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Toward a normative social media theory for public relations

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ABSTRACT

Social media might represent the greatest social innovation/revolution in the history of communication, fundamentally altering how humans communicate, and the practice of public relations, journalism, advertising, marketing, and business. Dozens of theories and concepts including dialogue, engagement, identification, social presence, uses and gratifications, conversational human voice, and many others inform social media. However, what has commonly taken place in social media contexts and public relations has been the importation and application of other theories and concepts, rather than exploring and clarifying the unique features and capabilities of social media per se. This essay argues that social media represent a new communication paradigm, and this essay takes up the challenge of building social media theory for public relations by identifying features of social media that have emerged from existing research as fundamental to understanding social media, and eventually developing a theory(s) of social media for public relations.

1. Introduction

Research on social media theory in the public relations and communication literature is sparse. Ngai, Tao, and Moon (2015), for example, reviewed what they call an "exhaustive" list of theories that have been used in social media research, identifying nearly three dozen theories from an assortment of disciplines, but argue that *no specific theories of social media* yet exist. Of course, there *are* a few scholars trying to build social media theory (cf., Dijck & Poell, 2013). However, just as media scholars have various interests depending upon the medium and their professional practices (cf., Bignell, 2013; Goodwin & Whannel, 2013; Pecora, Murray, & Wartella, 2006), so too are public relations scholars studying social media in a variety of unique ways relevant to their own communication context (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; du Plessis, 2018; Gesualdi, 2019). However, no one has yet proposed a social media specific theory for public relations.

Social media are more than just an interface that offers visual, textual, and aural affordances. Social media have become a way of life for hundreds of millions of global citizens. However, before academics and professionals can begin to maximize the value of social media for public relations, or any other professional context, the field needs to develop useful definitions and theoretical constructs for thinking about communication in mediated environments.

What print and online journalists do with social media tools is very different from what advertisers or marketers do, or what the broadcast industry does. Although the features of social media are still the same, their application or reification are not. As one anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this essay noted, over the last 100 years, there has never been a theory of media for public relations, rather public relations has adapted its practices to take advantage of the unique features of other media. Public relations needs to do the same in the internet age: to develop an understanding of the unique features of social media most useful in public relations, rather than just treating social media as a tool for messaging.

To begin work on building social media theory for public relations, this article first explores normative and positive theory building. Next, four influential concepts that have been used to understand social media theory: dialogue, engagement, social presence, and conversational human voice (CHV) are examined to help guide social media theory. Finally, all four concepts are used to help explain the direction that a social media theory of public relations might take.

2. Building social media theory for public relations

Building theory is essential for understanding phenomena, decisions, and practices, be it in the social sciences, the "hard sciences," the humanities, or any other area of research. Theories, like metaphors and frames help direct what we see (cf., Hallahan, 1999; Kent, 2001; Kent & Lane, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 2016b). But there is a difference between extending or refining an existing theory where there are phenomena

Table 1
Comparison Between Normative & Positive Theories.

