Evolving public relations: Social media use by higher education communicators

Case Study

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Abstract

There is a lack of understanding of the changing nature of social media use by higher education institutions in the public relations literature. This study examines whether they use social media in a way that follows Grunig’s model of two-way communication through interviews, documentary evidence, and institutional archives. The evidence demonstrates that Syracuse University to an extent uses social media to engage its audiences. It suggests to other higher education institutions that their use of social media should incorporate broadcast and engagement and that feedback should inform but not dictate the types of posts they make to their target audiences.
Background

Theory often lags behind practice but in 2009, noted academics Donald K. Wright and Michelle D. Hinson declared, “Social media has had a tremendous impact on the practice of public relations” (Wright & Hinson, 2009, p. 2). However, there are “few academic articles about social media in the public relations scholarly literature” (p. 4). Furthermore, it is an important topic of discussion for practitioners. As Robert Key writes, “Public relations in the digital age requires understanding how your key constituents are gathering and sharing information and then influencing them at key points” (Key, 2005, pp. 18-19). He notes that for public relations to flourish in the digital realm, “practitioners need to break out of traditional thinking and embrace new strategies and approaches” (Key, 2005 pp. 18-19). Public relations practitioners have realized the importance of emerging means of communication. A majority of respondents in a recent study published by the Institute for Public Relations “believe the emergence of blogs and social media have changed the way their organizations (or their client organizations) communicate” (Wright and Hinson, 2009, p. 18).

An unresolved issue, however, is which model is best equipped to offer a normative approach to organizational use of social media. James Grunig wrote that public relations practice will be most effective if it follows a few general principles and applies them to the local conditions, one of which is two-way symmetrical communication. This type of communication “uses research,
listening, and dialogue to manage conflict and to cultivate relationships with both internal and external strategic publics more than one-way and asymmetrical communication” (Grunig, 2009, p. 2).

He argued, despite the fact that the statistical evidence shows a “huge proportion of the world’s population now has access to and is using digital media...[, the fact that] digital media have made most organisations global and force organisations to think globally about their public relations practice” and the observation that public relations departments are “moving rapidly to adjust to this change in media,” that his general principles still hold true. In fact, Grunig claims, “the new media facilitate the application of the principles, and in the future, will make it difficult for practitioners around the world not to use the principles” (Grunig, 2009, p. 3). Specifically, he noted that “many organisations now are developing two-way, interactive, and dialogical communication programmes through digital media, especially using blogs and microblogs such as Twitter” (p. 13). In addition to using social media as a means to communicate with their target publics, organizations are now seeing the value of monitoring what is being written about them on these platforms. In Wright and Hinson’s study, 96 percent of respondents approved of “studies that measure or analyze content of what’s being communicated about their organizations (or their clients) in these new media” (Wright & Hinson, 2009, p. 13).
Social media are the new avenues for communicating a brand or organization’s core messages. In addition, social media allow for a more direct evaluation of the effectiveness of messages. Matthee, summarizing Breakenridge (2008), explained that the sequentiality of social media “allows communications professionals to gauge audience reactions to both the message issued by the organisation and the communication by consumers that follows, and respond to it as needed” (Matthee, 2008, p. 80). Recent research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth found that 100 percent of colleges and universities use social media, although there was a large disparity in how effective the schools are and whether or not they used student feedback to inform their use of the various platforms (Barnes, N., & Lescault, A., 2011, p. 2). Additionally, as Parnell and Parmley write in Public Relations Tactics, “The PR offices in higher education play a major role in boosting enrollment, rankings and publicity — so it is vital for them to understand and use best practices and social media to accomplish their communications goals” (Parnell and Parmley, 2009, p. 16). This paper specifically focuses on the use and analysis of social media by higher education professionals.

In addition to the above changes in the social media landscape, its use by public relations professionals is a compelling topic of study to the author because he has worked in a public relations role in which the majority of his external communication was via social media. He grew up using social media and is very
interested in studying it on a more formal basis because he believes it is the new frontier in public relations and may soon be the major avenue for colleges and universities to connect with their target publics.

**Research Problem**

There is little information about how public relations professionals in higher education ground their understanding and strategic thinking about social media in theory. This case study examines how communication departments in colleges and universities use two-way symmetrical communication as it relates to social media. Specifically, it examines whether James Grunig’s two-way symmetrical model of public relations is an effective model when it comes to external communication via social media for institutions of higher education.

**Research Questions**

RQ1: How do colleges and universities plan their social media communications?

This question helps the author answer the research problem because his sources in higher education communication were able to relate whether or not their strategies emphasize one-way or two-way symmetrical communication.

RQ2: How do colleges and universities incorporate feedback from their publics and social media metrics into their social media planning?
This question is helpful because it helped the author analyze how truly two-way the communication is and what, if anything, schools do with the feedback of their publics.

**Organization to be Studied**

Syracuse University is a private, coeducational research university located in Syracuse, New York, that was established in 1870. It currently has an endowment of more than $1 billion and a faculty of 1,546 serving 20,829 undergraduate and postgraduate students. The university has 240,983 alumni from all 50 states and 163 countries and territories (Syracuse University, 2012).

Syracuse University began its social media presence in or around 2007, when an ad hoc committee led by Kevin Morrow, who was then the University Spokesperson and Executive Director of the Office of News Services, decided that the University should have presences on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn. Initially, Morrow and his staff created and managed the university’s Facebook page and Twitter accounts while the Division of Advancement and External Affairs was responsible for a university YouTube account and the Office of Alumni Relations and the Center for Career Services cooperated on a LinkedIn presence (K. Morrow, personal communication, September 26, 2012).

