

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Sormanen, Niina

Title: Business and News Media Perspectives on the Power of Social Media Publics : Case Finland

Year: 2018

Version: Published version

Copyright: © Sormanen, 2018.

Rights: CC BY 3.0

Rights url: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

Please cite the original version:

Sormanen, N. (2018). Business and News Media Perspectives on the Power of Social Media Publics : Case Finland. *Journal of Social Media in Society*, 7(2), 141-163.
<http://www.thejsms.org/index.php/TSMRI/article/view/450>

Business and News Media Perspectives on the Power of Social Media Publics: Case Finland

Niina Sormanen

Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, FI-40014
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

*Corresponding Author: niina.sormanen@jyu.fi

The Internet, social media, and their varied online publics have affected the working processes of public relations (PR) practitioners and journalists. The digital era has enabled access for various online publics to create, share and search information online and also potentially to increase their communicative power by using networks for influencing, challenging or holding businesses and news media accountable. This interview study investigated Finnish PR practitioners' and journalists' perceptions of the potential communicative power of individuals and communities operating on social media and the effects these publics' online presence and activities have on the professionals' working processes. The results reveal that despite increasing access to monitoring and joining online discussions, both

professions show hesitancy in entering into dialogue with confrontational publics. The professionals have quite a positive stand towards easily classifiable individuals, such as bloggers, but fear more arbitrary individuals' discussions online. Social media's communities, such as boycott or lobby groups, present a cooperation potential but the professionals lack strategies to confront them. Overall, the communicative power of the online publics is clearly acknowledged and tied to their missions' and/or issues' topic, quantity of people involved, amplitude of discussion, media attention and good organization and professionalism of activities and communication.

Keywords: PR practitioners, journalists, communicative power, social media, online publics

The public communication arenas of societies have traditionally had many actors central to the democratic and economic processes. Organizations are seen as the producers of goods, (news) media as the watchdog and agenda-setter of public issues, and government as a societal regulator of the former (e.g. Carroll & Buchholtz, 2009; McCombs, 2005; Francke, 1995). Journalists have been members of a strong independent institution, the "Fourth Estate" (first identified by Edmund Burke in 1787, see Carlyle, 1846; de Tocqueville, 1835), i.e. press, radio, television and other mass media, with various societal information and observation roles. Public relations (PR) practitioners have represented the organizational and market

segments of public discussion, serving both organizational and public interests (e.g. Butterick, 2011). The Internet and the Web 2.0 environment and their various content creation platforms and social network sites (SNS) have led to a new culture of communication which gives access to many actors instead of only media houses and businesses (e.g. van Dijck, 2013). Individuals as producers and users of digital information (“produsage”) become meaningful actors of the digital sphere (Bruns, 2007). Thus, the various individual content producers and publics connected via social media have today profoundly affected the working processes and potentially diminished the societal power of communication professionals working in (news) media and business organizations.

Communicative power is traditionally seen to be created when people gather in the (offline) public sphere arena to unite their power against illegitimate use of power and to express voice in decision making (Habermas, 1962; 1996; Fraser, 2007). In the digital sphere communicative power formation takes many new forms. For example, individuals and publics connected via social media may be seen to be forming a “Fifth Estate” (see e.g. Newman, Dutton, & Blank, 2012; Dutton, 2009) when networked individuals source information independent from institutions and link up so that their communicative power can hold the former ruling estates (government, media and organizations/businesses) accountable. Hidri (2012) also refers to the “fifth power” as a new social media capable of monitoring and watching mass media and deconstructing the meaning production processes of the hegemonic Fourth Estate.

Online publics operate both as individuals and larger networks and communities when they search and share information and aim to build communicative power and influence societal matters in and through the context of Internet and social media. Commonly recognized social media’s individual actors are, for instance, bloggers and citizen journalists or any individuals communicating on the Internet (for example on discussion sites or SNSs) but in a non-organized manner. Social media’s communities oriented to increasing their communicative power may present themselves, for instance, as ‘ad hoc groups’ formed by individuals for a specific purpose (such as protesting or lobbying a cause). They may also function as more official campaigns organized around a cause, or as (online) “social movements” (see e.g. Castells, 2007), where collectives of networked

individuals use the Internet and social media to organize and achieve a common goal, for example social change.

The aim of this study is to explore how PR practitioners and journalists perceive the potential of the communicative power of individuals and communities operating in the Internet and social media arena and how the presence and potential power of the individuals and communities can influence the professionals' work processes. The study uses semi-structured interviews in its qualitative descriptive approach to achieve this aim.

Various studies since 2000 have focused on the transforming of communication tactics and marketing possibilities of businesses and media towards their stakeholders, especially the public, in the social media context (e.g. Hedman, 2016; Valentini, 2015; Ye & Ki, 2012). Quite many studies have also focused on online user generated content (UGC) and online audience behavior effects on news production processes (e.g. Ananny, 2014; Lee, Lewis, & Powers, 2014). Likewise, recent research has focused on the political developments of the digital communication era, for example citizens challenging governmental procedures and increasingly engaging in political activities due to social media (e.g., Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2013). There is nonetheless a gap in qualitative studies presenting and describing PR practitioners' and journalists' perceptions of the communicative power of Web 2.0 publics, their influence on the professionals' work processes, and the professionals' strategies to operate with the online publics. This study aims to particularly answer two research questions: (1) How has the Internet and social media arena and the individuals and communities operating therein affected the working processes of PR practitioners and journalists? And, (2) do the communication professionals perceive that social media's individuals and communities have communicative power to influence, challenge or hold businesses and news media accountable?

