professionally, shares ideas and strategies, and shares each other's content. Media Services doesn't want or assume complete ownership or management of all the campus social media strategy, nor do they purport to be the only experts on campus. While the Media Services staff does take leadership roles, they strive to create a team environment where all campus social media users are sharing information, strategy, and ideas. Barbara feels that has “been an opportunity ... it's been a service in that aspect too for us, and other people, not just our office, that bring their ideas and present information that they've learned elsewhere.”

The office uses the group's internal communications channels to share information in the event of emergencies. This allows them to remind people that University Relations is the main emergency communications source for the institution. The existence of the group has created a network of campus communicators and makes internal campus communications easier.

Internal perceptions of success and expertise.

Members of Media Services express their feeling that they conduct their work on social media “really well for a school our size” (Carol). They have gained this sentiment through observation of how other institutions conduct social media communications. They use the number of followers each institutional account has as a measure of success. Their sense of accomplishment is supported by industry recognition and multiple national awards for their web and social media efforts (Institution Website, 2012). They also attribute their success to the unique office structure and attention they have given to social media as an official strategy. Of their success, Angela said, “Some of that may be attributed to the fact that we do have this ... unit ... that’s right here.” Barbara added that because they have their office and it is structured the way it is, “We’re able to dedicate time to it.”

The office feels it has a responsibility to review and stay on top of new trends in social media and technology and be the experts on campus for their cross-campus peers. The office recommends a social media strategy where you start with one social media platform, set a communications strategy for that platform, do it well, and grow from there. They advise their peers on campus and at industry conferences to avoid trying to use all the available social media platforms at once when starting from the beginning. Barbara explained, “It can be very tempting to come on the scene now and know that there’s [sic] all these different tools out there.” Carol added, “If you don’t have anything to say, don’t make a foursquare or a Facebook page just to have a Facebook page.”

Based on their experience, the office also stresses the importance of regular, constant, fresh content and communications activity on social media sites. Angela explained that it

“looks worse if you just haven’t posted for three months” than if you have no social media presence at all. This is because the culture of the social media sites is to maintain activity. Therefore, they strongly suggest that offices have a behind the scenes strategy for how the sites will be used. Carol said, “you really have to be run well, don’t just cross-post so you can be on both.” This is particularly relevant when an academic leader or administrator asks an office to start using social media for their communications. This office stresses that leadership should be strategic and if they make this request, they should provide the resources (primarily staffing) to set and implement the social media strategy. Don’t get on social media “just because the Dean or the Chair says ‘We need to have a Facebook page’” (Angela).

Finally, based on their success, the office recommends an integration of whatever multiple social media platforms are being used for the benefit of the public audience. There are ways to integrate the various social media platforms so that they enhance the user experience and provide more value to the user.

Using Online Media to “Tell the Story” and Communicate with the Public

Both the staff and the policy documents of Media Services describe the office as a unit that supports university communications and utilizes various media outlets to “tell the Richards College story.” The theme of “telling the Richards College story” was the most prevalent throughout all the sources of data in this case study. The Media Services website (2012) says they “come to work every day thinking about ways to explain and promote what happens on our campus.” The use of social media tools is just one part of their work, and they strive to integrate and combine all types of media, including social, web pages, print,

photography, video, writing, and more (Institution Website, 2012). This is described by

Angela:

We provide communications for Richards College and departments in different ways by web, print, social media, video, YouTube, to match what the college's goals, strategically, the messages that are in our strategic plan ... we do provide the top level communications, marketing efforts for Richards College.

The overall mission of Media Services, as described by the staff members in my interviews, is to provide overarching communication and marketing efforts for Richards College. Barbara explained, "Generally I think the short version of what our office does is tries to communicate and tell the ... personal side and just the story of Richards College and what our mission is." They provide these efforts for the institution as a whole, as well as provide individualized services for units on campus as needed.

Media Services utilizes a variety of media and strategies to accomplish their communications and marketing goals, including print as well as online efforts. They conduct strategic communications that are in line with the strategic plan for the institution. Variations of the phrase "telling the institution's story" came up repeatedly in the research, both in interviews and in documents (Institution Website, 2012; Angela; Barbara; Carol). Staff members of Media Services describe their role and purpose as communicating the mission and initiatives of the institution in a personal way through a variety of media outlets as well as connecting the various audiences and publics to the institution through their communications efforts. There are four key messages or themes that Richards College tries to convey through its strategic communications and marketing plan: a lifelong connection,

personal connections (“your Richards College”), an engaged community, and public excellence (Institution Website, 2012; Barbara). Carol describes these themes by saying, “We have a set of initiatives that we’re supposed to be trying to support. And some of those are related to students and some of those are related to alumni or donors and trying to connect all of those different audiences into one.”

According to the institution’s website (2012), Media services believes that “Facebook is one of our most powerful tools, used to engage alumni, students, faculty, staff and other members of the Richards College community.” Social media can be used for “showing off great events, great photography and great fun” and can provide a “powerful and popular way for our students, staff and faculty to tell the Richards College story” (Institution Website, 2012). In an online portfolio of their social media pages, the office repeats that they use these media to promote what is happening on campus and “tell the institution’s story” (Institution Website, 2012). In particular, they describe their Facebook page as “one of our most powerful tools, used to engage alumni, students, faculty, staff and other members of the Richards College community” (Institution Website, 2012). The office attempts to represent the whole institution through its use of social media. According to Barbara, “I think we try and keep it balanced ... There’s a conscious effort to make sure we talk about all the different areas of campus.” Similarly, in addition to managing and generating their own social media communications efforts, the office provides services and resources for other offices on campus who want to have social media communications strategies (Institution Website, 2012). Among their other resources, the social media efforts in particular include the official Social Media Strategy document for Richards College (Institution Website,

2012), a comment policy for social media sites, the campus-wide social media user's group which promotes networking, support, and benchmarking on campus, and a social media content aggregator (Institution Website, 2012).

Social media communications strategy to inform, connect, and engage constituents.

Richards College's official social media strategy document produced by Media Services states that "a social media strategy is a communications strategy" (Institution Website, 2012). It states the purpose of social media is to reach the public and engage them in a genuine conversation in a new way. It specifically outlines that at Richards College, the purpose of social media includes creating a lifelong connection with alumni, offering customer service to the public, informing and educating the public about the institution, building a community, and supporting the academic mission and branding of the institution. The strategy also outlines that Richards College values conversation, feedback, and the sharing of content through their social media outlets. Promising to be responsive to customers, they encourage "concrete and substantive dialogue" and specifically recognize that theirs isn't the only "voice" of Richards College. They strive for "reasonable dialogue and offer a balanced perspective and multiple points of view" (Institution Website, 2012). The document consistently describes social media sites as communications outlets and sets a goal for the office to continue to share content that is unique and central to the aforementioned themes and messages of the institution.

Angela described an increase in social media use by the office since its creation when she said, "We knew that we really had this responsibility to communicate so much, and you

know, it's communicating a lot, but ... filtering and making sure you communicate the things that are of interest to all of your audience on social media." Barbara described their use of social media as "an evolving, constant project ... You never get that sense that ... 'we're done' ... which is fun, and challenging."

The use of multiple media outlets in their work is purposeful in order to provide an "engaging web presence" (Institution Website, 2012) that meets their public's expectations for use of social media. They strive to create "integrated and coordinated communication" which will "explain and promote what happens on campus" (Institution Website, 2012). They also strive to share the campus's "themes and messages in a consistent, flexible and powerful way" (Institution Website, 2012). The office uses multiple social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, foursquare, Flickr, and blogs. They offer this variety knowing that different members of their public use different social media channels. They also created an aggregator that they host on their website that features content from all their social media channels in one place, in case members of their public want to see their activity there, rather than directly on the individual social media sites. This is an attempt to make social media use easier for all their public audiences, especially those that aren't technologically savvy. While this aggregator site has received less web traffic than the office anticipated it would, office members still feel its presence is valuable. Like all the individual social media sites, it provides a place for images and videos and other heartwarming content to be accessible for public audiences that love Richards College and want to maintain a connection.