From August 2010 to June 2011, as Executive Director of Social Media, Morrow oversaw a pilot partnership between the Division of Advancement and External Affairs (AEA) and the School of Information Studies to develop the
University’s social media presence. That program ended in the summer of 2011 when it was agreed that AEA would take sole responsibility for directing SU’s social media accounts (K. Morrow, personal communication, September 26, 2012). In June 2011, Kate Brodock took over Morrow’s social media responsibilities as Executive Director of Social Media at Syracuse University and currently leads a team that manages Syracuse University’s social media accounts.

In Fall 2011, Syracuse University “put digital and social media on their list of priorities for communication and marketing by creating a team dedicated to university initiatives in the digital space” (Brodock, 2012). The school has been cited by a number of sources for its successful use of social media. PC Magazine included Syracuse University on its list of “Schools That Are Smart at Social Media” (Popolo, 2012). Klout, the online influence-measurement company, ranked Syracuse University the seventh most influential college on Twitter with a score of 66 out of 100 (Nguyen, 2011). It now has a score of 91 (Klout, 2012). While there is disagreement as to whether it is a valid measure of true influence, Klout is improving its ability to measure those who can create and move content important to their audiences (Schaefer, 2011). Additionally the Center for Digital Education included Syracuse University on its list of four top universities using social networks (Roscoria, 2011).
Literature Review

Understanding how best to use social media has been a subject of discussion by public relations practitioners for years. Some companies have dedicated departments following formalized social media protocols to communicate via dozens of accounts with millions of customers worldwide while others have interns managing fledgling social media presences on one site or two. Public relations practitioners are adjusting to the new social media-heavy landscape, but what is unknown is if they are doing so in a way that matches what public relations researchers see as best practice.

Excellence Theory

Excellence Theory, according to Zimmerman (2009) is one of the most respected models in public relations research (Zimmerman, 2009, p. 6). A major argument of the theory centers around the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. Posited by J.E. Grunig and L.A. Grunig and J.E. Grunig and Hunt, Excellence Theory argues that public relations is most effective when “the organization is more amenable to developing a dialogue with the public. Communication flows both ways between the organization and the public, and both sides are prepared to change their stances, with the aims of resolving the crisis in a professional, ethical, and effective way” (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010, p. 19). Furthermore, “[t]he attempts of two-way symmetrical public relations to balance the interests of the organization and its publics are based on research and
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use communication to manage conflict and cultivate relationships with strategic publics” (Kent, 2010, p. 38). Grunig’s theory emphasizes the importance of listening, maintaining that public relations is best practiced “when an organization is not only highly engaged with its public but it is also willing to adapt and make changes based on the public’s wants and needs” (Zimmerman, 2009, p. 4).

**Excellence Theory Applied to Social Media in Higher Education**

Brian Byl of Radian6, one of the world’s top social media monitoring companies, echoes Grunig’s sentiments in company-produced advising material. He writes, “Understanding what people love and hate about your school can help you figure out how to better satisfy applicants, students, faculty, donors, and the wider public. Social media supplies voluntary feedback without the toil and cost of focus groups” (Byl, 2012, p. 12).

In the 2012 E-Expectations report conducted by respected higher education research company Noel-Levitz, 69 percent of student respondents said they had “liked” a college’s Facebook page. Those who “liked” a page expected to find information about admissions deadlines and events (36 percent), special information unavailable elsewhere (26 percent), and most importantly, 26 percent expected interaction with page administrators (Noel-Levitz, 2012, p. 18). Also important to note is the fact that respondents wanted frequent content updates with 56 percent saying they expect updates at least twice a week (Noel-Levitz, 2012, p. 18). Social Media refers to modern social networks characterized by “the
potential for real-time interaction, reduced anonymity..., a sense of propinquity..., short response times...and the ability to ‘time shift,’ or engage the social network whenever it suits each particular member” (Kim & Ni, 2010, p. 645). For the purposes of this study, social media may include but is not limited to services including Twitter, Facebook, Foursquare, YouTube, LinkedIn, and blogs.

In recent years, colleges and universities have dramatically increased their use of social media. Researchers at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth have conducted an annual study on social media use by institutions of higher education every year since 2007. Their study uses a proportional sample of schools in all 50 states including public and private institutions. They found that the percentage of respondents reporting the use of at least one form of social media has risen from 61 percent in the 2007-2008 academic year to 100 percent for the 2010-2011 academic year. (Barnes & Lescault, 2011, p. 2). They also found not only that all schools surveyed use social media, but that specific platform use has risen (from 87 percent to 98 percent for Facebook and from 59 percent to 66 percent for Twitter in the last year (Barnes, N., & Lescault, A., 2011, p. 3). The schools ranked their social media tools as very successful, with 95 percent success rate for Facebook, 92 percent for YouTube and 86 percent for Twitter (Barnes, N., & Lescault, A., 2011, p. 8).
Publics in Higher Education

For colleges and universities, connecting with their target publics effectively through social media has never been more important. From the 2009-2010 school year to the 2010-2011 school year, there was an 18 percent increase (from 50 percent to 68 percent) in the number of respondents in a survey of schools who ranked social media strategies as “very important” (Barnes, N., & Lescault, A., 2011, p. 9). Publics are “groups that are almost always important to organizations” and are generally defined “in terms of the organizational relationship to us, including the media, employees, governmental officials, [and] community leaders” (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth, & Van Leuven, 2007, p. 7). However, this study is focused on more specific publics applicable to higher education, specifically prospective students, current students, and alumni of a given university. In terms of reaching target publics, recent research has found social media has been very effective in connecting higher education institutions to their target publics. A 2012 study by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth’s Center for Marketing Research concluded that social media is effective in helping schools connect to their target publics. According to the study, one-third of schools say social media is “more efficient than traditional media in reaching their target audience” (Barnes, N., & Lescault, A., 2012). Ninety-two percent of respondents said, “social media is worth the investment they make in it” and 86 percent plan to increase their investment in social media in the next year while 78
percent report, “these tools have changed the way they recruit” (Barnes, N., & Lescault, A., 2012). Another study by higher education companies Zinch and Inigral surveyed more than 7,000 students. An examination of the data by Inside Higher Ed concluded, “the way to get a high return on investment is to focus on engagement” (Tilsley, 2012).

