



Full length article

Facilitating community networks: Public relations skills and non-professional organizers



Margalit Toledano*, Alexander Maplesden

Department of Management Communication, The University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240, New Zealand

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 February 2016

Received in revised form 28 April 2016

Accepted 28 April 2016

Available online 24 May 2016

Keywords:

Community networks

Facilitating

PR skills

Community building

Ethics

Social capital

Meetup

ABSTRACT

In this article we present findings from an empirical study on facilitators of community networks who use an online platform to manage offline community interactions. Inspired by the centrality of community and community building concepts in the public relations literature (Hallahan, 2013), we argue that the role of PR in facilitating community networks deserves scholarly investigation. Based on a survey and interview material, our study finds that current democratic and inclusive networks might operate with no help from professional PR services, but network facilitators, who are not trained in public relations, use PR skills. Finally, we conclude that, on ethical and reputational grounds, PR practitioners should not exploit online/offline networks to influence the network members by promoting organizational interests in ways that may damage communities.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, PR practitioners used their ability to communicate, facilitate, and network for building relationships between organizations and stakeholders. This involved people-to-people and organization-to-organization communication (e.g., through events, introductions, and the setting up of opportunities for face-to-face interactions). The creation and facilitation of networks still remains a PR function that is often used for community relations, lobbying, fundraising, media relations, and building and maintaining relations with employees, investors, customers, and other stakeholders. In addition, networks are relevant to crisis, risk, and disaster management. While a few practitioners even built a successful career on their social skills and their involvement in networks, these characteristics are hardly discussed in the public relations literature.

Networks are valued as an important component of community building that result in social capital (Luoma-aho, 2009; Putnam, 2000), however, the actual role that PR practitioners play in networks is not very clear. This research approaches community networks from a practice perspective to contribute better understanding of the PR skills used and needed for network facilitation. It expands public relations literature with evidence from facilitators of community networks and provides insights into the current realities of social networks and community building.

To examine the involvement of public relations in the developing offline/online social networks phenomena, the research examined the portal Meetup.com. Meetup is basically an online notice board where various community groups advertise. Using geographical location information, the portal promotes groups that are listed and active in users' specific locations

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: toledano@waikato.ac.nz (M. Toledano), ajmmaplesden@gmail.com (A. Maplesden).

and that align with their interests. Meetup enables users not only to join, but to form local, community-based groups and to organize periodic, structured, and, most importantly, face-to-face social meetings. It is the world's largest network of local groups who use online communication for offline activities. Essentially, Meetup.com is a social network using the internet to get people off the internet.

Meetup groups use face-to-face local meetings in a variety of ways: to share information and experiences, to pursue a cause, to support political candidates, or just to go to the movies or restaurants together. The most popular groups are about adventure and outdoor activities, career and business, and parents and family (<http://blog.meetup.com/press/>). Each group has a different profile, topic of interest, size, and set of policies. What they have in common is that they all follow the framework provided by the portal Meetup.com and pay a small fee for administrative services and support via the group organizer (that is the person, or persons who set up and/or run the group, or act as the facilitator).

Headquartered in New York since 2002, and employing over 120 experts in technology, management and community relations, Meetup currently enables the operation of 224,371 groups in 180 countries (<http://www.meetup.com/about/>). It is the world's largest network of local groups. The researchers saw the sheer size of Meetup operations (24.45 million members), and the role of Meetup organizers in this system, as an opportunity to study the role of PR in this network and to reflect on its significance for PR and society. This article focuses on the role of Meetup group organizers and their use of PR skills as a way to gain insights into network operations and their implications for public relations.

1.1. Literature review

The interest in networks is not limited to public relations. Networks have actually been studied for a long time and have implications for many disciplines from computer science, biology, and physics, to sociology and organizational communication. Theories around networks and networking serve diverse goals and are relevant to organizational relationships with a variety of stakeholders. Leading sociologists have identified the development of *Network Society* (Castells, 2000; Shirkey, 2009; van Dijk, 2012), relating to “networks powered by microelectronic-based information and communication technologies” (Castells, 2004, p. 3). Castells (2004) description emphasises the egalitarian structure of a network as:

a set of interconnected nodes. A node is a point where the curve intersects itself. A network has no center, just nodes. . . the relative importance of a node does not stem from its specific feature but from its ability to contribute to the network's goal. (p. 3)

While this description does not align with organization-centered concepts of public relations, it serves to outline a field of public relations that, according to Luoma-aho (2009), “is intertwined with society and its functions” (p. 231). In spite of its relevance to PR functions such as community and relationship building, network theory has not often been used to inspire public relations research despite its intensive use by scholars in organizational communication (e.g., Mong & Contractor, 2003; Taylor, 2005).

The rationale for this paper is rooted in the importance of networks to communities and community building that results in social capital, which “refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). The role PR practitioners might have in facilitating or controlling social networks is a significant contributor to the strength of society since, as Ihlen (2013) states: “A society rich in social capital is also an efficient society, as it leads to less conflict and more satisfied citizens” (p. 838).

