

Digital Practices in Public Relations

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Abstract

While the internet and social media have made it easy to spread news and information, it has also been activated Advertising and Public Relations agencies to influence public opinion by adopting new ways of communication. Today, a person with basic knowledge of computer and internet can reach to mass audiences in different number of ways. This new age communication can be referred as Digital Public Relations. Digital PR is a mixture of traditional practices of public relations blended with social media content and search engine optimization therefore, transforming steady news into interactive mode by establishing direct connection with target audience. The recent development in technology with endless use of Internet has grown exponentially. One can now connect with friends and family, colleagues, look for recommendations, suggestions and associate strongly with commodities – in both traditional and digital space. Nowadays, PR professionals started using social media in their regular PR practice. They connect with journalists, participate in forums, share client's story and increase external communications for an organization. This paper looks into the latest digital practices adopted by Public Relations professionals and explores the latest trends in practice.

Keywords : Digital public relations; Public relations; Social media.

Introduction

The public relations professionals are highly practicing digital public relations activities because the internet plays a vital role in people's life, quoted in a report by Dutton, diGennaro and Hargrave. The research states that the internet is very important to most of the people where more than 7 in 10 believe that the internet is improving their life as it saves time. 60% of user's did multiple taskas like listen to music, watch TV or read while online. About 74% users use internet to gather information, 71% for sending emails to friends, and around 45% for online shopping. Almost half ie 42 % go online for work and 76% believes that people participate online for expressing their views.

According to a recent survey by market and opinion research firm Ipsos in 2016, 82% of internet users in the country said they cannot imagine life

without internet which is even higher than the UK, China, and the US. The poll was conducted with 18,180 adults across 23 countries between Sept. 12 and Oct. 11, 2016. With this dynamics of Internet in India, it is essential for organizations to connect with their publics on internet. Journalists, these days regularly create digital content on different social media platforms in form of text, podcasts, vodcasts, pictures, and blogs. This age of social media benefits PR people by establishing direct connect with Influencers and journalists through digital channels. Twitter is one of the platforms, where journalists share stories on their social media handles (**Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2012**). Social Platforms like Twitter, Facebook often used to break story or video which goes viral rapidly by sharing. The rapid rise of social networking sites changed the entire ecosystem as they are highly dynamic and reactive.

Organization these days, demand 360 degree visibility from their marketing agency which include piece of news in print or TV media, presence on social media like FB page or twitter handle. Rob Brown in his book said that we have now entered a third phase since the inception of digital marketing and the arrival of this third wave of digital communications, is characterized by user-generated content (UGC). Social Media is a users platform hence content created on social media is user generated therefore, more interesting content will spread more. A public relations professional, consider Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Linked In, YouTube as major social media platforms for promotion as these platforms have maximum users. Just as PR professionals write press releases for print media, and make arrangements for TV media, they also write content for social media. All these above mentioned platforms are different from each other. Facebook accepts text, video, image to create an impactful post while twitter accepts short text, short video or image. So, along with pitching the story to traditional media, PR professionals are also sharing the same on different social media platforms according to their respective formats. Blend of traditional communication tactics and digital practices are magnifying communication which helps in establishing deeper connection with the publics. The traditional press release is gradually transforming into a more advanced form of communication by creating Social Media Release (SMR) template (Deirdre Breakenridge, 2008). According to Breakenridge, SMR is a tool helps in communicating through meaningful information, précised data in form of content which can be shared with journalists; before he or she finds it from others source.

A basic press release can be enhanced by adding interactive feature to make it Social Media Release like Really Simple Syndication (RSS) direct news feeds and links. Sharing high resolution photographs, Videos, links to previous coverage (like del.icio.us or Digg) for social bookmarking or links

to blogs (Philip and Young, 2009). Hence it is widely observed that PR Professionals started incorporating new strategies keeping in mind the format and impact of social media in Public Relations.

Review of Literature:

Since the concept of utilizing social media into Public Relations is less explored, still a lot of books had been written on the same which argues on different angles. Richard Edelman, CEO Edelman says that social media has altered "the nature of how we do what we do". Solis and Breakenridge in their book mentioned that '**shift from pitching to participating, from selling a story to telling a story**'. Weber (2007) in his book, comments that the world of communication is remarkably heading towards digital mode, and those who are learning and practicing these tactics, will be able to express effectively. Therefore, veteran PR specialists believe that **this is the peak of a magnificent era which is undergoing major changes in PR practice**. It implies that there are advanced tactics which might help organization to serve marketing needs and requirements. Butterick (2011) also emphasize on the growth of digital media and comments that upgrading the mediums of communication linked to PR, will give enormous impact on public relations.

