

With a little help from my friends:

How public relations practitioners maintain social capital on Twitter

Abstract

This article explores how public relations practitioners use the microblogging tool Twitter to maintain and build social capital. Social capital, a concept popularised in the social sciences by Bourdieu, involves the sharing and exchange of commodities such as knowledge, services, words and time. Drawing on a thematic analysis of the Twitter feeds of 20 British public relations practitioners, this article argues that far from having to appear an 'expert' to build and maintain social capital among their peers, public relations practitioners maintain their network through social conversation and the constant surveillance of the Twitter feeds. The range of topics discussed by the public relations practitioners is narrow, and a highly developed media knowledge is necessary to decode many of the discussions. This has implications for the occupation's drive for diversity among practitioners, contradicting the industry rhetoric that anyone can 'join the conversation.'

Keywords

Public Relations, social media, Twitter, social capital, work, cultural intermediaries,
media

Introduction

This article explores how public relations practitioners use the microblogging tool Twitter to maintain and build social capital. Social capital, a concept popularised in the social sciences by Bourdieu, can be seen as the “result of a conscious or unconscious investment strategy” (Ihlen (2009, pp.74) that involves the sharing and exchange of commodities such as knowledge, services, words and time. In the context of this article, social capital is understood to be produced and reproduced by public relations practitioners through both physical and electronic means, but the focus of this article is the connection between social capital and the production, circulation and consumption of online messages sent via Twitter (or ‘tweets’) issued by practitioners working in public relations in the United Kingdom.

Since cultural intermediaries (Negus, 2002) are crucial in the creation of such social capital, this paper also explores whether practitioners are consciously exploiting their cultural intermediaries by using others to bring material, economic, social or psychological rewards via social networks.

This area of focus is illuminated via a thematic analysis of the tweets of 20 United Kingdom public relations practitioners, carried out in July 2012. The project aimed to explore both the themes and issues discussed online by public relations practitioners and, through these discussions, the ways in which practitioners used their cultural intermediaries to interact online and build social capital.

This research helps illuminate the issue of the value of social capital among media professionals and highlight the conscious and unconscious methods that public relations practitioners use to maintain and build social capital through Twitter.

Diga and Kelleher (2009) observed that public relations practitioners who engage in relationship-building through social networking boost their professional status through the creation and maintenance of social capital. This is a useful starting point from which to discuss issues surrounding how social capital is reproduced in an online space such as Twitter.

Literature review

Public relations and social media

The public relations practitioners who are the subject of this article occupy a place in the public relations hierarchy at or below senior management level. For instance, they hold an account director position (and are responsible for a number of clients within a public relations agency but do not have any real leadership responsibilities) or a junior management role, lead a social media teams or are employed for their social media expertise within a public relations agency. Some own and run their own public relations agencies but none own, or run, larger public relations firms. The roles mentioned above give them almost constant access to social networks since they are required to use them to carry out their work. This work, within a public relations context, involves using social media, traditional media and other forms of communication to build and manage relationships with a wide variety of individuals and groups, usually on behalf of an organisation. Whereas historically the public relations role was one divided between 'technician' and 'manager' (Dozier, 1992),

the use of social media within the practice of public relations has levelled this particular field making distinctions between the two roles less clear. To this end, Diga and Kelleher (2009) observe that ‘technicians’ are likely to spend more time writing and reading materials than managers:

[S]ince the Web provides many opportunities for issues management, relationship management, and environmental scanning, and these functions are more often associated with manager roles, managers may spend more time using social network sites and tools than technicians (2009, pp.441).

The position of public relations as a creative or ‘professional’ discipline has evolved over recent years from one which occupied a backstage position (with public relations practitioners talking to journalists, arranging events and liaising between groups) to one which is more frontstage, with public relations practitioners actively promoting themselves. This is due in part, according to Hesmondhalgh and Baker to increased marketing (including public relations) budgets and an increasingly “business-orientated approach” (2011, pp.97) in the creative industries, where marketing and public relations practitioners become involved in business and creative decisions at a far earlier stage in production. Thus, they are communicating and demonstrating their worth to an ever-increasing range of people.

Thus, no practitioner should be seen as having a greater or lesser familiarity with social media than another. As Marwick observes below, the act of being on social media allows all parties access to (or viewing of) a number of different lifeworlds.

People who use applications like Twitter and Facebook become part of a networked audience where participants both send and receive social information (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). As a user skims her Facebook feed, she may simultaneously read her friends' content, comment on it, and broadcast her own content to other people's feeds, using this information to improve her mental model of other people's identities, actions and relationships. Social surveillance thus indicates that those who practice it are simultaneously surveilled by others. (2012, online)

Whether personal, professional or a mash-up between the two, the social networks used by public relations practitioners are “characterised by the potential for real time interaction, (leading to) reduced anonymity [...] short response times and the ability to time shift” (Kent, 2009, pp.645). Since the middle of the last decade, social networks have developed to have a considerable impact on public relations practice – both in terms of the discussion around whether public relations is changing as a discipline (debated by, e.g., Grunig, 2009; MacNamara, 2010; Phillips & Young, 2009) and, less controversially, certainly in how public relations is practiced as a technical discipline.