The study focused on the national and cultural context of Finland, a Nordic welfare state, which has high ranking in respect to democracy, press freedom and lack of corruption (World Audit, 2018). Internet penetration and SNS usage for Finns are high: 88% of Finns aged 16-89 years have used the Internet within the last three months and 73% use it daily (Statistics Finland, 2017). 61% of the same age group have followed some SNS within the last three months (*ibid.*). Although Hallin and Mancini (2004) suggest that media in Finland belongs to the Democratic Corporatist Model, Ohlsson (2015) contends it

is evolving towards the Liberal Model. Finns (over 18-year-old) follow news increasingly in digital form (weekly followers: 88% of respondents) but still also from traditional (print) media (weekly followers: 85% of respondents). Further, social media, especially Facebook, is actively used for reading, sharing and discussing news, and 62% of the respondents in Finland state trusting news in general (Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2017). The private business sector in Finland is most active in social media but less than 40% of companies have a specific strategy for utilizing social media (Pönkä, 2015). Most used platforms by companies in sharing content include Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Twitter (ibid.).

LITERATURE REVIEW

PR practitioners on the Internet and social media arena

In Mexico, 1978, the World Assembly of Public Relations defined that “public relations is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation’s and the public interest” (see Butterick, 2011, p. 6). Traditional PR practitioner roles are seen as, for example, the “expert prescriber”, the “communication facilitator”, the “problem-solving process facilitator”, and the “communication technician” (Broom & Smith, 1979), and the “manager”, the “technician”, the “media relations specialist”, and the “communication liaison” (Dozier, 1992). In addition, van Ruler (2004) identified six relevant PR roles: “town crier”, “steward”, “traffic manager”, “conductor”, “creator”, and ‘facilitator’. She also defined PR strategies as: information, persuasion, consensus-building, and dialogue. PR practitioners are also seen as “boundary-spanners” (Wilcox, Ault, & Agee, 1995), sort of buffers between media and their organizations. According to a Finnish survey reflecting on the traditional PR roles, Finnish PR practitioners view their roles to be mostly bond and trust builders and communication and transparency enablers (Niskala & Hurme, 2014).

Businesses have accepted the benefits of the Internet and social media as communication and interaction venues. For example, Champoux, Durgee, and McGlynn (2012) state that with SNS, like Facebook, businesses can form relations with old and new clients, post business information and conduct informal market research. Nevertheless, Pang, Chiong, and Hassan (2014) interview study reveals that although PR practitioners

acknowledge the growth and power of social media, companies still remain wary of the online publics and do not, for instance, invite their writers or representatives to press events yet. Further, the Internet and social media have provided businesses with a serious test because they have enabled unsatisfied publics to be highly critical and conduct discussions against businesses in real-time. This aspect of the Internet enables individuals to hold businesses accountable for their actions and to press for needed changes (see Champoux et al., 2012). For example, Facebook contains today various communities formed by individuals concerned with specific societal issues. Many of the communities that protest against, or lobby businesses, often also attract news media attention (see Sormanen & Dutton, 2015). Moreover, Valentini (2015) notes that audiences have become more aware and sceptic of the tactics and marketing of companies due to social media. Overall, businesses seldom control the flows of online discussion, or news, because they are shared and re-shared on various social media platforms. Businesses and PR practitioners today monitor online publics and discussion but strategies in confronting or managing them are quite understudied.

Journalists on the Internet and social media arena

Volek and Jirák (2007) recognize three traditional journalistic roles and objectives of “education”, “advocate/adversarial”, and “neutral/objective”, and also add a fourth “career/pragmatic” objective. Cameron, Sallot, and Curtin (2012, p. 142) offer reporter (journalist) role definitions as follow: “adversary contending against a duplicitous source threatening the free exchange of true information; judge of information presented by two or more contending source/advocates, such as political candidates; judge of news value of information from a single source; and advocate of a position in public contention between two competing camps”. According to an interview study, Finnish journalists perceive their roles most as neutral observers, objective reporters, analyzers of current events, and monitors of the political and business sectors and their representatives (Pöyhtäri, Väliverronen, & Ahva, 2016). Similarly, according to a Finnish survey, journalist see themselves most as neutral informers, proponents of the weak, and societal monitors (Niskala & Hurme, 2014).

According to Ananny (2014), motives of news organizations adopting social media to their news production process include first utilitarian motives, such as seeing social media

as a good tool for distributing content, engaging publics, gathering news, and reporting. Second, the motives are also defensive, such as acknowledging the influence that social media has on journalism practices. Hedman (2016) found that, for instance, Swedish journalists openly discuss the news creation process on Twitter but do not actually invite the audience to take part in news creation. Moreover, the Internet age has also created a challenging environment for news media. The Internet and social media have enabled individuals to function as “watchers of the watchdog” with the power to monitor mainstream media and criticize their news stories (e.g. Cooper, 2006). Also Castells (2007, p. 252) notes “actors striving for social change often use the Internet platform as a way to influence the information agenda of mainstream media”. Overall, Internet and social media enable networked individuals to source information independent from traditional institutions, eliminate gatekeeping to news and information and obtain services, thus giving people more power and control as citizen, viewers, readers and consumers (Dutton, 2009).

