

DIPLOMA UNIT 2.3 FINAL PROJECT COVER SHEET

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How effective is social media as a tool for community engagement? Exploring social media as a two-way symmetrical approach.

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1. Introduction

It is evident throughout professional groups and in trade publications that social media is a hot topic in Public Relations (PR) and communications. This project aims to apply traditional PR theories such as the two-way symmetrical approach to this emerging trend of communication in order to reinforce the value of social media as an effective tool and not just a passing phase.

Two-way symmetrical model of PR

The two-way symmetrical approach to PR is one of the four models put forward by Grunig and Hunt (1984). The other models are the press-agentry, public information and two-way asymmetrical. Grunig and Grunig proposed that “excellent public relations departments practice the two-way symmetrical model of public relations” (1992, page 290). If excellence in PR is the two-way symmetrical approach then to find out how effective social media is as a tool for community engagement it would be appropriate to measure the extent to which it represents the two-way symmetrical model.

Community Engagement

The Government White Paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities (2006) calls for greater community engagement in the public sector.

The White Paper suggests the following steps must be taken to engage communities:

- inform citizens – providing good, accessible information on how to access services and on how local services are performing; through, for example, newsletters, information on websites, text messages, local media, or staff working in neighbourhoods;
- consult citizens and communities – about the shape of local services and policies using, for example, surveys, focus groups or neighbourhood and parish plans;
- involve citizens directly in designing, delivering or assessing a service – for example by co-opting a group of young people to help manage a youth centre; and

- devolve responsibility for the delivery of a service – for example through community management and ownership of a local community hall.

Community engagement is now a priority in many public sector authorities. There are close links between community engagement and the two-way symmetrical model of PR as they are both approaches that encourage discussion between publics and organisations, they are also concerned with communication being mutually beneficial for publics and organisations.

Social media

The rise of social media is a recent phenomenon. Popular social media platforms, including facebook, Twitter and blogs such as WordPress, are now widely used by individuals and organisations. Social media was primarily based on specific sites but more recently organisations have started to incorporate aspects of social media into their own websites.

The nature of social media makes it responsive, constantly adapting to its environment which can provide a good opportunity for PR practitioners to demonstrate excellent two-way symmetrical communications. This study will look at how effectively PR practitioners are using this medium and with what results.

This study aims to test the effectiveness of social media as a community engagement tool by measuring and assessing practitioners' experiences of using social media.

In order to answer the project title this research will seek to address the questions:

- How effective do PR practitioners consider social media to be as a tool for community engagement?
- What can ensure the success or failure of using social media in community engagement?

This project aims to explore the strengths and weaknesses of using social media. It will also seek to assess to what extent social media communication meets the two-way symmetrical model of public relations by addressing the following questions:

- Are practitioners using social media to fulfil their own aims or do they compromise between public and organisation motives?
- Are practitioners using social media in a way that encourages community engagement?

There currently exists a wide range of comment, opinion and discussion on the subject of social media on blogs and other social media platforms, however, very little of this content is based on formal research and the information is subjective and not academic or peer reviewed.

Social media is a new and rapidly expanding area for public relations study. It has broad practical implications for use in public relations practice across the industry. The platforms that are currently delivering social media (e.g. facebook) may not be around forever but the concepts around social media, such as sharing, collaboration, and the public becoming contributors and creators of content are indicative of the nature of digital media communications in the future, particularly as more generations grow up with the Internet.

This research seeks to provide objective evidence to link practical ideas about social media with theoretical models to demonstrate what value social media has in modern public relations.

2. Literature review

Community engagement is often represented as a pyramid or ladder with different degrees or stages of community engagement. These steps can be compared to the four models. As community engagement increases, the more it represents the two-way symmetrical approach.



Taken from the Improvement Network

Research suggests that by satisfying each of the steps in the pyramid will have positive outcomes for the public sector organisation and for the publics. For example the Improvement and Development Agency report (2002) showed that there was a direct relationship between how informed publics felt and how satisfied they were with the services offered. The goal of community engagement is empowerment and it means allowing some of the services to be controlled by publics.

These steps for increased community engagement correspond well to Grunig and Hunt's excellence model. With the lower levels of the pyramid being similar to the Public Information model and further up the pyramid it moves towards a two-way symmetrical approach.

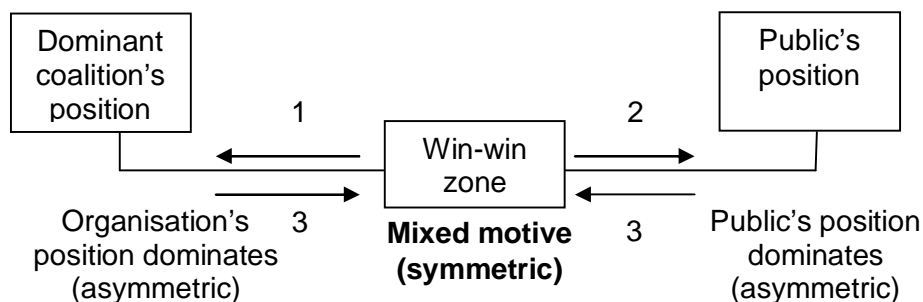
Heath (2005, page 169) described the Communitarian approach as trying to change practice from "talking to" rather than a "talking with" mode, or one-way versus two-way communication. Heath suggests that a Communitarian approach (or community engagement approach) should put the public at the centre of activities.

Sung states that, “excellent public relations departments are two-way and symmetrical in interacting with publics, and balance the interests of organisations with those of publics. Their practice is also ethical with knowledge and professionalism. Strategically managed communication programmes make an organisation build good relationships with strategic publics.” (2009, page 176)

Describing systems theory Edwards asserts that, “two-way symmetric communication practices are a keystone for excellent PR, although the authors recognise that in practice a mix of asymmetric and symmetric approaches is often used.” (2009, page 150).

Although many practitioners accept that the two-way symmetrical model reflects the most effective form of PR the theory has been criticised for being too aspirational. Pieczka (1996, cited in Edwards 2009) suggests that the two-way symmetrical model encourages open dialogue between public and organisation and a sense of equality between both parties, however this is incompatible with the idea that PR practitioners work most effectively when they are part of the dominant coalition. She also suggests that when PR is measured in terms of organisational benefits then it is not an accurate reflection of whether the approach is most effective.

Following criticism of the four models, Dozier, Grunig and Grunig reformed the model of symmetry in 1995 to produce the mixed motive model (in Edwards, 2009).



Type of practice	Explanation
1. Pure asymmetry model	Communication used to dominate public, accept dominant coalition's position
2. Pure cooperation model	Communication used to convince dominant coalition to cave in to public's position
3. Two-way model	Communication used to move public, dominant coalition or both to acceptable 'win-win' zone

Taken from Edwards, 2009

In order to assess the two-way symmetrical nature of social media it is important to assess the motives of both the public and the organisation. According to the model above communication will only be truly symmetrical if both the public's and the organisation's motives were being met. The model above demonstrates that to be symmetrical, communication must be reciprocal and that both sides must consider the needs of each other.

In public sector communications there is no emphasis on sales or products and so therefore public services are much more suited to mutually beneficial symmetrical approaches. Public services' performance indicators are often about improving outcomes for communities and therefore communications objectives will be aligned with this. This makes it easier to encourage a two-way symmetrical approach.

One of the features of social media that would make it more likely to be two-way symmetrical is that it is voluntary. Members of the public have signed up to become part of a site. They are able to opt in to certain organisations or groups that they are interested in receiving information from.

For example for an individual to choose to follow a local authority's Twitter feed, the member of the public must have had a motive of their own for them to have made that decision. This brings them closer to the win-win area of the mixed motives model.

Community engagement activity aims to involve publics in a two-way dialogue. Based on Grunig and Hunt's excellence model this project explores how effective social media is in practically fulfilling this approach to communications.

Uses and gratifications

If two-way symmetrical communications are based on satisfying the motives of both organisation and public then the motives of the public must be considered as well as the objectives of the organisation.

The uses and gratifications perspective is particularly significant in this context as, "[Uses and gratifications] sees media audiences as variably active communicators, rather than passive recipients of messages." (Rubin 2002, page 525-526). Social media has made it increasingly easy for publics to be active communicators. Social media provides publics with access to much broader audiences than before.

The uses and gratifications model has, however, been criticized for considering audiences as individuals and "ignores the fact that media use is social." (Choo 2009, page 226).

This raises the question that if publics are able to communicate more actively and are more willing to get involved with discussions, will this lead to better community engagement and two-way symmetrical communications? Referring back to the mixed motive model about finding the win-win zone to be symmetrical, it is necessary to establish what the public's motives or gratifications would be for engaging with the organisation.

Community engagement

Some professional bloggers have demonstrated levels of community engagement in terms of measuring types of audience. The diagram below (taken from the Wiser Earth Blog, 2009) shows that many people start as visitors and can progress to

How effective is social media as a tool for community engagement? Exploring social media as a two-way symmetrical approach.

different levels of engagement. The Leaders category at the top would be the most empowered and therefore the most engaged and representative of the two-way symmetrical approach.



Taken from Parker, 2009

In order to reach the two-way symmetrical approach, practitioners in the public sector should be aiming social media communications at enabling and inspiring more publics to climb the pyramid.

Grunig and Repper (1992, cited in Edwards 2009) differentiated between 'active', 'passive' and 'latent' publics. 'Active' publics seek out information and respond to the organisation's communications, 'passive' publics are uninterested in engaging with the organisation and 'latent' publics may not currently be engaged but may react to certain triggers and potentially increase their engagement. These different public segments could be placed on different levels of the community engagement pyramid. In order to engage publics different approaches could be taken with each group, e.g.