The adoption of social media tools for public relations practice has been discussed by a number of authors but opinions are mixed as to the effectiveness of their use (e.g. Taylor & Kent, 2010). However, this paper begins from the standpoint that while debate continues as to how organisations can best use social media, they may be useful for individuals who wish to enhance their status.

Benefits of Twitter usage

According to Lenhart (2009 in Taylor & Kent (2010, pp. 209) “*personal use* of social networks seems to be more prevalent than *professional use* of networks, both in the orientation of the networks that adults choose to use as well as the reasons they give for using the applications [...only...] 3–8% of the adult population uses social media for networking or professional purposes.” However, in media (as in other) industries, the line between personal and professional is blurred due to the need of many media people to use what Goffman would term both their ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ lives in their work and the blurring of work and leisure time (Gregg, 2011).

The neoliberal turn in the economy has created a need for workers to use social media and other forms of interaction (such as networking) to build a ‘personal brand,’ leading Lair, Sullivan and Cheney (2005) to comment: “Workers are encouraged to view themselves as entrepreneurs within corporate employment [...even though ...] work remains a primary source of individual identity” (pp. 316). Thus, in a professional (rather than academic) context, the social capital derived from online interactions and using the identity of work to build an individual’s profile is seen by writers such as Phillips and Young (2009) and Halpern and Murphy (2009) as something that increases individual and collective productivity. Such interactions and can help an individual access to career and networking opportunities and give them the ability to influence and be recognised by peers, journalists and opinion formers.

There are numerous guides to help practitioners and business people navigate the social media space for personal gain and most confront the area in unproblematic

terms. As Clark explains in her guide for business people who want to enhance their personal brand:

Set a goal of tweeting at least once a day and make it happen – it only takes 10 seconds. It will force you to read more in your field (so you can retweet articles), get you familiar with the power players in your area (you'll want to follow them), and help you hone pithy insights that you can later turn into blog posts, speeches, or other ways to spread your brand. (2014, online)

Central to Clark's thesis is that social media – and Twitter in particular – allows practitioners to get to know 'power players' personally. This is something which, pre-social media, could only be carried out by personal contact and introductions, making networking and through this, the development of social capital, virtually impossible for those outside the centres of power. Now, however, Twitter and other social media tools make it easier (especially for those afforded the status of working in public relations) to connect with peers and influencers – the cultural intermediaries - and use these connections to build social capital via interactions with them.

The move towards this strategic form of self-promotion has become necessary in 21st century business practice because, as Lair, Sullivan and Cheney observe "the road to success is found [...] in explicit self-packaging: Here, success is not determined by individuals' internal sets of skills, motivations, and interests but, rather, by how effectively they are arranged, crystallized and labelled" (2005, pp. 308). This labelling helps cultural intermediaries recognise talent, skill or possession of a certain capital, and thus brings a relatively junior practitioner into a network.

Within public relations practice, social networking's influence has been most keenly felt in the areas of physical networking, modes of contact, dissemination of information, contact with consumers/stakeholders and, notably, the visibility of public relations practitioners. Thus, in part due to reasons described above, many have been able to put themselves at the foreground of industry debates and discussions whereas previously they may have occupied the background. Practitioner discourse has been quick to react to this increased visibility, claiming practitioners have to be seen to be 'themselves' (in other words, operate under their own name and not a company name or pseudonym) and be clear about the basis of their authority. As Searls and Weinberger (2001, in Kelleher) observed: "Since corporations and businesses aren't individuals, ultimately their authenticity is rooted in their employees ... When a conversation is required, or even just desired, being able to count upon a rich range of corporate spokespeople is crucial" (2009, pp.98). Thus, the public relations practitioner became the face of the company in social media exchange and practitioners are able to make contacts with others in the public relations industry and wider media circles in a way that was not dependent (as in pre-social media days) on geographical proximity, a rich 'contacts book.' In theory this means that a practitioner, through their own use of Twitter, can become known to senior journalists and public relations practitioners simply by having conversations, making appropriate comments and being "first with the news" (Bailey, 2006) and can use their social capital to achieve career opportunities and develop industry 'friendship' – and this is vital for a practitioner's continuing visibility and success. However, as explored below, such acceptance is only offered to those who play by a set of undefined rules.

Although the motivation for sharing material online has been addressed by writers including Lee, Ma and Goh (2011), little research has been carried out among one of the most active endorsers and users of social media – the public relations community. The current picture in terms of how social networks help practitioners achieve status and power is limited. This is because research in the area of public relations and social media has focused on organisational use of social networks and the advantages and disadvantages of this aspect (e.g. Taylor & Kent, 2010). Furthermore, there has been curiously little exploration in literature of the occupational ideologies of public relations practitioners (Filby and Wilmot, 1988) and Kim (2003) are among the exceptions, although much has been written on the ideological codes that public relations practice transmits) which means that the context of any occupational practices – such as the use of social media for personal gain - are often difficult to define.

It is due to these gaps in previous work that it is useful to turn to Finkelstein's (1992) discussion of *expert power* (power derived from the contacts and relationships developed within an environment that make others turn to them for advice) as such power offers material, economic, social and psychological rewards as well as access to social spaces. Reputation achieved in this way can be widespread or exist within a particular group or subgroup – such as the public relations community. In the case of the public relations practitioners under discussion in this article, their reputation, formed online, can give them access to industry leaders and senior journalists which ultimately allows a practitioner to leverage status in the industry which can be used to obtain promotion or financial rewards, sometimes for personal gain or which can enhance the status of the employer or client.