1.1.1. Community building in public relations literature

Meetup was set up as a social media platform with a mission: To revitalize local community and help people around the world to self-organize. That mission makes it highly relevant to the topic of community and community building that is valued as central for public relations practice. Hallahan (2013) noted that “Several public relations theorists have called for focusing on community and community building in public relations practice” (p. 168). He also credits Kruckeberg and Starck's (1988) *Public Relations and Community: A Reconstructed Theory* with pioneering the idea that “public relations should be practiced as an active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community” (Hallahan, 2013, p. 168). In later reiteration of this assertion, Starck and Kruckeberg (2001) reaffirm their conviction “of the importance of community in contemporary society” (p. 58). This article offers a partial engagement with these scholarly expectation by examining the involvement, or possible involvement, of public relations in Meetup.

Public relations practitioners can play varying roles in the community. According to Hallahan (2013) “The overarching metaphor for all these roles is *Community builder* (p. 169) and he identified three ways in which public relations could build communities: Community involvement, community nurturing, and community organizing. For him, *community involvement* is about ‘facilitating an organization or cause's participation in an already existing community. . . (such as attendance at community event)’ (Hallahan, 2013, pp. 168–169); *community nurturing* entails “fostering the economic, political, social, and cultural vitality of a community. . . organization can be official sponsors of activities” (p.169); and *community organizing* involves the grassroots forging of new communities among disparate individuals or organizations with common interests. . . efforts to create clubs, associations, and societies outside of an existing organizational context” (p. 169). This study of Meetup organizers examined if and how PR is involved in their current community networks.

Hallahan (2013) comments that under *community nurturing* “public relations professionals act as program facilitators, orchestrators of events, producers of information, and managers or coordinators of volunteer and philanthropic activities” (p.

169). However, he emphasises risks that inform our discussion about the role of public relations in Meetup: “True nurturing ...excludes efforts by organizations that are intended simply to put a positive face on the organization through adroit impression management” (p. 169).

1.1.2. *Networks in public relations literature*

In the public relations literature network theory mainly refers to the exchange and distribution of information. [Heath \(2013\)](#) argues that “Network theory features the central premise, vital to public relations, that people need and want information” (p. 603). He is interested in the ability of public relations “to facilitate information flow and foster decisions that arise from the shared information” (p. 603). His focus is on the role of practitioners as communication managers who are in charge of providing information to an organization’s stakeholders:

Network theory poses a challenge of getting information to people who want and need it. This challenge may require that practitioners create networks where none exist. In addition, they need to know how to facilitate and maintain existing networks as well as shape and support new ones ([Heath, 2013, p. 603](#))

This article follows [Heath’s \(2013\)](#) lead to investigate the involvement of PR in the creation and facilitation of Meetup’s network of community groups. Although [Heath \(2013\)](#) also identified the social need in stating that “Networks consist of the relationships between the people that make them work” (p. 604), he still emphasized information flow as the major function of networks: “public relations serve networks, organizations, and individuals by obtaining, processing, and out-putting information between organizations and individual publics” (p. 605). This article explores Meetup as a contemporary social network that goes beyond information to focus on members’ engagement through participation and the sharing of experiences in face-to-face meetings. Meetup, and this study, are focused on communities rather than on organizations and their communication with stakeholders. The Meetup movement is less organization-centered and more focused on “the people that make them work” ([Heath, 2013; p. 604](#)) and what [Bortee and Seltzer \(2009\)](#) call “dialogic engagement” (p. 317). This study is interested in relationships skills for community building and the social engagement within Meetup groups rather than the information that flows between organizations and their stakeholders.

1.1.3. *Networks, social capital and democracy*

Social networks are powerful tools that constitute civil society and serve as agents of participatory democracy: “A fully functioning society posits that relationships among organizations and groups create social capital that makes communities stronger and better able to meet the needs of members” ([Taylor, 2010, p. 9](#)). For Taylor public relations is an important component of civil society and practitioners are expected to construct relationships that build civil society and social capital. This is clarified in the further claim of [Yang and Taylor \(2013\)](#).

Public relations facilitates communication among different individuals, groups, and organizations. When public relations reflects an educated, ethical relationships building function, then the profession of public relations contributes to the accumulation of social capital and democratic process. When it is a one-way publicity function, engaged in unethical media relations, then even a strong multi-billion Euro/dollar industry has limited impact on social capital (p. 269).

In short, in relationships between organizations and their stakeholders, public relations practitioners build social community networks that are central for building organizational and social capital. [Ihlen \(2013\)](#) goes on to define social capital as “networks and the benefits which accrue from inclusion in those networks” (p. 838) and he views public relations as instrumental to the development of social capital: “The notion of social capital fits in well with much public relations thinking that emphasises how relationship building has both short and long- term effects for an organization” (p. 494). Building on [Putnam’s \(1994\)](#) approach to social capital, [Sommerfeldt \(2013\)](#) describes it as “the collective value of social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other” (p. 284). They are supported by other public relations scholars who argue that social networks help practitioners build social capital (e.g., [Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Edwards, 2009](#)).

The idea that public relations might be used for building social capital offers a defense to criticism of the contribution public relations makes to public discourse in which powerful organizations gain a disproportionately large voice in the public sphere. In [Sommerfeldt’s \(2013\)](#) words:

The normative role of public relations in democracy is best perceived as creating the social capital that facilitates access to spheres of public discussions and policy formation as well as for maintaining networks among those organizations that check the power of the state and maintain social infrastructure (p. 280).