Determining and posting content that furthers office mission and supports goals.

In terms of content, Carol, who does most of the posting on Facebook and Twitter, describes the value of repurposing existing content which includes supporting peers in other offices at Richards College who are doing the same work. This is often done through re-posting something that other accounts have posted. There is also value in creating new content. Barbara elaborates:

Well, I think we try and keep it balanced ... there's a conscious effort to make sure we talk about all the different areas of campus ... top-level initiatives will get a higher focus, but we'll also ... make sure that we do touch on all of the aspects of Richards College which I think falls into making sure that we tell the entire Richards College story.

Carol and Barbara also described that the level of posting and type of posting varies across social media. Different social media outlets lend themselves toward different content processes because each outlet has its own culture. Barbara describes the use of Facebook as “more of a direct level of engagement and a little more official ... You can still do the sharing kind of stuff, from other people's things, but it's more, come up with an original, creative, clever something to say.”

The office attempts to have constant, approximately daily, posting action on their social media accounts with an understanding that posting activity may increase surrounding certain events. For example, the institution's Homecoming was taking place during the month I studied the office's Facebook activity. This activity surrounding concrete events or news items is strategic and is something the office attempts to plan in advance. They also

plan strategy around the time of year and what the audience is doing during that time of year. Barbara explained this process of evaluating and setting strategy occurs “every couple of months, you know, what’s coming up and what we’re going to be doing.” For example, during the summer they acknowledge that their student audience is, for the most part, not on campus, so they strategize ways to utilize their social media accounts to keep the student audience connected.

And in the summer something we’ve talked about, at first we were thinking, well, the summer, things kind of slow down, ... but then we’re like, wait, no, that’s when we need to try and keep that connection going the most, because everybody’s at home, they’re not really thinking about Richards College right now, so let’s actually try and keep that going and keep them connected to campus though the summer. (Barbara)

Not only does the office strive for daily posting, but they set strategy around what time of day posts are most effective at generating communication. They feel that is early morning and late afternoon. The office applies their timing strategy more or less stringently to posts depending on how important they deem the content. They base this strategy on industry-wide evaluations and take suggested best-practices from prominent figures in the professional communities of information technology and social media communications. These best practices are often suggested by these industry thought leaders through analysis (often non-scholarly) of user activity data from the social media sites. Carol explains:

It’s usually try to at least have something to post in the morning and try and post in, like, the later afternoon too, ‘cause [sic] according to all the magical statistics floating around, people check, check all their stuff in the morning, like, first when they get

into work, or first when they wake up or whatever, and then, usually sort of the doldrum [sic] of the afternoon is another spike of traffic so having ... so having a, having a really interesting post either in the morning or the afternoon is key, and then if there's something that is just sort of like, eh, well we should probably mention this, I just kind of throw it up whenever.

Social media practitioners are paying attention to the topics of when and how to post because of recent changes in the programming of social media sites, particularly Facebook, which actually affect the visibility of content posting. Professional users of the site who want their content viewed and interacted with by as much of their audience as possible have to be aware how the software works and what changes or strategies exist at the actual social media site itself.

Because of a recent change in how Facebook presents posts in individual's visible feeds, the office has found that the wording and strategy behind the posting is important, especially if you are striving for activity and interaction. Barbara explained, "We try and be aware and responsive to what Facebook is doing ... and how we can try and stay up in people's news feeds." Facebook's algorithm on how it presents and keeps posts in people's visible feeds is based on the response the post is getting. A decrease in activity also decreases the possibility of the post being easily seen by other users. This is described by Carol:

It just means that there's been a lot of stuff online; you just have to write even more interesting content. You can't just throw up whatever you need to say ... you need to

phrase it nicely and you need to put a video or a photo or something in with it to actually get people to pay attention to it.

The office also found it is important to pay attention to the technicalities behind the post, including the link being mobile device-friendly, since more and more people are viewing content and social media sites on their mobile devices. Overall, “there’s a lot of that kind of tweaking that we do, sort of, micro-tweaking along the way.” (Barbara). Media services is clearly putting thought into their strategy for how, when, and what they post on social media in an attempt to accomplish their communications missions and goals.

Communicating and interacting with the public.

It became apparent in my interviews that the office is aware that large and important audiences for them on social media are the institution’s alumni and prospective students and they want to maintain positive relationships with these audiences. Barbara said “There’s an aspect of customer service” which manifests itself when members of the public audience ask questions, sometimes related to original posted content, and sometimes unrelated or out of the blue. The office is committed to answering these requests or connecting the person to the right contact on campus for further assistance. Carol explained:

People will put up a question or something and we’ll either try and get it answered or find someone who knows the answer to it ... we’ll at least refer them to, you know, the right channel ... at least direct them to the correct answer, even if we can’t provide it ourselves.

Examples might be: clarifying content from an original post, connecting a prospective student with the Admissions Office, or connecting an alumnus with the Registrar’s Office for

a transcript. An example of this occurred in my observations. A prospective student commented on a post with the question, “Everything needed to apply is on Common App right?” The office responded, “All of the application requirements are available online at Richards College’s admissions website.”

Unfortunately, Angela briefly expressed that the office doesn’t “have the resources to respond” to every post, and the Facebook content data discussed later shows this. However, the office strives for interaction and considers it a necessity to respond to direct questions or to correct blatant falsehoods or misinformation that is posted by other users. Angela explains that “if somebody, you know, blatantly puts something that’s just wrong, that’s either about a policy here or something ... that’s something we want to correct, like, that’s actually not true.” Carol added the importance of “making sure there isn’t a false rumor or something going around or anything like that.”

Through my interviews it became clear that the office placed great importance on proper wording of posts and of responses to comments in order to communicate properly and to maintain positive relationships. Angela explained:

You have to be really careful with the way that you interact. I think we have to be really careful about the things that we post ... sometimes we think twice and we ask each other ... about, you know, certain posts, or about how she [Carol] should word something.

I observed a Facebook posting while waiting for the second part of my interviews. Prior to the beginning of our interview, Carol was preparing a Facebook comment in response to a user’s comment on a previous post from that same day. She asked Barbara to

review her comment text prior to actually posting it. They discussed the language and Barbara provided support and approval. Their discussion was open, team driven, collaborative and supportive in nature. It was clear that the text of the post, the language used, and the explanation the post was providing was important to the staff and they wanted to be sure they said it in a proper way. This observation was powerful because it supported the participants' description of both how they worked as a unit and how they place value on the wording of their posted content. Angela added, "If you have the right people running it I don't think you risk saying anything ... [or] putting out any bad image about Richards College."

Using personas: tapping into the fun side of social media.

As a result of some campus focus groups, the office created a few "personas" on social media, which are unofficial social media accounts for characters on the campus, including a historical campus figure that exists in statue form on campus and an animal that is indigenous and well known to the campus community. The office feels that these personas offer fun for users, but are also strategic in their effort to increase a sense of community and engagement. Barbara explains:

They're a sort of less official way of engaging with all of our audiences ... by having a little more fun, they're not always needing to pump out the official messaging ... they can have a little more fun with it, comment on things that maybe we wouldn't be able to otherwise. But their goal is to keep that lifelong connection going, and if somebody can have a fun, positive experience with this silly character which may not on paper look like it has any value, then who knows what that last piece of straw, you

know, is that gave them to give or gave them to decide to attend here when it was between us and another school and [say], “wait, that was so funny ... I love that fun side of Richards College.”

Based on follower counts and anecdotal interactions, the office is happy with the performance and public response to these personas. In fact, the existence of their office’s personas has spawned the creation of other personas under the control of other individuals or offices. These personas now interact with each other on the social media accounts and the office feels the public enjoys this and responds positively to it. Members of the office feel these online experiences of the personas help them meet the mission of their social media use. They help “tell the story” of the institution and provide the public a unique way for to interact with the institution that is unique to these social media sites.

Review of Facebook content.