Cultural capital, social capital and the role of cultural intermediaries

Diga and Kelleher (2009) argued that practitioners who partake in social networking may be more likely to perceive their prestige as being enhanced if they possess influential “followers” or “friends” on social networking sites such as *Twitter* or *Facebook*. Thus, practitioners are able to utilise online social networks to develop, and importantly maintain, social capital within their networks through the creation and sharing of content and the construction of networks which can then be used for further material or reputational gain.

Lee, Ma and Goh (2011) observed that among the motivations for the creation and sharing of content online included the formation of relationships, reputation and community identification. To this extent, while practitioners (and others) may often point to the ‘fun’ use of Twitter, this fun has a purpose. The social capital that the use of Twitter (above any other social network) brings offers material, economic, social and psychological rewards (although coupled with the need to work constantly to maintain these networks) and, crucially, access to social spaces and the centre of meaning generation.

Filby and Wilmot (1988) point to the schisms within public relations practice and the difference of opinion of what it actually is – a discussion which still continues (e.g. Public Relations Society of America, 2012). Ultimately, however, the ‘good’ public relations practitioner is seen as having superior communication skills, and this facet is recognised by others in the field. Essentially, without good communication skills (and the possession of these is very obvious when tweeting) a practitioner can

neither build nor maintain social capital online. Another public relations practitioner – essentially, a cultural intermediary – will not reproduce or respond to a tweet unless it is seen to follow a norm of address. While this article's research showed that abbreviations and swearing were permitted, 'text talk', poor spelling and obvious racism, sexism and homophobia were completely absent. However, as discussed below, an understanding of key themes in media, politics, sport and consumer culture were essential if these multiple conversations could be understood.

It is the cultural intermediaries used by practitioners to build their social capital whose role is crucial to practitioners. The term 'cultural intermediaries' tends to be identified with the work of Bourdieu (1984) but has been extensively developed over the past thirty years. Negus explains that "cultural intermediations [...] come in-between creative artists and consumers [...] and seek to manage how these values are connected with people's lives through the various techniques of persuasion and marketing and through the construction of markets" (2002, p.503). Interestingly, the cultural intermediaries, creative artists and consumers can actually be one and the same person occupying different roles at various stages in their social media development within the small world of public relations. The intermediaries in social networking construct discourses which gives status to people worthy of following and help to form a common ideology (as discussed above) to which a particular group will subscribe. This can include the subjects worthy of discussion (as my research demonstrates below, the range of subjects discussed by public relations practitioners is quite narrow) and the stance taken when discussing such subjects.

Nixon and Du Gay cite Bourdieu's (somewhat damning) description of cultural intermediaries as; "the producers of cultural programmes on television or radio or the critics of "quality" newspapers and magazines and all the writer-journalists and journalist-writers' [...] practitioners in design, packaging, sales promotion, PR, marketing and advertising" (2002, pp.496) However, they warn against considering this inclusive group as a mass and believe that "sober assessment of these groups which avoids the pitfalls of either celebration or denunciation" (2002, p.496- 497) is needed. Citing the work of McRobbie they argue that since these cultural intermediaries "condense and focus broader questions about social and cultural change" (2002, p. 499) their existence is worthy of study since these cultural intermediaries shape views about the nature of public relations work.

Negus asks (2002, pp.513) to what degree cultural intermediaries "make use of well-established and rather more traditional ways of maintaining power, position, privilege and patronage?" While it is possible for Twitter to allow people from any background or region with an interest in public relations to 'join in the conversation,' a much-vaunted industry term with a rhetoric that suggests that anyone who has something to say will be accepted, conversational themes were very limited. This could suggest that attempts to debate or raise interest a subject which does not follow a certain norm is effectively closed off – and given that most of my sample gave the appearance of being middle class, young to middle age and largely white or Asian, this suggests that there may be some who are unable to break in to the 'conversation' with public relations practitioners and in particular understand some of the codes of speech – for instance, understanding the different speech forms used in

across social interactions and how, as Bernstein (1971) observed, meanings are condensed. Bernstein's work on restricted codes is useful here, as the discourses on Twitter make assumptions that the listener shares understandings – not just of public relations and the media, but of certain political and news events, of social situations and of accepted modes of behaviour.

The concept of social capital is used in this article to explore how practitioners use the microblogging tool Twitter not just for entertainment but to actively increase their status among their peers. Such peers can include their colleagues, senior people within the public relations agency, clients, journalists and media scholars and writers. It is not simply the act of tweeting that can increase social capital but who the tweets are for, and with whom conversations are carried out with.