Normative/Practical	Key	Concepts	Positive/Nomothetic
Axiological, ethical or value laden, not neutral.	**Theories:** Dialogue, Cocreation, FFST, PerDi, Renewal, Excellence[a], Narrative.	**Theories:** Excellence[a], OPR, SCCT, Apologia, Framing, Management, Networks.	**Epistemological,** about "knowing" & understanding participants reality.
Ontological, or based on lived experience. Social, voluntary, historical.	**Definition:** Cocreation, Relational, Symmetrical/Two-Way[a], Interpersonal, Rhetorical, Positive Regard for Others.	**Definition:** Management Function, Asymmetrical/ Symmetrical[a], Two-Way, Organizational Control.	**Observational,** question driven, goal oriented. Reality is knowable.
Prescriptive, provides guidance before the fact about how to behave.	**Principles:** Relationship, Trust, Mutuality, Truth, Morality.	**Principles:** Goal attainment, Profit, Identity Management.	**Value neutral,** serves the interests of authorising party. No obligations.
Rule guided not rule bound, based on cultural and social practices.	**Social Media Features:** Commitment, Identity, Trust, Transparency, Genuine Friendships, Longevity, Intimacy, Physical Presence, Cost of Doing Good Business.	**Social Media Features:** Expediency, Quantity, Ad/Marketing Support, "Conversational," Faux, Anonymous/Managerial, Inexpensive.	**Controlling,** use what works in various situations.
Cocreational, based on the reality being described. Participants create reality.	**Behaviours:** Information Sharing, Collaboration, Seeking Understanding, Relational Maintenance.	**Behaviours:** Information Gathering, Surveillance, Shaping Knowledge, Attitudes, & Behaviours.	**"Scientific"** or hypothesis driven. Behaviour can be understood and controlled.
Social/Cultural, focused on building relationships.	**Opinion of Publics:** People are Unique, Publics Share our Values.	**Opinion of Publics:** Publics are Ignorant, People are Problems	**Organizational/Managerial,** focused on achieving goals.

[a] *Note*: Scholars disagree on where some theories/principles on this table should go. The table is intended as general reference not a definitive list.

and principles to explore, and building or proposing a new theory where the relevant principles and propositions need to first be spelled out.

The goal of research is generally to extend, refine, or clarify theory, pedagogy, or practice. But theory itself actually guides what we see, the questions that we ask, and how we interpret answers to the questions we ask. As Kuhn (1996) explained,

> a new theory, however special its range of application, is seldom or never just an increment to what is already known. Its assimilation requires the reconstruction of prior theory and the re-evaluation of prior fact, an intrinsically revolutionary process that is seldom completed by a single man and never overnight. (p. 7)

Few would likely dispute that the internet and social media represent communication revolutions in the purest sense of the word. The unfolding possibilities that have emerged via the internet have been "revolutionary" in the way that advertising, journalism, politics, and public relations, are practiced.

As Kuhn (1996) argued, scholars can spend their entire careers just testing and unpacking the details of existing theories. Occasionally something revolutionary happens and scholars are forced to accept a new reality and new facts. "To be accepted as a paradigm, a theory must seem better than its competitors, but it need not, and in fact never does, explain all the facts with which it can be confronted" (p. 17). We are at that point now in social media. We know that social media are complex, and that scholars from diverse fields have examined communication within social media contexts, but we are in need of a better understanding of social media per se, and how it can inform public relations practice.

Individual "features" of social media (say those useful in journalism or broadcasting), are not reified the same in other disciplines and professional realms. Journalists use social media differently than public relations professionals. Indeed, when one looks at how many journalists cite public relations sources, or how many in advertising cite journalism or public relations sources, etc., we find limited overlap. Part of the problem is of course disciplinarity (Nothstine, Blair, & Copeland, 1994), but the other part is simply that we serve different masters, and have different scholarly literatures, different theoretical, philosophical, and practical interests, etc. Part of developing an understanding of social media for public relations will be to understand the normative and positive features of social media.

2.1. Whether to build normative or positive theory

When building communication theory, scholars naturally start with certain predispositions related to how they see the world ontologically, epistemologically, and axiologically. Although, tautologically, theory informs our assumptions prior to theory building, an assortment of assumptions are also assumed by every theorist. In the nomothetic (scientific method) research and theory building process, prior assumptions and knowledge inform current practice. If we assume (or are told) the world behaves in a particular way, then our experiments or research will proceed in a fashion that supports or refutes particular hypotheses. If a relationship is shown to be consistent and reliable, a theory becomes stronger. If a relationship is shown to be variable or inconsistent, theories are revised.