In the month that I reviewed the Facebook content posted by the office there were 23 posts. See Table 1 and Table 2 below for a complete summary of the posted content. I reviewed, analyzed, and classified posts based on their type (status update, photo, video, link to a story or website), whether or not the posted information was from a source within the institution or external, and the general topic. I then tracked how many “likes,” “shares,” positive comments, negative comments, and unrelated comments each received. Finally I tracked whether or not the office responded to any interactions and how many dialogues took place in the interactions.

The most common type of posts were links to internal institutional information, split evenly between unique content created by Media Services, Richards College news, or

Richards College event information. The event information was particularly relevant in the month in which I reviewed the content because Homecoming took place during that time period. One post included two links, one to internal content and one to external content, both on the same subject, a piece of institutional news. The remaining six posts were two links to external links at external news sources, a campus photo, two status updates that posed questions to the public, and an update to the page's informational content. This page content update reflected the addition of the official social media comment policy to the Facebook page. These posts show that the actual content posted does support the stated mission of the office's use of social media, informing, promoting, connecting with, and engaging constituents.

The posts averaged 20 "likes" (where the public can select a link to signify that they "like" the content without entering a comment), the highest receiving 88 likes and the lowest not receiving any. This indicates some level of engagement among constituents. However, the average "shares" (where the public users can select a link to share the content with their social network directly from where the institutions shared it) was 1 with the highest being 14 and the majority not being shared. This indicates that this particular method of engagement on Facebook is not often utilized by the institution's constituents in order to engage with the institution. The average number of positive comments from members of the public in response to a post was two, 12 being the highest and zero the lowest. Three posts received negative comments, one receiving one, one receiving two, and the third receiving five. There were three posts where the office posted an additional comment in the comment stream of the post as a means of additional communication with the other commenters. There were five

posts where members of the public commented on the post with completely unrelated content. For example, three appeared to be in another language, possibly spam. Another example of an unrelated post appears to be what Angela referred to when she discussed comments made by a political organization to further their own messaging, “Didn’t you watch Brewster’s Millions by now, vote ‘None of the Above!’ about Democratic politics, but it is fiction, but made millions and a start out of Richard Pryor.” Not only does this quote not relate to the initial post, it doesn’t appear to make sense. This user posted similar comments on other occasions which were purposefully ignored by the Media Services staff.

In terms of dialogue, I identified four posts where it seemed actual dialogue was taking place. For two of them, the dialogue was a direct result of the post itself being a question posed by Media Services and members of the public responding with answers. In one the office asked “Which new restaurant are you most looking forward to trying?” in a new campus location. The second question asked, “How was your 2011 Homecoming? What was your favorite part of the weekend?” Posting questions like this did generate more dialogue than non-questions. The third was an instance of a member of the public posting an admissions question unrelated to the initial post and the office responded. The fourth involved a dialogue where a member of the public posed a question related to the initial post. In that post, 3 other separate dialogues took place between public users that did not involve the office. This particular conversation thread received a lot of interaction because it was about a new community initiative that benefited students and alumni but changed an official process those groups were traditionally used to. There was feedback about the changes and confusion over how the new initiative and process would work. I also identified two of what

Table 4.1
Summary of Responses to Office’s Facebook Content in One Month

Post #	Type	Likes	Shares	+ response	- response	Unrelated response	Office Response
1	Link Internal Office content	8	1	1			
2	Link Internal Institution News	35				1	
3	Link Internal Institution News	26	1	2			
4	Link External Local News	12		1	1		
5	Link/Question Internal Homecoming	12	1	1		1	
6	Update Update Page Content Added comment policy to description						
7	Link/Question Internal Institution News	8		2			
8	Photo campus Dining Facilities	68	1	2		3	
9	Link Internal Office content	6		1			
10	Link Internal Homecoming Video	52	14	9			
11	Links (2) Internal & External Institution News	11					
12	Link Internal School News	8					
13	Link Internal Office content	20					
14	Link Internal Institution News	12		3		2	
15	Link External Local Community Organization	20	2	7	5		1
16	Status Update Linkless Statement Homecoming	88		3			
17	Status Update Linkless Question Homecoming	16		12			1
18	Link Internal Institution Events	7					
19	Link Internal Institution Events	8					
20	Link Internal Office content	4					
21	Link Internal Office content	10		1	2	2	1
22	Link Internal Athletics	32		1			
23	Link Internal Office content	10	1	4			
Average		20.57	.91	2.17	.35	.39	.13

Note. Table 4.1 describes the content of each post, what kind of engagement it received, and if Media Services responded to public responses.

Table 4.2
Summary of Dialogues Conducted with Office on Facebook in One Month

Post #	Type	# of dialogues	# of other's dialogues	Missed Opportunity
1	Link Internal Office content			
2	Link Internal Institution News			
3	Link Internal Institution News			
4	Link External Local News			
5	Link/Question Internal Homecoming			1
6	Update Update Page Content Added comment policy to description			
7	Link/Question Internal Institution News	2		
8	Photo campus Dining Facilities			
9	Link Internal Office content			
10	Link Internal Homecoming Video			
11	Links (2) Internal & External Institution News			
12	Link Internal School News			
13	Link Internal Office content			
14	Link Internal Institution News		1	1
15	Link External Local Community Organization	1	3	
16	Status Update Linkless Statement Homecoming			
17	Status Update Linkless Question Homecoming	12		
18	Link Internal Institution Events			
19	Link Internal Institution Events			
20	Link Internal Office content			
21	Link Internal Office content	1		
22	Link Internal Athletics			
23	Link Internal Office content			

Note. Table 4.2 describes the content of each post, the number of dialogues each received, and missed opportunities for dialogue.

I call “missed opportunities” for the office to engage in dialogue where a member of the public posted a question and the office didn’t respond (“Does Professor [name] have a Facebook page?” and “Are they free?”), or another member of the public responded instead of the office (the other outside member of the public posted a link with further information about the initial posting in response to someone’s preceding question).

The three posts in the month that generated the most positive feedback were a status update about Homecoming, a campus photo, and a link to an internal video that was also about Homecoming. Angela commented on the popularity of these types of posts:

Everybody seems to respond to you know, photographs. And so the use of Flickr, you know, posting that on Facebook sometimes, or the use of the galleries, and the photography that we use in our website, you know, is I think is something that, that they relate to and makes them feel warm and fuzzy, you know, like they’re back here. The video also received the most shares. The Media Services staff believes that visual posts like photos and videos create a sense of emotion and connection which is why they generate the most positive feedback. Following that logic, it makes sense that content about Homecoming would also generate positive interactions from alumni.

According to the staff members who review the postings, and supported by the Facebook content data, the institution’s Facebook page receives a lot of encouraging comments, what I might call “cheerleading” comments where users are expressing general support for the content or, even more generally, school spirit for the institution. Examples of “cheerleading” comments that were observed were, “Go [mascot]!,” “Very creative!,” “yessss,” “great photo!,” “And THAT’S why I love this school!!!,” and “haha awesome.” A

particularly positive comment was “Love it. So much cool research happening on this campus. Kudos to the faculty and kudos to the staff who write those stories.” Carol described this by saying:

I think a lot of it based on the content that we put up there, it’s just a lot of “yay!” or you know, “I like Richards College!” You know, “Cool! This is neat!” and this sort of encouragement stuff.

The post that generated the most negative feedback, but also had the second highest amount of dialogue, was the previously mentioned link to external information related to the new community initiative. People expressed displeasure about the effort and engaged in a dialogue about not being able to find further information they were looking for related to the post, and that the office wasn’t helpful in providing that further information. The post with the most dialogue was one of the Homecoming-related posts mentioned above where the post itself was a question, eliciting responses from the public, this one in particular asked people to share their favorite part of Homecoming after it was over.

In general, the institution is generating communication, connections, and engagement with its constituents on Facebook, although it is yet to be determined if it is at a successful level, which is discussed more below.

Assessing the Value and the Risk of using Social Media

Value.