Further, the digital era has created a need to discuss the roles of journalists against other individuals producing content online, as the existence of the Internet, Luoma-aho and Nordfors (2009) argue, does not enable anyone who uploads news online to be identified as a journalist. Many scholars have studied definitions of citizen journalists. For example, St. John III and Johnson (2016, p. 186) define “citizen journalists” as “(1) citizens who report, and/or manage others who report news stories, primarily online and, (2) do so while not employed at traditional for-profit news organizations (but may have previously worked in such news operations)”. Wall (2015, p. 798) define citizen journalism as “news content (text, video, audio, interactives, etc.) produced by non-professionals”. The content may include a single, specific moment, like witnessing a happening, or be frequently produced in the form of a “hyper-local news operator” (ibid.)

Publics on the Internet and social media arena

In recent times powerful online social movements and communities have emerged around the world, such as the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ and the more recent hacktivist collective ‘Anonymous’ to challenge power-holders of society. In comparison, Finnish online social movements and collective actions are smaller in scale. Nevertheless, there are already examples of successful online collective actions, such as civic law initiatives and

Facebook pressure groups monitoring activities of businesses and using group pressure to affect business decisions (Sormanen & Dutton, 2015). Groups also form in response to both poorly constructed news stories and the general activities of Finnish newspapers (see Uskali, Niskala, & Lauk, 2014) and bloggers contesting societal issues have become quite popular. The activities of these social media's individuals and communities potentially initiate broad online discussions, which the media may amplify and disseminate.

Social media platforms have further afforded people to create news type content which can reach as many readers as traditional news but have not gone through any fact-checking or external (professional) evaluation (see Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Recently 'alternative (news) media sites' have emerged also on the Finnish Internet arena, which mainly promote anti-immigration, anti-refugee values. These 'media sites' do not function under any institutional oversight, but do abide by Finnish law. Their stories can be written by anyone, uncensored and unsupervised. Traditional (mainstream and news) media have started to criticize these sites, referring to them as "false or fake media". More than 20 Finnish media editors-in-chief, at the beginning of March 2016, signed a statement condemning the stories of the sites as misleading and deceiving, and their attacks against professional journalists unacceptable (Kallunki, 2016, March 1).

METHODS

The objective of this study was to examine PR practitioners' and journalists' perceptions of the potential communicative power of social media's individuals and communities and how these online actors affect the professionals' operations. In order to achieve the objective, the study interviewed Finnish business PR practitioners and news media journalists (N=6). The objective was for the sample population to represent the core economic sectors of both corporate business and news industries in Finland. Thus the PR practitioners were selected from the food industry, construction industry and PR agency fields and the journalists worked at a national newspaper, a medium to large regional newspaper and in the freelance sector. The interviewees were aged from 25 to 56 years and had lengths of service from 3 to 25 years and comprised a female:male gender ration of 2:4. In order to protect anonymity, the interviewees were coded by Random Number (1-6); Gender (Ff=Female, Mm=Male); Job Position (M=Manager, E=Editor, FE=Freelance/Entrepreneur); Economic sector (F=Food, C=Construction,

PR=Communications, D=Daily Newspaper, R=Regional, N=National); Age; Length of Service.

The study used face-to-face semi-structured interviews (n=4). Participants with whom interviews were difficult to organize (n=2) responded to the open questions by email. The researcher personally contacted the participants and conducted the interviews (lasting between 85 to 115 minutes) between December 2015 and March 2016. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Finnish. Summaries of the results were translated into English by the author. The research objectives and the use of the materials were discussed with the interview participants and the identities of the interviewees were promised to be concealed through the process and publication of results. The researcher has informed consent from the participants to use the interview content and results in this study. The interview records are destroyed and data transcripts and are kept confidential and only examined by the respective researcher.

The interviews followed the same theory-based themes and types of questions enabling comparisons to be made between all the interviewees' answers. The participants were presented the same general questions, such as "Does your organization have a strategy for social media communication and especially interacting with individuals and groups on social media?" with possible follow-up questions depending on the answers. In addition, some of the questions were customized for the specific respondents based on background research on their organizations, such as "The following groups have been formed to protest against your organization...What do you think of them and their activities?", or the participants' independent personal social media communication.

Analysis of the interview data was enabled by reading the transcribed words, phrases and sections and finding patterns and convergent themes of enunciated perceptions and activity descriptions from the texts (see "thematic analysis", Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data extracts are used in relevant sections of the reporting of the results to showcase how the interviewees announced the issues.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Communication professionals' roles and processes in the social media era

The PR practitioners suggest the social media arena has changed their work practices especially in four ways: First, providing various channels to create and disseminate information to stakeholders avoiding having (news) media acting as a node; secondly, the speed of communication exchange; thirdly, ways to constantly monitor public opinions, discussions and news media content; and lastly having dialogue with publics and customers. Journalists see the major influence of social media on PR work being the emergence of more critical audiences and customers, who have direct online channels to challenge businesses and hold them accountable.

Journalists still view their traditional roles as being important in the social media era, such as neutral information dissemination and monitoring society and power holders of society. Nevertheless, according to some journalists' statements, in the social media arena arises potentially new roles of first, providing more entertainment to the public due to increased competition of customers. Second, arises the role of being a 'stabilizer of public (online) discussions', relating to journalists providing facts, including expert commentaries, and making sense of issues amidst various potentially false or valid online statements and discussions. PR practitioners recognize that because SNSs have enabled businesses and their publics to create or reproduce and share content independently online, the power of journalists as societal agenda setters has declined. Nevertheless, PR practitioners still believe journalists are capable of assimilating into the social media culture easily and finding their own place in the digital era.