Coleman saw social capital as something that “make[s] possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” and that it derived from “relations among persons” (1988, pp.98-100). Essentially, social capital is understood to be the symbolic benefits that people derive from membership of a specific group or groups such as preferential treatment and access to information which can ultimately lead to social or economic benefits. Ihlen interprets Bourdieu's work on social capital as having two components which are explored through the research below:

[F]irst, the size of the network the person possesses, and second, the volume of the capital that the other components of the network have and to which a person obtains access through the network. (2009, pp.74)

Method

The use of Twitter as a subject of research is, inevitably, very new, and to this end researchers are still experimenting with methods of sampling a Twitter population (e.g. Page, 2012) and discovering ways to capture and analyse the creators and audience of 'tweets.' This paper uses a thematic analysis to explore the tweets of 19 high profile UK public with the following criteria used to select a sample:

- being listed on 'who to follow on Twitter' lists (e.g. the *UK Media Tweepie wiki* and on Twitter lists curated by leading industry figures (for instance, a list curated by public relations agency owner Andrew Bloch (Bloch, 2012);
- having at least 500 followers (who would include senior figures in the public relations industry defined as those who run agencies listed in *PR Week's* list of Top 50 Consultancies (2012);
- having a clearly-defined public relations role (or, a social media role within a public relations team) in their profile;
- tweeting their own material (not noticeably auto-tweeting or having a third party tweet on their behalf);
- possessing a role which would not normally afford such public or industry status (e.g. not an owner/CEO of a major PR agency or leading communications effort for a major organisation and not in a public-facing role with a PR industry body such as the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) or Public Relations Consultants' Association (PRCA) and not from a former high profile journalism role). These exclusions avoid those who brought their fame to Twitter – thus, they may have acquired status via their connections or activities outside social media and who are now using social media to amplify their achievements;

- tweeting under their own name (or a pseudonym) and not under the name of an organisation or brand;
- tweeting at least 20 times per month;
- based (as far as it could be ascertained from their Twitter profile) in the UK.

Fig 1: Twitter members included in sample

Name	Occupation/location	Gender
AaronHuckett	Specialist manager, PR agency, London	Male
AdeBradley	Manager, public sector, London	Male
AlexMyers	Senior manager, PR agency, London	Male
BigTimBond	Senior manager, PR agency, London	Male
BrownBare	Senior manager, PR agency, London	Male
EmLeary	Freelance PR/social media consultant, London	Female
EmmaLouiseKent	Manager, PR agency, regional	Female
GeetarChurchy	Manager, PR agency, London	Male
GreenWellys	Freelance PR/social media consultant, London	Female
JamesCrawford	Owner, regional PR agency	Male
KateSteven	Senior manager, PR agency, London	Female
Laura_Netts	Manager, PR agency, London	Female
MichelleLowery	PR Manager, public sector, London	Female
Pazman1973	Senior manager, PR agency, London	Male
PRGeek	Senior manager, PR agency, London	Male
SciFiDQ	Manager, PR agency, London	Female
Stedavies	Freelance PR/social media consultant, London	Male
Suburbman	Senior manager, PR agency, London	Male
TheTylerPeters	Manager, PR agency, London	Male

Obviously, no population of people working in an unregulated occupation can ever be deemed to be complete, but despite some shortcomings (e.g. the sample selection was biased towards PR agency employees) the sample derived from the population is fairly representative of the type of public relations people who are active on Twitter and subscribe to the occupational cultures described above.

The units of analysis were users' 140 character 'tweets' - including 'retweets' (where a Twitter user repeats another's 'tweet', sometimes with a comment) and replies - from a one-week period in July 2012, drawing on material from 20 practitioners.

Thematic analysis was used to establish the nature of the public relations practitioner's tweets and their relationship to social media power, for instance whether they maintained their fame through unique insight, connection cultural intermediaries, publishing items of interest to their peers and the PR industry, or through attempts at engagement and conversation.

Thematic analysis analyses data by identifying patterns and organising them into themes. The thematic analysis in this context consisted of gathering all Tweets made by the consultants and categorizing them into meaningful subsets – in other words, the themes were not pre-judged but deduced from material in the *data corpus*. Each tweet was read, coded, and the codes then grouped and mapped into a thematic category. The tweets were then re-read to ensure that the thematic category held true. The themes should be seen as umbrella terms, and the description of each theme below describes the type of material that it contains..

This qualitative approach in terms of thematic analysis was informed by Schutz's theory of social phenomenology as both a philosophical framework and a methodology. The thematic analysis attempted to discover how a certain reality (or set of realities) was created by the data – in this case looking at how practitioners used Twitter for personal and professional gain.

The thematic analysis extracted the key topics that the practitioners discussed. These themes were then compared against literature on social capital and the role of cultural intermediaries to see which tweets could be said to be for the creation of

social capital or the maintaining or acquiring of social intermediaries, and which were for another purpose. The themes could then be used as starting point to discuss a number of issues relating to social capital and the role of cultural intermediaries in the production and reproduction of electronic content.

