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#publicrelations on Twitter: Pushers, Talkers, Influencers on Spamming PR and Job Hunting

Abstract

A space generally associated with marketers and breaking news (Hobsbawn, 2009 cited in Evans, Twomey & Talan, 2011), Twitter has also become a space debate, community building and legitimization for companies and social movements alike. The academic literature has seen a rise in interest in the micro-blogging platform. For instance, Adi and Moloney (2012) assess the strategic uses of Twitter by protest groups, Adi, Erickson and Lilleker (2014) reflect on the networks and use pattern of the same platform by politicians, namely UK Labor party representatives in the House of Lords while Adi and Grigore (2015) analyze the strategic uses of social media by corporations. Bajpai and Jaiswal (2011) on the other hand propose a framework for analyzing collective action events on Twitter and so do the creators behind visual analysis platforms like NodeXL, Gephi, Linkurious and Socioviz. Public Relations research too has provided several reflections and analyses of Twitter. Verhoeven et al (2012) and Sweetsner and Kelleher discuss how practitioners use social media; Lovejoy, Waters and Saxton evaluate how NGO are engaging stakeholders through the new medium, while Saffer, Sommerfeldt and Taylor (2013) suggest that Twitter interactivity influences the quality of organization–public relationships. With questions about the professionalization of Public Relations as well as about the portrayals and perceptions of the profession continuing to intrigue researchers, it is surprising that only Xifra and Grau (2010) looked into the type of information shared in tweets about public relations. Using the Twitter data collection and analysis option from Socioviz this paper provides an exploratory account of the #publicrelations on Twitter. Using the visualizations provided by the platform and automated data analysis to gain insight into over 10,000 tweets published during June 15-24 and July 15-24, this paper qualitatively assesses the emerging themes about public relations focusing on association of hashtags and type of messages shared and identifies the most active and most influential users within the issue topic. The paper reveals that the #publicrelations is often associated with #jobs or is hijacked and associated with tags such as #gossip or #entertainment. The paper also shows that conversation in the #publicrelations issue network is limited and that the hashtag only partially includes content relevant to the practice. In doing so the paper raises important questions about the nature of dialogue and symmetry on social media and their assessment and suggests that further research should explore twitter chats as well as continue to apply similar data collection methods as used for the study.

Keywords: Social media, Twitter, network analysis, exploratory study, content analysis

1. Twitter fascination

A space generally associated with marketers and breaking news, Twitter has also become a space for community building and legitimization for companies and social movements alike. Currently the 12th most popular social media platform worldwide (Statista.com, 2014), Twitter appeals to a younger, professional and college-educated demographic, the service record-

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ing according to Duggan et al (2014) “significant increases among a number of demographic groups: men, whites, those ages 65 and older, those who live in households with an annual household income of \$50,000 or more, college graduates, and urbanite”. The academic literature too has seen a rise in interest in the micro-blogging platform with political communication, activist communication, public relations, marketing, and journalism researchers exploring its uses, influences and effects.

For instance, Adi (2015) and Adi and Moloney (2012) assess the strategic uses of Twitter by Occupy groups concluding that social movements need, beyond clear and focused messages and robust strategic communication planning and execution, both scale and a supportive communities. A similar interest in Occupy’s use of social media is also shared by Juris (2012) whose article focuses on the logics of aggregation. Speaking of social movements, Giroux (2014) examines ISIS and its online “spectacle of terrorism”. In discussing the wider use of social media as a place where a new conception of politics is formed, Giroux also touches upon Twitter’s role in enhancing the visibility and gaining support for ISIS and the organization of “personal and public structures of attention”. A framework for analyzing collective action events on Twitter is proposed by Bajpai and Jaiswal (2011) and so do the creators behind visual analysis platforms like NodeXL, Gephi, Linkurious and Socioviz.

Still on the subject of political communication, Lilleker et al. (2015) indicate that political parties take the online environment seriously as a campaign tool, adopting social and digital media platforms to gain more followers and increase visibility and support for their campaigns (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). In the context of the permanent campaign however, and the politicians’ need and ability to connect with their constituents outside and in between campaign times, the analysis of the network structures and social media use of UK Labor party representatives in the House of Lords carried out by Adi, Erickson and Lilleker (2014) shows the big disconnect between the well maintained and trained campaign machine and the mixed professional and personal communication of politicians.

