Research in Brief

Social media, societal culture and Israeli public relations practice

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The aim of this study is to explore Israel's societal culture as an environment with which public relations practice has to align. It asks whether Israeli public relations practitioners use social media elements, how do they perceive these elements and what do they think about their future? A web-based survey revealed that Israeli practitioners generally are willing to use and gain experience with social media elements although this usage is still in its initial stage.

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1. Introduction

Sixty years ago, when the state of Israel was established, the Zionist institutions and the government of Israel promoted the idea of "social integration," whose aim was to unite the Jewish immigrants in a new culture. Toledano and McKie (2007) argue that in order to support nation-building and social integration, most Israelis preferred the model of "social responsibility of the press" over "freedom of the press" and the cultural environment resulted in an Israeli media that restricted open and democratic public discourse.

From the 1970s till the 1990s, Israel's political, social and economic atmosphere underwent a major change. The government lost control over the media, which became more diverse and competitive, journalism became more critical and public relations practice became more professional, while public relations practitioners started to work also for the private sector and not mainly for the governmental and public sectors (Toledano & McKie, 2007; Zafrir, 2000).

Public relations theory also gradually changed from the Functional approach to the Co-creational approach (Botan & Taylor, 2004). The Internet and the World Wide Web have provided the field of public relations with additional space to grow and. New Web 2.0 and Social Media elements, such as blogs, wikis, forums, and social networks, enabled information-sharing and discussions among publics and within organizations and promoted diversity, individuality and freedom of expression. According to various scholars, social media elements and mainly business blogs promote and humanize two-way communication by enabling companies to talk with customers and allowing customers to talk back (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Lim & Yang, 2006; Scoble & Israel, 2006).

In light of these environmental changes, it is important to question whether Israeli public relations practice has also changed. This study will try to provide answers to this question while using a Web based survey originally developed by Wright and Hinson (2008) and also Gillin (2008).

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2. Methods

In Israel, there are approximately 400 public relations firms that work with the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. A web-based survey of Israeli public relations practitioners was conducted during September 2008 among 45 practitioners. The participants' demographic characteristics were properly distributed across gender, age and work experience.

The survey was based on a questionnaire developed originally by Wright and Hinson (2008) and partially also by Gillin (2008), and it tried to answer three research questions: do Israeli public relations practitioners use online social media elements? How do Israeli public relations practitioners perceive online social media elements and how do Israeli public relations practitioners see the future of social media?

3. Findings

The first part of the survey explored the actual usage of social media elements by Israeli public relations practitioners. The findings showed that 78 per cent of the practitioners used at least one social media element in at least one campaign, while only 22 per cent did not use any of the elements. The most popular elements were blogs (56 per cent) social networks (53 per cent) and forums (49 per cent). In addition, 80 per cent of the participants had at least one personal experience (for any purpose) with blogs, 69 per cent with social networks, 67 per cent with forums and 42 per cent with photo sharing.

Most practitioners (73 per cent) read blogs that were relevant to their clients, and 44 per cent actually wrote or had written a blog in the name of their organizations or clients. The vast majority (95 per cent) tracked online mentions of their clients on the Internet, and 59 per cent responded to online opinions or criticism regarding their organizations or clients.

When the participants were asked whether their clients usually were interested in integrating social media elements in their campaigns, only 32 per cent responded positively, while 68 per cent answered that their clients "seldom" (36 per cent) or "never" (32 per cent) wanted them to use social media elements.

Asked to rate the effectiveness of various social media tools in achieving campaign goals, practitioners gave blogs the highest score (64 per cent), second came forums (60.5 per cent) and photo sharing was third (34 per cent). On the other hand, 56 per cent of the participants answered negatively to the question whether social media have changed the way their organizations or their clients' organizations communicated.

The second part of the survey explored how Israeli public relations practitioners perceived social media. The findings showed that 62 per cent agreed that "social media and traditional media complement each other" and only 20 per cent thought that "social media and the traditional media are in conflict."