**Overall Engagement and Social Media Metrics**

Integrating social media into an organization’s overall communication plan is important to its success (Parnell and Parmley, 2009, p. 16). Richard Marshall, managing director of the corporate affairs practice at executive search firm Korn/Ferry International said that recently, universities raising their profiles realized they needed fresh communications leadership, with many senior level placements from corporate and media sections. “Academic institutions are becoming more mindful and strategic in how they manage their communications,” he says, “They are recognizing that their student population is engaging in multiple ways and they must be much more in tune with how they communicate if they are to be effective” (Parnell and Parmley, 2009, p. 16).

Effective communication, as noted above, includes listening as a crucial element. In social media, feedback can be measured in terms of quantity (counting the numerical listing of metrics (raw data) on different platforms (followers, “likes”, number of comments, number of shares) and quality (sentiment of comments) and then ascribing meaning to them based on organizational goals. As
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Paine (2011) explains, “[m]easurement takes those totals, analyzes what they mean, and uses that meaning to improve business practices. Measurement of your processes and results...provides the data necessary to make sound decisions” (Paine, 2011, p. 5). Integrating the feedback ("measurements of results") on social media leads to sound decisions (effective strategy) in a business environment and translates to effective two-way communication in a public relations context. A survey by strategic marketing and communications agency mStoner Inc. found that the most used outcome measure to evaluate success is “Number of active ‘friends,’ ‘likes,’ members, participants, people who post, or number of comments” with 68 percent answering they use that measure “Quite a bit or Extensively” followed by “unique person counts” with 52 percent answering they use that measurement “Quite a bit” or “Extensively.” Fifty-seven percent of those surveyed said “Increasing engagement with our target audiences” was the way in which social media has been most successful for their institution (Slover-Linnet, 2012, p. 9).

The literature as a whole demonstrates that two-way symmetrical communication is a widely accepted normative theory in public relations and that students expect and experts prefer two-way communication via social media in higher education but not whether schools are actively putting that advice into practice. Excellence theory “primarily has been applied to organizations other than higher education institutions” (Zimmerman, 2009, p. 19). A knowledge gap
exists between what theory supports and what happens in practice, and this study helps to fill that gap.

**Case Study Method**

The proposed research project is extremely well suited to the case study method. Yin describes a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real-life context…” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). This study investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its current context. Yin (2009) explains that there are some situations in which a specific research method has a distinct advantage. “For the case study, this is when [a] ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control” (Yin, 2009, p. 13). The research focuses precisely on how decisions are made and actions are carried out. The author’s research did not influence the relevant behavior as the questions are neutral in tone.

A limitation to using a case study as the research method is that it provides little basis for scientific generalization (Yin, 2009, p. 15). Due to the fact that this study focuses on one university, the findings may not apply universally to all universities in every context. However, this research could be useful to other researchers as it can be repeated with different types of universities to ultimately have generalizable data.
Data Collection Procedures

The researcher used the following three sources of evidence as described by Yin (2009): 1) interviews, 2) documentation, and 3) archival records. (Yin, 2009, p. 102). The subjects of the three in-depth interviews were Syracuse University’s Executive Director of External & Public Affairs Strategic Communications Kevin Morrow, Executive Director of Digital & Social Media Kate Brodock, and Social Strategist Jared Kraham, who all agreed to be interviewed. Kevin Morrow was chosen because he has extensive experience managing Syracuse University’s social media communication. This gives him a unique view of Syracuse University’s social media use and how it fits into the school’s overall communication goals. Kate Brodock is in charge of Syracuse University’s social media strategy. Jared Kraham is a public relations technician who helps implement the strategy. All three provided crucial information into how social media communication is carried out at Syracuse University. The interviews are based on the set of pre-determined questions included below and in the appendix.

Through looking at documentation and archival research, the researcher developed a deeper understanding of the context in which the interview subjects find themselves and the way in which Syracuse University implements its social media communication.


Interview Questions

As noted above, the researcher used questions to determine how the organization uses social media to communicate with its target publics. The focused interview questions directly relate to the research questions, which are 1) “How do colleges and universities plan their social media communications?” and 2) “How do colleges and universities incorporate feedback from their publics and social media metrics into their social media planning?” The questions, while explicitly focused on the research questions, are open-ended and allowed the interviewees to answer fully and truthfully.

1. Can you give me an overview of Syracuse University’s social media presence?
   a. This question aided in answering RQ1 because it provided the scope of Syracuse University’s social media use, a necessity in determining how it uses social media.

2. Who leads Syracuse University’s overall strategy and mission in social media?
   a. This question helped answer RQ1 because it provided information on the social media communication decision-making structure at Syracuse University.

3. Can you tell me about Syracuse University’s key audiences?
a. This question addresses RQ2 as knowing the key audiences is a vital step in determining how the university incorporates feedback into its social media planning.

4. How would you describe Syracuse University’s communication goals on social media?

a. This question addresses RQ1 in that it provided the overarching goals, which are necessary to determine how the school plans its social media use.