However, the humanities and social sciences are somewhat different. We often deal with both positive theories, or theories about how the world *actually* works—typically through empirical research—and normative theories, or theories about how the world *should* work—often based in philosophy, ethics, and lived experience. Since the launch of the internet, scholars have proselytized about the potential of new technologies. Indeed, presidents and politicians in countries around the world regularly extoll the virtues and possibilities of technology. Similarly, scholars in particular fields, such as public relations, have advanced theories, such as dialogue, as a way of guiding ethical online public relations practice.

At the same time, scholars have studied new technologies in order to determine how they work, exploring relationships on Twitter, Facebook, WeChat, etc. and using existing normative and positive theories taken from other areas to test their assumptions. The approach taken to theory building in this article is similar. Given the current abundance of *topics* being examined in social media and the complexity of social media which includes dozens of different features and actions that users can employ. An examination of normative and positive theory building will be helpful for clarifying the arguments that follow.

Table 1 illustrates the differences in assumptions and approaches between normative or practical theories and positive or nomothetic theories. The outermost columns include the features of the two theoretical approaches, and the innermost columns list key concepts relevant to each approach. Throughout the essay we will take up the differences between these approaches to theory building and what the implications are for developing a public relations theory of social media.

2.2. Applying mediated theories in public relations

In practice, many scholars treat social media just like existing forms of mass media, as primarily a one-way, or two-way asymmetrical, sender–receiver communication tool, importing whatever communication or mass communication theory that suits the object of study (cf., Abitbol & Lee, 2017; du Plessis, 2018; Watkins, 2017; Zhao, Zhan, & Liu, 2018). As Kent and Taylor (2016a) show in their longitudinal analysis of social media in public relations, about one in four studies have no guiding theory at all, and the most common theories examined in social media contexts include crisis, dialogue, and engagement. A number of studies going back to the early days of the internet have shown that organizations are not responsive (Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003), and many studies have shown that organizational "interaction" on media such as Facebook and Twitter are quite limited, defining interaction and engagement nomothetically, as likes and retweets, and asymmetrical exchanges (Guidry, Jin, Orr, Messner, & Meganck, 2017; Smith, 2010). Often, as in crisis and politics, social media are seen as one-way messaging tools (Lee & Xu, 2018) that serve no relational purpose.

Public relations is not the only field that has largely ignored any specific social media cultural or relational influences in its research. Consider for example several recent social media texts. Fenton (2009), in her 11-chapter edited volume, describes social media as it relates to journalism and democracy, focusing on mainstream media concepts: political economy, journalistic ethics, online sources, news production, regulatory issues, etc. Fenton's focus is on the transformation of journalism, rather than on whether social media have any unique structure of their own. For Fenton, then, social media are simply a new delivery medium for journalistic content, rather than a unique communicative environment.

More recently, Flew (2014), in his eponymously named *New Media*, focuses primarily on features of "new media" rather than on any unique theoretical content. Flew's book covers a lot of ground, including chapters on Internet law, online activism, higher education, creative industries, gaming culture, journalism, social networking, and, of course, concepts and approaches to new media that highlight existing theories such as actor-network theory, political economy, information, and networking. Flew's book offers an excellent primer for undergraduates or those new to technology, but, like Fenton, does not identify any unique social media features.

One final example should make this point clear. Lievrouw and Livingstone's (2006) 22-chapter *Handbook of New Media* takes exactly the same approach as the texts mentioned above. Lievrouw and Livingstone offer discussions on community, children, interactivity, small groups, cultural studies, power, diffusion of innovations, etc., but these are just applications of existing theories, not social media theory per-se. As McLuhan (1964) argued half-a-century ago, in *Understanding Media,* "the medium is the message" (p. 7ff).

What McLuhan suggested with his pithy aphorism was that all media are different. All media have unique features. This is not to say, as Flew did, that all media are not only part of an evolution from what came before, but that each type of media imposes its own logic. We know that social media are having an influence on how literally billions of people live their lives as a result of social media and apps like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WeChat, gaming, gambling, and hundreds of others (cf., Kent & Saffer, 2014).