Almost four decades ago, [Naisbitt’s \(1982\)](#) popular *Megatrends* identified networking as one of ten new megatrend directions that were transforming our lives in a shift away from its predecessor, hierarchies. [Naisbitt’s \(1982\)](#) concentration on the potential of networking not only occurs a decade prior to the appearance of social media, but still remains relevant to the realities of social networking:

Is networking so different from the Old Boy Network, the informal way professional men have helped each other for decades? The answer is yes. . The Old Boy Network is a clubbish fraternal conspiracy that protects the self-interest of a

limited few. The new networking is both ubiquitous and essential. The “Old Boys Network” is elitist; the new network is egalitarian (p. 220).

Public relations scholars predicted in 1981 that the new communication technologies would reduce “the frequency of face-to-face meetings” (see [Duhé, 2012; p. xiv](#)). Around the same time, [Naisbitt's \(1982\)](#) saw the increase in networking as fulfilling “the high-touch need for belonging” (p. 221) even though he was unaware of new technologies that would eventually enable this phenomenon to flourish. Meetup actually aligns with [Naisbitt's \(1982\)](#) predictions in its founder, Scott [Heiferman's \(2009\)](#) statement that “there’s nothing more powerful than a community coming together around a purpose” recognizing the human need to belong to community groups that are more than virtual online social networks.

Our study engages with the role of public relations in the challenging environment of community networks because of its significance to social capital. The literature points to risks associated with the potential abuse of public relations power for the benefit of the organization and at the expense of the community.

1.1.4. Network facilitation skills

In the offline environment PR practitioners are recognized for social networking skills that empower their organizations in the market place. Clients value PR services that provide the organization with “contacts” with media, influential business people, politicians and decision makers, potential investors, donors, and other important stakeholders. Organizations value the connectedness to power of many PR practitioners and sometimes “who they know” is the most sought after skill. However, public relations literature hardly discusses the social skills of practitioners and it is seldom an explicit topic of study.

Networking is mentioned in the public relations literature as part of the practitioner's responsibility for relationship-building ([Hon & Grunig, 1999](#)). Other publications mention networking as one criterion on a list of skills required for developing a career in PR but not as a topic for study in its own right. It is implicitly assimilated into “possessing interpersonal skills” and “relationships and relationships building” ([Heath & Coombs, 2006, p. 426](#)), but not specifically as network facilitation. There are rare exceptions. One is in a report published over two decades ago that studied employer requirements from PR practitioners. According to this report ([Wakefield & Perkins Cottone, 1987](#)), public relations employers place more emphasis on knowledge and skills in interpersonal communication (customer/client relations, decision making/problem solving)...than they place on knowledge and skills in news writing” (p. 31). Another rare exception is in [Gregory's \(2011\)](#) acknowledgement of the importance of networking skills for public relations. [Gregory \(2011\)](#) refers to them in relation to PR's in-house internal relations capacity and includes networking as one of ten competency titles, descriptions, and behavioural indicators for private sector communicators (p. 100). According to [Gregory \(2011\)](#), the skills expected from public relations for networking are listed as personality requirements and a public relations practitioner is someone who

- Seeks opportunities to interact with people at all levels
- Builds relationships with “gatekeepers”
- Consult with subject matter experts
- Talks to people regularly
- Canvases suggestions and options
- Builds relationships across functions
- Builds relationships externally
- Develops an extended network via team
- Imparts knowledge and expertise to others
- Makes himself/herself visible throughout organization (p. 100).

This article addresses that neglect in part through its primary interest in community networks and specifically in the role of the network facilitator. It questions the assimilation of professional PR skills in the role of organizer of nonprofessional online/offline networks, offering new insight into scarcely discussed topic.

1.2. Research Questions

- Are public relations skills used to construct Meetup community networks?
- Are facilitators of Meetup's community networks using public relations skills?
- Who might be benefiting from the involvement of public relations in community networks such as Meetup?

2. Method

The number of groups that meet offline via online platforms is estimated in millions around the world and many of them have been networking since the start of the new millennium. This growing movement is helped by major providers of services to groups. Google and LinkedIn offer online services for community and business groups and they enable the connection, organization, and ongoing communication between group members. Unlike LinkedIn and Google, Meetup.com was established as a mission driven company: “To revitalize local community and help people self-organize” ([Meetup.com](#),

2016). Meetup.com was therefore selected as the focus of our research because it aligns with progressive public relations concepts on the vital role of the community in building social capital.

To understand the way organizers of groups work we first conducted face-to-face pilot interviews in New Zealand with one facilitator of a LinkedIn group and one organizer of a Meetup group. We then interviewed, via email, a Senior Community Relations Specialist (B.T.) from Meetup's New York headquarters. One of the co-authors also participated in three different group meetings in New Zealand and in Israel to gauge the way they worked. The information from these preliminary conversations helped to develop the research and eventually led to the design of a questionnaire for our February 2015 online survey. We received by email a permission from a Meetup Community Relations Specialist (L.B.O) to contact Meetup people.