Table 2: Results of thematic analysis: tweet topics:

Theme	Description	Maintenance or acquisition of of social capital (SC), cultural intermediaries (CI) or neither (N/A)
Providing unique insight - Industry comment:	tweets and retweets (where the tweets of others are repeated) of news and comment relating to the wider public relations industry.	SC
Personal anecdote/update	theme relates to tweets where a practitioner reveals part of their 'backstage' life; this would also include location-based service check-ins	SC CI
Self/organisational promotion	Statements about the practitioners expertise or the success of his/her employers; requests for information – essentially direct questions about work or personal issues (these tweets were frequently relevant to other thematic categories too).	SC CI
Practitioner as engaged consumer	tweets where a practitioner commented on their use of consumer products or the media	CI
Conversation with other	This was by far the largest category and focussed on conversations of any length and with either two or multiple tweeters. Interestingly only a small number of tweets in this category could be coded to another category	CI SC

As (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) explain, social phenomenology is a “descriptive and interpretive theory of social action that explores subjective

experience within the taken-for-granted, “commonsense” world of the daily life of individuals [...] Social phenomenology takes the view that people living in the world of daily life are able to ascribe meaning to a situation and then make judgments” (2). Thus, when we consider the analysis of practitioner tweets, a number of judgements have to be made by the researcher – for instance, we do not know whether the tweets were typed quickly as a response with little thought, or considered for many hours. It’s very difficult – if not impossible – to spot the difference but all are being analysed in the same way. To this end, member checks or interviews would have helped to gain a person’s reason for a tweet, but this was not possible due to the amount of data.

This analysis of Twitter behaviour and use is new territory for researchers and a snapshot of recent research (e.g. Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007; Zhao and Rosson, 2009; Sharma, Ghosh, Benevenuto, Ganguly & Gummadi, 2012; Page, 2012), shows that there are many methodological approaches which can be taken. Thus, it is hoped that this research and its use of thematic analysis can act as a model from which future improvements can be made.

In the case of this research, the justification for thematic analysis was that it was the best method to consider the nature of the public relations practitioner’s tweets, their use of cultural intermediaries and how they maintained their social capital in an online space. Given that, to be included in the sample, these practitioners already had reputation and influence in the public relations field, an analysis of their tweets could demonstrate, for instance, whether they had maintained their fame through unique insight, connection with elite persons or cultural intermediaries, and/or

whether it was through publishing items of interest to their peers and the public relations industry, or attempts at engagement and conversation.

1. Results and discussion

The results of the thematic analysis were used as starting point to discuss a number of issues relating to social capital and the role of cultural intermediaries in the production and reproduction of electronic content.

Ultimately, public relations practitioners would not have social capital (or acquire it so quickly) without cultural intermediaries – the people who retweet, reply to and discuss their communications. Negus (2002) argued that cultural intermediaries shape and construct values, and those who wish to become accepted within a public relations/social media universe need to adhere to these norms – thus potentially excluding those cannot follow the restricted codes of Twitter public relations talk . The role of gender is also worthy of note here, since the majority of online public relations practitioners named in ‘who to follow on Twitter lists’ are men – despite the majority of public relations practitioners being women (e.g. Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2011). Although the sample selection in this research was deliberately gender-neutral, it transpired that 12 of the 19 in the sample (63%) were men. In addition, those who tweeted most during the one-week period were also men with an average of 103 (n=13) tweets per week compared to women who tweeted an average of 19 (n=7) times. (It should be noted that one male Twitter user tweeted over 700 times during the one-week time frame and his tweets have significantly skewed the male average).

Theme one: Providing unique insight

The analysis of tweets suggested that the ability to provide unique insight or to demonstrate superior expertise was not a significant reason to tweet. Most users only provided one or two non-personal comments which showcased their media-related knowledge each day. Interestingly, these tweets tended to be related to politics, the media or the arts far more than public relations. However, what was notable was how little the practitioners retweeted (representing the work of others while acknowledging the original author) the works of others – usually only retweeting between two and four times in a week. If they did repeat the work of others, it was often with their own expert comment:

@adebradley Agree with this by @mjrobbins about the Greenpeace Shell hoaxes. A very odd strategy - <http://ow.ly/cjTXb> ht @julesmattsson

@stedavies I wonder if our friends @PenguinUKBooks are secretly behind this... pic.twitter.com/Ptxd9oV7

Here it can be seen that, practitioners were showcasing their ability as media commentators. This allowed their opinions in turn to be retweeted and quoted by cultural intermediaries and thus allowed their social capital to be enhanced because they were either seen to be 'first with the news' or they were retweeting or commenting on a tweet made by an industry leader.

@AlexMyers RT@ AliMaynard We won!! Best Integrated Campaign and the

*GRAND PRIX at the Digi Awards!!!!!! Wooooooot #digiawards ManifestComms
you rock*

The practitioners above are doing what Lair, Sullivan and Cheney (2005) would describe as 'labelling.' The practitioners are highlighting their expertise and connections in the public relations industry by demonstrating their knowledge and exhibiting their contacts and highlighting their membership of a particular group. As mentioned above in the discussion of social capital, members of a group can derive benefits such as access to information (such as job openings and media opportunities for clients) which can result in social or economic benefits for a practitioner or his or her employer of clients. Thus, their 'expert power' is amplified because people listen (or in Twitter's case, follow) practitioners who appear to be well connected.

Theme two: Personal anecdote

While a public relations practitioner could attempt to connect with cultural intermediaries or elite persons by demonstrating their occupational expertise, the thematic analysis demonstrated that use of personal anecdote appeared to be a more popular method. Thus, a practitioner could build their social capital (as long as their attempt at conversation was reciprocated!) by asking questions, including the name of an elite person in a tweet, or commenting on one of their tweets. In addition, other users were often added to location-based service check-ins – demonstrating who the practitioner engaged with 'in real life.'