Angela, Barbara, and Carol feel that the value of their website is that it serves as a resource for people, especially prospective students and their parents. A value to their social media use is that it creates a place for alumni to go to further their “lifelong connection,” one

of the themes that is promoted in the office's mission. The office feels that alumni rarely visit the main institutional website for this. Angela explained:

I think a big asset to this is that one of the [institution's] missions is "lifelong connections," you know, that's really been a lot of push lately with the message here is a "lifelong connection," connecting back with alums, having them connect back with us, and I think that's one vehicle that, you know, they're coming to the website, probably when they need something, they're not just coming to the website to browse it probably.

A value that is unique to social media, particularly Facebook, is that users opt-in to receiving communications from the institution on that site by officially following the institution's page. This allows for the institution's content to be automatically pushed to and viewed on the individual's personal stream of information. Barbara discussed this value:

They have chosen and said, I am interested in what you have to say, um, so you know your audience is interested in what you have to say, and they are just, I mean, imagine they're sort of a, a thankful sense that that information is being put out ... Um, and the fact that, what, over 26,000 of them are still there, and haven't un-liked us tells me that they're clearly liking what they're getting.

This unique value of social media enables the institution to provide a constant push of content to the individual which encourages a continued positive relationship. Angela discussed this value as "forcing that connection, so I think that's one huge, you know huge advantage to using social media."

Another value in social media is that they allow institutions to be where their audience is. According to Barbara, “if this is where all of your audiences are, then that’s where you need to be ... You certainly want to come through their news feed and share something that’s going on at” the institution. Social media sites are providing a place for institutions to share information. Due to the popularity of sites like Facebook, users are seeing shared information from the institution that they may not have seen otherwise because while they never would’ve looked at the original source, they have made that connection on Facebook and “they’re learning stuff that they wouldn’t have necessarily learned otherwise” (Barbara).

Another value to social media is that it enables the office to put a personal face, and sometimes fun face, to the institution which helps it seem less institutional. The personas mentioned above are a perfect example of this. Carol described this value:

I think that it puts, puts a human face... makes us less institutional and that you know, you, we can have fun ... And it also provides the community a way to tell us what they think as opposed to like, sending, you know people don’t really send an email to complain about something anymore. They’ll complain about it on Twitter and then someone needs to respond to that. So it’s a way to engage with the community in a more modern way.

This also described a final value to social media, which is that it gives the community a place to provide feedback in an environment where feedback and interaction is encouraged. Social media give the public a way to engage with the institution, according to Barbara, “a more

approachable way.” It is meeting the needs and desires of the users by using technology they are already using and expect institutions to use.

Risk.

When assessing risk Barbara said “there’s always a risk when you put yourself out there.” The concept of risk came up multiple times in my interviews. While the interaction between the office and the public is a value, it is also seen as a risk, because it is within the interaction where negative communications can take place. Angela felt “that’s probably the largest risk in using social media is just the interactive part of it. Which can also be a plus, but, it’s also a risk.” Barbara also expressed this sentiment, “Your risk and reward are kind of similar and hand in hand with that. When you allow comments and allow interaction, it gives them an opportunity to share their opinion, but it gives them an opportunity to share their opinion.” This is where it became evident how much emphasis the office places on the proper wording and accuracy of content. Angela expressed how important it is for anyone who is creating and posting content to be informed about the institution’s culture, history, nuances, and politics of the institutional community. This is why, as I both observed and was told, a culture has formed in the office where the people responsible for posting content often consult with one another prior to creating a post to be sure the wording and tone of the post is what the office wants to convey. This is also where the office finds great value in its comments policy, discussed further below, as a result of the risk of negative interactions.

There is an inherent risk to being visible in the public eye. Countering the risk of being visible is a value that the public that has opted to follow you and create this community that is generally behind you. This office has found that their public generally offers support

and self correction in defense of the institution, in the rare occasion that it is needed, even before institution has the chance to. One example of this was observed on Facebook. Multiple comments and questions were posted in response to a link the office posted about a new community initiative and before the office had a chance to respond to some of them, another individual wrote, “Seriously people, you are alumni of Richards College, reading comprehension should be old hat. If you follow the link given to you...” and he went on to answer the questions and concerns that had been raised. Barbara described this phenomenon:

But the beauty of it is how much, how self-correcting it can be, ‘cause [sic] it’s not just you out there, it’s like, you’ve got the support of the rest of the 22,000 uh, you know, friends and family of Richards College that are out there ... it’s amazing how often they come to your defense before it’s even necessary.

While the interaction on social media can be both a value and a risk, it has primarily been a value to this office. Angela said “it’s been more on the plus side” for Media Services.

Minimizing risk of social media through strategy and a comment policy.

The theme of risk was particularly evident when participants discussed their blog strategy and social media comments policy. The office supports the use of blogs across campus. The blogs are moderated which means the office reviews the blog content before it is posted, and comments are reviewed and removed if necessary. It took the office a while to gain administrative permission to even allow comments to be posted in reaction to the blogs. This policy is new and was approved and made official during the month that I conducted my interviews and content review. This process was described by Angela as a “struggle” because administration expressed a fear that allowing comments might invite the public to

post negative things, and then those negative statements would exist on their own site. The administration feared that something bad would be said “that’s gonna [sic] hurt the University” (Angela). The administration’s fear was fueled by a recent history of negative events and opinions being expressed in various forms on the internet as a result of alumni discontent with the institution’s former president. According to Angela, campus leadership “was just so sensitive about the media, you know, and everybody being so angry at Richards College.” In order to address this concern, the office created a social media comment policy that makes it clear to the public that the blogs (and other social media) are a part of the office’s web strategy and they reserve the right to moderate and remove comments as they deem necessary. Members of the office feel strongly that the existence of the ability to post comments on a blog is a necessity because that makes it a social medium and they “want it to be interactive, that’s what a blog is” (Angela). They also feel that if the public really wanted to create a negative online presence toward the institution, they would create their own place online to do it, and would probably not communicate that negativity on the institution’s blogs. According to Angela, “If they’re really angry about something, they’re going to find other ways to do it.” And they’ve yet to have a problem, “the only thing we’ve ever had to remove in the last year is spam” (Angela).

Beyond the blogs, the office encourages interaction on their social media sites but, though their social media comments policy gives themselves the authority to remove negative interactions. According to the policy, the office feels their social media sites are places that their public can “learn about and enjoy some of the great things happening at the university (Institution Website, 2012).” In this policy they encourage their social media

followers to engage in interaction and communication through posts and comments. The policy ensures that this interaction and dialogue occurs between them and their public in a civil and respectful way, allowing the office to address and remove communication that is negative or harmful in nature to the institution or anyone viewing it online. The comment policy allows the institution to create “a safe, vibrant and respectful online community (Institution Website, 2012).” The office has had very few incidents where they removed comments or content posted by members of their public audience. “We’ve never had a problem with anyone getting out of control on there” (Angela).

The creation of the comments policy was also helpful in addressing the emergence of a campus group that was posting comments on Facebook that were just meant to further their group’s mission and were unrelated to the initially posted content. They were using the site as a place to gain visibility. Angela discussed this issue and said social media “are vehicles of interaction, you are going to, you could get, you know, responses, and then you have to deal with, “do I respond to that?” and “do I not respond to that?” And if you do, how do we do it?” Internal strategy discussions surrounding how the office should handle this type of situation concluded with a general consensus in the office that they will not delete this type of post if it is not negative, harmful, or threatening to anyone, but they won’t respond to it either. Essentially, they will ignore irrelevant interactions. Angela explains that in general, with the exception of extremely offensive comments as defined in the comments policy:

You don’t delete anything. You don’t respond to it ... and that’s how we handle that.

We just don’t respond on Facebook to a lot of that ... And it doesn’t really do us any

good to respond to it 'cause [sic] they're just going to get into a conversation that we don't want to be in.

The nature of the social media sites is that content eventually becomes less visible and is soon out of sight, out of mind. Angela continues:

You know, somebody will post something they might be angry about but we just ignore those and we don't usually tend to have, they don't keep following up ... if you ignore them long enough it falls off the wall.