According to the Meetup website there were more than 140,000 organizers of Meetup groups, and many of them organized more than one group. Meetup allows more than one organizer to take responsibility for a group thus some groups are run by a leadership team of organizers. We identified a list of 125 Meetup groups in the US that were designated to organizers who wanted to share their experiences as organizers with other organizers. We identified the organizers of these groups as an appropriate source of information for our research and accessed a full list with email addresses on the Meetup website. We then sent a link to an online questionnaire (powered by Qualtrics) to the list of 38 organizers of large organizers groups with a detailed introduction about the research goal. Our introduction to the questionnaire included a request from the organizers to send the link to other organizers within their group or to other organizers that they might know. As a result, we could not know the exact number of organizers that eventually received the invitation to participate in the survey; however, we estimated that no more than 50 received the invitation to participate. The link to our questionnaire was open between January 12 to February 20, 2015 and we received 29 valid responses to it. Though a small sample drawn from a small population of experts, the nature of the questionnaire allowed for some meaningful descriptive and qualitative analyses

2.1. Findings

Prior to investigating the facilitators' skills we examined the way *Meetup.com* functions:

Meetup.com earns most of its revenue from the small monthly fee charged to group organizers, but it allows corporate sponsorship and companies may support the activities of specific groups in return for logo recognition and access to members. There are no commercial advertisements on Meetup website and Meetup policies limit commercial activities on their platform. Meetup monitors all groups to make sure they fall within the Terms of Service and does not support groups that promote products or services, advertise, seek an audience for focus groups, use hate speech, or groups that do not meet face-to-face. The Meetup team monitors all groups to make sure they fall within the Terms of Service (<http://www.meetup.com/terms/>).

2.1.1. Meetup HQ and organizers

In response to an email request, a Meetup employee on the community team (B.T., 2014), clarified the support Meetup team provides to organizers of Meetup groups:

When an Organizer starts a Group, we send a series of automated messages to help them get their Group off the ground. We also suggest Organizers utilize a variety of resources including: Our Community Guidelines: <http://meetu.ps/1znyRv> 'Best Practices' for Meetup Organizers: <http://meetu.ps/1zQS6s> Meetup's Ask an Organizer: <http://meetu.ps/1Q8TDx>.

The last two resources actually provide a framework for an internal network of organizers who are able to consult with each other about issues involved in event management (e.g., selecting the venue, dealing with last minute cancellations, promotional activities, and attracting a sponsor). A Meetup group organizer/network facilitator has to take responsibility for setting up the group, organizing meetings or events, promoting the events to ensure participation, selecting attractive content, activities, speakers, as well as initiate fundraising activities and liaise with donors, and maintaining the group conversation.

Each group has its own cause or interest and is free to conduct its offline activities as it chooses. Most offline meetings and events happen in local venues, mainly coffee places. Some venue owners offer it for free and sponsor the group in this way. The organizer's role is pivotal to the members' satisfaction and commitment to the group. However, Meetup HQ has no specific requirements from organizers and does not check their prior training as facilitators:

As long as they're a member of Meetup, anybody can start a Meetup Group! Organizers don't have to have any special qualifications (though it sometimes helps). All an Organizer needs is a desire to create and organize a local, face-to-face community group (B.T., 2014).

Indeed, one of the organizers we interviewed reported his group actually failed and people had not participated in meetings suggesting that the reason was "probably because [he] was an introvert" (J.H., 2015).

2.1.2. The survey participants' profile

52% of respondents were organizing groups that had been running for more than five years and 56% were organizing groups of over 500 people. The groups generally met regularly: 44% weekly and a further 48% at least monthly. It should be noted that many (if not most) Meetup groups are not as active as the groups in our sample of organizers. The sample

actually represented a limited population of very experienced and knowledgeable Meetup organizers who provided expert evidence and contributed valuable data in response to our questionnaire.

Experience and training:

Organizers were asked how many years of experience they had in the practice of communication, public relations, marketing, management, or another related field. 50% of respondents stated they had no experience in any of the aforementioned industries, while of those who did, had little experience, only 27% stating they had more than 5 years in the field. Additionally, 58.3% of organizers had no formal training in any profession related to the field of PR.

Interestingly, following the survey one of the organizers posted the follow comment on January 24, 2015:

We, as organizers, project our agenda through how we communicate that to those who visit and/or join our groups. . . . Most of us probably have zero training in that area. We have a particular passion, we have our own agendas, and we found an outlet for that in the Meetup Software Platform. . . The PR professional has to get his/her message out. Traditional methods used the “media.” Now, the “media” is online – and it is us – that’s a sobering thought ([Discuss Meetup.com Forums](#)).

This organizer kept reflecting on how the survey questions helped him become more enlightened about his role

We use the Meetup Software Platform to communicate that, and we use the events we create to extend that communication to “face the group” interaction. We are the face, the attendees of our events are the group. Yikes, I never thought of it that way ([Discuss Meetup.com Forums](#)).

2.1.3. The organizer role

2.1.3.1. Challenges. Question 13 asked: “on a scale of 1 (very easy) to 5 (very challenging) how would you evaluate the following challenges as an organizer?” and provided eight different potential challenges to relate to.