Journalists' objectives in social media include gaining a larger audience, gathering topics and sources for their stories and building their individual professional brands to manage within the competitive work market. Journalists overall see that social media has brought more dialogue into journalism and made public discussion open to more voices:

If you made a mistake 15 years ago, you got away with it quite easy. Someone called indicating the mistakes and the journalist wrote an amendment. Now if you make a mistake, even a small one, the feedback is instant and potentially massive. If you

make a big mistake, even accidental, it leads to a typical ‘social media issue/discussion storm’. (5/Mm/E/D/N/40-49/16)

This has made journalists more accountable for their stories, even more alert to details. In addition, journalists have started to focus now more frequently on regular people, not just the elite or powerful:

Before if a woman would have called to say that she had been mocked at a gym, it would have not met the news criteria. Now we may see that the story has raised tens of thousands of likes on Facebook and it is reason enough to raise the issue on the media agenda. (1/Mm/E/D/R/30-39/7)

Consequently, journalists admit that news media no longer have a monopoly and journalists are no longer dictating what society knows and talks about.

PR practitioners now consider (traditional) news media and social media as being equally important to their processes. Business stories (excluding paid marketing content) are no longer offered in the same quantity to news media because quality content and information is easy to produce and diffuse independently online. Nonetheless, business information published by news media is viewed often even more valuable than content published independently because it can reach a broader variety of audiences and is presumed to be more trustworthy in the eyes of the public.

Communication professionals’ views on and strategies towards online publics

Most PR practitioners report their businesses having automatic social media monitoring services for following online discussions and media outputs, which are reviewed daily by at least one person. One practitioner reports following specific critical stakeholders daily (e.g. animal rights organizations, Greenpeace etc.) and having active online and offline discussions with them. Concerning more arbitrary online publics, s/he reports always answering sensible questions regarding their business and correcting factual errors, but rarely taking part in actual conversations, especially when they are seen as provocative or having negative hidden agendas. Other practitioners have witnessed conversations and critiques concerning their businesses on social media

platforms but have not so far felt the need to participate in the conversations. Their strategy is still to influence most close stakeholders on more conventional offline forums (expert meetings, events etc.) and view that taking part in conversations and all reactions on social media should be well considered and planned.

Social media's communities centered around societal and everyday life issues (such as food, health and work) are recognized by the PR practitioners to be popular among people today. Information disseminated in the communities are seen to potentially have a meaningful effect on people's images on issues, and also on images towards businesses involved with the issues. Nevertheless, the information content of the communities, especially those monitoring businesses and organizing boycotts, are seen mostly nonfactual and biased concerning the businesses and their services or products. PR practitioners view individuals and communities on social media as having quite limited abilities in reporting facts and issues. The practitioners often notice unfavorable information concerning their own businesses and classify the public as "ignorant". For example, the practitioners' perceptions of popular Finnish discussion sites, such as 'Suomi24', are quite negative and not taken seriously due to their incoherent, short and anonymous conversations. On the other hand, PR practitioners find citizen bloggers, who write about the specialty fields of the businesses and have a lot of readers, as being quite meaningful new stakeholders. They are today treated nearly the same way as journalists: they are invited, or are planned to be invited, to the same press conferences and are sent the same product samples. Nevertheless, most PR practitioners appear not to have fully figured out how to operate with bloggers, or take use of their full potential.

Although the PR practitioners review daily the monitored content of social media, they are unaware of many of the discussions related to and boycott groups formed against their businesses that do exist. PR practitioners state they have general crisis communication plans for highly escalated situations and themes (online and offline) but they do not have specific, concrete reaction strategies concerning challenging online publics. The current most common online communication strategies include pre-determined answers and statements for crisis situations and questions, and handling 'discussions and issue storms' case-by-case. The lack of any working strategies to handle attacks from social media's individuals and communities causes PR practitioners to avoid

having any dialogue with the uncontrollable audiences. This may be a valid fear. For example, boycott groups are not concrete institutions, they usually lack clear leadership and are arbitrary in form, and thus create a difficult environment in which to create a discourse relationship. Some positive views on cooperation possibilities are nevertheless stated:

Even in a negative discussion atmosphere a positive end results could be achieved if the people outraged about something would come and discuss, e.g. face-to-face, with the company, and find a common solution to the problem. (6/Ff/M/C/50-59/25)

PR practitioners emphasize two-way communication with social media's communities and individuals. Although customers are reported to be included, for example, in product developments and advertising campaigns, the practitioners do not provide examples of concrete discussions with wider publics on the publics' terms. The communication is basically one-way information dissemination, pushing content to the public. This is primarily claimed to be due to lack of resources as answering each question and motivating people to participate requires many full-time workers, and also because there appears to be lack of knowledge on how effective, positive conversations should be achieved. For example, Valentini (2015) notes that merely using social media to post content for the purpose of enhancing dialogues with publics does not directly result in conversations, relationships or collaborations with audiences.

The PR practitioners strongly emphasize openness and general ethical conduct in all communication and PR practices (online and offline). The practitioners still send product samples and organize events for journalists and bloggers and conduct social media monitoring (perceived by the practitioners as ethical and efficient procedures). Nevertheless, no unethical practices, such as deleting comments, controlling conversations or ghost blogging/commentating (see Toledano & Avidarb, 2016), are perceived by the practitioners to be a part of PR work today. The Finnish culture characterized by high public trust towards institutions (e.g. Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2017) demands very ethical business procedures. The PR practitioners believe that if the

businesses behave well and are transparent in their communications, their interplay with (online and offline) publics is easier.