- 'Active' publics – keep informed and maintain motivation
- 'Latent' publics – identify and promote factors that will trigger their engagement

Grunig (1983, in Edwards 2009) segmented publics depending on what may trigger engagement, these are:

- All-issue publics;

- Apathetic publics;
- Single-issue publics; and
- Hot-issue publics.

Either of these methods of categorisation may assist in forming social media strategies and triggering new or increased engagement.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has summarised the factors influencing the rise in popularity of social media. Social drivers included:

- Shift to younger age groups (“digital natives”) with substantial ICT skills, willingness to engage online (i.e. sharing content, recommending and rating content, etc.) and less hesitant to reveal personal information online.
- Desire to create and express oneself and search for more interactivity than on traditional media platforms such as TV.
- Development of communities and collaborative projects.
- Spread of social drivers to older age groups and for societal functions (social engagement, politics and education).

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007

This shift in the public's social behaviour, particularly the willingness to express oneself and share information, gives PR practitioners and organisations greater opportunities to successfully engage with the public. This means that communication is more two-way symmetrical and higher levels of the community engagement pyramid are reached.

Another aspect that could contribute to the effectiveness of social media as a tool could be the authenticity of messages. It is likely that, as with other forms of media, there are different levels of trust. As many messages within social media are often not authentic and not verifiable there may be lower levels of trust and increased suspicion towards PR practitioners using social media.

Assessing the effectiveness of social media will provide evidence to support or oppose the use of social media in public relations work.

Social proof theory

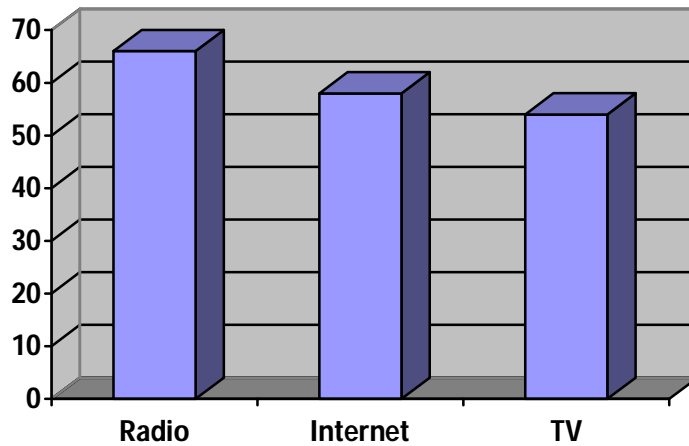
A theory which can be applied to social media is social proof theory which is the idea that “individuals determine appropriate behaviour for themselves in a situation to examine the behaviour of others there - especially similar others” (Cialdini et. al 2001, page 36). Social proof theory supports social media as an effective tool because by joining a social network, users can clearly see what other people think, whether it’s by seeing how many others have joined a group, seeing what is a trending topic on Twitter or by seeing what their own peers agree or disagree with. Facebook frequently suggests pages to users depending on what their “friends” have liked. The word “viral” is now associated with web content that is quickly spread to mass audiences. This relates directly to social proof theory as it often becomes fast spreading when publics recommend things to each other. Content spreads itself quickly when it can be seen that lots of other people have shown their approval of it by posting it in their own online space or sending it to friends.

Accessibility

According to an Ofcom survey, reported by the BBC, accessibility to the Internet and social networking sites has risen sharply in the last two years.

“About three quarters (73%) of adults used the internet in 2009, up from two thirds (63%) in 2007... Twice as many internet users had a social networking site profile (44%) compared with 2007.” (BBC, 2010)

This rise in public access to the Internet indicates that social media and online communications are becoming more popular and widespread. The more people who have access to social media, the more effective this can be as a tool for community engagement. However, the same study indicated that the public considered that information online was less reliable than information on radio but more reliable than TV. The diagram below shows the percentage of respondents who found the following media sources reliable.



It can be seen that the Internet still has some distance to build public trust, however, the fact that it has, this year, overtaken TV as a reliable source indicates that public opinion is improving.

3. Methodology

This research project uses both qualitative and quantitative methods of research. An online survey using multiple choice questions was used to collect quantitative data. Respondents were then asked to write a little about their experiences of using social media, providing more in-depth, qualitative insights into the subject area.

Online survey

The online survey sought to measure the extent to which PR practitioners in the public sector were using social media and their perceptions of its effectiveness as a tool for community engagement. Public sector communicators were approached directly by email and also indirectly via various social media platforms, professional discussion forums and professional groups.

The public sector and private sector's organisational objectives and motives are very different. The public sector often focuses on non-financial performance indicators about things such as wellbeing, crime and poverty rates. The private sector often focuses on financial targets such as profits and sales. This means that their motives and approach to communication is fundamentally different. For this reason it is appropriate to treat the two sectors individually when discussing two-way communications and the mixed motive model. Therefore this study refers to the public sector and survey respondents were sought from this sector only.

The questions asked to PR practitioners in the public sector sought to determine the following:

- which are the main groups being targeted by PR practitioners;
- which platforms are most popular;
- what extent organisations have integrated social features into their own websites;
- what practitioners use social media for;
- how practitioners spread their social media presence;
- how feedback is received and responded to;
- how closely social media was monitored compared to traditional media; and

- what perceptions are there of the effectiveness of social media as a tool for community engagement.

Some initial questions were also asked about the respondents' organisation, geographical location and job titles to be able to demonstrate the scope of the sample.

As the survey questions require some knowledge and experience of using social media it was important to ensure that PR practitioners that were familiar with social media responded. Distributing the online survey through social media forums, sites and professional groups ensured that PR practitioners who already use social media responded to the survey.

All survey responses were anonymous and responses from those who had selected no to the opening question (Are you, or have you ever been, a public relations (PR), marketing or communications practitioner working in the public sector?) were filtered out to ensure that the sample included only those who were PR/comms professionals in the public sector.

3.1. Limitations

It is important to note that if more time and funding had been allocated to this funding a wider sample would have been approached to complete the online survey. A larger sample size would have given a more accurate picture of experience and opinion of PR practitioners across the public sector.

With extra funds it would have been a good idea to offer a cash or voucher incentive to complete the survey, this would ensure that a range of participants would be more incentivised to participate and not necessarily just professionals who use social media regularly to communicate with professional groups. It may also contribute to the survey being forwarded on to others, increasing its exposure to potential participants.

As interviews address a much smaller sample size they may not be entirely representative of the industry. However as participants were specifically chosen for their expertise, responses are more likely to be of high quality and respondents were able to demonstrate a strong theoretical and experiential knowledge of the subject.

With the survey research method the wording of questions could unintentionally illicit certain responses. Also, respondents may want to provide responses that support the research. To counter this, details of the study given to participants were deliberately vague and did not include the project title. Questions were phrased carefully to ensure that they didn't suggest or show bias towards certain answers.

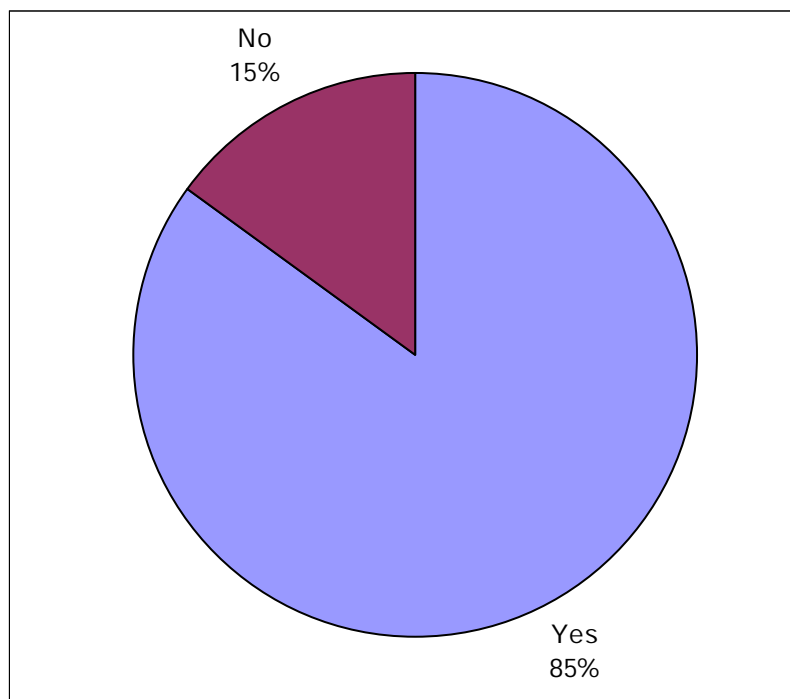
4. Research findings

Online survey results

A total of 93 PR, marketing and communications practitioners responded to the survey however several respondents skipped many or some of the questions which meant that the actual number of completed surveys is estimated to be around 70.