Although they had little training, respondents did not indicate many organizational challenges aside from members paying dues and the participation of group members. The average responses indicated that organizers generally do not find any of the challenges suggested to be more than moderately easy. Participation of group members was found to be statistically more challenging than interpersonal challenges within the group (e.g., managing conflict and consensus). Furthermore, the low variability of responses to participation of group members indicates that this was a common challenge. Another question revealed that 80% of organizers reported that less than a quarter of listed members regularly participated in their Meetup events; thus, attracting existing member to events is evidently a major challenge (which requires PR skills) for the organizers. As challenges, recruiting new members and promoting events had high variability of response, indicating no clear agreement about the difficulty of these activities.

When asked (in question 14) to rank items that were the most effective recruitment method the Meetup portal was clearly identified as the most effective recruitment tool (69.6% ranking it first), better than offering incentives to members who recruit new members, organizing special events, or offline promotions. Respondents relied heavily on the Meetup portal for promoting their group to new members and promoting events to group members, and thus were not often inclined to practice more traditional recruitment methods.

2.1.3.2. Openness. To the question: “Who decides whether to include or reject a potential new member,” almost half of the groups (48%) were open to any new members and said everyone was welcome. 44% of organizers took full control of membership decisions with only 8% of respondents identifying that decisions of whether to include or reject a new member were made by *the group collectively*. Meetup seems to follow more democratic regulations and not the exclusive Old Boys Club culture.

2.1.4. Network facilitation skills

The majority of Meetup organizers understand their role as both online and offline facilitators: 84% of respondents agreed that their role incorporated both of these channels. The survey assessed relevant skills for competent network facilitators. In question 18 Meetup organizers were asked to evaluate the importance of a list of 11 skills for a successful organizer and to rank them on a scale of four options from unimportant to very important ([Fig. 1](#)). One-sample *t*-tests using the test value of 3 (important) identified that the *ability to organize engaging events*, *ability to communicate well in person*, and the *ability to listen to members* were significantly higher than the test value, indicating that those three PR social skills were necessary for their success. Their emphasis on listening skills is especially relevant to PR ethics though all three are linked to major PR skills. Albeit, the majority of skills perceived as important were people-related with an emphasis on engagement and high-touch social involvement corroborated by the lowest three averages being related to recruitment, decision-making, and sponsorship.

Congruently, when asked (question 21) to state their opinion on the statements about their role as a group organizer, respondents unanimously perceived the most important aspect of their role as *planning content and activities for group meetings*, with a low standard deviation of 0.18 and an average response of 4.57 on a 5-point Likert scale. One sample *t*-tests (using the test value of 4) further concluded that *participating themselves in group activities/discussions* and *making an effort to listen carefully to members* were both significantly important organizer duties (see [Fig. 2](#)). Ultimately, Meetup organizers perceive their role more as an event manager rather than as a community manager

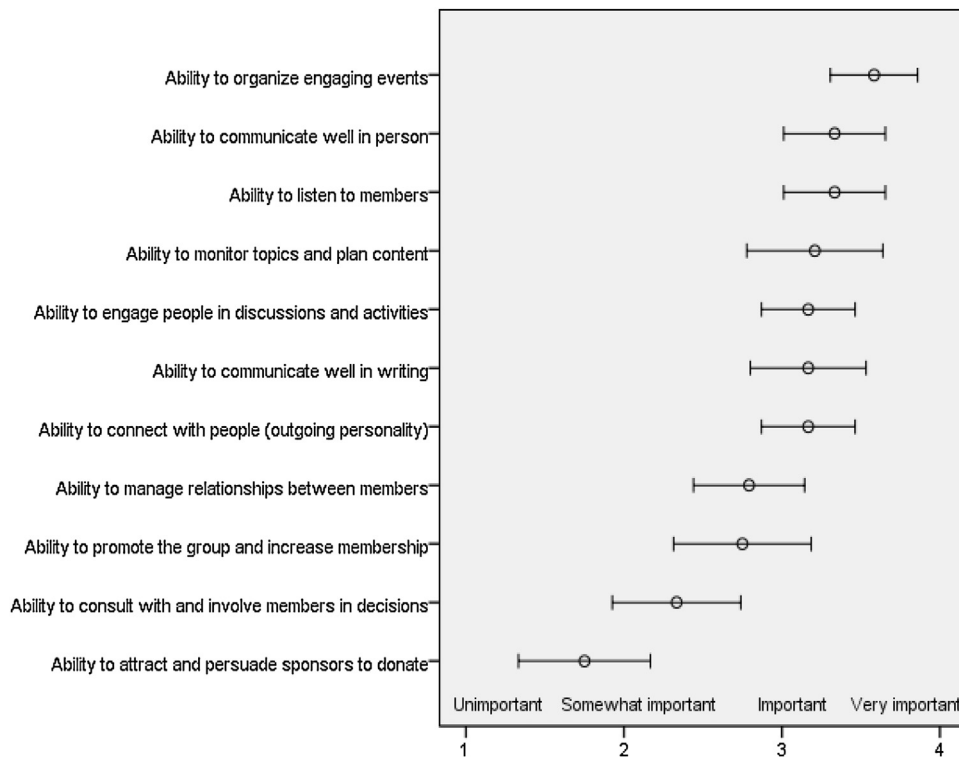


Fig. 1. Skills for successful organizer.