As Kent and Saffer (2014) noted in their Delphi study on the future of new technology in public relations, social media are having an influence on personal identity democracy, relationships, sense of self (pp. 571–573), and many other areas that we have thus far ignored in the positivist literature, focusing on empirical variables like crisis responses, tweets, and likes. Trust and other quantifiable concepts that have been examined for decades have also been used in studies of other media (print and broadcast). By ignoring the unique ontological, cultural, relational, and other aspects of the social media interface and experience, we privilege positive approaches that focus on quantification rather than experience or understanding (cf., Valentini, 2012). Both approaches have the potential to inform what public relations professionals do in social media contexts, however, when we privilege one over the other, we diminish what can be learned.

Much like the new media scholars noted above, many public relations scholars have focused on communicative *practices* in social media, treating social media as if they had no unique communicative features or imparted no influence to messages, examining various *features* of social media like trust or crisis (cf. Yang, Kang, & Cha, 2015; Zheng, Liu, & Davison, 2018), or taking a dialogic approach to the study of social media in public relations (cf., Smith, Smith, & Knighton, 2018; Zheng et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2018). Treating social media as a neutral medium, while studying other theories or concepts of interest, does not actually build social media theory (cf., Kent & Taylor, 2016a; Watkins, 2017).

As the public relations field moves toward understanding social media as a public relations and communicative phenomenon, rather than just a carrier of messages, we need theories and concepts that are rhetorically and communicatively based. A physicist is able to conduct experiments about dark matter because of a set of theoretical propositions and mathematical guidelines; similarly, a public relations professional or researcher needs communicative explanations for phenomenon and a reason to focus their attention from one area to another. Although ideas from the past still inform the present, new media contexts and phenomena also call for new ideas and theories. Public relations professionals are first and foremost professional communicators; as such, we need to understand the features of each medium we employ.

Scholars were aware of differences among media decades ago. Tan (1985) for example, reporting on studies of mass communication theories and research decades before the internet, identified dozens of differences between the various media (television, radio, print, etc.) in terms of source, audience, messages, media, and other features. Public relations educators were readily aware of those differences, as we saw in introductory textbooks such as Newsom, Turk, and Kruckeberg (1996), where summaries of the differences and suggestions for professional communicators were offered. A theoretical understanding of social media is missing from our journals and textbooks now. The third issue in this section deals with the role that social media have played in public relations.

2.3. Social media in public relations

The roots of social media in public relations are difficult to trace precisely. The word social media was first used in the public relations scholarship in 1998, but the first study of social media did not appear in the literature until 2008 (Kent and Taylor, 2016a, p. 67). Additionally, blogs were the earliest forms of social media, being first mentioned in the literature in 2003, and scholarly articles written in 2006 (cf. Kent, 2008; Wright & Hinson, 2008), while Twitter and Facebook were first mentioned in 2008, and studied in 2008/2009 respectively (p. 67). Public relations scholarship on the internet itself can be traced to a special issue of *Public Relations Review* from 1998 (24[3]) that contained articles by Esrock and Leichty, Badaracco, Heath, Coombs, and Kent and Taylor.

In terms of what social media are in public relations, Kent (2010) provided one of the earliest definitions of social media, explaining that social media were "any interactive communication channel that allows for two-way interaction and feedback" (p. 645). Kent also pointed out an assortment of caveats about social media such as the influence of moderation and interactivity on the social media experience, noting that:

Modern social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn have actually institutionalized participation. For example, on Facebook, "friends" can give a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" rating to the

posts of others with very little effort. Little substantive discussion actually takes place publicly. (p. 646)

Perhaps one of the most overlooked features of most social media is the idea of interchangeability which suggests that for most people the number of friends that they have exceeds the physical capabilities of the human brain to maintain active relationships with (Kent, 2010; King, 2012).