Journalists consider social media discussion topics as societal phenomena worthy to be used as news sources. Journalists do not specifically search for topics but when tipped off about a phenomenon that has raised a lot of discussion online, will use it as a news topic. The news criteria, i.e. selection of issues for news publication (see Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) of “human interest” and “importance and significance” are thus determined greatly by journalists in evaluation of the quantity of ‘likes’ and ‘followers’ of a social media discussion, phenomenon or a community.

Media houses do not monitor social media regarding discussion about themselves in the same way as do businesses, and consequently journalists are intentionally unaware of most online discussions and protest groups concerning their papers. Furthermore, the journalists say their newspapers have not been very active in online conversations with the publics. Similar to businesses, communication of newspapers has been quite one-way, although the journalists do not want to be seen a “silent elite”. They nevertheless view that joining actual online conversations may not be the best option for a media house in a crisis situation, but prefer to mainly use the paper’s own online platforms to make statements and corrections. In general, journalists emphasize brainstorming with the online publics in creating stories as important, but in practice it is not done as much as intended or wanted (cf. Hedman, 2016).

Basically, journalists perceive plurality of sources, i.e. the Internet and social media as well as mainstream and news media, in forming people’s worldviews is a positive notion. However, journalists suggest the danger is that social media does not engender a wider worldview but closed ‘bubbles’ of like-minded people sharing limited information, even false information. For instance, the journalists argue that social media in Finland has allowed immigration criticism to become mainstream. Anti-immigration oriented individuals, groups and politicians tactically refer to journalists and media as an inimical figure:

We [news media] are supposedly all the time concealing something. Sometimes the criticism is valid but mostly not true at all. Sometimes a newspaper leaves something unreported because it simply is not true. (1/Mm/E/D/R/30-39/7)

Journalists generally report reading comments related to their own stories, but do find them quite hurtful at times due to their aggressiveness and unconstructive nature. Social media is not viewed as a place to debate with the audience. Journalists perceive that aggressive people get even more aggressive when journalists contest them. Although accepting their public role and need to avoid being overly sensitive, journalists do question the need to bring up certain topics, which may result in online attacks, thus restricting their work and freedom. This indicates the power of social media's individuals and communities, although in a quite negative manner.

Journalists often refer to citizen journalists when explaining their professional role in comparison to other online content producers. Journalists of this study separate themselves from citizen journalists by virtue of:

- 1) being journalism professionals that work for a media house or as freelancers, and thus have the time and motivation to follow stories and check facts thoroughly,
- 2) following clear ethical and practical journalistic guidelines ('guidelines for journalists' set by the Finnish Union of Journalists and regulated by the Council for Mass Media),
- 3) aiming at separating their opinionated stories from actual news stories, and overall
- 4) perceiving as an obligation the need to work for the public interest.

Thus, in contrast to for example St. John III and Johnson (2016), this view also dissociates professional freelancers from citizen journalists and adds quality levels of ethics and objectivity to professional journalism.

Journalists emphasize the significance of Finnish popular bloggers as citizen journalists who despite being opinionated still remain factual and concretely influence societal agendas. However, journalists also recognize the influence of those bloggers who do not operate under any ethical models and produce opinionated stories and sell them as news. Journalists of this study regard Finnish alternative (news) media sites (i.e. 'fake media sites') as contemptible and untruthful. Although they nevertheless agree with the need to tolerate them, as the freedom of speech in Finland applies to everyone, they do not

perceive it as their role to try to form any dialogue with these media or to correct their messages for the public.

Communication professionals' views on the communicative power of online publics

Journalists perceive that social media, with its instant feedback, has made journalists more pedantic in their work and writing, accuracy and checking facts, which they overall perceive as a positive development. Thus, the idea of online publics being “watchers of the watchdog” monitoring the media (Cooper, 2006) is considered by the journalists to be a real phenomenon and beneficial to news media development as it improves journalistic quality.

Regarding the overall power of social media's individuals and communities, journalists view that all businesses and organizations should be and probably are fearful of online commentaries and campaigns against them, especially if they attract a great deal of support. Those issues and discussions that are aimed at and reach beyond the bubble of only like-minded people's conversations are seen as especially powerful. PR practitioners understand that, generally, social media 'issue storms' rise and fall equally rapidly. Nevertheless, when an issue gets enough publicity, including news/mass media publicity, and is sufficiently concrete, the influence is usually meaningful and lasts longer.

Social media's individuals and communities are not seen to have the power to make the actual final decisions in most cases, be it changing corporate procedures, making amendments to law or dictating mainstream media content:

Yes, they [online publics] have power but it is not in any way automatic. Social media is a part of long-term work for a cause, and in most cases the power to make the final decisions is not in the hands of one's friends in social media.

(2/Mm/FE/D/N/40-49/13)

They are, nevertheless, recognized by both professions to have capabilities in affecting, challenging and holding accountable those who do have power, and thus acting as paradigms of the Fifth Estate (e.g. Dutton, 2009). Especially when social media's individuals are identifiable factual content producers and online publics form organized communities with a clear strategy and identifiable leadership, they are seen to have

significant power to voice customer demands, steer both advertising campaigns of businesses and attention of media to certain societal phenomena, and voice strong resistance and conduct organized attacks when misconduct from either party is evident.