5. How does social media fit into Syracuse University’s overall communication goals?

a. This question addresses RQ1 in that how practitioners see social media fitting into overall goals determines how they plan their communication.

6. How does Syracuse University interact in social media in order to achieve those goals?

a. This is applicable to RQ1 and RQ2 because it both addresses how the school uses social media and how it reacts to its publics.

7. Syracuse University has been noted by various sources for its success in social media. What do you think makes Syracuse University so successful?
a. This is applicable to RQ1 and RQ2 because it both addresses how the 
school uses social media and how it reacts to its publics.

8. How would you describe Syracuse University’s philosophy when it 
comes to social media?

a. This is applicable to RQ1 and RQ2 because it both addresses how the 
school uses social media and how it reacts to its publics.

9. Is social media best used as a broadcast tool or as a means to facilitate 
dialogue?

a. This is applicable to RQ2 because it addresses how the school reacts to 
its publics.

10. How do you incorporate feedback (in the form of comments and 
analytical data) from your audiences into your social media use?

a. This is applicable to RQ2 because it addresses how the school reacts to 
its publics.

11. Is there any more information you think would be useful for this study?

a. This question applies to both RQ1 and RQ2 because the answer would 
address its social media planning and potentially its two-way 
communication goals.

These questions are designed to explore the planning and thought behind 
Syracuse University’s social media usage which allowed the researcher to 
evaluate whether or not the school, which has demonstrated success in the field,
aligns with Grunig’s argument that two-way symmetrical communication is the most effective means of public relations communication. The questions allowed the interviewees the opportunity to provide the information they, as practitioners, find most useful in their given position. They were able to define key audiences in their own terms, which further allows them to define their communication and engagement efforts without the researcher influencing their response to later questions.

**Data Analysis**

Pattern matching is “one of the most desirable techniques” for case study analysis and thus was used in this project (Yin, 2009, p. 136). It compares the “empirically based pattern” of the university’s approach to social media communication to the predicted one (two-way symmetrical communication) (Yin, 2009, p. 136). If the patterns coincide, the internal validity of the case study is strengthened (Yin, 2009, p. 136). Due to the fact that the evidence shown via interviews, documentation and archival material matches with the predicted pattern in the literature, the study demonstrates that Syracuse University plans its social media communication in a way that encourages two-way symmetrical communication and took into account the needs and wants of its publics in adjusting its communication, which further strengthens the validity of Grunig’s Excellence Theory.
Results

Information for this report is based on information from interviewees, archival material and documentation. The subjects of the three in-depth interviews are Syracuse University’s Executive Director of External & Public Affairs Strategic Communications Kevin Morrow, Executive Director of Digital & Social Media Kate Brodock, and Social Strategist Jared Kraham. Documentation included the university’s Facebook and Twitter accounts, analytic information provided by Kate Brodock, and two articles, and a directory published on the university’s website. Archival information included a news article from Fast Company, a survey of public relations practices in higher education, and a Noel-Levitz report on high school student expectations of college and universities.

RQ1: How do colleges and universities plan their social media communications?

Kevin Morrow, executive director, external & public affairs strategic communications for Syracuse University (SU) noted the university’s actions on social media “tend to support the communications, marketing, and development goals of the university,” (personal communication, September 26, 2012). On Syracuse University’s social media use being positively documented by various outlets, he noted the school has been recognized as a leader in social media communications for a number of reasons, one of them being that “we have a very
renowned school of communications and with that there’s an expectation that SU
is going to do communications well…” (personal communication, September 26,
2012). In addition to SU’s recognition as a communications leader, it has a
growing reputation as a leader in social media education.

Ryan Holmes, CEO of social media engagement company Hootsuite,
recently wrote that Syracuse University is among those “leading the pack” in
formalized social media training (Holmes, 2012). In addition to its educational
reputation, Morrow says the most important reason why SU is succeeding in
social media is the level of strategic thinking that goes into its social media use
(personal communication, September 26, 2012). “You need to think about what
you’re going to say to people. How you’re going to interact with people. You
need to write well and express yourself well as an institution and I think we do all
of those very well,” said Morrow (personal communication, September 26, 2012).

Syracuse University’s nationally recognized social media management
program centers around the notion “students are the lifeblood of our institution —
so having students on our flagship social media accounts creates an authentic
voice more likely to resonate with our community of alumni, students,
prospective students, faculty and staff, and fans,” (Brodock, 2012).

Kate Brodock, Executive Director of Digital and Social Media at Syracuse
University is very serious about the team she manages. “I feel really strongly
about our team because I think students offer the best voice for the University,”
she said (Xu, 2012). Jared Kraham, a member of Syracuse University’s social media team, a group of students who run the day-to-day operation of Syracuse University’s social media accounts, noted that he is proud to be a part of the team. “…I think the biggest part of what we do is coming up with ideas on innovative ways to engage our community, and really make a statement that SU is a leader in social media in the United States,” (Xu, 2012). Kraham said that their overall focus is to “maximize Syracuse University’s brand through social media.”