Still, the comments policy was established so that future incidents that did contain negative or harmful content could be addressed.

Assessing Effectiveness

Angela relies on Carol to track Media Services' social media use and statistics. The office doesn't have standard metrics or a strategy for assessing the success of their social media activity. They use anecdotal reviews of activity and get a general sense of how things feel like they are going. They admit that as long as momentum seems to be moving forward (as defined by increasing follower counts and positive reactions and interactions), they have been comfortable. They would be concerned if they saw traffic, followers, or activity slow down but "honestly, it's been mostly 'let's keep things going in this direction' ... And the more engagement, the more comments and the more likes, the better, but I don't think we've necessarily, specifically set a [goal]" (Barbara).

The office does use some of the basic, built in measurement tools that the social media sites offer, as well as some basic free tools they have found online. It was said of one new tool they have recently implemented for measuring content statistics, "we haven't used it

too much yet, 'cause [sic] we just started using it a couple months ago, so now we're finally getting enough data to really get a good feel on what's going on, but, that's sort of the main metrics tool we're using" (Carol).

Through comments in the interview, the office seems to have the assumption that if followers haven't left, they must like the interaction they are getting with the institution. One measureable goal might be to gain the number of followers equal to number of alumni. This figure was discussed in the group interview as a potential goal for Facebook fans. Initial goals were established when the office first started using social media because they wanted to increase their follower counts, but at this time goals simply seem to be to keep the work going. Barbara explained these thoughts:

Once you hit 20,000 [followers] you really just want to keep things going up. And we would be concerned if we saw the comments or likes, sort of, disappearing ... and we would talk and we would redirect sort of the topics that we're posting.

Summary

All the sources of data in this study converge and paint a unified picture of how this office uses social media for public relations and communications. The statements made in the interviews are in line with the policies and procedures outlined in the strategy documents. The interviews, observed actions, and observed Facebook content are also all in line with each other, signaling that the strategy in this office is strong, accepted, and adhered to. Certain important themes emerged, including the uniqueness of the structure and organization of the Media Services office, combining web and print communications strategies in one organization. There is a sense at Richards College that this is an important

structure to have in order to serve other campus communicators as well as to provide quality, effective communications and media strategy. The concept of having a defined communications strategy was also important and Media Services specifically stated a mission to “tell Richards College’s story” in order to inform, connect, engage, and communicate with constituents. Studying the actual efforts through social media showed that engagement does exist and is mostly positive. However, not all of the social media efforts generate dialogic communication and there were instances where Media Services missed opportunities to engage in dialogic communication with constituents. The most engaging content appeared to be photos or videos that captured constituents’ attention or event information, all of which connects with constituents on emotional levels. Dialogue was most often generated as a result of negative responses from constituents because this often provided the opportunity for Media Services to provide customer service and communicate on behalf of Richards College. Despite the negativity, the value of social media as a communication tool outweighs the risk of vulnerability at Richards College. What remains to be determined is if the social media strategy and use by the office is effectively generating the outcomes they strive for. On face value, they seem to, but it cannot be determined to what extent the success can be defined.

The remaining chapter will review these findings through the lens of dialogic communications and dialogic public relations theory to determine if these theories adequately describe the office’s use of social media for communications. It will also discuss the implications of these findings and suggest further research.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter will review the findings of the case study of how Richards College's Media Services office is using social media for public relations. It will also evaluate the usefulness of dialogic communications and dialogic public relations theories in framing research of social media use by higher education public relations practitioners. Theoretical and practical implications will be explored with recognition of this case study's limitations. Finally, suggestions for further research will be presented.

How the Institution uses Social Media

This case study asked, how does one institution of higher education use social media for public relations? The sources of data in this study support the fact that the office's mission is to promote the institution, tell the institution's story, and connect with and engage the institution's constituents through a distinct strategy on multiple social media platforms. The office's use of Facebook supports their stated mission and goals, and is successful in promoting the institution and engaging their constituents, although they have not determined an adequate way to assess the extent of the success of the engagement yet.

This research found that the organizational structure of this office, one that includes communications staff and information technology staff together in one department who work together to create social media strategy (among other things), is a relatively new format on this campus, and possibly in higher education in general. The office was specifically created to provide communications for the institution and integrate social media use into the overall communication strategy. Their work is guided by the institution's overall strategic marketing and communications plan and is supported by Richards College's highest levels of

leadership. The office's mission is to "tell the story" of the institution, which includes sharing stories and information about the history, the people, the events, and the places, all through their multiple communications outlets. Their communications are intended to support the mission of the institution, personally engage their public, provide customer service, create a sense of community, and create a lifelong connection to Richards College. This office is not the main news source for the institution, but they are responsible for campus communications and some aspects of public relations. Media Services is an industry leader in social media and web communications work, as defined by national colleagues who admire their work and strive to emulate their process, and also as recognized by national professional awards. Media Services is also a leader and a resource on campus for other communicators conducting similar work. Interestingly, none of the staff members I interviewed received their professional education or training in communications, marketing, or social media. They all have web backgrounds and have evolved into their roles as social media communicators.

This office uses social media with a purposeful communications strategy. They describe their social media communications plan as ongoing. The strategy and posting is determined and implemented through a team effort. They promote and encourage interactions with the public as well as customer service on their social media sites. They emphasize the importance of posting the proper content for each medium with the proper wording, using each medium to its unique usefulness. They also experiment with fun aspects that social media sites offer, such as the ability to create unofficial personas, or post photos and videos. The office describes the potential interaction on social media as both a value and

a risk, but the potential value outweighs the risk. They have mitigated much of the risk by reserving the right to end harmful dialogue and remove harmful content from their sites. The members of the office express that social media communications is not only vital to their work, but it is expected and it is their responsibility. It does not appear that the office has a concrete strategy in place yet to assess the success of their social media strategy, other than constantly reviewing the interactions and anecdotally keeping pulse of the interactions and dialogues. One reason for this is the lack of an industry-wide standard for assessment of this type of work.

The Facebook content itself supported the statements made by the staff members. They did post regularly, although not necessarily daily as they indicated was their goal. The most common type of post was a link to internal content, “telling the story” of the institution by sharing news about Richards College, its people, or events, either through new content that Media Services created or repurposed content from other offices at Richards College. This fact shows that their social media use follows their stated goals and mission to inform, connect, and engage constituents. The majority of the interactions on the Facebook page were positive, although actual dialogue was rare (only occurring in four of the 26 posts reviewed). The Facebook content review revealed that fun, visually stimulating or reminiscent content (photos, videos, and events) is the most interacted with by users. Additionally, interactions and dialogues with users take place most often when there has been an overt attempt by the office to ask the audience a question, or when content needs clarification. Other dialogues occasionally occur when community members are seeking some form of customer service. Negative interactions occurred rarely and were in response

to the content of the post, but the negative interactions produced dialogue (more so than other types of interactions).

Viewing Findings through Dialogic Communications and Dialogic Public Relations

Lens

This case study also asked, does the use of social media for public relations reflect the theories of dialogic communications and dialogic public relations? In general, dialogic communications describes a two-way dialogue between the institution and their public (constituents) that is developed through principles in a communication process and is grounded in a mutual understanding of both parties, regardless of agreement (Kent, Taylor, & McAllister-Spooner, 2008). The social media use of this office did encourage a two-way dialogue with their online followers in some, but not all, posting instances. Other instances were monologic because they were pushing out a piece of news content that didn't inherently seek dialogue, although sometimes dialogue did occur as a result of the post and at the instigation of a member of the public. The office's stated mission of promoting what is occurring at the institution and telling the institution's story is more monologic than dialogic. Because feedback can come in the form of a comment, a "like," or a "share," it can sometimes be monologic and sometimes dialogic. This office strives to create content and utilize social media for multiple purposes, some which are more suitably described as monologic communication and some as more suitable described as dialogic communication. Current research does not point to either monologic or dialogic communication as being the "right" or "wrong" way for an institution to communicate with their public, but the desired outcome of the communication activities will determine which type of communication the

institution is striving for. If it is dialogic communication that is desired, Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) theories are useful theoretical lenses for reviewing and assessing the efforts.