Both professions assign specific qualities to powerful social media's individuals' and communities' issues and missions which can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Importance of the topic (relevance to large segments of society, relevance to corporate processes and reputation and societal meaningfulness judged by media),
- 2) quantity of people involved (e.g. group membership size), following and/or discussing the issue,
- 3) amplitude of discussion (reaching varied and sufficient audiences online and offline),
- 4) media attention (journalists reporting about the issue or group), and
- 5) the communication and activities must be professionally organized and performed, and based and planned according to factual information.

Traditional institutions (media, corporate and government) will in the future, the journalists say, still be a power in society but should they show weaknesses the field is open to ad hoc groups and competent individuals operating online. Journalists also see that digital media will become even more fragmented as a consequence of an increase in the various platforms and information arenas available to the publics. This could lead to the loss of a common shared publicity, and society will not be able to discuss matters when people live in separate 'digital bubbles'. Journalists, while foreseeing the demise of many media businesses, also hope that the news media or some other authority will remain as the arbiter of common general knowledge.

The PR practitioners believe that 'trolling' will increase in the social media in the future, but the publics will also be more media literate to judge real information from trolling and false information. PR practitioners perceive that the power and activity of social media's individuals and communities will escalate and increase even further. The core issue is that the power is dependent on how professionally people can learn to address

issues: Social media discussions and movements can turn against themselves if there is too much distressing and disorganized communication behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated Finnish PR practitioners' and journalists' perceptions of the potential power of individuals and communities of the Web 2.0, and their effects on the work procedures of the professions. The study used semi-structured interviews to compose descriptions and summaries of the communication professionals' perceptions.

According to the study, most of the traditional roles of PR practitioners and journalists still prevail in the Internet and social media era. The greatest changes reported by PR in the social media era are in the arena of practice; online platforms available to create content directly for stakeholders, speed of exchange, working with challenging online publics, increased online discourse monitoring, and the possibility of dialogue with various publics. Journalists are seeing changes in social media providing access to more stories and sources, the means to diffuse own news, selecting news topics, making journalists more accountable for their work, and increased reactions from the public to their stories. The profession's roles that are becoming more meaningful for journalists are participation in online societal discussion and offering entertainment to the public. Furthermore, journalists may now be required to act as 'stabilizers' of public (online) discussions and information in the social media era.

Both professions agree that the social media era has increased the importance of PR practitioners for businesses, as they are today needed to interact with various online publics and manage crisis situations. On the other hand, social media is seen to have decreased the power of news media as the autocrat societal agenda setter (the Fourth Estate). Nonetheless, both professions agree that society needs an information checking authority such as professional journalists in the increasingly fragmented online communication sphere.

PR practitioners and journalists perceive that social media's individuals and communities in Finland definitely have communicative power but its formation and concrete effects are complex and the power is used both positively and negatively. The professionals acknowledge many successful activities of these online publics confirming

their capability to form actualized communicative power, such as holding businesses accountable for their activities, causing notable ‘issue storms’ (i.e. issues that have caused vast discussion), voicing customer demands, and making journalists more pedantic with their work. The results formed a summary of qualities assigned by the communication professionals to powerful social media’s individuals’ and communities’ issues and/or missions: 1) importance of the topic, 2) quantity of people involved, following and/or discussing the issue, 3) amplitude of discussion among varied audiences, 4) media attention, and 5) organization and professionalism of the activities and communications.

The communication professionals mostly want to operate with and recognize the power of online publics first, when the social media’s individuals are identifiable (not anonymous) content producers, who produce content in a continuous manner (for example bloggers), and whose information content is based on facts. Second, when the social media’s communities’ activities are well organized, they have identifiable leadership and the activities and communication (internal and external) are based on factual information and individual actors who can perform in a professional manner. Consequently, the professionals overall see that both social media’s individuals and communities should operate according to traditional societal authority figure and institutional/organizational rules for them to have actual communicative power. This may be because then they would be easier, more familiar stakeholders to operate with. Nonetheless, social media’s individuals and communities still have a tendency to operate conforming to the culture and freedoms of social media and not operate according to traditional rules.

Both professions emphasize the possibilities provided by social media to concretely interact with various publics. Both are still hesitant about having dialogue with arbitrary and indeterminate publics, and especially the uncontrollable publics that challenge the professionals or their organizations with negative discussions and boycotts. Both professions respond to such challenges by falling back on pre-determined statements for online questions and crisis situations, pushing content on own online platforms, and handling ‘issue storms’ on a case-by-case basis. PR practitioners pursue to monitor the social media arena continuously for the purpose of being informed about possible discussions against their businesses but journalist mostly stay intentionally unaware of the discussion if they are not directly challenged.

Both professionals find easily definable individual actors online, such as bloggers, as meaningful and pleasant stakeholders (especially when they are factual in their communications). Potential cooperation procedures with bloggers are being investigated currently by the professionals. For example, PR practitioners place bloggers now nearly in the same stakeholder category as journalists. Individuals, taking part in various discussions on platforms, are usually ignored by both professionals due to their arbitrariness and disorganization.