Question 1

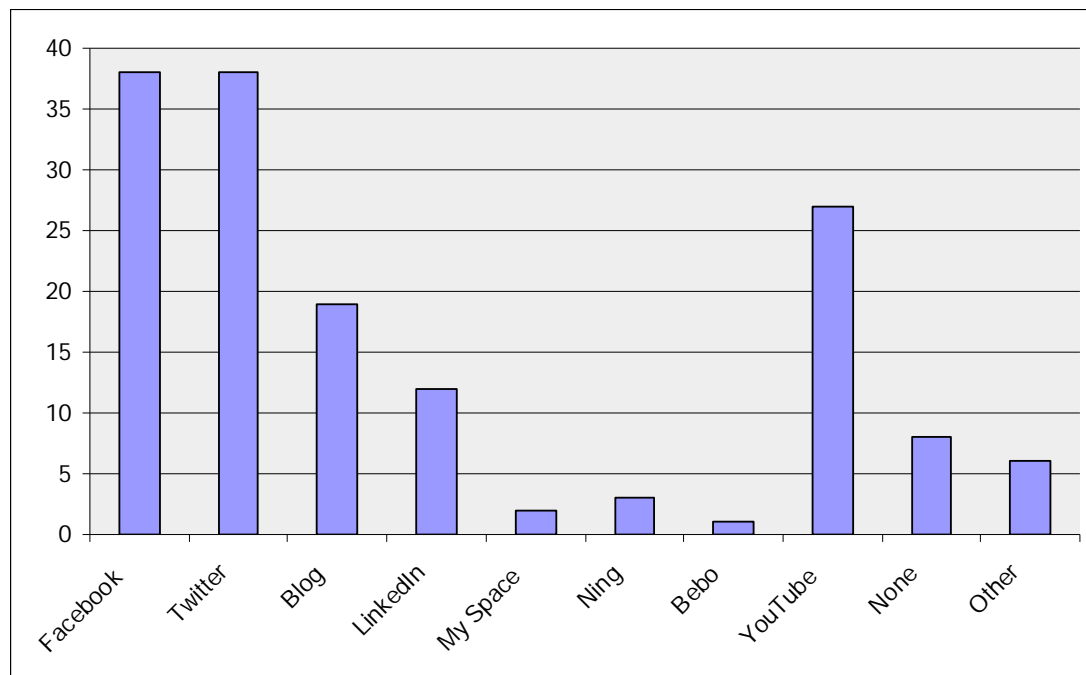
- **Do you or your team use social media for professional purposes?**



A large majority of respondents use social media for professional purposes. Considering that this survey was distributed through social media channels this result is not surprising. The fact that most respondents have experience in using social media professionally means that they are more qualified to answer questions about social media in public relations.

Question 2

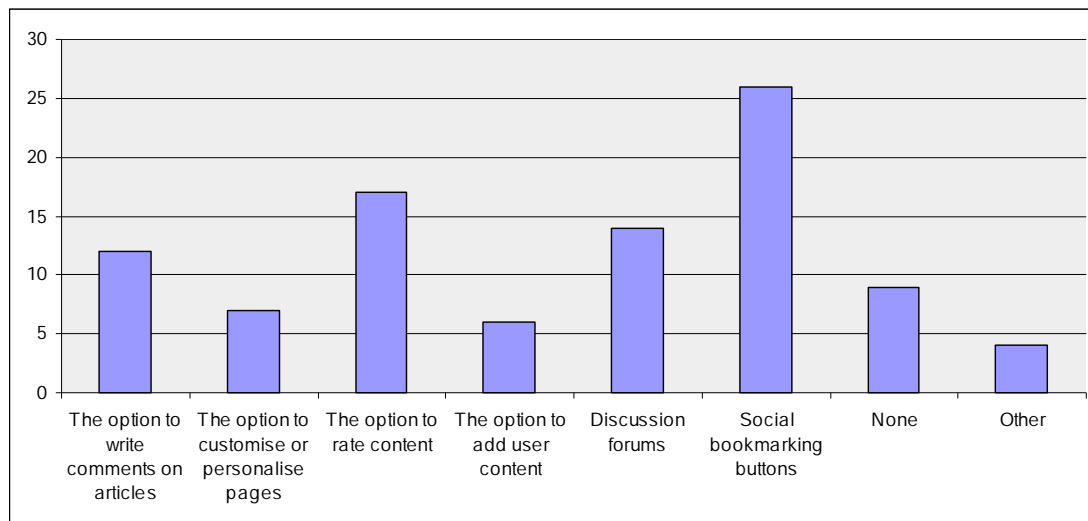
- **What social media sites do you use for professional purposes?**



The most popular social media platforms were Facebook and Twitter which is consistent with statistics about the most popular websites. In January 2010 Facebook was most popular with 218,860,914 unique users and Twitter came second with 42,138,681 unique users (BBC (b) 2010). It can be seen here that PR practitioners are focusing their efforts on the platforms where there is a greater concentration of people, therefore achieving the widest reach of audience.

Question 3

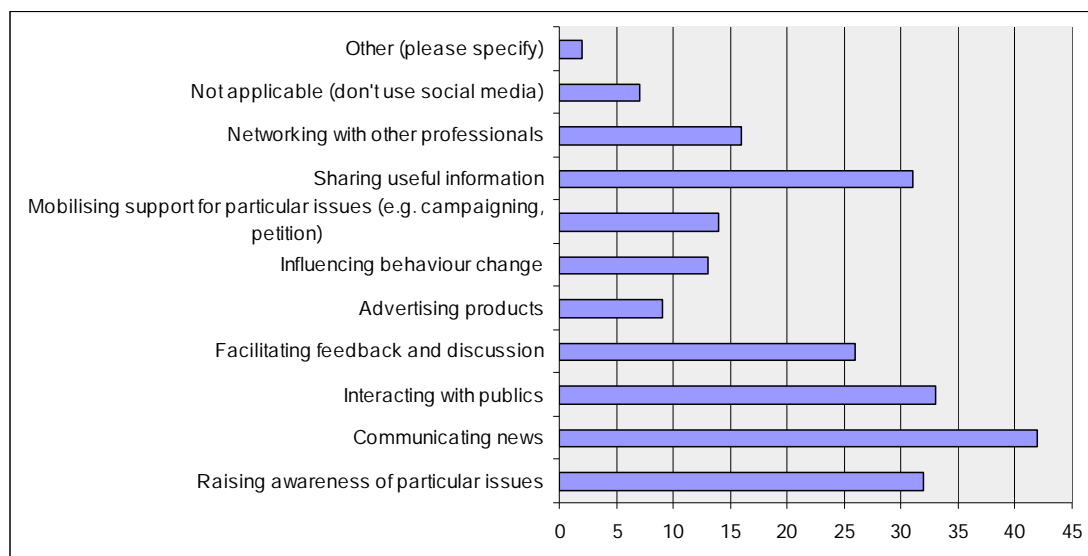
- **Does your organisation's website incorporate any of the following social features?**



The response to this question shows that PR practitioners are increasingly using aspects of social media in their own websites. A wide range of tactics are being used in order to engage publics with the content and to enable publics to create and contribute to their own content.

Question 4

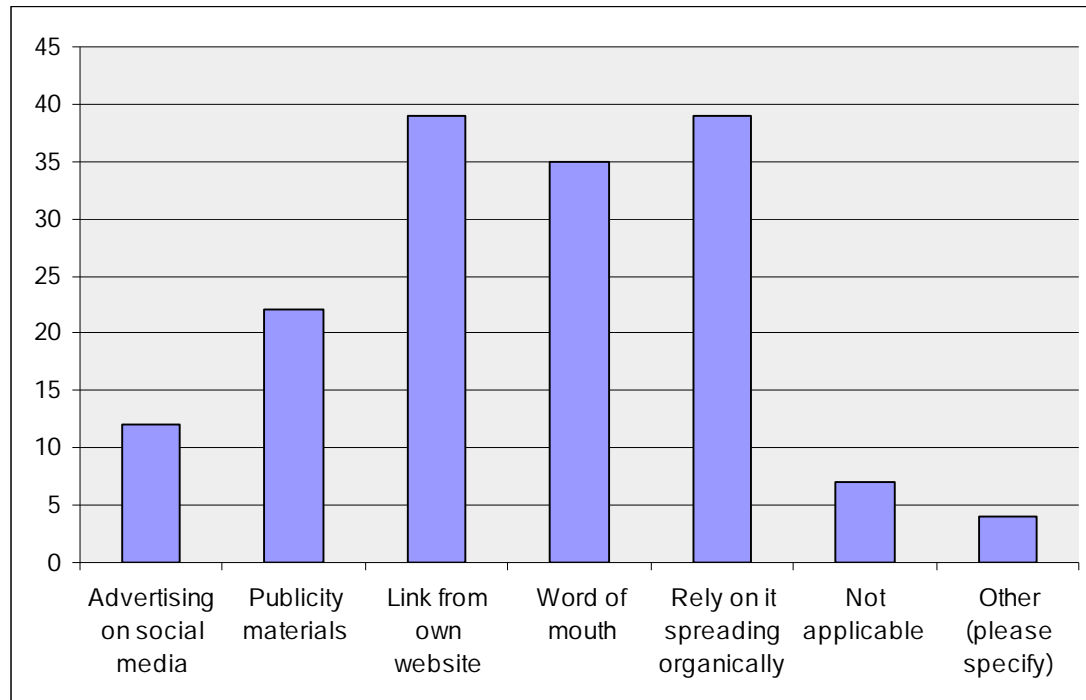
- **What do you mainly use social media for?**



There are a range of possible uses for social media by PR practitioners. These different uses could be associated with each of the four models of communication and this will be discussed further in the discussion part of this project.