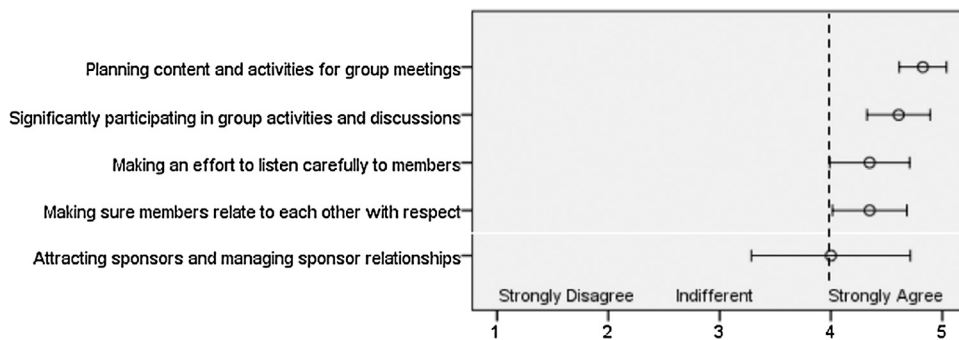


Fig. 2. Perceived role of group organizer.

2.1.5. Relationships with sponsors

Only 28% of respondents reported that their Meetup group was sponsored by third-party organizations. This might explain the organizers' response (presented in Fig. 1) indicating that the ability to attract and persuade sponsors was the least important skill identified by respondents. However, respondents generally agreed that attracting sponsors and managing sponsor relationships was an important duty as a Meetup organizer.

Overall, sponsored group organizers felt that the sponsor significantly enabled group activities and that the sponsorship relationship was mutually and equally beneficial. They did not see the sponsorship as limiting the freedom of the groups' activities and discussion (Fig. 3).

A Skype interview with a Meetup organizer in the US (A.L., 2015) clarified how a highly motivated organizer operated with several groups. According to her testimony she "owns" three Meetup groups and manages to attract sponsors who provide free venues, refreshments, speakers and such. She is also using the groups to promote her own business as photographer (A.L., 2015).

The issue of sponsorship has developed in recent years as it was, at first, not allowed by Meetup policies. It seems that the use of sponsorship depends on the personality of the organizer, the size of the group, the members' profile and their relevance to the sponsor, and the topic of the group that makes it attractive to sponsors. However, this is an issue that keep changing and needs to be studied further.

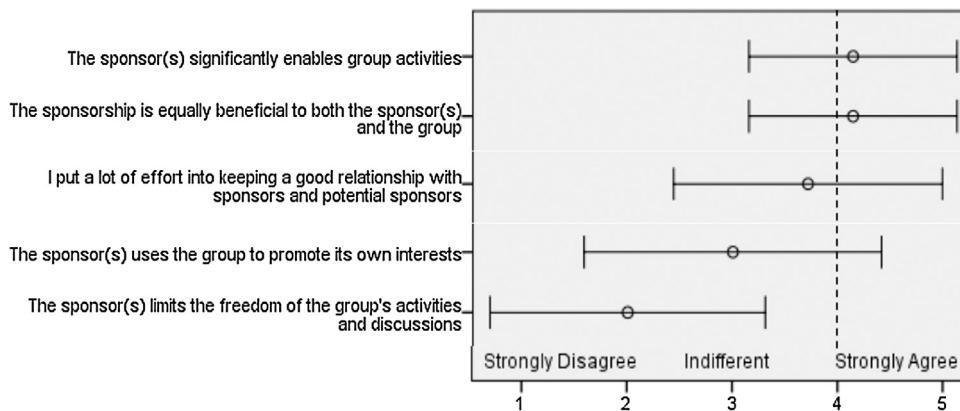


Fig. 3. Relationship with Sponsors.

3. Discussion and conclusion

This article reports on an exploratory research project that started to examine the use of PR skills by non-professional facilitators of social networks. As discussed in the literature review, public relations scholars (Ihlen, 2005, 2013; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Taylor, 2010; Yang & Taylor, 2013) identified social networks as essential for building organizational and social capital. Further, they expected PR practitioners to build and be involved in social networks. This research used the unique portal of Meetup.com to identify the role of its pivotal group organizers and to discover if and how PR practitioners were involved in organizing Meetup groups. In this concluding section, we will reflect on the significance of these questions to the profession and society.

By focusing on Meetup.com we were able to investigate a current community network that goes beyond Heath's (2013) description of networks as effective information channels. Meetup groups enable participant engagement and social connectedness and indeed help empower society and build social capital. This feature makes it relevant to public relations and thus guided our first research question:

- Are public relations skills used to construct Meetup community networks?

The examination of Meetup operations revealed that professional PR practitioners are hardly involved. The organizers of Meetup groups had little specific training in communication, public relations, marketing or related fields. They do not speak on behalf of organizations and are not remunerated by organizations for services. However, organizers who responded to our survey questions used PR skills and were passionate about succeeding in managing events and facilitating communication with group members. Thus, even though the notion of group organizers as PR practitioners was generally not considered by the organizers themselves, this study finds that they are successfully enacting community building in Hallahan's (2013) description of *Community organizing* as involving "the grassroots forging of new communities among disparate individuals or organizations with common interests. . . efforts to create clubs, associations, and societies outside of an existing organizational context" (p. 169). Meetup community networks facilitators meet this description. They are mainly community organizers and event managers.