Conversations on Twitter may have been started by a question, or a 'check-in', or a general point about a product, brand or idea, or in response to a comment made by

another. Some attempts at conversation were futile whereas others generated multiple tweets from many users.

The tweet below is an example of a question designed to encourage engagement:

@suburbman: Twitterfolk, what would be the one thing most likely to make you want to change your job?

Meanwhile the following tweet is a personal anecdote – essentially a status update but one which demonstrates the backstage life of a professional person:

@emmalouisekent: For the first time EVER I'm ready before James to go out. Knocking back some Pimms lone wolf style

Some status updates incorporate the names of other Twitter users to encourage engagement:

@geetarchurchy: Tough to see @mapps23 laughing and joking with #readingfc staff, but can't argue he deserves his move. Great player and servant. #WatfordFC

Such tweets can also be used strategically – to (in this example) demonstrate a ‘spontaneous’ and caring nature, relating the issues of another Twitter member (in this case an ‘elite person’ in the form of a PR agency owner) to the news of the minute:

@Laurahelenwords: @1010Yetis THANK GOD! I was worried about your trip there today, so I rang National Express to plan their route.

These are very different types of personal anecdotes but essentially fulfil similar purposes; they are designed to stimulate engagement with others and portray a certain type of lifestyle or set of interests which are broadly accepted within the culture of public relations; to this end they are demonstrating that the tweeters subscribe to a particular occupational ideology. The conversational nature belies an effort to engage with people in positions of power and seniority – in effect, many of these tweets are a brutal attempt to strike up conversation with a ‘power broker’ as can be seen by the example below:

@GreenWellies Congrats @wadds how lovely is Kate?...Speed acquire KTB Group as it looks for scale <http://bit.ly/NgpOlp>

In this case @GreenWellies is demonstrating her connection with @wadds (at the time the owner of Speed Communications) by congratulating him and demonstrating her knowledge of his new acquisition. At once, she is building her social capital through both her connection with elite people and by being observed as a person with a connection to elite people, thus potentially increasing her cultural capital through her connections.

Theme three: Self/organisational promotion

Unsurprisingly, those who ran their own consultancies or were freelance were far more likely to demonstrate their expertise than those who were employees.

Such tweets would often showcase the talents of the practitioner, or celebrate a recent success. However, they would also include retweets of tweets mentioning or directed at the tweeter – the purpose of this appeared to be to amplify success or demonstrate how well a person was connected with other elite persons.

It could be argued that the publicising of a private conversation appears at best pointless and at worst narcissistic (for instance when @PRGuru retweeted all the birthday wishes from his friends) – but retweeting or in some way mentioning someone's personal message does allow the user to publicise the level of intimacy or familiarity that exists between two Twitter users. It is also worth noting that use of Twitter can also be seen to be *enjoyable* and thus practitioners take pleasure from casual conversation – possibly to relieve either the boredom or stress of the working day. This unnecessary/necessary narcissism and talk-for-talk's sake suggests that regular Twitter users understand the crucial role that cultural intermediaries play in the creation of social capital and that the 'grooming' of cultural intermediaries is as important as saying something new.

The work which practitioners are paid to do seems to take a back seat to actual conversation and engagement with peers (although it could be argued (e.g. Gregg, 2011) that this *is* work since practitioners are communicating with industry colleagues and thus building networks of value to both themselves and their employers). Thematic analysis suggested that very few tweets appeared to directly

relate to clients, although this was hard to measure since the industry practice of putting [CLIENT] after a client-related tweet had fallen into disuse by the time this research was carried out.

On the whole, the PR practitioners under investigation were more likely to talk obliquely about their expertise and clients but with the tweet still acting as a signifier of a PR practitioner's expertise. For instance, in the tweet below, @emleary is using a diary-type entry to improve her status as a Twitter 'expert' while another user, @bigtimbond is demonstrate is willingness to test a new online product.

@emleary Just talking a client through the virtues of Twitter for local business networking.

@bigtimbond @limelight_team My pleasure! Excited to start trying out the site. Let me know if there's anything else I can help with too.

Such a use of Twitter may well be for survival as much as it is for personal promotion. Freelance public relations practitioners and those who are the public face of their public relations agency rely on others acknowledging their expertise in order that they can 'win' their share of the client market. They also need to demonstrate the type of work they are willing to do. Meanwhile, others are aware that their Twitter profiles may be surveilled by current and future employers and thus are keen to highlight their skills, and related to this, their impressive social network. So, when @katesteven tweets:

@katesteven: @ruthwalters jet lag on company time is best! Just get outside as often as you can today, it really does help

She is at once demonstrating her knowledge of coping with jetlag, hinting at an life of long-haul travel (1) and that she may travel on company business as well (2) and maintains her connection with another cultural intermediary (3) while being very slightly 'anti establishment' (4). The thematic analysis demonstrated that tweets in this category like these are a mix of personal promotion, engagement with cultural intermediaries and demonstration of expertise, knowledge and humour – all within the Twitter 140 character limit. Analysis of individual tweets displays that such a use of Twitter is not uncommon and it could be argued that some tweets have been very carefully considered before publication.