Question 5

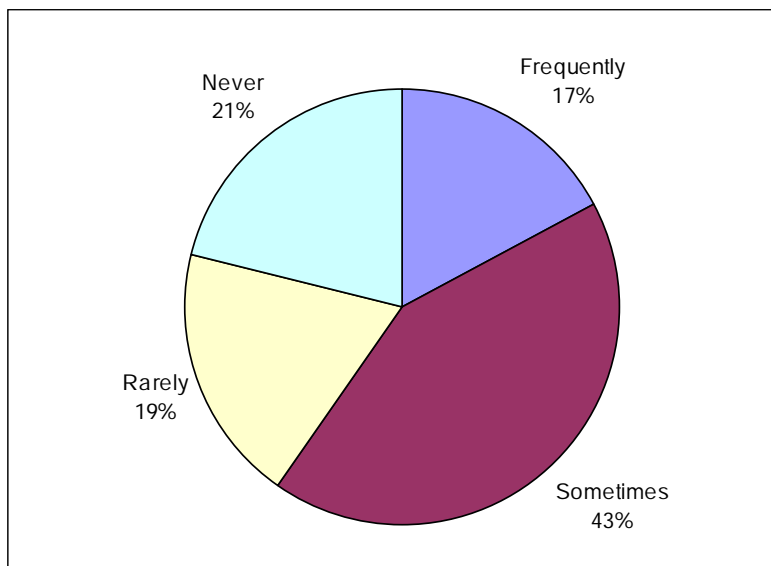
- **How do you gain followers, fans or members?**



In this survey the most popular ways of spreading messages to wider audiences were linking from their own websites, word of mouth and relying on it spreading organically. All of which are low cost methods of communication compared to tactics such as advertising.

Question 6

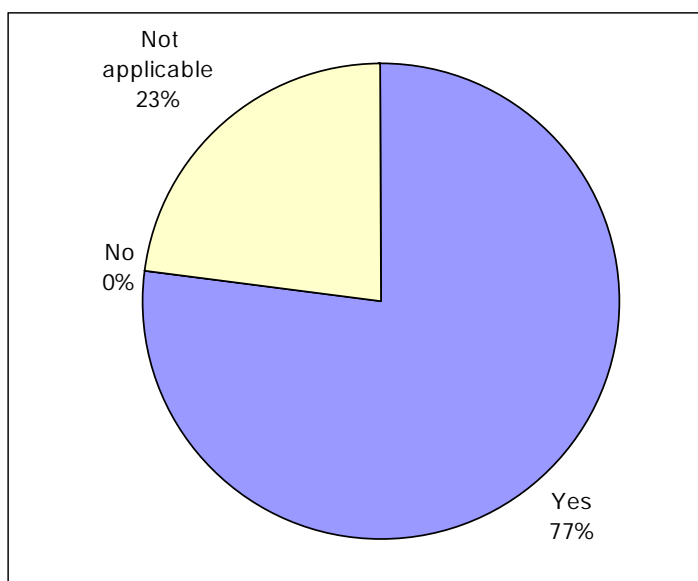
- **Do members of the public comment or send you messages via social media?**



The results to this question suggest that publics sometimes engage with public sector organisations using social media, however, in order for social media to be effective in engaging publics in two-way symmetrical communication interaction should take place more frequently. This would suggest that more still needs to be done to encourage publics to interact so that they are able to make a difference.

Question 7

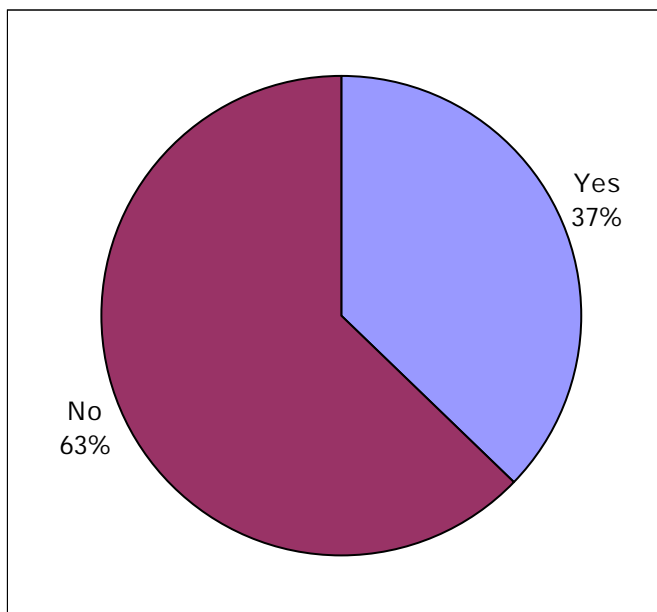
- **Are the messages or comments sent to you via social media responded to by your organisation?**



All organisations that said they received messages through social media said that they respond to all messages. This indicates that the social media channel is working as a two-way model. However this does not necessarily prove that the engagement is symmetrical.

Question 8

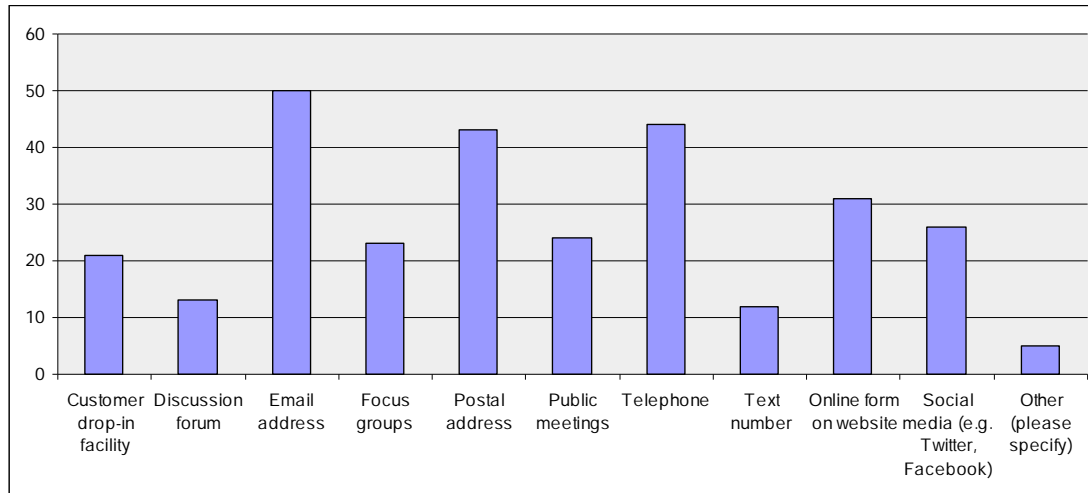
- **Have you ever used feedback received through social media to inform changes to services or the organisation itself?**



The response to this question shows that over a third of respondents are using feedback to inform changes which suggests that social media engagement is beginning to empower publics to make changes. This would suggest that over a third of respondents are using social media in a two-way symmetrical way however, nearly two thirds have not yet reached the top level of the community engagement pyramid and this indicates that in these cases publics have not become empowered.

Question 9

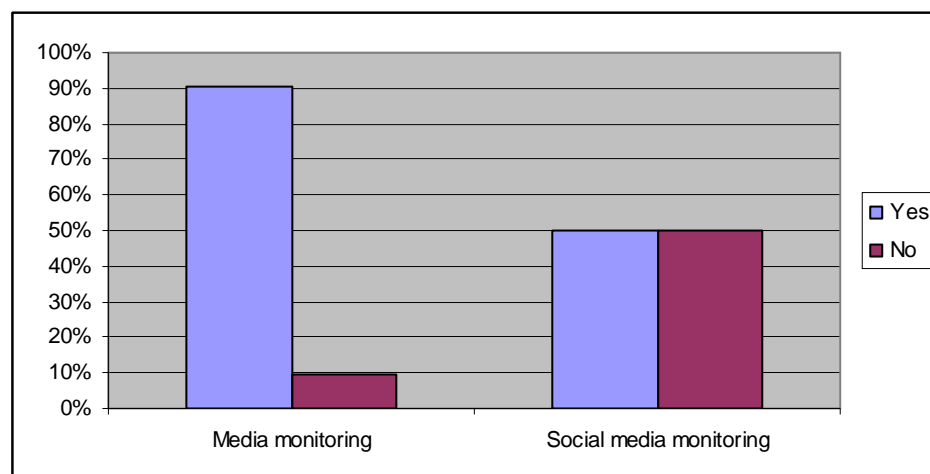
- Which of the following communications methods do you provide to allow feedback about your organisation/service?



Other than social media engagement these results show that traditional methods of community engagement are still being used to gain feedback. This suggests that social media is just one in a raft of techniques used by public sector organisations to provide feedback.

Question 10 and 11

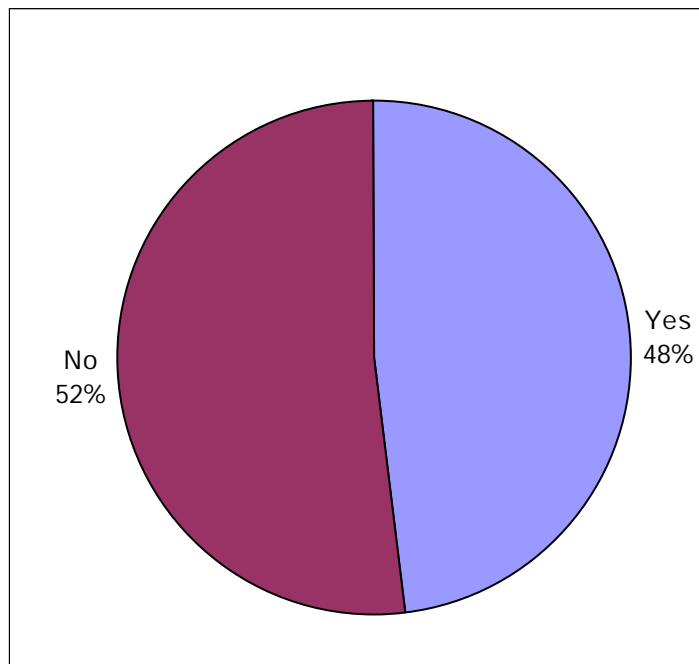
- Do you monitor media coverage about your organisation?
- Do you monitor content posted about your organisation on social media?