Maximizing Syracuse University’s brand is done in many ways, the most important of which for this study is that Syracuse University is “engaged on all major social networks that any enterprise-level institution would be involved in,” Kraham said (J. Kraham, personal communication, November 12, 2012). The main, flagship accounts of the University are managed by Brodock’s team while other administrative and school-level accounts are managed by other departments. “We have a centrally run structure but also a very diversified social media presence,” Morrow said (K. Morrow, personal communication, September 26, 2012). There 39 Facebook pages, 27 Twitter accounts, 15 Blogs, 11 YouTube channels, 11 LinkedIn groups, five Pinterest Accounts, four Flickr Accounts and a LinkedIn company page that are recognized by Syracuse University as being run by a college, department, professor, or otherwise connected to the school (Syracuse University News).
All three sources noted that audiences are not entirely divided by social media network, but some groups prefer certain networks. Kraham noted there is more engagement on Twitter from current students, recent alumni, and those in the Central New York area (J. Kraham, personal communication, November 12, 2012). He added that their audience on Facebook “skews a little bit older” and so the team has to “adapt what we post and how we engage [with those groups],” (J. Kraham, personal communication, November 12, 2012). Brodock confirmed the difference in demographic, saying that almost 50 percent of the school’s audience members on Facebook are over 25 and do not live in the Syracuse area (personal communication, November 13, 2012).

Combined, the three named prospective students and their parents, current students, faculty, staff, alumni (of over 225,000), and other supporters of the school as the school’s key audiences. Brodock noted that Foursquare is mostly students on campus, Tumblr is mostly prospective students, and the Pinterest account attracts mostly female prospective and current students (personal communication, November 13, 2012). The university also has an Instagram account which is Kraham’s focus on the social media team (personal communication, November 12, 2012). All three noted that there are people who have no formal ties to the university but nevertheless consider themselves part of the community.
While there are a number of social media channels operated by the Communications Office, Brodock singled out Twitter and Facebook as the “more serious” communications channels the school uses while Tumblr, Foursquare, Pinterest and others appeal to smaller audiences (personal communication, November 13, 2012). Brodock noted that the other accounts are thought of as fun ways to engage people. “It’s where we can be creative and still engage with parts of our audiences but it’s not necessarily a huge institutional goal that we have on social media” (personal communication, November 13, 2012). Accordingly, interview answers from all three sources centered around Twitter and Facebook use.

Syracuse University’s goals in general, which include use of social media, are to communicate to its audiences what’s happening at the university, to “showcase the work of students and faculty and via social media to not only share this information out but be able to take feedback from individuals who reflect upon what it is we’re communicating,” (J. Kraham, personal communication, November 12, 2012). Kraham elaborates, the student social media team is “…not a PR machine that’s only concerned about posting good news articles that were written but interesting and I think, more importantly, more engaging content-rich information that I think our community will enjoy,” said Kraham (personal communication, November 12, 2012). He added, “When people see content from SU,” Kraham wants it “to be something people want to read because that’s
interesting to our community and it’s something to be engaged in,” (J. Kraham, personal communication, November 12, 2012). He also mentioned the importance of engagement for the school. “We are stressed just as much about putting out good content as getting people to engage with that content.” (personal communication, November 12, 2012). He said that communicating with the school on Twitter and Facebook with comments and questions is an important way of “opening the doors of communication with our community and in that way growing our already strong bonds,” (J. Kraham, personal communication, November 12, 2012).

For alumni in particular, Morrow said social media is very important because “it enables us to not only share with them what’s happening at their alma mater but we can also engender in them a stronger connection to the university just by maintaining an ongoing dialogue with them,” Morrow stated, “This is something that the alumni have said is something they really, really appreciate,” he added (K. Morrow, personal communication, September 26, 2012).

Kraham explained the overall importance of the school’s social media strategy by saying that “in a lot of ways, social media is the first and most consistent form of communication that people get” from Syracuse University (personal communication, November 12, 2012). He added that whether it is positive or negative news, they expect there to be a response on social media from the university. (personal communication, November 12, 2012). The content on
social media therefore, “has to be diverse, it has to be up-to-date, and it has to be
the most two-way form of communication that the university has” (personal
communication, November 12, 2012). Syracuse University posts multiple times a
week on both Facebook and Twitter, including on weekends (Syracuse
University), more than fulfilling the desires of a major audience, prospective
students (Noel-Levitz, 2012, p. 18).

Compared with other universities as a whole, private universities, and
other colleges and universities with student enrollment of or above 10,000,
Syracuse University is a leader. The Primary Research Group’s survey of public
and private colleges and universities of varying sizes and types in part examined
social media use by public relations professionals in higher education. The survey
found that 90 percent of schools had a Twitter account (Primary Research Group,
2012, p. 104). Of those schools who had an account, 40 percent publish tweets
‘multiple times a day’ while 37.14 tweet ‘every day or two’ and the remaining
22.86 “are split evenly between tweeting ‘weekly’ and ‘just on special
occasions’” (Primary Research Group, 2012, 107). Private schools and schools
with total student enrollments of 10,000 or more posted more frequently than
public schools and smaller schools, respectively (Primary Research Group, 2012,
p. 110).

Morrow also noted the increased importance put on social media, saying its
use by higher education institutions has “gone beyond the point of being a novelty
to being a necessity” in the communications mix (personal communication, September 26, 2012). Brodock noted that when she was handed the account many of the posts were “announcement-driven” and she has worked to more from posting about events to posting content from that event so that it is useful for their audience. (personal communication, November 13, 2012). She gave the example of keeping in mind an alumnus in California is basing their content strategy on ensuring the school is posting content that promotes the event but is still useful to him (personal communication, November 13, 2012).

**RQ2: How do colleges and universities incorporate feedback from their publics and social media metrics into their social media planning?**

For Morrow, Syracuse University’s philosophy on social media could be summed up as “carefully conceived, very active engagement,” (personal communication, September 26, 2012). While not every comment or mention of the school gets a response, the team, he says “make[s] an effort to engage in both of those instances when we deem an engagement is necessary,” (personal communication, November 12, 2012). “We have an incredibly digitally-connected community and so we look to them to share,” said Kraham ,” (personal communication, November 12, 2012). On Twitter, he said, the University monitors mentions of “@SyracuseU in addition to Syracuse University without specific mention of the username,” (personal communication, November 12, 2012). In terms of content, she says that while they take into account what their
audience wants, they cannot simply post what is most popular (personal communication, November 13, 2012).