Public relations, CSR and marketing communications and their social media applications and implications are also of interest for researchers. In their discussion about how practitioners use social media, Verhoeven et al. (2012) and Sweetsner and Kelleher (2011) argue that digital communication and social media are perceived to have grown in importance in the media mix, especially in the view of European organizations. This is also echoed by Evans, Twomey and Talan (2011) and Distaso, McCorkindale and Wright (2011). More specifically, Evans et al.’s interviews with executive-level public relations professionals reveal that executives believe that Twitter offers a unique form of communication and a valuable asset to a campaign social media strategy.

Distaso, McCorkindale and Wright’s interviewees on the other hand also acknowledge the value of the insights accessed through direct or indirect social media participation. Although perceived as important, Distaso, McCorkindale and Wright (2011) interviewees also point out to numerous challenges that social media poses to communicators including lack of control of information, criticism, false information, potentially embarrassing employee behavior. Taking into account that only about a third of the organizations studied by Verhoeven et al. (2012) have social media policies in place, this potentially alludes to a wider discrepancy between the perceived importance of social media channels and the skills and training opportunities practitioners have, which in practice is seen through the either uncoordinated and ad-hoc approaches to social media by some organizations, or through the continuation of one-way communications (Adi & Grigore, 2015). In the case of Pfizer, although the Twitter channel

is brand consistent and the messages shares are integrated within the company's general values and propositions, the channel is a true mouth-piece of the organization, an un-engaging and self-centered presence.

Many NGOs are not doing better than corporations either. Perceived to be more flexible and with enhanced access to agile teams, the studies undertaken by Waters and Jamal (2011) and Lovejoy, Waters and Saxton (2012) evaluating how NGOs are engaging stakeholders though the new medium provide insights that contradict these assumptions and expectations. While using different models and methodologies, their conclusions are very similar: instead of using Twitter to maximize stakeholder engagement, the nonprofits "continue to use social media as a one-way communication channel, as less than 20% of their total tweets demonstrate conversations and roughly 16% demonstrate indirect connections to specific users" (Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012, p.1). An exception is perhaps the American Red Cross; the study carried out by Briones et al. (2011) based on interviews with forty individuals working for the NGO suggest that the organization is practicing public relations through social media achieving two-way dialogue with younger constituents, the media and the wider community using channels like Twitter and Facebook.

Twitter is an appealing channel for communicators (whether political, from NGOs or elsewhere) yet differences between its perceived importance, its adoption and its effective use being noted. Twitter however is also a space for debate and discussion, with both opposing and supporting voices converging on the platform. Jürgens' (2012) work focused on social media communities and their integration of digital methods shows that users leave digital traces which enable other users and researchers alike to detect community dynamics. This suggests that the content users post can record the rise and fall of topics of interest, the tags used enabling the access to these records.

Perhaps the most insightful in this respect is Twitter's hashtagging. Defined by Chang (2010) as a "bottom-up user proposed tagging convention" that "embodies user participation in the process of hashtag innovation, especially as it pertains to information organization tasks" (p.1), Twitter hashtags enable users to link as well as tap into broader yet theme or topic-focused conversations. By joining either live conversations such as Twitter chats or contributing to issue focused hashtags, the practice enables the emergence and formation of issue publics (Highfield, 2012). Cook et al. (2013) argue that Twitter chats, "periodic, synchronized group conversations focused on specific topics" (p. 1) are an unintended use of the platform. Their analysis of 1.4K group chats involving 2.3 million users indicates „the grassroots nature of these organized groups demarcates a subset of Twitter containing passionate users producing seemingly higher quality tweets" (p. 10). Budak and Agrawal (2013) start from the „five major factors that affect the participation of a person in a group: individual initiative, group characteristics, perceived receptivity, linguistic affinity, and geographic proximity" (p. 165). In looking at thirty Twitter educational chats recorded over a two year period, the authors reveal that Twitter chats share similarities with traditional groups, social inclusion and linguistics similarity being among the factors that influence most their dynamics. While also confirming the community building value of these chats, the authors do show however that for educational chats it is their informational support that is more important.

Current research has explored issue publics formed around specific events and their discourses and the emotions they convey. Equally, the little research carried around Twitter hashtag/issue chats, as shown above, focused either on the mechanics of the information transmission process or on the factors influencing diffusion of information or group cohesion.

There is a need therefore to focus more into hashtag discourses, and in particular on professional hashtag discourses as a means of understanding the issues of concern of professionals as well as to identify their influencers and contributors.