A lot was also argued on the content used on social media to practice Public Relations. Solis and Breakenridge in their book, tries to explain that, UGC (**User Generated Content**) is the actual cause of practicing PR on social media. It altered the "equation of influence" and empowering ordinary people (Solis, 2011). They further said that in the world of Web 2.0, conversation is playing a vital role in establishing relation with publics rather than content.

Social networks are the most preferred platform for generating and sharing content, where 75 percent people are doing this regularly on Internet. (Young, 2009)

Internet is providing possible opportunities for public relations practitioners of assembling data, observe public reactions on current issues, and involve with them directly for identifying insights. Therefore, it is now become easier to reach the target audiences and influencers through social media not locally but also globally.

Discussion:

Social media precisely in India is gaining popularity at an enormous rate. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest are some of the social network popular amongst Indians. The users of this social network are

increasing day by day. According to a recent survey by Hootsuite and Wearesocial in January 2019, of the total Indian population, 310.0 million users are active on Social Media. Their survey claims that 93% are active on YouTube, 89% on Facebook, 69% on Instagram while 57% and 48% respectively on twitter and LinkedIn.

The use of Hashtags“#” for organizing content is in trend on Twitter mostly and other social networking sites, which is use to identify messages on a particular topic. This helps in making content or news or information trending on social sites when masses are talking about it. This popularity of photo, video, article is also known as Viral Content as it spreads rapidly on online and social media. Recent examples of some of the Viral Content are

1. **#jcbkiKhudai:** Recently, JCB ki khudai comes was trending because of the statement given by one of the MP of Hyderabad. He was discussing the issue of unemployment in India, where he said a controversial statement that, “India me berozgaari itni hai ki agar kahin JCB ki khudai ka kaam chal raha ho toh who dekhne ke liye bhi bheed ikhatti ho jati hai”. After his statement, local Facebook and twitter groups of that particular area started creating memes on that and after that “JCB ki khudai” started trending on various social media and online platforms. Most of the memes are made on how Indians tend to gather around to watch these vehicles dig and transport earth/mud/tar had gone viral for couple of days.

All the memes and jokes around #JCBKiKhudai got a shot of credibility when the official Twitter of JCB acknowledged the ‘love’.



Also, the entire movement has brought about a ton of free, ‘earned media’ attention for a brand like JCB which concentrates mostly on B2B communication and has very little to do with the B2C communication.

Netizens have even dug up old videos of the earth-digger in action to produce memes and have even dragged cricketers, popular politicians and Bollywood actors into their graphic images to enhance the meme experience. This created a huge publicity for JCB in no cost.

- #Zomato:** Recently Zomato was in news when a video of especially abled man in a Zomato T-shirt and with a delivery bag in his hand-operated tricycle speeding towards the destination to deliver food. The said video was appreciated and shared across the social media. This man is seen doing his job like anyone would without any complains and grievances. This zomato delivery man is not just making news but is also inspiring people. Moreover celebrities seem to be in awe of this delivery man too. Such an act of zomato to step forward and empower such people is really appreciable. Later, zomato surprised the especially abled delivery man with an electric vehicle by zomato to help him deliver food in his area more conveniently. The entire act has brought almost free of cost exposure on Internet and super attention for the Food deliver app Zomato as how inclusive zomato is when it comes to employing people.



In both of the above case studies, PR team of the respective organization amplified the attention by spreading the word in online and offline communities. There are lots of other stories around on how corporates are gaining and losing popularity via social media.

The above discussion also brings our attention towards the fact that if social media can enhance the credibility of an organization, it can also damage the image of the organization at a same speed. But at a large, social media has enhanced the practice of PR by making it easy to reach a huge number of publics, cheaply and within a short time.

The above mentioned two case studies show the benefits of strong presence on social media. The below example is therefore a contradiction which shows that if an organization is involved in some wrong or foul practices, they can be dragged easily on same social media platform.