This case does display some use of Kent and Taylor's (1998) five principles of dialogic communications for public relations strategy using the internet. The ability for the principle of a "dialogic loop" (where communication occurs back and forth between parties) naturally exists on the social media sites in the form of comment capability and other possible interactions. This institution saw multiple examples where a "dialogic loop" was generated as a result of a Facebook post when constituents posted a question as a "comment" and the institution or other constituents responded in the same manner.

The principle of "usefulness of information," which states that online content should be useful and should provide the information the constituent is seeking when accessing the site, is supported by the office's strategy to develop or repurpose what they believe to be useful and relevant content. Some of the content that the office posts is informative and promotional (like a listing of Homecoming events or activities), which satisfies this principle.

The principle of "generation of return visits," which suggests the importance of online activity that encourages constituents to continue to return to the site, is accomplished by the office posting regularly, thus appearing regularly in their constituents "feeds." Return visits are also generated by the very nature of the social media sites because the constituents opt into receiving the information and the office is able to push it out to them. A value of the social media sites is that this principle is satisfied by the very structure of the site already. The same applies to the principle of "intuitiveness/ease of the interface" (how easy the site is for a general user to use) because in this case, the "ease of interface" is out of the office's

control because they are using the third-party managed social media sites and are at the mercy of those sites' designers. Fortunately, most social media sites are built to be user-friendly and easy to use, as is the case for Facebook.

The principle "rule of conservation of visitors" which states the importance of website content that keeps users on the site and prevents them from linking to other sites may be less relevant in the case of Richards College's social media efforts, since the content intentionally links to content on the office's main website or other websites and is less concerned about having the constituents continue to return to the social media site. In general, the principle of "conservation of visitors" is done naturally by the nature of the social media sites, particularly Facebook, again because it keeps pushing the content directly into the constituents "news feed." When someone becomes a "fan" or "follower," they are opting in to having the institution's content pushed to them without necessarily having to return to the site's page. They receive the content on their own newsfeed page. The very nature of the social media sites, especially Facebook, is to keep them connected to the institutional account with very little effort on constituent's part.

A future question for this theory, particularly this principle, is whether or not constituents are clicking on the links posted on Facebook that take them to the institution's website, and then staying there. All considered, Kent and Taylor's (1998) principles for dialogic communications for public relations using the internet are relevant and useful as a lens to study this case, some of them being inherently fulfilled by the nature of the social media sites, and the rest being accomplished by the office's strategy to the best of their ability, appearing in some, but not all of their Facebook activity. Because this theory was

created with basic websites in mind and prior to the creation of today's social media sites, it could be reevaluated and extended so that it is more relevant to social media sites. For example, all principles except for the "usefulness of information" are inherently related to the social media site, which the user can't control. This has applications for users if they want to follow these principles in their social media use.

Kent and Taylor's (2002) dialogic public relations theory which presents five principles that drive successful public relations is also relevant, and perhaps more useful than the principles of dialogic communications for public relations strategy using the internet, in describing the work this office conducts for institutional communications using social media. The office does recognize the principle of "mutuality" of relationships, which means that they understand that they have unique relationships with each member of their public. They encourage collaboration with the individuals and a lifelong connection with them based on each individual's own personal relationship with the institution. This is often encouraged when Media Services creates a post that asks for direct feedback from individuals, such as asking what their favorite part of Homecoming was. The office displays the principle of "propinquity," meaning they respect the time-sensitivity of their content and importance of its relevancy, and acknowledge their shared past and future with their public. Content that includes breaking news or time-specific event information is an example of this principle. Within this principle they also recognize the unpredictability of constituents on social media while also consulting their constituents for feedback. The principle of "empathy" relates to the office's understanding of their constituents' goals and interests and providing a supportive and affirming environment. The office's main content posts may not portray

“empathy” because of the nature of the social media sites promote s the pushing out of unique content initiated by Richards College, but Media Services’ follow-up communication with members of their public once they engage in dialogue can and often does portray empathy. Media Services is most certainly aware of the principle of “risk” of their use of social media communications, communicating on the public’s terms and being vulnerable. This theme was evident in the research. However, they embrace the risk as a potential value. They recognize the “otherness” of their constituents, that they are external to Richards College with different goals and missions, but are striving to keep them engaged and connected and reduce some of the “otherness” and turn it into connectedness. That they can do this on social media speaks to its power of minimizing risk and creating value through communication. Finally, the institution as a whole shows the principle of “commitment” to the social media communications efforts and a willingness to generate conversation and mutual understanding using social media, as evidenced by the President’s support of the efforts and the organizational structure of this department. The office itself is also committed to their social media communications work and encouraging connection and dialogue. However, it could be argued that this commitment isn’t shown 100 percent of the time given a stated need for more resources to achieve the work, the nature of some of the posts being monologic, the existence of a comment policy that allows for restriction, and their policy to ignore some public content if it is negative or unrelated to their content.

Theoretical Implications

As discussed in Chapter 2, this case study utilized the theories of dialogic communications for public relations strategy using the internet and dialogic public relations

(Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002) as a theoretical framework. Figure 1 depicts how I conceptualized the two theories working together as an organization utilizes a tool on the internet (a website or social media site) for public relations. I found the theories are useful for framing the exploration of Media Services' activity on Facebook and their overall description of their social media use. However, I primarily focused on exploring the existence of four of the principles from the two theories (dialogic loop, mutuality, propinquity, and empathy) in Media Services' use of Facebook. I found that the rest of the principles were clearly being exhibited just by the nature of employing a social media strategy and by the structure of Facebook itself.

The theory of dialogic public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002) is more relevant in this study as it relates more directly to the actual communication efforts taking place. The theory of dialogic communications for public relations strategy using the internet (Kent & Taylor, 1998) refers more often to an online website, in this case the third-party social medium Facebook, the design of which is out of the control of the institution. It appears that Media Services is striving to achieve both monologic and dialogic communications with their public through social media, but these theories are most helpful in assessing just the instances of dialogic communications. Thus, this research could extend these theories to include principles related to monologic communication as well as dialogic communication. This would address that there may be cases where institutions strive for both monologic and dialogic communication over time using the same communications tool. Additionally, this research suggests that these theories could be extended, or a similar theory could be created, that accounts for instances when public relations professionals use social media sites for

communication which they don't have control over in terms of site design or features, like Facebook. Lastly, this research shows how these theories could be expanded to account for the need of a principle of "assessment" of social media strategy and efforts in order to ensure that the other principles are being met, and being met at the level the organization desires.

This research is relevant because it adds to a scant base of literature on the use of social media in higher education. It can be used in conjunction with previous studies on how higher education is using social media for crisis management, alumni relations, branding, and marketing and extends the discussion to using social media for public relations. This research also supports and adds to the public relations literature that shows that social media is an important tool for communicating and building relationships with constituents. This study provides a case of a higher education institution using social media for public relations that has been viewed as successful in the eyes of its internal professionals and external peers. The work done by Richards College Media Services can serve as a model for other institutions that are looking to perform similar work.

Practical Implications

This research found some implications specifically for the Media Services office in their use of social media for public relations. While they are clear that the mission of their social media communications strategy is to inform, connect, and engage their public, they should define what types of feedback and engagement they truly desire. The concepts of informing, connecting, and engaging most closely mirror the dialogic public relations principles of "dialogic loop" and "propinquity". If they truly want to engage their audiences in dialogue, the office should determine if they value dialogue regardless of if it arises from

negative interactions. The data show that they understand the principle of “risk” stemming from negative interactions and have minimized that risk, but might not take full advantage of the dialogic communications opportunities that arise from negative contact from constituents. This was evident by some missed opportunities for dialogue on the Facebook page which the office should address if they are setting goals for “propinquity” (meaningful engagement) and communication in a “dialogic loop”.