2. Perceptions of public relations

Public relations have a contested history and, arguably, a continuously contested image, its function within organizations as well as role in society being often discussed by professionals and academics alike. Authors like Rampton and Stauber (1995) and Miller and Dinan (2008) focus on the negative aspects of the practice, both current and historical, criticizing PR's association and representation of big corporations accusing it of spin, lack of ethics, propaganda and manipulation. Public relations professionals are therefore propagandists, spin doctors, liars and manipulators. Coombs and Holladay (2007) on the other hand, invite a more distant analysis of the profession that considers aspects of power and societal impact. In their view, PR practitioners are at the confluence of business and stakeholder needs with a difficult task of enabling dialogue and collaboration between the two. A similar approach is also taken by Solis and Breakenridge (2009) who, in speaking about the role social media play in changing current PR practices, launch a call for a more strategic, structured, critical and realistic approach to what PR practitioners can achieve. These, from a theoretical perspective are further revisited, in Grunig and Grunigs's (2008) excellence theory, Kent and Taylor's (2002) dialogical critique of public relations or Zerfass' (2008) integrated communication and communication controlling perspectives.

Public relations is also represented in popular culture and media, a wide range of representations including those referred to by Miller & Dinan (2008) as well as by Coombs and Holladay (2007) being found. Some of these images are for instance echoed on the big screen; movies like "Thank You for Smoking", "Wag the dog" and "Phone booth" portraying in particular the generally negative stereotypes associated with the profession. This is also confirmed by Saltzmar (2011) and Kinsky (2011) who focus in their studies on portrayals of PR practitioners in television and movies. Their findings indicate that the portrayals of public relations – both practitioners and the practice – are by far more negative in movies than on the small screen. Similar negative stereotypes are also echoed by journalists, Spicer's (2009) analysis of media reports containing the term public relations "revealing seven different connotative themes or definitions: distraction, disaster, challenge, hype, merely, war, and schmooze. In over 80% of the cases, the journalist used the terms in a negatively embedded context".

As a response to these critiques, Grunig (2000) suggests that for PR to gain recognition as a profession it needs professional norms and an intellectual tradition that would accompany an established body of knowledge, this besides a set of professional values. Some of these norms are currently inscribed in codes of ethics or codes of conduct (CIPR; IPRA, 2011; PRSA) and their impact is often discussed by academics and professionals alike (Farrell, Cobbin and Farrell, 2002; Fitzpatrick, 2002; Long & Driscoll, 2008; Wood, 2000). The question however is whether these norms, principles and values are an integral part of the practitioners' current and general discussions about the profession and not only codified in normative documents. Research like the one undertaken by Xifra and Grau (2010) would suggest that this is the case, however only to a smaller extent. Their content analysis of 653 tweets comprising keywords like "public relations" and "pr" reveals that most almost a third of the tweet collected include

announcements, reviews, agenda and retweets followed by an attempted dialogue with the community. Tweets were also labor introspective, offering general information on the public relations sector, academic introspective, practice, research and press releases, which one could argue provide a reflection of professional values, processes and functions. They conclude that Twitter is a “medium of more professional use than a platform which favors the theoretical development of the field” (...) the platform being “a good tool for disseminating information about experiences, case studies, ideas and theoretical approaches” (p. 173).

There is therefore a need to further explore Twitter conversations and messages about the profession. This study, continuing on the theme explored by Xifra and Grau (2010), will assess the discourses, influencers and conversation drivers around the #publicrelations hashtag.

3. Methodology

3.1. Methodological approach and data collection

This paper uses an exploratory approach combining automated online data collection with qualitative observation. Qualifying into the wider digital humanities tradition, this paper uses two free, online platforms (Socioviz and Foller.me) to collect data and gain some insight into its meaning through the visualizations or automated analyses provided. Socioviz¹ enables data collection of up to 5,000 tweets per search and automatic reporting on the top ten most frequent hashtags, the top ten most active accounts and the top ten most influential accounts (understood as account re-tweeted the most often) while Foller.me provides an activity summary of any public Twitter account based on its most recent 100 tweets. The Foller.me analysis includes the accounts mentioned most often, the most used hashtags, the links and domains shared the most together with information on the joining data, time zone, number of followers and following, followers ratio for the account. Foller.me also provides a summary of the accounts activity reporting the number of tweets with mentions, replies, hashtags, links and media within the dataset of 100 tweets collected.