These results show a significant difference in the way social media is perceived amongst PR practitioners. While nearly all PR practitioners in the survey invest time and resources in monitoring traditional media outlets, only half do the same to monitor attitudes and reactions on social media. This could be because PR practitioners don't yet see social media to be as influential as the traditional media. However this may be a danger as several high-profile examples, such as Nestlé (O'Reilly and Magee 2010) and Habitat UK (Sudhaman 2009), have shown how social media can fuel organisational crises and how monitoring social media can be useful to detect issues before they become crises.

Question 12

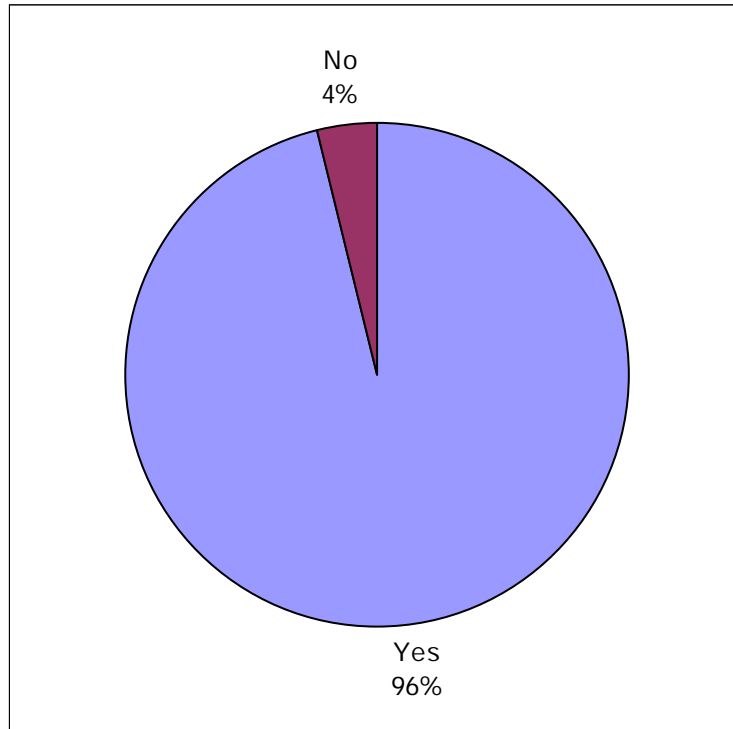
- **Does your organisation have an official policy, protocol or strategy for staff using social media in a professional capacity?**



Like questions 10 and 11, this question also reinforces how social media is perceived among PR practitioners. Just over half of respondents said that their organisation did not have an official policy protocol or strategy for social media use which suggests that it is not yet being considered as a significant part of an organisation's PR strategy. This also suggests that although organisations are widely using social media for community engagement are not yet considering reputational risks or opportunities that social media can pose. Although there are many benefits of community engagement using social media, recent examples, such as Habitat (Sudhaman 2009) and Nestlé (O'Reilly and Magee 2010), have highlighted potential reputational risks

Question 13

- **Would you recommend using social media as a tool for community engagement to other PR/communications practitioners?**



Nearly all respondents said that they would recommend social media as a tool for community engagement. Many provided additional comments to reinforce this:

“Proven way of targeting hard to reach groups”

“It’s cost effective and encourages 2-way communication”

“People choose to communicate with each other in varying ways - the more you encourage interaction in ways that they prefer, the better engagement you’ll have”

“Used correctly, social media is an excellent tool for community engagement. It’s free, easy to use, and has a wide target audience. People can dip in and out as they please.”

“It allows greater 'direct' interaction between the organisation and it’s publics”

“Invaluable for customer service”

“Great tool for two-way interaction”

However some felt that it was important to clarify their endorsement of social media as an effective tool:

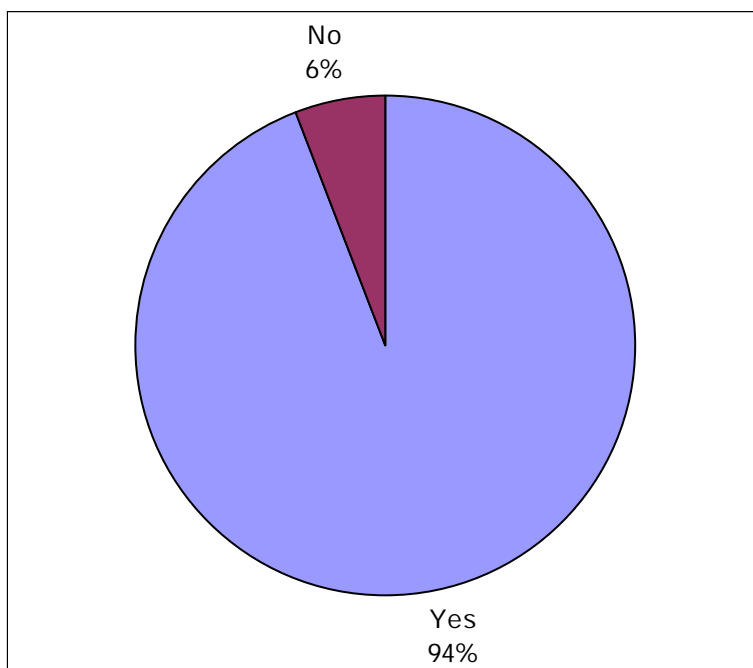
“With the proviso that they have a plan, a method of measuring progress and assuming it's an appropriate tool for target audience. People need to move beyond just using it for the sake of it and instead look at how best to use it.”

“Where it fits with objectives”

“When appropriate”

Question 14

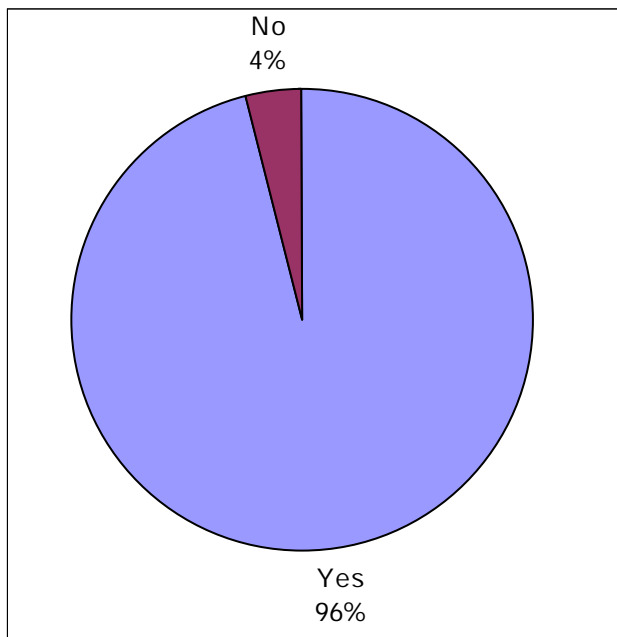
- **Do you think that, in the context of your work, social media can improve two-way communications between the organisation and publics?**



The response to this question shows that PR practitioners recognise the way in which social media can improve two-way communications.

Question 15

- **Do you think that social media communication between organisation and publics can be mutually beneficial?**



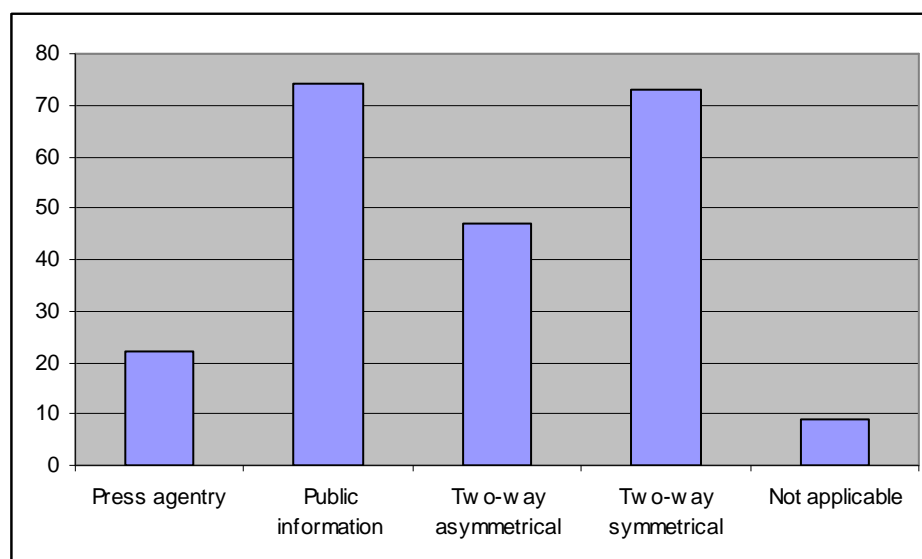
This final question reinforces the perception that the PR practitioners surveyed have of social media. As in the previous question, that most respondents feel that social media can improve two-way communications, they also feel that it can be mutually beneficial to public and organisation.

5. Discussion and analysis

In question 4 (What do you mainly use social media for?) it could be seen that social media was used by practitioners to meet a variety of objectives. If we apply these objectives to the four models we can see which models of communication practitioners are using social media for.