It might be considered frustrating to realize that the fulfilment of a public relations aspiration – a democratic and engaged community relations (Stark & Kruckeberg 2001) is happening with no help from professional PR. Meetup is just one of the portals that enable offline groups activities but a company big enough to operate successfully all over the world. Significantly, Meetup itself does not specify any of its employees (those working from New York headquarters to support the groups organizers) as "public relations" specialists, but rather refers to them as "community relations specialists," a seemingly conscious decision to distance itself from commercial interests.

The second research question was focused on the job description of the Meetup group organizer (the network facilitator):

- Are facilitators of Meetup's community networks using public relations skills?

Based on the study of Meetup organizers' role and online consultation it is possible to confirm that yes, the network facilitators use social skills and personality features that are associated with traditional public relations. They rarely have public relations training or experience and do not know public relations principles but the technology and Meetup platform automated services provide them with guidance and support. Over time that helps them to develop as leaders and better organize attractive activities. Meetup is fourteen years old and some of the Meetups groups have been operating within it for several years. Though not all the registered members participate regularly in activities, the groups still involve a significant

number of people and, for some of them, Meetup groups provide an intense and time consuming social engagement. These Meetup groups are evidence to the accomplishments of organizers in a task that requires PR skills.

In reflection on the significance of PR practices to society we have asked the third question:

- Who might be benefiting from the involvement of public relations in community networks such as Meetup?

The answer to this major question depends on the professionalism and ethics of public relations when getting involved with community networks. As mentioned in the literature review, [Yang and Taylor \(2013\)](#) stated that public relations could build social capital via network facilitation only when it reflected “an educated, ethical relationship building function” (p. 269). Meetup networks might be abused by unethical public relations through sponsorship and undisclosed interventions designed to manage the conversation and influence the group members’ opinions and behaviour. Our findings indicated that sponsorship was present in only about a quarter of the groups included in our sample, even though the organizers evaluated the ability to attract sponsors as an important skill organizers should have.

[Hallahan's \(2013\)](#) emphasis on risks inspired our discussion about the role of public relations in Meetup: “True [community] nurturing...excludes efforts by organizations that are intended simply to put a positive face on the organization through adroit impression management” (p. 169). Meetup.com seems to offer the practice of public relations a great opportunity to do both – to use it for promotional self-interested organizational objectives via sponsorship and financial support or to use it to empower and revive communities

[Kent \(2013\)](#) advocates for a more responsible use of social media that would not exploit publics, would be genuinely social and committed to the democratic ideals of public relations. He is concerned that

For decades, we have argued that our communication technologies will connect us, but that connectivity to our ‘friends’ on social media comes at the expense of isolation from our fellow human beings who live next door or down the hall. Obviously, social media are a tool that can be used better (p. 344).

Meetup seems to exemplify Kent’s ideology of social media, and at the moment, it seems to be ethically resilient. Nevertheless, the idea that public relations practitioners could join group networks, or create their own network through the user-friendly platforms that serve networks, for spreading their business message more effectively and reaching out to audiences is mentioned in other publications ([Breakenridge, 2008](#); [Philips & Young, 2009](#)). We argue that concerns about the impact of PR social media activities on the community and society and the implication for democracy need to be more prominently expressed and addressed.

This article examined Meetup as an effective tool for community building; however, PR could also abuse this platform and use it to enhance the organization’s voice at the expense of other voices in the community. It is not unrealistic to envisage that a PR practitioner serving a mining company would join a Meetup group of activists who oppose mining to find out about their plans, persuade them to trust the company’s plans, and distort their activities. An innocent foodies’ network might be invaded by PR representatives of junk food companies to destroy it from within. PR practitioners might be able to use the platform to create front groups to mislead public opinion for what the organization identified as its interest. On past evidence, the sky is the limit (see [Beder, 2002](#) on the climate denial lobby) and the options are scary. It would be irresponsible to ignore the potential abuse of the system mainly because these community networks could benefit from company’s financial support and PR could buy influence through sponsorship and financial support for activities. Although our findings indicate that, for now, sponsorship of Meetup groups is not as widespread as it could be, we would hope that this situation would not change in negative fashion for organizational goals. Meetup’s efforts to encourage organic community groups have succeeded and are contributing to building social capital rather than providing opportunities for plausibly clandestine and self-interested PR.

We recognize that PR skills are necessary for facilitating online/offline networks, and that these networks might serve as an effective tool for promoting organizational interests. However, we strongly argue that it would be best if public relations would stay away from networks such as Meetup and respect the organizers desire to keep commercial groups out. Meetup is good news for democracy and public relations should keep it a genuine community network.

For [Kent and Taylor \(1998\)](#) the dialogic nature of the online networks provided an opportunity for public relations to facilitate democratic networks rather than try to control the conversation on behalf of organizations. Meetup is a community network rather than an online network though it is using the internet. However, in alignment with [Kent and Taylor \(1998\)](#) goal we conclude that public relations probably will keep practicing the traditional networking in the behind the scene Old Boy Club mentioned by [Naisbitt's \(1984\)](#) decades ago. The current genuine social networks should keep the genuine community dialogue free of organizational interventions and empower the democratic systems in which it functions.