While Foller.me has been used in research before and most recently by Adi and Moloney (2012), and Adi (2015) in their analyses of Occupy and by Adi and Grigore (2015) in their analysis of Pfizer's use of social media in Europe, Socioviz currently unknown to social sciences and communication research, the only one paper so far using platform and discussing its benefits being published in computing journal (Anoop, Asharaf, & Alessandro, 2015).

Unlike Xifra and Grau (2010) who aggregated their Twitter data by collecting four waves of 100 tweets that included “public relations” or “PR” as keywords at four different times and clustered them around emerging themes, this paper relies on a much bigger corpus of data: 10,000 tweets that included the #publicrelations hashtag (the platform scrapes a maximum of 5,000 tweets on each search) in two equivalent weeks of two consecutive months (June 15-24 and July 15-24, 2015).

3.2. Data analysis

Besides the automatic data reporting (of top hashtags, most active users and most influential users), Socioviz also includes two visualization options of the data scraped, one enabling for the accounts network and the other for the hashtags network. This enables the observation of network dynamics and the connections either at user or at concept level. These visu-

alizations together with the tables automatically generated by the platform were used as entry points back into the data. This means that the database of tweets was then searched for the top hashtags in order to extract the tweets containing them and observe their format, topic shared and, where relevant and necessary, the tone. The tables featuring the most active and most influential accounts too were used as entry points, each account in the list being then submitted to an additional Foller.me check on August 5, 2015, enabling thus the observation of its communication, interaction and sharing patterns.

As the corpus of data analyzed is small compared to the entire corpus of data collected, this paper is exploratory in nature, focused as much on testing the methodology of data collection and analysis as on the identification of emerging patterns (of conversation, of discourse, of themes).

4. Spamming PR & Job hunting

The hashtags used the most in conjunction with #public relations are #pr, #socialmedia. Similar interest, concerns and discussions about social media are also reflected by many practitioner surveys including the European Communication Monitor (Zerfass et al, 2015), The Latin American Communication Monitor (Moreno et al, 2015) or CIPR's State of the Profession (2015) as well as Solis and Breakenridge (2012). This also confirms Jürgen's (2012) findings according to which hashtags record and trace the rise and fall of current topic/issue interests within a network.

When #pr and #publicrelations are used in tandem, the tweets generally include tips, links and best practice questions and examples. This is in line with Xifra and Grau's (2010) findings about public relations conversations on Twitter being labor introspective, offering general information on the public relations sector and practice. Additionally, the balanced mixture between RTs and tweets comprising the two hashtags would suggest that the messages shared are consumed and considered valuable to share, however very few, if any at all, lead to conversations.

RT @theallyest: Malaysia Airlines: Hardest #PR Job Jackie Crossman Has Ever Done <http://t.co/e8IrWw3nXz> #PublicRelations (@tanvin194, June 24, 2015)

Media Pitching Do and Dont's <http://t.co/HvrLN3xBGc> #PR #publicrelations (@emilyahills, June 24, 2015)

How to measure the value and importance of #PR for your business #PublicRelations @EverythingPR <http://t.co/Pr1V6ElfUh> (@EverythingPR, June 23, 2015)

RT @AneelaRosePR: How to write 'tweetable' press release headlines – <http://t.co/je17bvLZLC> #PR #PublicRelations <http://t.co/kPSI7Z7PeF> (@getrefined, July 24, 2015)

Some tweets containing the #pr and #publicrelations tags also include #jobs. In fact, job related hashtags (#jobs, #job, #getalljobs) represent circa 15% of the tweets collected, their position however being different during the two data collection periods: #jobs for instance occupies the fourth position in the top 10 of most used hashtags in the tweets collected in June but is only on the sixth position in July. Most of the jobs advertised are based in North America ranging from advisory to management roles and from promotions to corporate communications. From this perspective, Twitter is used as a recruitment tool by organizations of any kind, something that Xifra and Grau's (2010) study did not feature. Although no conversa-

tions or Twitter-based interviews were found in the dataset, it could be said that communicators find the platform to be supportive for recruitment as well as a good monitoring tool for the interested candidates. Perhaps what is the most interesting here is the number and diversity of the positions posted as well as their geographical spread. While this confirms that the #publicrelations is a mostly English and North-American topic hashtag, the abundance of tweets featuring job openings suggesting the existence of a thriving, competitive, dynamic and perhaps volatile market. This also indicates a stark difference between Grunig's (2008) normative model of symmetrical communication, and the industry focus and continued preference for positions better fitting the publicity and public information models; positions like events manager and promotions are among the most frequent. A higher frequency of such positions being advertised could also potentially lead to the perpetuation of the professional misrepresentations of the PR profession and PR practitioners discussed earlier (Miller & Dinan, 2008; Rampton & Stauber, 1995; Spicer, 2009).