Theme four: Practitioner as engaged consumer

Public relations practitioners are also consumers of material products and while the analysis suggested that conspicuous consumption does not seem to be part of practitioner culture, queries about new products (which can include smartphone applications and music) were frequent. It could be argued that the discussions about material products were not displays of wealth but attempts at conversation which were highly likely to receive an answer in a consumer-driven society and thus help a practitioner build social capital. The social capital that the practitioners possess means that questions about products usually did not hang in the ether but are answered by peers. The reason *why* people felt the need to answer these questions is beyond the scope of this paper but connection with cultural intermediaries can open further networks or cement relationships and thus it is in the

interest of those wishing to enhance or maintain their social capital to answer these questions. In many cases the questions could be answered by a Google search but this is not the point; high profile Twitter users maintain their profile through frequency of personal tweets and thus will continue to communicate even when there is little to discuss, e.g.:

@jamescrawford: I'm bored of my iPhone. When is the new one coming out?

Conversations could also be quite lengthy and potentially of little interest to those outside the conversation. However, these personal conversations about products also helped build a picture of a person's backstage life among cultural intermediaries. Such tweets also moved the practitioner from solely operating from within a public relations arena towards an area where they could communicate with other cultural intermediaries who were of use to the public relations practitioners – such as journalists and advertising/marketing practitioners.

Theme five: Conversation with other

The analysis of tweets suggested that Twitter is less of a broadcast medium for practitioners and tweets are more likely to include conversations (or attempts to begin a conversation. The public relations practitioners in the sample appeared to be active in scanning their Twitter feeds for tweets made by their peers upon which they can comment and reply, e.g.:

@adebradley: @titty_biscuit sounds like a cool thing to do. What was the medium?

@emleary: @tref *Now that is a full day! *salutes**

Often these replies turn into conversations which continue over several tweets and although they are between two people, they are made in a public forum, with users “strategically reveal[ing], disclos[ing] and conceal [ing]personal information to create connections with others and tend social boundaries.” (Marwick, 2012, online). While it could be argued that many of these conversations could be carried out via Twitter’s ‘direct message’ function, this element of Twitter has occasional usability problems; messages can be delayed, and ‘spam’ (unwanted messages) are sent via this channel. However, as mentioned above, the self-promotional use of Twitter - in terms of broadcasting connections, knowledge, insight or even wit or humour – is vital if the practitioner is to ensure that their social capital is maintained or improved.

The ‘private’ conversation below demonstrates the intimacy which can be revealed in a public forum:

@Michellelowery: @JOprahPrime *“The couple - he's 7ft and she's 6ft 5in”.*

I'm sorry. True love never does run smooth. Wanna get a cat with me?

@JOprahPrime: @Michellelowery *I am sadly without a Metro, should I go ahead and assume someone ridiculously tall got married?*

@JOprahPrime: @Michellelowery *a woman in the bathroom at work has just asked me if I read the metro this morning...Make it a french bulldog and you're on.*

@Michellelowery: @JOprahPrime *You can't be picky when you're going to die alone. It's a cat or nothing.*

@JOprahPrime : @Michellelowery *can I have four years to think it over?*

@Michellelowery: @JOprahPrime *what happens in four years?*

@JOprahPrime : @Michellelowery *I turn 30. I hear cats and platonic life partners are pretty appealing at that point.*

@Michellelowery: @JOprahPrime *Out of luck in 4 years I'm going to be settled down with an actual man, drinking Elderflower and reading the Daily Mail.*

The conversation makes little sense to those outside the pair's immediate social circle (and in that sense does not need to be public) but at the same time, by strategically revealing personal information, shows both to be media-literate women with a good line in one-liners. This discourse also reveals to the world the age of @JOprahPrime, the fact that both women are single, and their respective pet choices. In this sense they are both revealing a specific 'backstage' identity to others. They are also talking in a restricted code which would make little sense to those unfamiliar with the style of the British media and current fashions in dogs and relationships. However, an alternative reading could be made in that the women's use of Twitter is closer in conversational style to a feminine and working class ideology and where the work of, e.g. Wood (2009) on TV talk may be of more help in the analysis. Wood observes that "[t]he medium of sociability is conversation – talk for talk's sake" (pp. 46) and that in this sense, Twitter owes more to female than male conversational styles. This 'talk for talk's sake' is a clear feature of Twitter where many of the tweets have no business or social purpose apart from cementing

bonds and creating a diversion from the stress and monotony of everyday working lives.

The action of actively scouring Twitter and responding to tweets by peers and industry experts in what Marwick and Boyd (2011, online) refer to as “social surveillance.” “This takes place between individuals, rather than between structural entities and individuals [...with] people who engage in social surveillance also producing online content that is surveilled by others” (2011, online). Thus we can see that practitioners make full use of their intermediaries, using them to amplify their presence and demonstrate the level of connectivity they have with people in the media industry. However, this strategy is not without risk as it “depend[s] on visibility as a means of increasing social and economic gain.” (Page, 2012, pp.181) and relies on a user constantly maintaining and updating their Twitter presence.

Though the mechanisms described above, Twitter allows public relations practitioners of all levels to enter into conversations with industry peers and senior figures; synthetic or real friendships are formed which can be of mutual or one-sided benefit. However, it could be argued that however altruistic someone may appear – in terms of sourcing information for others or responding to a call for help – the use of Twitter is ultimately egotistic and more for individual than peer or collective benefit. However, as will be explored below, the narcissistic nature of Twitter can benefit another group – the employer – simply because much of this talk helps to build links with journalists and influencers who, in turn, can use their social capital to discuss a public relations practitioner’s client or organisation.