Morrow agreed that what’s popular should not be the main focus, saying that photos have been shown to garner the most feedback, “we don’t necessarily just want to provide people with just a steady diet of photos. We want to mix that up with other content and that’s what we do” (personal communication, September 26, 2012). Some of the most engaged-with photos are sports-related. A photo of Syracuse University’s Football team with the caption “In our final BIG EAST Conference football season, we leave as champions. Congratulations Orange!” on the school’s Facebook page garnered 2,290 likes, 632 shares, and 62 comments (Syracuse University). Brodock noted that SU’s social media use is a balancing act of “giving the audience what they want but also making sure that we are promoting what we’d like to be promoting about the school and that’s been very positive,” (personal communication, November 13, 2012).

An important goal of social media, Brodock states, is to create lasting relationships. “When you do that on an ongoing basis when, it comes time to needing them to take action, that’s where the long-term approach to relationship building really works,” says Brodock (personal communication, November 13, 2012). She noted that “Twitter is the place where we get the most bi-directional engagement,” (personal communication, November 13, 2012).
“You can’t slack off on them and then all of the sudden want something from them and then expect,” said Brodock (personal communication, November 13, 2012). All three said there was a combination of broadcast and engagement. As Brodock explained, it is both types of communication, but you “have to be careful of how you’re doing both,” (personal communication, November 13, 2012). She mentioned that Syracuse University created a campus Twitter account (@SUc Campus) specifically to promote events on campus (personal communication, November 13, 2012). She said that people who are close to campus want and value broadcasted content but followers of the main account do not necessarily want to know about campus events, so they created an account (@SUc Campus) specifically for campus-related announcements (personal communication, November 13, 2012). She concludes “…when you go back to the idea of relationship-building, it’s all two-way so you’ve got to have that with your audience somewhere,” (personal communication, November 13, 2012).

Posts on Twitter represent the dual nature of Syracuse University’s social media use. They range from announcements about the 50th anniversary of the Creative Writing Program and the MBA program being ranked highly by BusinessWeek to encouraging engagement through a campus Foursquare challenge (Syracuse University).

A Facebook post by Syracuse University about Prince Sultan bin Salman of Saudi Arabia accepting the Chancellor’s Medal resulted in 22 likes and one
In addition to posts announcing important happenings on campus, Syracuse University regularly uses both its Facebook page and Twitter feed to update prospective students on the application process (Syracuse University). The school also posts announcements regarding school closing and opening, recently during Hurricane Sandy (Syracuse University). The most clicked on tweet from Syracuse University for the month of November was an SU sports promotional video with 1428 clicks. The following nine links had 1445 combined clicks (Appendix C). The top eight of ten posts by engagement on Facebook were photos (Appendix D).

Kraham adds that getting the combination of the two right “isn’t a formula” but is done by feel and that the balance is always changing (personal communication, November 12, 2012). Morrow stated that “there’s no question that social media is a great broadcast tool and I probably would be considered a heretic in a social media class for saying that but it’s true,” (personal communication, September 26, 2012). He continued to say the ability to get information and messaging out is “incredible because of social media’s popularity and reach these days,” (personal communication, September 26, 2012). However, he added that “the essence of social media is the opportunity for interaction and interactivity and this is something that has never ever been available to communicators” before the advent of Facebook and Twitter (personal communication, September 26, 2012).
Majorities of schools in every category monitor the web for comments about the school, with 84.21 percent of colleges stating they do so. 94 percent of schools who responded to the question said they monitor social media specifically in some fashion (Primary Research Group, 2012, pp. 111-112). In terms of responding to feedback via metrics, the student team has one person dedicated to looking at social media analytics via Hootsuite (J. Kraham, personal communication, November 12, 2012). Kraham says the idea is not to specifically frame future posts based on metrics, but to examine which categories of posts were and were not engaged with and to continuously learn what types content its audiences find engaging (personal communication, November 12, 2012). Morrow agreed, adding that the school takes it into account but cannot base decisions solely on popularity, explaining that there’s important information about the school to share and that needs to be included as well (K. Morrow, personal communication, September 26, 2012).

Brodock added specifically with Facebook she takes into account not only likes and shares but what people click on because although they may not ‘like’ or share it, clicks are a good measure of interest (personal communication, November 13, 2012).

Kraham summarized what the extent of the interview data, archives and documentary evidence collected concludes by saying, “At the end of the day our success isn’t based on the number of followers we have on Facebook…or the
number of Twitter followers we have…but the extent we think we are engaging in our community and giving them a great product” (personal communication, November 12, 2012).

**Conclusion**

The results of my research conclude that Syracuse University, one of the leading schools in the country actively using social media for public relations purposes, plans its social media strategy in order to both maximize the reach of messages it deems important and engagement of its many publics. The research also demonstrates that while Syracuse University takes into account the feedback of its audiences, it does not plan its posts exclusively on what its audiences find most popular, instead opting for a mix of popular and institutionally important content. The school at times did adjust its output with a focus on the kind of content the community enjoys, but there was still an appreciation of and a focus on broadcasting messages the school deemed important. These findings lead to the conclusion that Grunig’s thoughts on the use of social media for two-way communication for public relations professionals apply to higher education.