Other hashtags associated with public relations include #marketing, #webdesign, #model, #promotion, #gossip (place nine in both June and July) and #publicity (place four in July). As with the job opening tweets these too include potentially misleading associations. The association with #promotion and #publicity reduces the PR practice to sensationalism, hype and schmoozing, something also encountered in Spicer's (2009) journalistic portrayals to PR.

The association of marketing and public relations, on the other hand, while recognizing the shared tools and tactics, would also posit PR in the 4P, including it into the wider marketing and bottom-line focused practices and thus diminishing its contribution to promotion.

For instance, marketing and public relations are used in the same tweets of marketing agencies promoting their services or in messages generally about content marketing or digital marketing. These messages are unidirectional and promotional. By including multiple hashtags often from different yet related disciplines these messages present an attempt to reach out to audiences that are as wide as possible. However, by doing so, these messages are borderline-spam and impersonal. Similar characteristics are also displayed by tweets including #promotion or #publicity.

3 Important Benefits of Digital Public Relations (Infographic) <http://t.co/ehT24WJdKf> #PublicRelations #PR #DigitalMarketing #SEO (@Buzz_Nitro, June 23, 2015).

Figure 1. Top # associated with #publicrelations during June 15-24, 2015. Collected via Socioviz.

Figure 2. Top # associated with #publicrelations during July 15-24, 2015. Collected via Socioviz.

Follow my new account for #digitalmarketing #technology #publicrelations and #internationaltidbits <https://t.co/l7n0uhQyY1> (@blonde_rays, July 23, 2015)

Want upward success? Call us 631.761.9223 #BluChipMarketing #socialmedia #success #publicrelations #media #advertising <http://t.co/gXBr2N7spw> (@BluChipMrktng, July 23, 2015)

#Promotion #Growthhacking #Marketing #Seo #PublicRelations #Worldwide #Exposure #Music #Super #Viral (@RealRizzReed, July 22, 2015)

Contact Us @MeekMill We Can Strategize This Publicity Stunt Properly !! :) #PR #PUBLICRELATIONS #DAMAGECONTROL #MEEKMILL (@MidoriStarMedia, July 22, 2015)

With regards to #gossip, the messages are highly consistent and with high frequency: 4-6 posts with the tag being recorded almost every hour. They always include the same three hashtags (#socialmedia #publicrelations #gossip) and share the same anatomy: the beginning of a sentence followed by a link which connects, in fact, to an automated post. They are all focused on celebrities and entertainment, with the Kardashian family competing in frequency of mentions with Start Wars in the June dataset. In July, other favorites emerge, many related to sports, mirroring the trends and interests and calendars of celebrity and entertainment media.

Kim Kardashian – Meet ... <http://t.co/UnjHJ2R6NF> #socialmedia #publicrelations #gossip | <https://t.co/4LgokrTL4i> <http://t.co/rRCjpAAAWN> (@CSchwarz17, June 24, 2015)

Magic Johnson's Mega-Ya... <http://t.co/Z284VcJDs5> #socialmedia #publicrelations #gossip | <https://t.co/4LgokrTL4i> <http://t.co/wr29kMQ0Lh> (@CSchwarz17, July 23, 2015)

KKK Rally Gets Trolled ... <http://t.co/Ex5xshrngE> #socialmedia #publicrelations #gossip | <https://t.co/4LgokrTL4i> <http://t.co/i0b3FebF8p> (@CSchwarz17, July 21, 2015)

All messages are generated by a single account, @CSchwarz17, an account with no bio and no further details except for a black and white photograph of its owner hiding behind sunglasses. Behind the anonymity of an RSS feed automated account, lies the second most prolific contributor to the #publicrelations twitter chatter.