Use of social media	Relevant model
Advertising products	Press Agency
Influencing behaviour change	Press Agency
Raising awareness of particular issues	Public information
Communicating news	Public information
Interacting with publics	Two way asymmetrical
Mobilising support for particular issues	Two way asymmetrical
Facilitating feedback and discussion	Two way symmetrical
Sharing useful information	Two way symmetrical
Networking with other professionals	Two way symmetrical
Not applicable	Not applicable
Other	Not applicable

By associating these results with the four models we can see the following results:



Both the public information model and two-way symmetrical model scored highly which suggests practitioners are taking two main approaches to using social media. One approach (public information) uses social media as an additional channel to

provide the public with news and information. The other approach (two-way symmetrical) is using social media to engage with the public in a way that is beneficial to both public and organisation.

This could also suggest that practitioners use social media to employ a range of models. As social media is flexible and has various applications these results may imply that as a communications channel, social media can provide varying levels of engagement ranging from one-way models to two-way symmetrical models and is not restricted to just one model. This reflects Edwards' view that in reality a mix of symmetrical and asymmetrical methods will be used (2009).

One respondent commented, "The problem with open dialogue is the need to monitor comments in case of bogus or malicious comments. At the moment we play it safe and use Facebook more as a notice board for us to post news, but the email address is highlighted for people to use to give feedback and express opinions." In this situation the use of social media is more for public information however it is used in combination with a separate technique to encourage feedback and make communications more two-way symmetrical.

Another comment reinforced the importance of listening and trusting communities in order to make social media mutually beneficial, "As with all forms of communication, listening with social media is the most important thing - this will only be mutually beneficial if organisations trust the community enough to lose control of what happens on social media, and to respond appropriately."

The results indicated that communities were being trusted to post content and comments on features such as discussion forums and social media pages, however there still seems to be some resistance to giving communities full control over social media and organisations are sometimes reluctant to assign the resources to monitoring and responding to social media users as this respondent's comment implies, "It needs to be carefully managed, as otherwise it is possible for a small number of mobilised objectors to make a disproportionate amount of work for the organisation."

Practitioners' attitudes towards social media

The final three questions measured practitioners' attitudes towards social media as a tool (Would you recommend using social media as a tool for community engagement to other PR/communications practitioners? Do you think that, in the context of your work, social media can improve two-way communications between the organisation and publics? Do you think that social media communication between organisation and publics can be mutually beneficial?). The responses to these questions were overwhelmingly positive which implies that practitioners that have had experience of using social media in a professional context feel that it does provide an effective two-way symmetrical approach.

However it is important to consider that this response may be biased as the majority of practitioners answering this survey are already using social media as a tool and therefore must already believe that there are benefits to using it. But this result still reflects the fact that social media has been tried and tested by practitioners and can be seen to have positive results.

These positive attitudes are not replicated in questions 11 and 12 (Does your organisation monitor social media content? Does your organisation have an official policy, protocol or strategy?) which showed that most organisations weren't committed to providing resources to monitor, plan and legitimise social media. These results may be indicative of a lack of support from the organisation to fully invest in social media strategies. Alternatively it may just show that as a new tool for community engagement, organisations are reluctant to fully invest in social media until its benefits have been better researched and proven.

Another application could be that social media is seen as a casual tool that individuals use to catch up with friends, play games and share photos. It is possible that practitioners have adopted a casual approach to using social media professionally as it does not seem as formal as traditional methods of organisational communication. One respondent added, "I'm aware that it is a useful tool, just need to convince our directors of this in order to get an effective strategy in place - as always getting buy-in at board room level is the key".

Although a more casual approach may appear friendlier to the public, it is still important to structure and plan communications activity and also to evaluate and

monitor its impact. If this is done properly and practitioners are able to demonstrate impact and community engagement in real terms then it is more likely that senior management will support this communications activity.

One respondent highlighted that social media shouldn't be used as a tool to cure all communications problems, "Still early days and although a useful tool it's not the silver bullet many believe. Must be used as part of a wider strategy." Public sector organisations have been required to be more transparent and offer the public greater opportunities to engage with the organisation about issues that matter to them. The results from question 9 show that although organisations are beginning to implement social media in their communications, they are still employing other tactics to support consultation and engagement activity. Providing an email address, postal address and telephone number remain the most popular methods for giving the public opportunities to provide feedback. This shows that public sector communications are not yet dependent on the Internet and organisations are still providing alternatives to social media for community engagement.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Social media can be an effective tool for community engagement if it is used properly. This report has highlighted the need for proper planning and strategies in order to get the best results from social media. Many practitioners are currently implementing social media strategies and campaigns with positive results. This can be seen on social media platforms (most popularly facebook and Twitter) and also with organisations integrating social features into their own websites.

Social media can be used to achieve varying degrees of community engagement. It should be accepted that different publics may be at different stages on the community engagement pyramid but the objective of social media communications should be to increase public participation. It should also be accepted that a mixture of two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical methods can be used effectively to engage the public at different levels.

Practitioners feel that in order for social media to be used more effectively:

- social media use should be properly planned;
- official procedures should be in place to mitigate against risks;
- social media should not be used in isolation, it should be used with other communications;
- social media should encourage two-way symmetrical communications. The more two-way symmetrical the more empowered publics are and the more engaged they are. This builds up strong relationships and gives publics a sense of ownership of their services; and
- practitioners should use feedback to inform changes in the organisation.

Social media itself has the capacity to provide two-way symmetrical communication but it's the way in which the practitioners encourage and respond to feedback and meet the motives of the public which make it correspond to the two-way symmetrical approach.

This study confirms that practitioners feel that social media is two-way but further research in the subject should focus on surveying public groups to find out if they feel that an organisation's social media provides two-way symmetrical communications.

Which tactics provide the most opportunity for engagement also needs to be discussed with stakeholders.

If both practitioners' objectives and stakeholder's expectations are met then it could be concluded that the two-way symmetrical approach in the mixed motives model has been achieved.

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8. Appendices

8.1. Appendix 1

Copy of online survey

Using social media - for public relations / communications

1.

* 1. Are you, or have you ever been, a public relations (PR), marketing or communications practitioner working in the public sector?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Using social media - for public relations / communications

2. About you

Please complete this survey if you are a public relations (PR) or communications professional working in the public sector.

1. What type of organisation do you work for?

2. Which geographical area do you work for?

3. What is your job title?

4. How long have you worked in PR / communications?

☐ Less than a year

☐ 1-2 years

☐ 3-4 years

☐ More than 5 years

Using social media - for public relations / communications

3. Professional use of social media

Please answer these questions in relation to your professional use of social media sites NOT your personal use.

1. Which age groups are your communications/PR activities mainly aimed at?

- ☐ 0-12
- ☐ 13-19
- ☐ 20-29
- ☐ 30-39
- ☐ 40-49
- ☐ 50-59
- ☐ 60-69
- ☐ 70+

2. Do you or your team use social media for professional purposes?

☐ Yes

☐ No (please explain why)

3. Which social media sites do you use for professional purposes?

- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Blog
- ☐ LinkedIn
- ☐ My Space
- ☐ Ning
- ☐ Bebo
- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Using social media - for public relations / communications

4. Does your organisation's website incorporate any of the following social features?

- ☐ The option to write comments on articles
- ☐ The option to customise or personalise pages
- ☐ The option to rate content
- ☐ The option to add user content
- ☐ Discussion forums
- ☐ Social bookmarking buttons
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other (please specify)

5. What do you mainly use social media for?

- ☐ Raising awareness of particular issues
- ☐ Communicating news
- ☐ Interacting with publics
- ☐ Facilitating feedback and discussion
- ☐ Advertising products
- ☐ Influencing behaviour change
- ☐ Mobilising support for particular issues (e.g. campaigning, petition)
- ☐ Sharing useful information
- ☐ Networking with other professionals
- ☐ Not applicable (don't use social media)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

6. How do you gain followers, fans or members?

- ☐ Advertising on social media
- ☐ Publicity materials
- ☐ Link from own website
- ☐ Word of mouth
- ☐ Rely on it spreading organically (e.g. one person joins and other people follow suit)
- ☐ Not applicable
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Using social media - for public relations / communications

7. Do members of the public comment or send you messages via social media?

☐ Frequently

☐ Sometimes

☐ Rarely

☐ Never

8. Are the messages or comments sent to you via social media responded to by your organisation?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not applicable

9. Have you ever used feedback received through social media to inform changes to services or the organisation itself?

☐ Yes

☐ No

10. Which of the following communications methods do you provide to allow feedback about your organisation/service?

☐ Customer drop-in facility

☐ Discussion forum

☐ Email address

☐ Focus groups

☐ Postal address

☐ Public meetings

☐ Telephone

☐ Text number

☐ Online form on website

☐ Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook)

☐ Other (please specify)

Using social media - for public relations / communications

11. Do you monitor media coverage about your organisation?

☐ No

☐ Yes (please explain how)

12. Do you monitor content posted about your organisation on social media?

☐ No

☐ Yes (please explain how)

13. Does your organisation have an official policy, protocol or strategy for staff using social media in a professional capacity?

☐ Yes

☐ No

14. Would you recommend using social media as a tool for community engagement to other PR/communications practitioners?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please explain your reason

15. Do you think that, in the context of your work, social media can improve two-way communications between the organisation and publics?

☐ Yes

☐ No

16. Do you think that social media communication between organisation and publics can be mutually beneficial.

☐ Yes

☐ No

17. Please add any comments that you have about the use of social media as a tool for community engagement.

	5
	6

Using social media - for public relations / communications

4. Thank you

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Your responses will be used as part of my research project for the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) professional Diploma in Public Relations.

I will only use your data to inform my research project and will not share your personal information with any other organisations.