Conclusion

The analysis of tweets suggested that public relations talk on Twitter, while politically, culturally and socially diverse, still tends to centre around a well-spelt/constructed set of views on a range of media-related subjects. When the discourse wanders away from 'work', the recreational subjects largely centre on politics, leisure, the arts, popular science, dating, celebrity and home/gardening. There is also a degree of cynicism attached to 'the establishment.' Diversity in terms of sexuality was discussed openly, reflecting the values of the media industry as a whole. However, radical views, discussion on religion or any questioning of the value of public relations/social media as well as criticism of leading public relations or journalism figures on Twitter was virtually non-existent, suggesting that despite the disruptive nature of some of the practitioners, there was a fear of upsetting the establishment or their cultural intermediaries. On the whole, the social media use in this study amplifies Marwick's view (2012) that people monitor their digital actions with a particular audience in mind, often tailoring social media content to the individuals who will view it and with a high awareness of the fact that their content is visible and will be watched.

Thus, the act of belonging to a certain public relations Twitter elite or group is one that can only be achieved through conformation to a set of values and beliefs common among public relations practitioners and thus behaviour is limited to what is acceptable in these boundaries. It would be difficult for someone who did not subscribe to this worldview, did not understand the myriad of contexts in which subjects were discussed (the restricted code), or even whose English was poor, to break in.

This research suggests that practitioners maintain their status and social capital on Twitter not necessarily by demonstrating industry knowledge but by their active engagement with those from within the public relations (and broader media) social media networks and understanding the contexts of media discussions. Far from being 'first with the news' or having to appear knowledgeable about public relations, public relations practitioners active on Twitter appear to take a relaxed approach to the platform and use it mostly for networking and conversation. While this approach may not involve the frantic scanning of public relations sources, it does involve the constant attention to the Twitter feeds of practitioners on Twitter so that appropriate comments and responses can be made (often within a media context). This has implications for the occupation's drive for diversity among practitioners in that it may be difficult for someone lacking relevant media or cultural knowledge to 'break in' to a social network.

It is interesting to note that little thought is given to the reputation of the employer in these exchanges, despite the role the employer plays in granting status to the practitioner. While some employers may be delighted that their staff are networking on their behalf, others may feel that organisational reputation is at stake could be compromised by unwise tweets.

This research findings suggest agreement with Diga and Kelleher's (2009) view that practitioners who partake in social networking may be more likely to perceive their prestige as being enhanced through the possession of influential "followers" or "friends" on sites such as *Twitter* but it appears that such capital is not maintained

through any expert knowledge of, or engagement with, public relations news. Rather, it is maintained by an expert knowledge of who to follow and a deep understanding the norms of conversation among this particular group of cultural intermediaries and thus the 'expert power' discussed above does not stem from an in-depth knowledge of public relations *per se* but an ability to engage with a set of ideologies found among the broader media community. These cultural intermediaries can include industry leaders in public relations but generally are people below this level who are not part of any formal network of influence and power in an organisation and whose life is dictated by work, rather than the other way around. In this sense, Twitter can be seen to provide distraction from the working day or to be seen as a 'star' among a certain peer group.

Thus, involvement in social networks allows practitioners to actively use their connections to enhance their career and develop connections and opportunities which ultimately benefit them. However, it could be argued that these connections ultimately benefit the organisations for which the practitioners work as they are building networks and contacts which allow them to, for instance, develop deeper links with journalists or media players and are thus using these contacts to create favourable receptions for their employer's clients.

Ultimately, the discussions that public relations practitioners have within social networks largely centre on topics relating to sport, the media, alcohol, showbusiness, politics and the misfortunes of others. Thus, this "unproductive middling group" (Nixon & Du Gay, 2002, p.496) keeps itself occupied and maintains a worldview which, despite the rise of social media and the potential for newcomers to join in,

reproduces a middle class ideology (if not a conversational style) which has barely changed over the past half-century due to the subjects discussed and the worldview of public relations presented and represented.

Essentially, this project was a snapshot of a week in the lives of 20 practitioners and potentially the only way to clearly see a development and building of social capital over a period of time would be to follow practitioners and analyse their tweets over a one- to two-year period and to map their connections as well.

However, the research upon which this paper is drawn can be seen as a first stage in exploring how social media is used by public relations practitioners to enhance their status and build connections – essentially recording how “largely White, male, professional class of middle managers and other dislocated professionals [... are...] seeking a new formula for success in a world seemingly turned upside down” (Lair, Sullivan and Cheney (2005, pp. 334)

Many claims are regularly made for the influence and significance of Twitter in professional, practice-based and academic literature. While it is clear that Twitter can be used for real-time interaction and campaigning, often for social good, this paper demonstrates two additional sides of Twitter. Firstly, it can be used to build social capital of benefit to both an employee and employer, but secondly, it can be used for social chat which, while enjoyable for the practitioner, does little to enhance the status of the employer whose presence allowed the practitioner to succeed in these forums in the first place.

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