References

- A. L. (2015). Personal communication with the authors on Skype. January 28, 2015.
 B.T. (2014). Personal email interview with B. T. Meetup employee on the community team. April 19, 2014.
 Beder, S. (2002). *Global spin: the corporate assault on environmentalism* (2nd. ed.). Dartington, UK: Green Books.
 Bortee, D. S., & Seltzer, T. (2009). Dialogic strategies and outcomes: an analysis of environmental advocacy groups' Facebook profiles. *Public Relations Review*, 35(3), 317–319.
 Breakenridge, D. (2008). *PR 2.0: new media, new tools, new audiences*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

- Castells, M. (2000). *The rise of the network society* (2nd. ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Castells, M. (Ed.). (2004). *The network society: a cross-cultural perspective*. In Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2007). *It's not just PR: public relations in society*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Discuss Meetup.com Forums. (2015). *Organizer discussion and questions. a post by John, Founder, got wind and water.*, retrieved January 27, 2015. <http://www.meetup.com/forum/general-questions-how-tos-tips-tricks/?PHPSESSID=055e515b89d671775c5051de8ba9fc3f>
- Duhé, S. (2012). A thematic analysis of 30 years of public relations literature addressing the potential and pitfalls of new media. In S. Duhé (Ed.), *New media and public relations* (2nd. ed., pp. xiii–xxvi). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Edwards, L. (2009). Symbolic power and public relations practice: locating individual practitioners in their social context. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 21(3), 251–272.
- Gregory, A. (2011). The capabilities needed for the strategic management role. In D. Moss, & B. DeSanto (Eds.), *Public relations: a managerial perspective*. London, UK: Sage.
- Hallahan, K. (2013). Community and community building. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of public relations* (1) (2nd. ed., 1, pp. 166–169). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Heath, R. L., & Coombs, T. (2006). *Today's public relations: an introduction*. Thousand Oak, CA: Sage.
- Heath, R. L. (2013). Network theory. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of public relations* (2) (2nd. ed., 2, pp. 603–605). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Heiferman, S. (2009). The pursuit of community. *The New York Times*. Sept 5, 2009. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/jobs/06boss.html?_r=0 December 20, 2014.
- Hon, L. C., & Grunig, J. E. (1999). *Guidelines for measuring relationships in public relations*. Gainesville, FL: The Institute for Public Relations.
- Ihlen, Ø. (2005). The power of social capital: adapting Bourdieu to the study of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 31(4), 492–496.
- Ihlen, Ø. (2013). Social capital. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of public relations* (2nd. ed., pp. 838–839). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- J. H. (2015). Personal communication with the authors. Hamilton, New Zealand. January 5th, 2015.
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (1998). Building dialogic relationships through the world wide web. *Public Relations Review*, 24(3), 321–334.
- Kent, M. L. (2013). Using social media dialogically: public relations role in reviving democracy. *Public Relations Review*, 39(4), 337–345.
- Kruckeberg, D., & Starck, K. (1988). *Public relations and community: a reconstructed theory*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Luoma-aho, V. (2009). On Putnam: bowling together – applying Putman theories of community and social capital to public relations. In Ø. Ihlen, B. van Ruler, & M. Fredriksson (Eds.), *Public relations and social theory: key figures and concepts* (pp. 231–251). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Meetup.com <http://www.meetup.com/about/>retrieved, January 20, 2016.
- Mong, P. R., & Contractor, N. S. (2003). *Theories of communication networks*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Naisbitt, J. (1982). *Megatrends: ten new directions transforming our lives*. New York, NY: Warner Books.
- Philips, D., & Young, P. (2009). *Online public relations: a practical guide to developing an online strategy in the world of social media* (2nd. ed.). London, UK: Kogan Page.
- Putnam, R. D. (1994). Tuning in, tuning out: the strange disappearance of social capital in America. *Political Science and Politics*, 28(4), 664–668.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone. The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simone and Schuster.
- Shirkey, C. (2009). *Here comes everybody: how change happens when people come together*. London, UK: Penguin.
- Sommerfeldt, E. J. (2013). The activity of social capital: public relations in the public sphere, civil society, and democracy. *Public Relations Review*, 39(4), 280–289.
- Starck, K., & Kruckeberg, D. (2001). Public relations and community: a reconstructed theory revision. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* (pp. 51–59). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Taylor, J. R. (2005). Engaging organization through worldview. In S. May, & D. K. Mumby (Eds.), *Engaging organizational communication theory and research: multiple perspectives* (pp. 197–222). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Taylor, M. (2010). Public relations in the enactment of civil society. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *The Sage handbook of public relations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wakefield, G., & Perkins Cottone, L. (1987). Knowledge and skills required by public relations employers. *Public Relations Review*, 13(3), 24–32.
- Yang, A., & Taylor, M. (2013). The relationship between the professionalization of public relations, societal social capital and democracy: evidence from cross-national study. *Public Relations Review*, 39(4), 257–270.
- Dijk, J. V. (2012). *The network society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.