If you have any questions about this study please contact me at

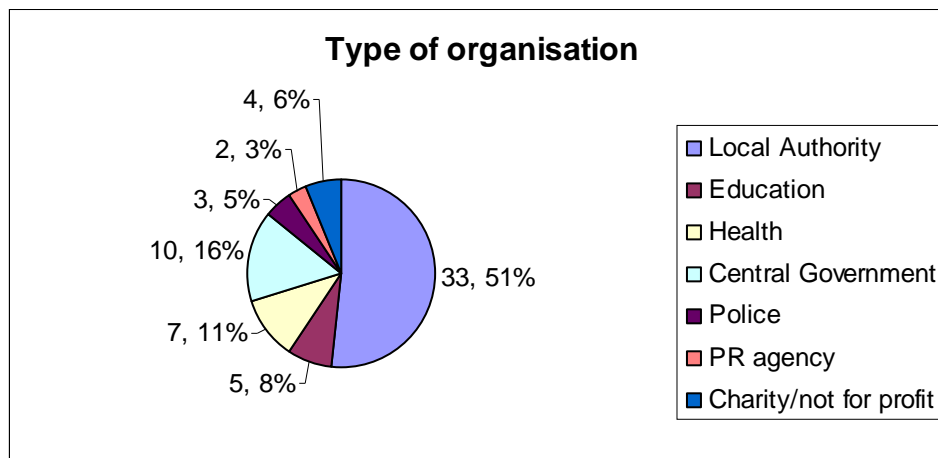
Many thanks

1. If you would like to be sent a copy of the completed research project, please enter your email address.

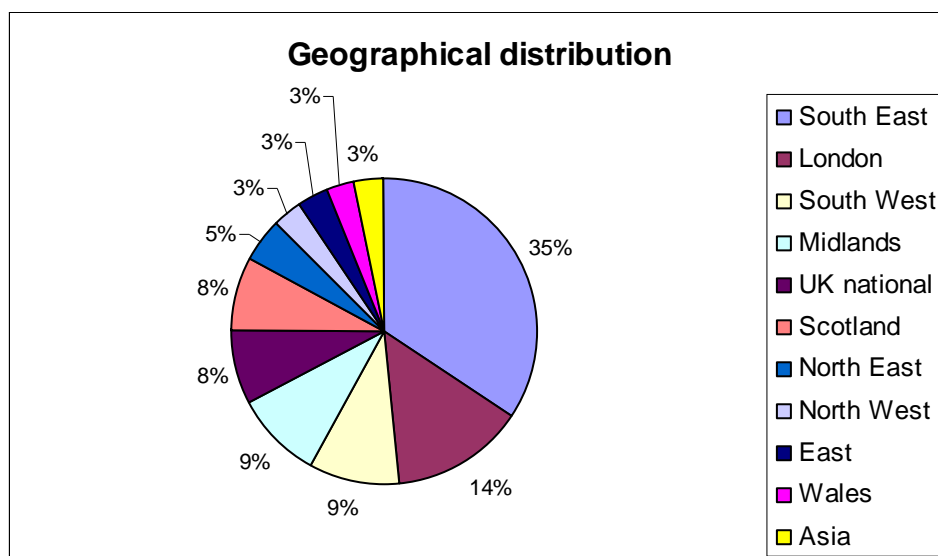
Using social media - for public relations / communications

8.2. Appendix 2

Profile of survey respondents



The majority of respondents work in Local Authorities, however there was also a varied response from colleagues in other public sector organisations.



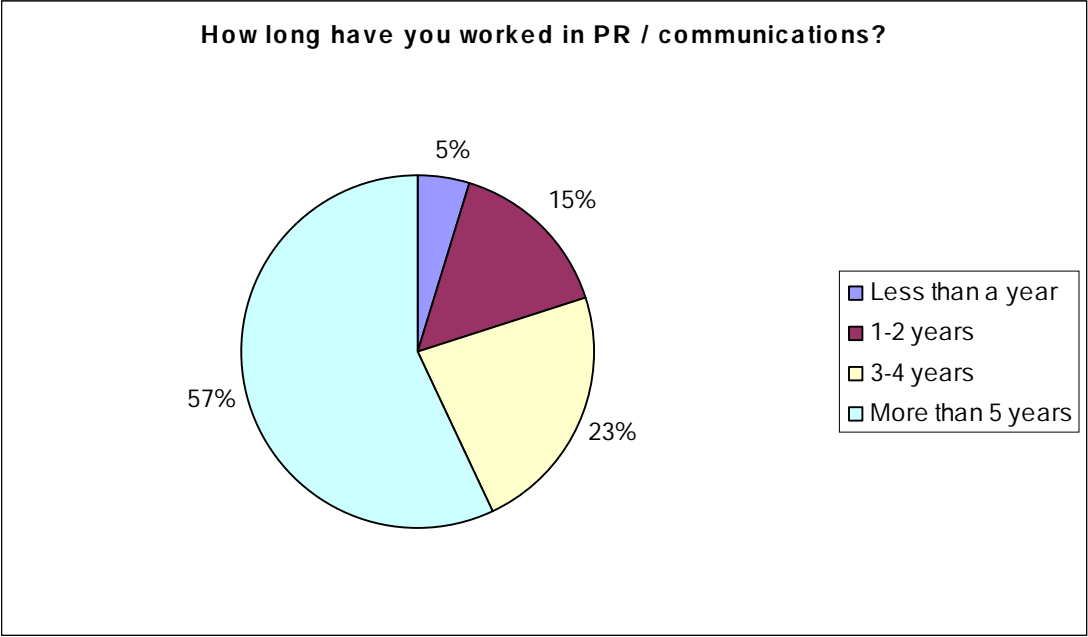
Nearly all of respondents were from the UK and the highest concentration of respondents was in the London/South East area.

Job titles

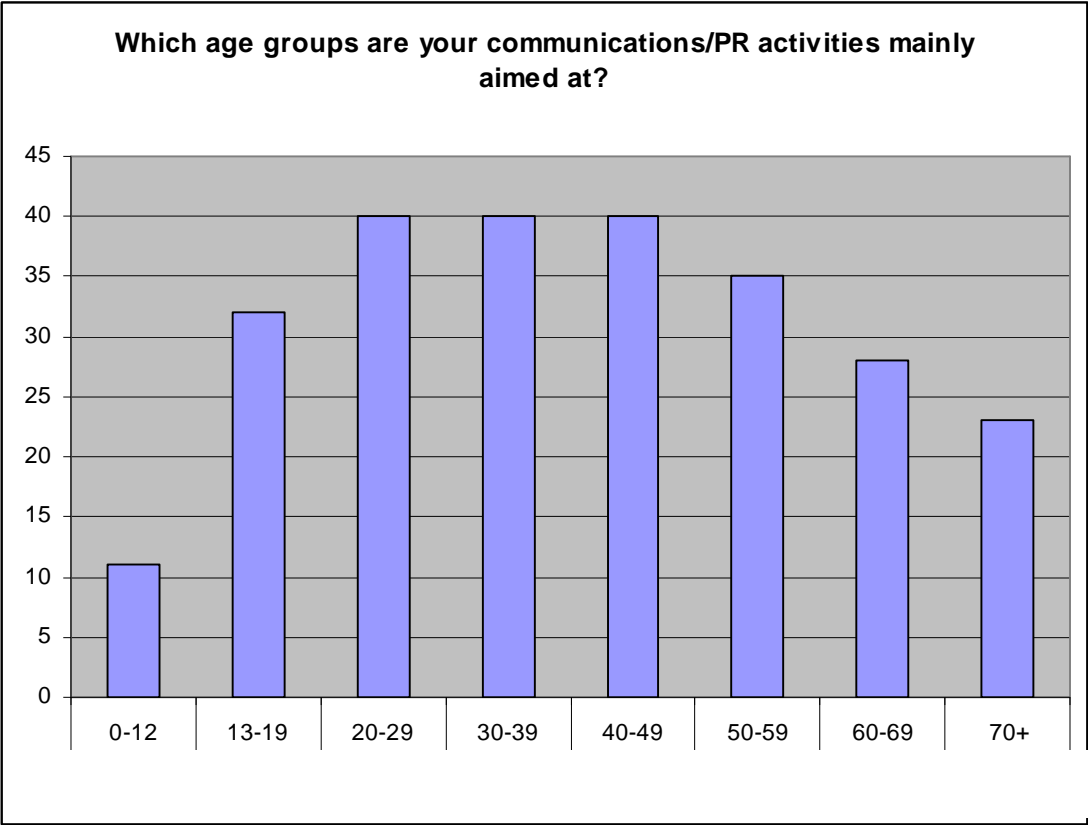
Regional Communications Officer
Events & PR Manager
Marketing & Communication Officer
Communications Manager
Communications Assistant
Communications Officer
Communications Officer
Marketing Communications Manager
Communications Officer
Principal Communications Officer
Media relations specialist
Head of Communications
Corporate Communications Officer
Press officer
Senior Communications Officer
Climate Change Communications Officer
Media Advisor
Senior Communications Officer
PR Consultant
Communications Officer
Communications and engagement manager
Marketing Communications Manager
Communications Officer
Communications Officer
Public Relations Officer
Communications Officer
Senior Youth Worker
Corporate communications officer
Account Director
E-Communications Manager
Communications officer
Web Editor

e-communications and marketing officer
Digital Marketing Officer
Communications Manager
Consultant (freelance)
Director of Policy and Communications
Coordinator for International Relations
Communications manager - external relations
Senior Communications and PR Officer
Web Assistant
Head of Communications
Communications Manager
Head of Media
Communications Manager
Press & PR Officer
Communications / Publicity Officer
interim head of communications
Consultant
senior communications officer
Communications Officer
Information officer
PR + New Media Co-ordinator
marketing and communications manager
Communications manager
Communications Co-ordinator
eCommunications Manager
Head of social marketing
Interim Head of Communications
Head of communications and marketing
Events & PR Manager
Communications Officer
Communications Manager

A wide variety of professionals of ranging levels of seniority and with various specialisms were surveyed.