More organized communities on social media, such as boycott groups, lobbying groups or social movements, are recognized by PR practitioners, but they are seen as quite problematic audiences and stakeholders to communicate and cooperate with. This is because, although somewhat organized, the communities most often cannot be classified according to traditional organizational or business stakeholder mapping, or are not yet seen as specific stakeholders at all: First, they are not traditional institutions and may not, for instance, care about their image nor act according to societally accepted activist group, NGO or business norms. Second, often communities on social media do not have clear leaders who communication professionals can pursue dialogue with. Nonetheless, even when there are identifiable leaders, the communities may mostly operate conforming to the culture and freedoms of social media. There is a need to develop new online stakeholder categorization (mapping) especially for communities on social media, based on varied types, objectives and tactics of communities, to be able to create new strategies for PR practitioners to communicate and cooperate with these online stakeholders.

Journalists are especially hesitant in debating issues with online publics because in today's media hostile societal atmosphere, outcomes may easily turn aggressive and unconstructive. Interestingly, social media has caused the phenomenon that, in addition to judging published stories, it enables the public to question why some issues are not reported by the (news) media, or are even claimed to be concealed by the media. In this atmosphere, journalists would have a full-time job just explaining the inconsistencies of invalid issues (raised with suspicious objectives) and covering the valid ones. The question is whether news media should still put more resources into managing the issues of the digital environment and if the 'stabilizer' role is one of the most important for journalists in the future of the social media era? Further, journalists might benefit from a (more) open

approach to dialogue with the online publics and communities (even those challenging news media organizations and individual journalists), especially if they do not want to appear as a 'silent elite' and want to build trust among their followers (readers). The strategies which journalist can take to manage this dialogue in a constructive manner, nevertheless, also require further research.

Journalists willingly use social media phenomena as news sources. The study revealed that nowadays an online issue, community or discussion fulfills the news criteria often by the amount of people 'liking', 'following' or commenting on the issue on social media. This information might benefit PR in their publicity work. The information also benefits people planning and executing for example campaigns, movements or boycotts. The study also suggested novel specific qualities separating professional journalists from citizen journalists. This information may benefit the categorization and legitimization of the journalism profession in the social media era.

The study aimed to be objective in describing the perceptions of the communication professionals but recognizes that many aspects can influence the results. These aspects include, for instance, the subjective impact of the researcher interpreting the transcribed interview materials, the interviewees' skills and willingness to describe perceptions and practices, and the Finnish cultural and professional context. Also inefficiencies of the study may include making generalizations from a small population of six interviewees' answers. Nevertheless, the aim was to form a comprehensive current state description from the professionals and to get a good representation of Finnish PR practitioners and journalists from different fields and with different backgrounds to fulfill the objectives of the study. The conclusions can function as a formative basis for a future broader survey study concerning the perceptions of the professionals. Future research also demands studies focused on varied social media's individual and community actors to acquire knowledge of their differences in objectives, tactics, and perceptions of operating, and even collaborating, with businesses and news media. This future research could help to develop strategies for both professions to confront the online publics amidst the special communication culture of social media.

References

- Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211–236.
- Ananny, M. (2014). Networked press freedom and social media: Tracing historical and contemporary forces in press-public relations. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19(4), 938–956. doi: 10.1111/jcc4.12076
- Bode, L., Vraga, E. K., Borah, P., & Shah, D. V. (2013). A new space for political behavior: Political social networking and its democratic consequences. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19, 414–429. doi:10.1111/jcc4.12048
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Broom, G. M., & Smith, G. D. (1979). Testing the practitioner's impact on clients. *Public Relations Review*, 5(3), 47–59.
- Bruns, A. (2007). Produsage: Towards a broader framework for user-led content creation. *Proceedings Creativity & Cognition*, 6. Retrieved from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00006623/01/6623.pdf>
- Butterick, K. (2011). *Introducing public relations: Theory and Practice*. London, UK: SAGE.
- Cameron, G. T., Sallot, L. M., & Curtin, P. A. (2012). Public relations and the production of news: A critical review and theoretical framework. In B. R. Burleson (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 20* (pp. 111–155). NY: Routledge.
- Carlyle, T. (1846). *On Heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history: Six Lectures: reported with Emendations and Additions*. In engl. Sprache. London, UK: Chapman and Hall.
- Carroll, A. B., & Buchholtz, A. K. (2009). *Business & society: Ethics and stakeholder management*. 7th Edition. Mason, US: South Western Educational Publishing.
- Castells, M. (2007). Communication, power and counter-power in the network society. *International Journal of Communication*, 1, 238–266. doi: 1932-8036/20070238
- Champoux, V., Durgee, J., & McGlynn, L. (2012). Corporate Facebook pages: When “fans” attack. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 33(2), 22–30. doi: 10.1108/02756661211206717
- Cooper, S. D. (2006). *Watching the watchdog: Bloggers as the fifth estate*. Spokane, DC, US: Marquette Books.
- De Tocqueville, A. (1835). *De la démocratie en Amérique [On democracy in America]*. Paris, France: Michel Lévy frères libraires éditeurs.
- Dozier, D. M. (1992). The organizational roles of communications and public relations practitioners. In J. E. Gruning (Ed.), *Excellence in public relations and communication management* (pp. 327–356). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dutton, W. H. (2009). The Fifth Estate emerging through the network of networks. *Prometheus*, 27(1), 1–15.
- Francke, W. (1995). The evolving watchdog: The media's role in government ethics. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 537(1), 109–121. doi: 10.1177/0002716295537000010
- Fraser, N. (2007). Transnationalizing the public sphere: On the legitimacy and efficacy of public opinion in a postwestphalian world. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 24(4), 7–30. doi: 10.1177/0263276407080090