When asked if social media have enhanced public relations practice, the respondents gave diverse answers: 38 per cent thought that the level of enhancement was "medium," 34 per cent thought that it was "much" or "very much" and 25 per cent thought that it was "very little" or "little" (3 per cent were "missing cases"). The same pattern appeared when practitioners were asked whether blogs enhanced public relations practice: 33 per cent thought that the level of enhancement was "little" or "very little," 31.5 per cent answered "much" or "very much" and 27 per cent responded that it was "medium" (8.5 per cent were "missing cases"). The vast majority of practitioners (71 per cent) agreed that organizations were forced to respond more quickly to criticism, since social media (including blogs) have made communications more instantaneous.

Approximately half of the respondents (51.5 per cent) were not of the opinion that social media were more accurate than "traditional media," more credible than "traditional media" (49 per cent) or presented a more trusted information source (49 per cent). Furthermore, nearly half of the Israeli practitioners (46 per cent) thought that social media did not tell the truth. On the other hand, they did agree that social media offered organizations a low-cost way of developing relationships with various publics (64.5 per cent).

The last part of the survey explored practitioners' thoughts about the future of social media. The majority (60 per cent) estimated that they would "probably" use some kind of social media elements in a media campaign during the coming year; 27 per cent hesitated ("maybe"); and only 9 per cent answered negatively ("probably not") (4 per cent were "missing cases").

That the inroads being made by social media were not perceived as superficial may be seen by the 73 per cent who said that they would "very" or "very much" like to "deepen their knowledge regarding social media usage." Moreover, 51 per cent believed that "social media usage for public relations purposes will become more dominant in the future than traditional media usage." Nevertheless, the majority (73 per cent) did not agree that "social media usage will cancel in the future the usage of traditional media."

4. Analysis and conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore Israel's societal culture as an environment with which public relations practice has had to align.

The first part of the survey revealed that most practitioners had experience with or started to familiarize themselves with social media elements. Nevertheless, the usage of social media elements by Israeli practitioners was still in its initial stage and its potential had not yet been utilized. In addition the Israeli clients of public relations services do not as yet acknowledge the potential and importance of social media elements in achieving campaign goals. Additional evidence for this contention is found in the 56 per cent of the practitioners who thought that the emergence of the social media (including blogs) has not changed the way their organizations or their clients' organizations communicate. As a comparison, an international

survey conducted by Wright and Hinson (2008) found that 61 per cent of public relations practitioners believed that the emergence of social media and blogs had changed the way their organizations or their clients' organization communicated. In another international survey conducted by Gillin (2008) 57 per cent of the respondents said that social media tools were becoming more valuable to their activities and 27 per cent reported that social media constituted a core element of their communication strategy.

When the participants in our study were asked about their perceptions of social media, a duality characterized the answers. On the one hand, most Israeli practitioners believed that social media and "traditional media" complemented each other and that they were not in a conflict. They also thought that social media offered organizations a low-cost way of developing relationships with members of various publics. On the other hand, practitioners could not agree whether social media or blogs have enhanced public relations practice.

It seems as though Israeli practitioners have accepted social media but not yet embraced it. They have accepted the idea that social media are important to public relations practice, but their minor experience with these new media does not allow the Israelis to actually believe in the new environment or to recommend it with confidence. Moreover, the survey indicates that many Israeli practitioners still do not trust social media and do not see such media as credible or reliable sources.

A possible explanation for these findings is that social media elements are still newcomers in Israel. Therefore, practitioners and their clients do not have any substantial experience with them; they do not know at first hand of any success stories related to their usage, and therefore they treat social media with suspicion.

An alternative explanation might be that the societal culture in which Israeli public relations practice evolved, one which promoted "propaganda of integration" and "intolerance toward diverse, conflicting discourses, which presented a threat to unity" (Toledano & McKie, 2007), still echoes today. Accordingly, social media elements that promote diversity, pluralism and multi-voices are perceived as "suspicious."

The third part of the survey explored the future of social media in the eyes of Israeli practitioners. The findings indicated that practitioners believed in the future of social media and thought that its usage would grow.

To summarize, Israeli public relations practitioners generally are willing to use and experiment with social media elements. Nevertheless, the usage of such media is still in its initial stage. The challenge for Israeli public relations professionals nowadays is to understand social media better in order to utilize these media elements for the benefit of the field and their clients.

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