Most PR practitioners surveyed had several years of experience and were therefore in a good position to respond in an informed way.



8.3. Appendix 3

Additional comments to questions

Question 1 - Do you or your team use social media for professional purposes?

Comments (If not why not)

There is a corporate social media page already
We don't have anything set up yet but we are exploring which options would be best for our needs.
No suitable opportunities have yet arisen, however we are monitoring this.
Not got round to sorting it out yet! - Newly formed team
Exploring its use at the moment.
Not the most appropriate medium; can be seen as intrusive and not accessible to all.
Generally a conservative approach to comms, which will change due to new leadership. We are about to launch a new website with integrated social media as a first step.
Don't think it's relevant

Question 2 - What social media sites do you use for professional purposes?

Other (please specify)

Our own discussion boards on www.channelmogo.org
Developing our own community platforms/sites, one for consultation/engagement/collaboration & one for marketing/comms
Vimeo
Flickr
Delicious
Knowledge Now

Question 3 – Does your organisation's website incorporate any of the following social features?

Other (please specify)

Question & Answer
Separate ning site with full functionality
All of the above are currently in development.
We're looking at most of these for our new site which is in development.

Question 4 - What do you mainly use social media for?

Other (please specify)

Exchange of technical information/student study support

Question 5 - How do you gain followers, fans or members?

Other (please specify)

Joining others, following others and also training groups in how to use social media therefore gaining followers
Many others, incl. seeding in other communities
Mailshot to existing members inviting them to join up
Retweeting

Question 9 - Which of the following communications methods do you provide to allow feedback about your organisation/service?

Other (please specify)

Information Centres
Old-school paper based surveys!
Through trustees and advisory council
Regular 'involvement' groups
Formal consultations

Question 10 - Do you monitor media coverage about your organisation?

Media monitoring techniques used

Media Monitoring Service
Clippings services, newspings, Google alerts,
web searches, twitter feeds
Monitored through the media centre – newspaper cutting service
Media centre produce reports outlining where media interest has been in the past month
hard copy press cuttings, online local and national news
Newsflash
Via press office.
Daily monitoring of items related to our business in the press and internet.
Yes – manually
Done at a regional level (for Stockport, the North West)
Media monitoring subscriptions/press cuttings
Via our PR team and hired agency
Monitoring service
Press Cuttings, polling, online searches
A media monitoring company is used
all print, online, and broadcast media
Press cuttings, google alerts
We use a media monitoring agency.
press cuttings
Press cuttings
Google sends me a daily record of new articles or blogs relating to the organisation or relevant work.
Media monitor - news clippings etc
Media monitoring service
Newspaper, Google Alerts
press cuttings service
Several media monitoring companies and online searches.
Google news
Newspaper clippings / record tv & radio news
press clipping service, electronic alerts
Using external agencies and email alerts
Use a media monitoring service
Press clippings and media management reports
Monitor press cuttings each month to work out AVE for monthly reports.
Informally, on a bespoke basis
Print we use Durrants (the media monitoring agency), online we use Nielsen Buzzmetrics (currently running a trial)
Google Alerts, press cutting agency (not always- specific projects)

Google alerts, vocus, newspapers
Press cuttings, Google alerts
get newspapers delivered and cut articles as well as monitoring online news sites via google alerts
Volume of coverage, content analysis
Paid for service
Through the SHA agency
press cuttings service
own press cuttings
Media monitoring

Question 11 – Question 11 - Do you monitor content posted about your organisation on social media?

Social media monitoring techniques used:

Tweetdeck, Google alerts
Search
Comms team go online and search what's being said
Running searches on Twitter (Tweetdeck)
Manually
regular updates emailed to account holder
through special reporting and evaluation forms, usually reports come out on semi annual and annual bases
socialmention.com
searching ourselves
Twitalerts and constant monitoring
Technorati, blog and Google searches, online alerts for keywords.
Google news up to a point
Search social media for keywords
Email alerts
Regular review and search for org name mentions
Regularly look at Twitter @replies, Facebook comments etc - a decision is then made as to whether the comment needs a response.
Vocus
As above: Nielsen Buzzmetrics) plus various free services such as Social Oomph.
Tweetdeck
Tweetdesk
Hootsuite for Twitter. Google alerts. Working on a Council Watch site with my husband which monitors various channels.
Mainly Google alerts - because it is free and also separate searches on social media sites
Volume of coverage, resulting hits on our website
Social Mention
Google alerts, social mention, council monitor

Question 13 - Would you recommend using social media as a tool for community engagement to other PR/communications practitioners?

Please explain your reasons:

With the proviso that they have a plan, a method of measuring progress and assuming it's an appropriate tool for target audience. People need to move beyond just using it for the sake of it and instead look at how best to use it.
Even if not that many people use it to make helpful suggestions - they will still look when they

hear about it - and this will raise awareness of your organisation
If it was appropriate to their business
Proven way of targeting hard to reach groups
It's cost effective and encourages 2-way communication
I believe there is real potential by using this as a tool but you need to ensure your organisation is ready to commit the time required to make it work.
As we are moving forward, online media is becoming the norm.
Young people often ask us to.
People choose to communicate with each other in varying ways - the more you encourage interaction in ways that they prefer, the better engagement you'll have
For the right organisation, audiences and messages it can be appropriate e.g. charity/lifestyle issues.
Used correctly, social media is an excellent tool for community engagement. It's free, easy to use, and has a wide target audience. People can dip in and out as they please.
It allows greater 'direct' interaction between the organisation and it's publics
growing in popularity and easy to use
Valuable networking tool
Invaluable for customer service
Great tool for two-way interaction
where it fits with objectives
When appropriate

Closing comments from respondents

As with all forms of communication, listening with social media is the most important thing - this will only be mutually beneficial if organisations trust the community enough to lose control of what happens on social media, and to respond appropriately. As important as that is publics having the resources to access social media - I face a lot of opposition in communities who expect it all to cost a lot of money through computers or phones, when in reality phones that can access the media are inexpensive, libraries have computers. Finally the only other barrier we've found is that many workplaces block social media sites for staff - so accessing it in a professional sense is something they'd have to do at home if at all.
Any additional tool for communicating with the public is useful to raise awareness and invite dialogue. Feedback from younger users is that they would like to be kept up to date with news and events via Facebook as they do use it every day. The problem with open dialogue is the need to monitor comments in case of bogus or malicious comments. At the moment we play it safe and use Facebook more as a notice board for us to post news, but the email address is highlighted for people to use to give feedback and express opinions.
I don't know whether these is an official policy or protocol in the organisation
In a local government context, there is a reluctance to get involved with social media, largely because there is a lack of understanding as to its potential benefits. There is a need for local authorities to engage better with young people and social media presents possibly the most immediate way of doing this. Social media cannot simply be ignored as it is a cultural phenomenon and mutual benefits can be gained if it is controlled and regulated in the right way.
Social media is great but only reaches a small audience
If nothing else, I believe the argument for incorporation of Social Media falls under "hygiene factor" - the general public expect and want companies and councils to have these platforms and strategies in place for day to day communication. Therefore we should be in this space.
Social media in the third world countries (like Palestine) is still a new concept so basically the feedback still can't be generalized nor set the ground for any strategies

I think it really only works when it is developed and sustained by the community, and the organisation are invited to be part of that discussion. When the organisation sets it up expecting for people to take part, it is unlikely to work!
Hi Karen, This is Andrew Thomas of Communicate magazine. Please do let us know of any results of your survey, we could be interested in covering the results. Best regards Andrew andrew.thomas@communicatemagazine.co.uk
Social media should be used appropriately and not just for the sake of it. It needs to be set up for the audience and with a purpose in mind. It needs to be safe for those staff working directly with young people. Staff looking after social media sites should have the time to look after and monitor sites. This should be part of their role and not just an add-on to existing work. Organisations should develop policies which help the whole organisation to use social media safely and effectively. Good practice should be shared across organisations.
Social media can help with raising awareness and encouraging discursive debate. However, the internet and discussion boards already provide an additional medium for feedback, along with conventional and expected routes. From a reputation perspective, it can take a lot of monitoring/managing in terms of resource.
In addition to work, I have set up a ning site for the estate where I live which is increasingly used by the council, police etc to engage with us. An interesting situation.
Using social media effectively can be time consuming, so it must be planned and resourced
As an educational organisation, we use social media as a method of communicating news/events to our students and staff, as well as external stakeholders, other educational organisations etc. As an example of how it can be used; during the bad weather (snow) in January the College was closed for a few days, sometimes closing half way through the day. Twitter was the main form of communicating this to students/staff and they were made aware that this would be the most up to date method via lessons/emails/student union facebook group. As a result 200 people joined our Twitter feed in the space of 2 days, and feedback afterwards told us that many people who weren't aware of how to use Twitter now regularly check the college feed or are active users of the site. Would definitely like a copy of the report please - my email is josie.scobling@cornwall.ac.uk - currently completing the final part of the Diploma myself so good luck!
It needs to be carefully managed, as otherwise it is possible for a small number of mobilised objectors to make a disproportionate amount of work for the organisation.
still early days and although a useful tool its not the silver bullet many believe. must be used as part of a wider strategy
I'm aware that it is a useful tool, just need to convince our directors of this in order to get an effective strategy in place - as always getting buy-in at board room level is the key!