Out of the content shared around the #publicrelations hashtag, less than a third² is related to information exchange about the profession; if the issue tag is not hijacked or infiltrated by other user groups that are not related to the profession, the other messages most frequently shared are about job openings. Structure-wise, the messages display all the types of communications that Twitter enables – from simple, one-way messages, to RTs, mentions and replies. In the entire data ecosystem however, the conversations are the least frequent. We reach a paradox: an environment that is praised for its connectivity and ability to enhance dialogue and symmetry displays as its most common practice communication that is one-way (one-to-many), self-focused, shouting-in-the-dark type.

5. Pushers, spammers, talkers, influentials

While identification of topics and themes related to #publicrelations reveals potential challenges to the portrayal of the profession, all these messages have sources that can be identified. Socioviz in this case makes a difference between influentials (accounts receive the highest numbers of mentions and/or RTs) and active accounts, the latter having a higher frequency of postings. This difference is also seen in network analysis, a concept on which Socioviz is based, where hubs are vertices (or nodes) that bring higher connectivity to the network. Clearly, the in the case of issue topics and hashtag chats, the people who are referred to the most play a more important role in bidding the network than those sharing content. The influential account in this case would be acknowledged for their contribution while active users will be driving the sharing of particular hashtag associations. Figures 3 and 4 show the top influential and most active users for the June and July datasets.

Figure 3. #publicrelations most active and most influential users in June 2015 (data collected via Socioviz.net during 15-24 of June, 2015)

Figure 4. #publicrelations most active and most influential users in July 2015 (data collected via Socioviz.net during 15-24 of July, 2015)

@Getpubrelatjobs is the most prolific sharer of content, followed by @CSchwarz17 and @bulldogreporter, the three accounts maintaining their positions in both datasets. Although they all publish content often, @getpubrelatjobs and @CSchwarz17 are the promoters of the #jobs, respectively #gossip hashtags. Their content is generally automated and is hardly ever shared. Like with the hashtags they promote, the most active users gain visibility through their sharing yet they have little impact and drive no conversations. This however, might be their desired outcome.

Compared to them, @bulldogreporter has a wider topic network which is also shared further, a quarter of its messages being RTed.

RT @BulldogReporter: BMW Leads All Companies in #CorporateReputation, Unseating Disney, Google @Reputation_Inst <http://t.co/prCCf49Tlu> #PR ...(@KarlJamesPR, June 20, 2015)

This is also the case of all the other influential accounts, a more careful look into the data revealing that these accounts gain their influential status solely because their tweets are retweeted. Perhaps the most successful at this practice is @managerialmag, a UK-based “bi-monthly magazine for senior managers” whose sponsored ad for a free business consultation was RTed more than 500 times:

SPONSORED AD: Get FREE PR Business Consultation #PR #PublicRelations #SocialMedia #Publicity <http://t.co/CHuSka6TpP> <http://t.co/JFsny2WeN3> (@managerialmag, July 21, 2015)

As a sponsored post, the message is perhaps even more interesting as it includes a combination of paid media shared over an owned media channel.

The performance is replicated by @ShujaRabbani, a Dubai-based and self-described “Writer, speaker & commentator of all things Afghanistan. Electronic Dance Music Producer”. His statement-post received more than 260 RTs.

RT @ShujaRabbani: I’m no publicist, much less a public relations person, but over the last 48-hours I’ve learned a lot. #publicrelations (@rGavityCycles, July 22, 2015)

Similar thoughts of wisdom and strong displays of a personal brand are seen in the tweets of @JotoPR, or Karla Jo Helms, „CEO of JoTo PR – PR services for Healthcare, Finance & IT”:

A good PR campaign is essential to the growth of your business. Karla Jo Helms #PR #publicrelations (@JoToPR, June 17, 2015)

Public relations is all about knowing how to reach out to the public to establish your credibility. ~ Karla Jo Helms #PR #publicrelations ((@JoToPR, June 17, 2015)

@jeffbullas, „#1 Content Marketing Influencer, Social Media Marketing Strategist & Speaker, Forbes Top 10 Social Media Influencer, Huffington Top 100 Business Twitter Accts” and @jose_garde, „#MarketingDigital #SocialMedia, #PersonalBranding #SEO, #Management, #Marketing, #Sales, #Strategy. Conviction, Determination are keys to achieving success” on the other hand focus more on tips and tricks of the trade:

RT jeffbullas: Should #PublicRelations Claim Control of #ContentMarketing? <http://t.co/MKFDfJ961W> #PR #thoughtleadership #socialmediamark...(@whissocialmedia, June 18, 2015)