This study is the first in the academic literature that I have found that specifically addresses the applicability of Grunig’s notions of two-way communication as it relates to social media use in higher education. It demonstrates that Grunig has current research that supports the continued relevance of excellence theory. Practically, this research signals to other higher
education institutions that their use of social media should also incorporate a balance between broadcast and engagement and that feedback should inform but not dictate the content of posts they make to their target audiences.

This study demonstrates that Syracuse University is using social media successfully by using a two-way approach. As Pang, Jin, and Cameron wrote, public relations is best practiced when “[c]ommunication flows both ways between the organization and the public, and both sides are prepared to change their stances, with the aims of resolving the crisis in a professional, ethical, and effective way” (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010, p. 19). Syracuse University does show that it is “not only highly engaged with its public but it is also willing to adapt and make changes based on the public’s wants and needs” (Zimmerman, 2009, p. 4) and thus is excellent in this aspect of its overall public relations effort. As found in the literature, students expect feedback from universities via social media, and Syracuse University delivers.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

The limitations of this study include the limited range of interviewees, documentary evidence and archival analysis centered around one school. While Syracuse University is a nationally-recognized leader in the use of social media for public relations, all universities surveyed by University of Massachusetts, Amherst use social media to some degree (Barnes & Lescault, 2011, p. 2). Future
research should address this limitation, possibly with the use of a survey sent to a range of schools asking them about how and why they use social media.
Appendix A

Follow-up Contact

The researcher contacted and confirmed the participation of all three interviewees. Before the interview, the researcher sent an email message to all three to ask for the following background information in order to give context to the interview.

[name],
Thank you again for agreeing to participate in an interview for my case study [in timeframe]. In order to save time while talking, could you please provide me with the following information?
Your official job title, a brief description of the structure and responsibilities of the department, and a brief description of your responsibilities.
I appreciate your input to this project and look forward to speaking with you.

Best,
Geoff Campbell
M.S. in Public Relations Candidate
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications
gbcampbe@syr.edu | http://geoffbcampbell.com
Appendix B

Interview Protocol

The following script and interview questions was used for all three interviews.

Thank you again for agreeing to this interview and for the information you provided in advance. Before I begin with the official questions, do you have any questions for me? Is there any information you intend on sharing that you do not want me to share beyond the classroom? Do you mind if I record our discussion to ensure accuracy?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty. I wish to verify that you are 18 years of age or older. Thank you. Let us begin.

1. Can you give me an overview of Syracuse University’s social media presence?
2. Who leads Syracuse University’s overall strategy and mission in social media?
3. Can you tell me about Syracuse University’s key audiences?
4. How would you describe Syracuse University’s communication goals on social media?
5. How does social media fit into Syracuse University’s overall communication goals?
6. How does Syracuse University interact in social media in order to achieve those goals?
7. Syracuse University has been noted by various sources for its success in social media. What do you think makes Syracuse University so successful?

8. How would you describe Syracuse University’s philosophy when it comes to social media?

9. Is social media best used as a broadcast tool or as a means to facilitate dialogue?

10. How do you incorporate feedback (in the form of comments and analytical data) from your audiences into your social media use?

11. Is there any more information you think would be useful for this study?

That concludes my questions. Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me. May I contact you via email or phone if I have questions or need to clarify something as I work on my case study?
### Appendix C

Facebook Analytic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Reach 1</th>
<th>Engaged Users 2</th>
<th>Talking About This 3</th>
<th>Virality 4</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nov 30, 2012</td>
<td>In our final BIG EAST Conference...</td>
<td>47672</td>
<td>5125</td>
<td>4028</td>
<td>8.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dec 3, 2012</td>
<td>Instagram Photos</td>
<td>38808</td>
<td>2237</td>
<td>1596</td>
<td>4.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nov 14, 2012</td>
<td>&quot;Syracuse, a school whose mascot...</td>
<td>40400</td>
<td>2147</td>
<td>764</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nov 12, 2012</td>
<td>Michael Carter-Williams led the...</td>
<td>41664</td>
<td>1819</td>
<td>1013</td>
<td>2.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nov 25, 2012</td>
<td>On Mount Olympus, winter has...</td>
<td>36824</td>
<td>1545</td>
<td>785</td>
<td>2.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nov 11, 2012</td>
<td>Instagram Photos</td>
<td>36584</td>
<td>1488</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nov 18, 2012</td>
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<td>35248</td>
<td>1390</td>
<td>552</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nov 27, 2012</td>
<td>Orange Appeal _ Taylor Swift: We...</td>
<td>40784</td>
<td>1310</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>0.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nov 21, 2012</td>
<td>We would like to wish all of...</td>
<td>43768</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dec 2, 2012</td>
<td>&quot;It means a great deal to us to...</td>
<td>30608</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>0.71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. The number of unique people who have seen your post. Click on the number to see more details. Figures are for the first 28 days after a post's publication only. Click on "Reach" to sort your posts.
2. The number of unique people who have clicked on your post. Click on the number to see more details. Figures are for the first 28 days after a post's publication only. Click on "Engaged Users" to sort your posts.
3. The number of unique people who have created a story from your Page post. Stories are created when someone likes, comments on or shares your post; answers a question you posted; or responds to your event. Click on the number to see more details. Figures are for the first 28 days after a post's publication only. Click on "Talking About This" to sort your posts.
4. The percentage of people who have created a story from your Page post out of the total number of unique people who have seen it. Click on "Virality" to sort your posts.
## Appendix D