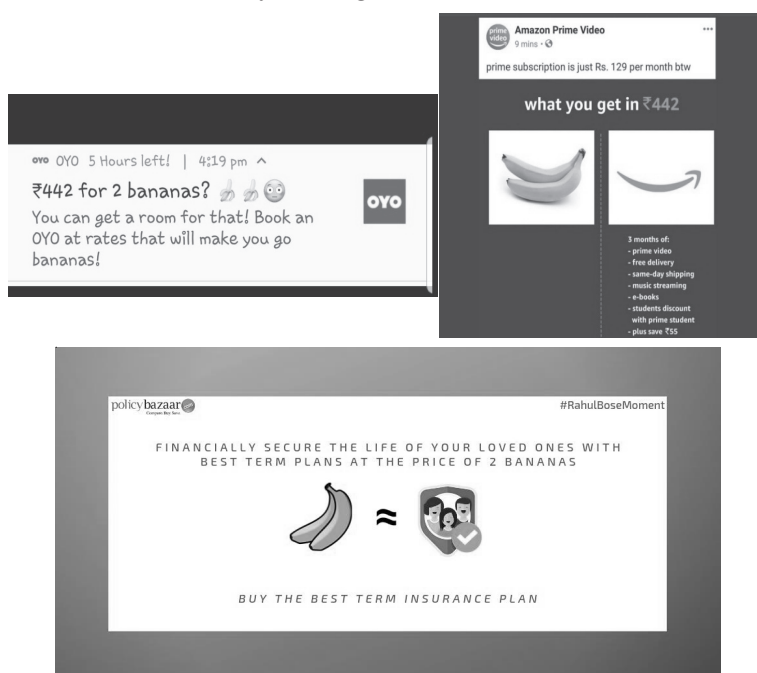
3. **The Rahul Bose going banana story:** The said moment which broke the internet was started by bollywood actor Rahul Bose who was staying at JW Marriott in Chandigarh. The actor was charged with Rs.442 for the "fruit platter" which has only 2 bananas in it. He ordered 2 bananas post his workout session at the hotel's gym. The actor took to twitter to share his shock over the whole incident and post the bill and his own video on the twitter account. The video went viral within few minutes and saw an outpour of reactions from twitter users across the country.



Following the actor's viral video, Deputy Commissioner of Chandigarh ordered probe and asked The Hotel, JW Marriott to explain the cost.

The video has garnered more 143K views on twitter and 159K retweets so far. Sometime after his bananas story went viral, twitterites began sharing their own 'Rahul Bose moments' - their experiences of being fleeced for a product or service with a #rahulbosemoments.

Later, the excise and taxation dept. fines the hotel for Rs. 25000 for collecting illegal tax on an exempted item (fresh fruit). In the same series, several Indian brands like OYO rooms, Amazon, policy bazaar also took to social media by sharing hilarious memes on the issue.



4. **#Sareetwitter:** The #sareetwitter was a recent trend on twitter which a huge participation of females ranging from celebrities to politicians. The trend started by Priyanka Gandhi, where she shared a throwback picture of herself wearing a saree. After this, women from all walks of life shared their trendy and graceful pictures in Saree.

#sareetwitter saw huge response from actors, politician and influential personalities where they post their pictures in saree. The pictures also have their families and friends posing with them. The interesting thing came out to be that lots of foreigners are also participated in this trending issue which shows India culture acceptability among foreigners. Some male users also shared the pictures of their mother, wife & daughter in their favorite saree.

This trend gave the chance to common man to be a part of trending community. Some memes are also shared on twitter to bring a humorous content out of this trend. Also, Some saree brands have also leveraged this opportunity and promoted their brand during this ongoing social media activity.

Conclusion:

Incorporating social media in public relation is a new phenomenon in India; hence, existing PR practitioners are required to scale up their skills especially on how social media can be best tapped into. If social media are to be fully utilized by public relations practitioners, they need to be more skilled in areas such as website management, social media marketing, search engine optimization, web analytics etc, which will help them to spread the word in a more organized manner and hit the target audience.

Another important factor for using social media into public relations is to develop strategies for different social media platforms which will be easily acceptable by online communities. It is the need of the hour as the organizations are demanding 360 degrees visibility across media platforms and hence PR professionals need to brace up for the same.

The study concluded that social media is dramatically changing the way PR is practiced. Social media has accelerated and intensified the way public relations practitioners communicate, relate, their attitudes and tools/methods of practice. Social media has created new dimensions of communication with their internal and external publics.

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