RT @jeffbullas: 50 Surprising Tips for Getting Attention in Mass Media <http://t.co/Tw705ddyvC> #Publicrelations #PR #Marketing #marketingtips (@samOneKenobi, July 21, 2015)

jeffbullas: How to Shield Your #Brands Social Reputation <http://t.co/3OGNRFNA3d> #SocialMedia #PR #PublicRelations (@abhigyan2014, July 19, 2015)

RT @jose_garde: 3 Ways To Make News For Your Business – <http://t.co/dlX2cGHXnj> #PublicRelations #Marketing (@jllakosta, June 23, 2015)

What these influential accounts also have in common are wider follower networks, a high posting frequency, and a high use of tweets with #hashtags and media. In comparison with the most active accounts whose tweets only include hashtags and links (see @Cschwartz17 and @GetPubRelatJobs), most of the influential accounts have high numbers of tweets with

mentions and relatively low numbers of tweets with replies. In Twitter-speak, a mention is the first to happen; it is a proactive call for attention. It can be interpreted as a initiation of a conversation, a call for support, as an acknowledgement of a source or a direct way of targeting information. A reply on the other hand is reactive, is a response to a mention or to a simple tweet. All influentials with exception of @giusy_cantone just mention people but hardly ever reply. Moreover, only a half of them would retweet yet, as this data shows, their influential status comes from being retweeted. So influentials are good at pointing out sources, recognizing contributions or calling for attention but avoid repeating what others are saying. This is, in itself, rather paradoxical, as all the sharing and mentioning activities are partly supported by repetition of information that is to be found elsewhere. This could reveal that influentials get their news and content from outside of Twitter and their influence results of their content scouting capacities.

On the other hand, taking into consideration the unclear interpretation of the value and meaning of a retweet – whether supportive, endorsement, agreement or simple sharing of information while acknowledging the source – the lack of retweets from the influentials messages could be perhaps explained. Moreover, automation and planning of messages (sometime with the aid of content aggregation platforms) also makes retweets less likely to be featured in a user's mix.

Table 1 provides a summary of the activity of the top most influential accounts using #publicrelations.

Table 1. Top Influentials and most active on #publicrelations. Data captured with Foller.me on August 5, 2015.

Account ID	Year created	Tweets	Followers	Replies	Tweets with @mentions	Tweets with #	Retweets by the account	Tweets with links	Tweets with media
@bulldogreporter	2008	27,192	11,283	1/100	97/100	93/100	36/100	99/100	32/100
@CSchwartz17	2014	11,386	171	0/100	0/100	100/100	0/100	100/100	86/100
@GetPubRelatJobs	2008	42,565	11,950	0/100	0/100	100/100	0/100	100/100	0/100
@giusy_cantone	2011	14,229	927	79/100	81/100	88/100	0/100	6/100	90/100
@jeffbullas	2008	223,238	374,171	6/100	10/100	89/100	0/100	100/100	16/100
@jose_garde	2014	66,722	16,441	4/100	12/100	91/100	6/100	96/100	0/100
@KirklandReader	2011	55,008	2,668	2/92	73/92	74/92	59/92	44/92	30/92
@managerialmag	2015	2,366	114,784	1/100	80/100	77/100	47/100	16/100	11/100
@PRdaily	2009	23,483	80,891	0/100	31/100	42/100	29/100	64/100	21/100
@ShujaRabbani	2011	29,291	2,003	8/100	60/100	31/100	28/100	66/100	17/100

6. Conversation is dead. Repetition and parallel talk rule Twitter

Twitter is indeed a platform for information dissemination, as Xifra and Grau (2010) point out in the conclusions of their study; all the tweets in this study include information that is disseminated – sometimes for the first time, oftentimes however reiterated, repeated and repackaged. However, unlike the expectations or the promises for dialogue and two-way symmetrical

communication on social media in general and Twitter in particular, the content shared around the #publicrelations hashtag is often unilateral, promotional, and self-interested.

The absence of direct evidence that the messages shared are the result of analysis, feedback and followers' interests and needs, the messages thus shared about #publicrelations are fitting mostly the earlier stages of Grunig's models of public relations such as public information or two-way asymmetrical communication. Twitter is therefore not a conversational, two-way symmetrical platform, at least not when it comes to information exchanged and shared about #publicrelations.