**Twitter Analytic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Clicks</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Nov 19, 2012</td>
<td><a href="http://ow.ly/fpqzY">http://ow.ly/fpqzY</a> <a href="http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/19/the-10">http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/19/the-10</a>... The @HuffingtonPost recently compiled the ten majors where students feel they are changing the world. Do you see yours? <a href="http://ow.ly/fpqzY">http://ow.ly/fpqzY</a></td>
<td>156 clicks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Nov 30, 2012</td>
<td><a href="http://ow.ly/fHmeJ">http://ow.ly/fHmeJ</a> <a href="http://inspace.ischool.syr.edu/2012/11/29/wha">http://inspace.ischool.syr.edu/2012/11/29/wha</a>... What is this Snapchat thing that has been sweeping through campus? @iSchoolSU tells us: <a href="http://ow.ly/fHmeJ">http://ow.ly/fHmeJ</a> #InfoSpace</td>
<td>127 clicks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Syracuse University. (n.d.). *Syracuse University (SyracuseU)*. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/syracuseu


Evolving public relations: Social media use by higher education communicators

1. Background
   a. Social media has had a tremendous impact on the practice of public relations
   b. An unresolved issue is which model is best equipped to offer a normative approach to organizational use of social media
   c. Grunig: ‘Social media reaffirms the validity of two-way symmetrical communications’
   d. Practitioners approve of analysis of social media as feedback (two-way communication)
   e. Personal interest of the author

2. Research Problem
   a. Little information about how public relations professionals in higher education ground their understanding and strategic thinking about social media in theory
   b. Expansion

3. Research Questions
   a. RQ1: How do colleges and universities plan their social media communications?
      i. Explanation
b. RQ2: How do colleges and universities incorporate feedback from their publics and social media metrics into their social media planning?
   i. Explanation

4. Organization to be Studied
   a. Syracuse University
      i. Basic Facts
      ii. Social Media Presence
         1. Leadership
            a. News Services
            b. School of Information Studies Pilot Program
            c. Advancement and External Affairs Takeover
            d. Kate Brodock

5. Literature Review
   a. Introduction
      i. Practitioners unclear about social media use
   b. Excellence Theory
      i. Two-way symmetrical model of public relations
         1. Emphasizes the importance of listening, engaging and adapting
   c. Excellence Theory Applied to Social Media in Higher Education
i. Radian6 Best Practices

ii. Noel-Levitz Student Expectations

iii. Social Media Defined

iv. Higher Education Use of Social Media

d. Publics in Higher Education

i. Specific publics applicable to higher education, specifically prospective students, current students, and alumni of a given university

ii. Center for Marketing Research Study

iii. R.O.I. depends on engagement

e. Overall Engagement and Social Media Metrics

i. *Public Relations Tactics*: Social media should be part of overall plan

ii. Paine - metrics vary depending on business objectives

iii. What colleges generally measure

f. Demonstrated Knowledge Gap

i. Gap between theory and practice in social media use by higher education practitioners

6. Case Study Method

a. Yin: “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context…”
b. Yin: Distinct advantage in using case studies when a how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control

c. Limitation: not useful for scientific generalization

7. Data Collection Procedures

a. Interviews, documentation, archival records
   
i. Interviews with Kevin Morrow, Kate Brodock, and Jared Kraham

b. Interview Questions
   
i. Explanation
      
   1. Questions
      
a. Justifications
      
   ii. Appropriateness of the questions

8. Data Analysis

a. Pattern matching
   
i. If the evidence shown matches with the predicted, the research showed Syracuse University planned its social media communication in a way that encouraged two-way symmetrical communication

9. Results

a. Based on interviewees, archival material and documentation.
b. RQ1: How do colleges and universities plan their social media communications?

i. Organized to support SU’s overall communication goals

ii. Nationally recognized strategy

iii. SU has a leading communications school and SM training

iv. Using a student team

1. Importance according to Kate Brodock

2. Importance according to a team member

v. On all major social media sites

1. Twitter and Facebook are the most important to the school’s goals

2. Subsections within the school-use blogs, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Flickr

3. Demographic information for Twitter and Facebook

4. Comments on other accounts

vi. Showcasing SU

1. “not a PR machine” – Kraham

2. Quality content that its audiences enjoy

3. Getting its audiences to engage

4. Sharing and engendering connections

vii. Important communication channel
1. Audiences expect a response

2. Out-performing other schools in meeting desires of its audiences

3. From novelty to necessity

viii. Tactics

1. From announcements to providing value to those far away

10. RQ2: How do colleges and universities incorporate feedback from their publics and social media metrics into their social media planning?

i. Providing what the audience wants and important information

ii. “Carefully conceived, very active engagement” – Morrow

iii. “We have an incredibly digitally-connected community and so we look to them to share,” – Kraham

iv. Creating lasting relationships

v. Twitter examples

vi. Facebook examples

vii. Finding the right mix isn’t a formula

viii. Using feedback via metrics — informing rather than dictating content strategy

11. Conclusion
a. SU plans its social media strategy in order to both maximize the reach of messages it deems important and engagement of its many publics.

b. While Syracuse University takes into account the feedback of its audiences, it does not plan its posts exclusively on what its audiences find most popular, instead opting for a mix of popular and institutionally important content.

c. These findings led to the conclusion that Grunig’s thoughts on the use of social media for two-way communication for public relations professionals applies to higher education, to a degree.

d. Grunig has current research that confirms the continued relevance of excellence theory.

e. Practically, this research signals to other higher education institutions that their use of social media should also incorporate a balance between broadcast and engagement and that feedback should inform but not dictate the types of post they make to their target audiences.

f. This study demonstrates that Syracuse University is using social media in the best way.

g. Limitations
   i. Limited range
h. Future research
   i. Asking questions regarding social media strategy in the form of a survey sent to many schools

12. Appendix A
   a. Follow up Contact

13. Appendix B
   a. Interview Protocol

14. References