Additionally, the institution needs to determine for itself whether or not they are generating the amount of dialogic communication they desire through their social media use (how much do they want and how often do they want it in relation to how often the post content), as well as compare it to the monologic communication that is being generated. The Facebook activity reviewed for this study didn’t reveal many instances of dialogue, but it did find types of posts that specifically seemed to generate dialogue. This indicates a possible area for improvement in order for actual use of social media to fulfill the office’s goal of engaged communication (“propinquity”), if a further goal is to achieve that through a “dialogic loop”. This can be done through the creation of dialogic loops and communication that conveys mutuality, propinquity, and empathy. The office now has examples in my data of types of posts that are more successful in generating this type of engagement and communication, for example, asking specific questions to their public or posting content that speaks to emotion and memories, like photographs and videos of campus or events. Finally, Media Services would benefit from an assessment process that ensures they are producing the interaction, engagement, sense of community, lifelong connection, promotion of the institution, and telling the story of the institution as they intend.

Beyond this office, practical implications are extremely valuable for other practitioners in the current higher education environment who seek to use social media or public relations without guidance from a strong base of peer reviewed literature. As a case study, it documents initial research on the subject, provides a positive example for practitioners to follow, and describes distinct ideas for further research.

This research begins to address the problem that higher education public relations staffs need best practices to follow for social media use in their work. The results of this research establish several best practices for public relations practitioners in higher education to follow.

First, Richards College's Media Services provides a good organizational model for how an institution of higher education can organize staffing to implement the use of social media in their communications and public relations strategy. As part of that model, the findings of this research also support the importance of the dialogic public relations principle of "commitment," which means having an established communications strategy for social media use that drives all social media efforts as well as a strategic mission for the office responsible for the implementation of social media communications strategy. Vital to the success of implementing this social media communications and public relations strategy is the existence of strong administrative support, also displaying the dialogic public relations principle of "commitment." This means support from the institutional leadership by way of providing verbal, mental, financial, technological, and human resources support.

Another important best practice is the creation of meaningful policies that guide communication and enable the institution to embrace the inherent dialogic public relations

principle of “risk” in using social media communication while embracing the value regardless of vulnerability (particularly since this research found the fear of negative communications is largely unfounded). The organizational model should also promote the importance of internal communication strategies and collaboration with any other practitioners involved in campus communications.

Next, within the externally focused social media communications strategy, there are several best practices, particularly the importance of displaying the dialogic communications principle of the “dialogic loop” and the dialogic public relations principles of “mutuality,” “propinquity,” and “empathy.” Displaying the principle of “mutuality: means that the office clearly displays knowledge of the unique relationship they have with each member of the public they are communicating with, and an understanding that each member of the public has a distinct and unique relationship with the organization. Displaying principle of “propinquity” entails sharing time sensitive information with the public and generating meaningful engagement that relates to that information. This can be aided by creating a procedure that ensures that recent information is consistently being shared and that a definition for the desired engagement on social media exists. This research provides data that indicates certain types of information and ways of sharing that information generate more engagement, such as information or content related to events or emotions and memories, or asking direct questions. Along those lines, this research found that a “dialogic loop” most often occurs when the institution overtly asks for it by asking for direct responses or feedback from the public. The utilization of the dialogic public relations theory principle

of “empathy” is displayed by providing quality customer service in a supportive and encouraging environment at all times.

Part of the social media communications strategy should establish plans so that no potential communication goes unanswered which ensures the dedication to creating “dialogic loops” and providing “propinquity” and “empathy.” In general, a best practice implied by the Media Services staff in this study is to utilize each social media site to its full potential in accordance with its unique culture and features that ideally assist in all five principles of Dialogic Communications Theory.

Perhaps the most important practical implication of this research is that it highlights an important need for the creation of assessment tools to determine what measures and defines successful use of social media for public relations in higher education. Having tools and measurement in place can help justify the work and strengthen the institution’s commitment to the social media strategy. Because successful use of social media for public relations in higher education hasn’t been defined yet, it is difficult to set strategy and there are no tools for assessment. Without goals and metrics for social media strategy, it will continue to be difficult for practitioners to determine the effectiveness of their work. Additionally, it will be difficult for them to justify the use of social media for public relations to administrators who control the resources.

Units of measurement and assessment tools could be determined using Kent and Taylor’s (1998, 2002) theories of dialogic communications for public relations strategy using the internet and dialogic public relations. The principles in these theories, as well as additional principles identified in this and future research, could be established as best

practices and assessment tools which could judge if and how well institutions are implementing the principles in their social media use. This research contributes to higher education literature through both the implication of best practices for social media use for public relations in higher education and the implication of a need for further research establishing descriptive, relevant theory and assessment tools.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

Research in the field of social media will be forever impacted by the limitation that the media itself is constantly changing and evolving as technology changes and evolves. This means that research results can become outdated and obsolete quickly if the technology they explore and describe changes or disappears. This study is limited by the fact that it only reviews Media Service's use of one social media site, when they utilize five. A further limitation of this particular study is that only a portion of the staff was able to be interviewed so it is possible that the research did not gather a full description or understanding of the Media Services office's work.

Future research could include more descriptive case studies and quantitative studies that gather a larger mass of data from a larger population. Surveys and self-reported data could assess institutions' use of social media, mission, strategy, and assessment tools, in order to reach a point where generalizations could be made about how social media is being used for public relations in higher education. Once patterns emerge from a larger set of data, further theory could be constructed that explains social media use for higher education public relations. Once a theory helps define what successful use of social media for public relations

in higher education entails, assessment tools can be created that measure levels of that success.

Other areas identified through this research for further study include:

- What is successful use of social media for public relations in higher education? How can it be assessed? Can an assessment tool be created? What content is useful to constituents? Is engagement on social media contrived or meaningful?
- What factors contribute to creating a popular and engaging social media presence?
- What is the current status of the professional training of higher education social media communicators? Does a trend exist among them in terms of schooling, training, professional background, and career trajectory? Is there a burgeoning profession of social media professionals in higher education and how does that relate to or impact related professions in information technology, communications, marketing, and public relations?
- How does the non-stop, around the clock, real-time nature of social media sites affect traditional processes and strategies of public relations and quality of subsequent communication?

Above all of these identified areas for further study is the important need for further research on, and ultimately the creation of, a theory that uniquely explains the phenomenon of institutions of higher education using social media for public relations and the creation of tools to assess their success. This case study provides a strong example of an institution using social media for its public relations strategy. In reviewing how Richards College is using social media for public relations, I identified a number of best practices that this

institution conducts that can be useful to other practitioners of public relations in higher education. I also describe an important need for specific theory and the creation of assessment tools in order for this type of work to be successful in the field of higher education. While the methods and uses of social media are constantly evolving, it is fair to say that they aren't going away. Public relations practitioners, particularly those in higher education who are responsible for communicating with large groups of stakeholders, cannot ignore social media as a necessary addition to their toolkit and their overall communications strategy. This study provides them with initial best practices for their work as well as calls for important further research that can continue to guide work of this nature.