- Habermas, J. (1962). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. [English Translation 1989]. Cambridge, MA, US: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. (W. Rehg, Trans.) Cambridge, MA, US: MIT Press.
- Hallin, D.C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hedman, U. (2016). When journalists tweet: Disclosure, participatory, and personal transparency. *Social Media + Society*, 2(1), 1–13. doi: 10.1177/2056305115624528
- Hidri, A. (2012). The fifth estate: Media and ethics. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, 5(1), 49–70. doi: 10.1386/jammr.5.1.49_1
- Kallunki, E. (2016, March 1). Päätoimittajat vetoavat luotettavan median puolesta [Editors-in-chief appeal for trustworthy media]. *Yle Uutiset [Yle news]*. Retrieved from http://yle.fi/uutiset/paatoimittajat_vetoavat_luotettavan_median_puolesta__emme_salli_etta_journalisteja_vaiennetaan_painostamalla/8709192
- Lee, A. M., Lewis, S. C., & Powers, M. (2014). Audience clicks and news placement: A study of time-lagged influence in online journalism. *Communication Research*, 41(4), 505–530.
- Luoma-aho, V., & Nordfors, D. (2009). Attention and reputation in the innovation economy. *Innovation Journalism*, 6(2). Retrieved from <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-6-2.pdf>
- McCombs, M. (2005). A look at agenda-setting: Past, present and future. *Journalism Studies* 6(4), 543–557.
- Newman, N., Dutton, W. H., & Blank, G. (2012). Social media in the changing ecology of news: The Fourth and Fifth Estates in Britain. *International Journal of Internet Science*, 7(1), 6–22.
- Niskala, N., & Hurme, P. (2014). The other stance: Conflicting professional self-images and perceptions of the other profession among Finnish PR practitioners and journalists. *Nordicom Review*, 35(2), 105–121.
- Ohlsson, J. (2015). *The Nordic Media Market 2015 (Nordic Media Trends 13)*. University of Gothenburg, Sweden: Nordicom.
- Pang, A., Chiong, V. H. E., & Hassan, N. B. B. A. (2014). Media relations in an evolving media landscape. *Journal of Communication Management*, 18(3), 271–294.
- Pönkä, H. (2015). Sosiaalisen median katsaus 02/2015 [Review of social media 02/2015]. Retrieved from http://koulutus.purot.net/sosiaalisen_median_tilastoja
- Pöyhkä, R., Väliaverronen, J., & Ahva, L. (2016). Suomalaisen journalistin itseymmärrys muutosten keskellä [Self-understanding of Finnish journalists amidst changes]. *Media & viestintä*, 39(1), 1–23.
- Reuters Institute Digital News Report. (2017). Suomen maaraaportti [Finnish land report]. Uutismedia verkossa 2017 [News media online 2017]. Retrieved from http://tampub.uta.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/101610/uutismedia_verkossa_2017.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Shoemaker, P., & Reese, S. (1996). *Mediating the message. Theories of influences on mass media content*. New York, NY, US: Longman.

- Statistics Finland. (2017). 1. Internetin käytön yleisyys, useus ja yleisimmät käyttötarkoitukset [1. Prevalence of Internet usage, frequency and most common usage manners]. Retrieved from https://www.stat.fi/til/sutivi/2017/13/sutivi_2017_13_2017-11-22_kat_001_fi.html
- St. John, B. III, & Johnson, K. (2016). Perspectives of an underconsidered stakeholder group: Citizen journalists' views of public relations practitioners and their materials. *Public Relations Review*, *42*(1), 184–191.
- Sormanen, N., & Dutton, W. H. (2015). The role of social media in societal change: Cases in Finland of Fifth Estate activity on Facebook. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2), 1–16. doi: 10.1177/2056305115612782
- Toledano, M., & Avidarb, R. (2016). Public relations, ethics, and social media: A cross-national study of PR practitioners. *Public Relations Review*, *42*(1), 161–169.
- Uskali, T., Niskala, N., & Lauk, E. (2014). Facebook ad hoc groups in Finland: The effects of the Fifth Estate. In T. Pavlickova & I. Reifova (Eds.), *Media, Power and Empowerment: Central and Eastern European Communication and Media Conference Ceecom Prague 2012* (pp. 76-81). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Valentini, C. (2015). Is using social media “good” for the public relations profession? A critical reflection. *Public Relations Review*, *41*(2), 170–177. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.11.009
- van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity. A critical history of social media*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- van Ruler, B. (2004). The communication grid: An introduction of a model of four communication strategies. *Public Relations Review*, *30*(2), 123–143.
- Volek, J., & Jiráček, J. (2007). Professional self-image of the Czech journalists: Selected attributes. *Media studies*, *IV*, 358–374.
- Wall, M. 2015. Citizen journalism. *Digital Journalism*, *3*(6), 797–813.
- Wilcox, D. L., Ault, P. H., & Agee, W. K. (1995). *Public relations strategies and tactics*. NY: Harper & Row.
- World Audit. (2018). Democracy table March 2018. Retrieved from <http://www.worldaudit.org/democracy.htm>
- Ye, L., & Ki, E.-J. (2012). The status of online public relations research: An analysis of published articles in 1992–2009. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *24*(5), 409–434.

Funding and Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Media Industry Research Foundation of Finland. The supporter has no involvement in study design or execution.

The author declares no conflicts of interest.