This is further supported by the fact that the most active accounts, as this paper has shown, gain their visibility due to the sheer amount of information that they share. The most influential accounts too are heavily relying on repetition of information; however, the major difference here is that their content is sourced outside of Twitter. Their tweets are not conversational either, in the sense that they do not spark discussion and debate even if at times some might adopt a conversational tone. When it comes to general discussions about #publicrelations, repetition and parallel talk are the most common practices.

Instead of contributing strongly to the advancement of the profession, its standards or its associated research, the wider majority of the #publicrelations tweets are either focused on job hunting or include other hashtags that associate the practice with publicity, gossip, entertainment or marketing. This, on the one hand, could confirm yet again Jürgen's (2012) findings; that users leave digital traces that enable other users and researchers alike to detect community dynamics. This is certainly true both for #gossip, which captures the volatility of the entertainment industry focus and its trends, as well as for #jobs capturing the current market demands, including skills (SEO, SEM, content management, and storytelling). On the other hand, however, this could also deepen the misconceptions about the profession and further question its legitimacy and role, something that Spicer's (2009) alluded to and do did Miller and Dinan (2008) and Rampton and Stauber (1995).

This paper has aimed to identify the themes, practices and influencers sharing messages about public relations on Twitter using the #publicrelations hashtag. In doing so, it has used two collection dates in June and July 2015 and analyzed 10,000 tweets in a novel and innovative exploratory manner combining social media data scraping and analysis free tools with qualitative assessment of discourse and observation of behavioral patterns displayed by active and influential social media users. It has shown that conversation is limited and that the hashtag only partially included content relevant to the practice.

This is echoing Adams and McCorkindale's (2013) US 2012 presidential candidates' uses of Twitter study results, "revealing that political candidates are not using Twitter to create meaningful dialogue with their constituents" (p. 359). A lack of ability to create or maintain dialogue is also observed by Waters and Williams (2011) in their study of government agencies communication on Twitter as well as by Adi and Moloney (2012) and Adi (2015) in their studies of Occupy. Much wider questions about whether dialogue is possible on Twitter result thus from here and, more importantly, a need to revisit the definition of dialogue and symmetry in the case of social media. Kent and Taylor's (2002) proposed framework for assessing the potential for dialogue for public relations based on propinquity, mutuality, empathy, commitment, and risk provides a very detailed conceptualization of the elements needed for dialogue to happen. Equally insightful is Theunissen and Noordin's (2012) review of the concept of dialogue in public relations together with its features and assumptions however, it too remains normative in its nature, focusing mostly on what the communicators should do

and on the potential for dialogue that social media presents. Kent's (2013) later essay on the value of dialogue and the role of public relations in reviving democracy shares those same characteristics. Perhaps closer to an assessment of dialogical features on social media, and therefore a new definition of the concept of dialogue that is fit for these new, social and technical environments, is Rybalko and Seltzer's (2010) adaptation to Twitter of Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogical principles for the world wide web: "ease of interface (how easy is the website to navigate?), conservation of visitors (does the site contain features that encourage a visitor to stay on the site?), generation of return visits (does the site contain features that encourage visitors to make repeat visits to the site?), providing useful information (does the site contain content tailored to the specific needs of the sponsoring organization's stakeholders?), and dialogic loop (does the site feature mechanisms for visitors to ask questions and receive feedback from the sponsoring organization?)".

Needless to say, there is a need for further research to continue to explore public discourses on Twitter and extend the analysis from user uses and discourses, to issue topics like this paper has explored and to Twitter chats like #prprochat, #pr20chat, #journchat, #measurepr and #prstudchat, arguably the most conversational of all the features currently available on the platform. Moreover, there is a need to continue to use innovative methods of data collection and analysis, enabling thus researchers to analyze social media phenomena and reflect upon their findings. More importantly however, there is a need for future research to revive the discussion about dialogue and symmetry on social media and the conceptual and theoretical assumptions they include as well as to move beyond advice of what communicators should do and into developing an applicable assessment framework for dialogue on social media.

Notes

¹ Socioviz.net is a Java-based platform importing public data from Twitter and visualizing it with a Gephi embed.

² Considering that the #pr hashtag represents around 32% of the total tweets recorded in the June dataset, respectively 36% in the July dataset and that not all #pr tweets also include #publicrelations, it is safe to assume that the percentage of tweets about public relations dedicated to information exchange or discussions about the profession is lower than the numbers recorded.

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