References

- Angela. (2011). Using social media for public relations in higher education: A case study/Interviewer: Rebecca B. Bramlett. Master's Thesis, North Carolina State University, Raleigh.
- Barbara. (2011). Using social media for public relations in higher education: A case study/Interviewer: Rebecca B. Bramlett. Master's Thesis, North Carolina State University, Raleigh.
- Barnes, N. G., & Lescault, A. M. (2011). Social Media Adoption Soars as Higher-Ed Experiments and Reevaluates Its Use of New Communications Tools. Retrieved from <http://www.umassd.edu/cmr/studiesandresearch/socialmediaadoptionsoars/>
- Botan, C. (1992). International public relations critique and reformulation. *Public Relations Review*, 18(2), 149-159.
- Carol. (2011). Using social media for public relations in higher education: A case study/Interviewer: Rebecca B. Bramlett. Master's Thesis, North Carolina State University, Raleigh.
- Christ, P. (2005). Internet technologies and trends transforming public relations. *Journal of Website Promotion*, 1(4), 3-14.
- comScore (2011). U.S. digital year in review 2010: A recap of the year in digital media. Retrieved from http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Presentations_Whitepapers/2011/2010_US_Digital_Year_in_Review

- Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA. Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA. Sage Publications.
- Curtis, L., Edwards, C., Fraser, K. L., Gudelsky, S., Holmquist, J., Thornton, K., & Sweetser, K.D. (2010). Adoption of social media for public relations by nonprofit organizations. *Public Relations Review, 36*, 90-92.
- Diga, M., & Kelleher, T. (2009). Social media use, perceptions of decision-making power, and public relations roles. *Public Relations Review, 35*, 440-442.
- Facebook. (2011, August 1). Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>
- Fusch, D. (2011). Social media: Uncovering opportunities for higher education. (Higher Ed Impact Monthly Diagnostic, January-February). Denver, CO: Academic Impressions. Institution Website. (2012, January 1).
- Kang, S., & Norton, H. E. (2006). College and universities' use of the world wide web: A public relations tool for the digital age. *Public Relations Review, 32*, 426-428.
- Kent, M. L. (in press, 2010). (Draft copy) Chapter 45: Directions in social media for professionals and scholars. In, R. Heath (Ed.) *Handbook of Public Relations (2nd Edition)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. (Draft copy) Retrieved from <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/K/Michael.L.Kent-1/>
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (1998). Building dialogic relationships through the world wide web. *Public Relations Review, 24*(3), 321-334.

- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 28, 21-37.
- Kent, M. L., Taylor, M., & McAllister-Spooner, S. M. (2008). Research in dialogic theory and public relations. In R. R. Mathur (Ed.), *Public relations: An ethics engagement*. New Delhi, India: ICfai University Press. Retrieved from <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/K/Michael.L.Kent-1/>
- Li, C. & Bernoff, J. (2008). *Groundswell: Winning in a world transformed by social technologies*. Boston, MA. Harvard Business Review Press.
- McAllister, S. M., & Taylor, M. (2007). Community college websites as tools for fostering dialogue. *Public Relations Review*, 33, 230-232.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, M.B, and Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA. Sage Publications.
- Nail, J. (2009). Social media in 2009: A tale of two futures. *Public Relations Tactics*, 16(1), 13.
- Neff, D., & Denison, A. (2008). Face to face – virtually: Two professionals share their success on facebook. *Public Relations Tactics*, 15, 15.
- Osborne, N. (2011). Amplification and analysis of academic events through social media: A case study of the 2009 beyond the repository fringe event. In L. A. Wankel & C. Wankel (Eds.), *Higher education administration with social media: Including*

- applications in student affairs, enrollment management, alumni relations, and career centers* (pp. 167-190). United Kingdom: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- J Owyang. (2010a, April 15). Framework and matrix: The five ways companies organize for social business [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2010/04/15/framework-and-matrix-the-five-ways-companies-organize-for-social-business/>
- J Owyang. (2010b, November 9). Research: Most companies organize in “hub and spoke” formation for social business [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2010/11/09/research-most-companies-organize-in-hub-and-spoke-formation/>
- Oxford Dictionary. (2011, August 1). Social media. Retrieved from <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/social+media?region=us>
- Palen, L. (2008). Online social media in crisis events. *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, 31(3), 76-78.
- Pearson, R. (1989). A theory of public relations ethics (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Ohio University, OH.
- M Petroff. (2011, January 31). Social media strategy and business organizational structure [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://dotedguru.com/id6488-social-media-strategy-and-business-organizational-structure.html>
- Peshkin, A. (1988). In search of subjectivity – one’s own. *Educational Researcher*, 17(7), 17-21.
- R Reuben. (2008, August 19). The use of social media in higher education for marketing and communications: A guide for professionals in higher education [Web log post].

- Retrieved from <http://dotedguru.com/id423-social-media-uses-higher-education-marketing-communications.html>
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- A Shaindlin. (2010, November 09). Matrix update: 2 more uses for online social networks [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.alumnifutures.com/2010/11/matrix-more-uses.html>
- Slover-Linett, C., & Stoner, M., & Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). (2011). *Best practices in social media: Summary of findings from the second comprehensive study of social media use by schools, colleges and universities*. Retrieved from http://www.mstonerblog.com/images/uploads/CASE_Social_Media_Survey_-_Topline_Report_of_Findings.pdf
- B Solis. (2008, August 5). Introducing the conversation prism [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.briansolis.com/2008/08/introducing-conversation-prism/>
- Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 443-466). Thousand Oaks, CA : Sage Publications.
- Stewart, J. (2008). Twitter time: How companies are using and responding through the social networking tool. *Public Relations Tactics*, 15(11), 17.

Taylor, M., & Kent, M. L. (2010). Anticipatory socialization in the use of social media in public relations: A content analysis of PRSA's *Public Relations Tactics*. *Public Relations Review*, 36, 207-214.

Taylor, M., Kent, M. L., & White, W. J. (2001). How activist organizations are using the internet to build relationships. *Public Relations Review*, 27, 263-284.

Twitter. (2001, August 1). What is twitter. Retrieved from <http://business.twitter.com/basics/what-is-twitter>

Wankel, L. A. & Wankel, C. (Eds.). (2011). *Higher education administration with social media: Including applications in student affairs, enrollment management, alumni relations, and career centers*. United Kingdom: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Waters, R. D., Burnett, E., Lamm, A., Lucas, J. (2009). Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How nonprofit organizations are using facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 35, 102-106.

Weaver, K. (2011). Connecting fans and sports more intensively through social media. In L. A. Wankel & C. Wankel (Eds.), *Higher education administration with social media: Including applications in student affairs, enrollment management, alumni relations, and career centers* (pp. 191-207). United Kingdom: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Wigley, S., & Fontenot, M. (2010). Crisis managers losing control of the message: A pilot study of the virginia tech shooting. *Public Relations Review*, 36(2), 187-189.
doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.01.003

Wright, D. K., & Hinson, M. D. (2008). How blogs and social media are changing public relations and the way it is practiced. *Public Relations Journal*, 2 (2), 1-21.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Interview Protocol

Project: *Using Social Media for Public Relations in Higher Education: A Case Study*

Principal Investigator: *Rebecca B. Bramlett*

Faculty Sponsor: *Dr. Alyssa Bryant Rockenbach*

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee (use number):

(Go over informed consent and get signature. Briefly describe the study)

Questions:

1. What is the mission of your office?
2. How are you involved in your office's use of social media?
3. How would you describe your office's use of social media?
4. How would you describe your communication with your public/constituents through social media?
5. What is the value of your office's activity on social media?
6. What are the risks of your office's activity on social media?
7. Would you be willing to share any documents that outline policies and/or procedures for using social media for your office?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your office's use of social media?

(Thank individual for participation and interview. Assure him/her of confidentiality of responses and potential future interviews or observations)

**Appendix B
Content Review Protocol**

Project: *Using Social Media for Public Relations in Higher Education: A Case Study*
 Principal Investigator: *Rebecca B. Bramlett*
 Faculty Sponsor: *Dr. Alyssa Bryant Rockenbach*

Social Media Post(s)

Date of Posting:

Time of Posting:

Reviewer:

Type of post (update, update with link, photo(s), video(s), other:	
Descriptive Notes or Copied Content	Reflective Notes
Room for sketches, visual representations	
Summary:	

Document(s)

Date of Document:

Reviewer:

Type of document:	
Descriptive Notes or Copied Content	Reflective Notes
Room for sketches, visual representations	
Summary:	

**Appendix C
Observational Protocol**

Project: *Using Social Media for Public Relations in Higher Education: A Case Study*

Principal Investigator: *Rebecca B. Bramlett*

Faculty Sponsor: *Dr. Alyssa Bryant Rockenbach*

Observation of : (created for staff meeting, could be adapted for social media posting activities)	
Length of Activity:	
Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
What are the experiences of the staff in this Activity?	
Document Layout of Situation	
Document Seating	
Document Agenda	
Document Discussion Topics related to social media	
Document Conversation flow and highlights	
Other...	
Other...	
Other...	
Room for sketches, visual representations	
Summary:	