Other issues raised by Kent (2010) include interchangeability, lack of propinquity, etc. also need to be considered when describing social media. Social media provide a means of contact for most people with individuals and organizations, but in practice, as abundant scholarship has shown, social media are rarely interactive or dialogic and in practice have evolved into two-way asymmetrical communication tools useful in marketing and advertising (cf., Taylor & Kent, 2014b). Additionally, as noted earlier, in some professions, such as journalism, social media are imagined as a very different thing, as "the public," or all citizens reached by a particular news source. In public relations, there are no mass publics, there is no "everyone." There are specific publics, specific stakeholders and stake seekers, etc., our messages are never intended to serve the democratizing function that journalism serves.

Given the ubiquity and centrality of social media that have become part of public relations education and research, scholars and professionals need to better understand social media theory itself, rather than treating social media like some sort of magic bullet whose mere use is sufficient for success, or as a completely neutral communication tool that imparts nothing special to messages. Additionally, as noted above, scholars have identified theories from mass communication, film, interpersonal communication, philosophy, and other disciplines as "relevant" social media theories (e.g., uses and gratifications, para-social interaction, dialogue, framing, etc.) (Ngai et al., 2015), but no theories have yet emerged that we might call "social media theories for public relations."

3. Dominant public relations approaches to social media: dialogue, engagement, social presence and CHV

To identify the broader theoretical elements that are currently present in social media and need to be more widely recognized and explored, we examine four influential approaches. Dialogue and engagement are perhaps the most influential of the four. For more than two decades—since Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) essays on dialogic public relations—scholars have sought to evaluate whether the internet and later social media were capable of acting as dialogic communication tools. As Lane and Kent (2018) suggested, all media may be placed along a continuum from monologic to dialogic. Thus, the dialogic potential of social media, vs., say, the mass media or the broadcasting industries provides insight, just as an exploration of ontology or epistemology helps to clarify other theories. Similarly, engagement has emerged over the last decade in public relations as an important concept in social media research (Johnston & Taylor, 2018), as well as notions of social presence and conversational human voice, all reviewed next.

As noted above, too much research exists in an assortment of disciplines to cover everything about social media and review every essay on the subject in one article. Although, as suggested above, no real body of social media theory exists yet for public relations, only concepts appropriated from mass communication and other areas (Ngai et al., 2015), however, a robust body of literature studied in social media *contexts* does exist for dialogue, engagement, social presence, and CHV (cf., Johnston & Taylor, 2018; Kelleher, 2008, 2009; Lane & Kent, 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014a, etc.).

3.1. Dialogue and engagement in public relations

As suggested earlier in the article, a question that needs raising is what kind of theory do we want to develop for social media in public relations? Positive theories describe actual practice (praxis), while normative theories are axiological and serve what Burke (1966) refers to as a hortatory or moralistic function. Both approaches can of course be applied when looking at social media beginning with dialogue and engagement.

Dialogue is one of the most studied areas of the field of public relations. Thus, a lengthy review of dialogic principles is not included in this essay. However, the basic principles of dialogue that have been studied in hundreds of essays would be Kent and Taylor's (2002) principles of dialogic communication that include: mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk and commitment (pp. 25–29). As well as their (1998) dialogic principles essay that tried to identify "dialogic potential" and included: the dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of interface, and conservation of visitors (pp. 326–330). Dialogue in general also includes a number of other features such as risk, trust, unconditional positive regard, engagement, willingness to be changed, etc. (Kent & Taylor, 2002). The key principles of dialogue identified by public relations scholars such as Kent and Taylor are readily found in the literature on dialogue and ethics, etc. (Anderson et al., 1994; Buber, 1923; Freire, 1970; Johannesen, 1990; Laing, 1961, etc.).

Although dialogue is a normative theory, the early web-based dialogic theories also sought to recognize the rational, procedural, and interface based constraints that are part of a dialogic approach. On the most basic level, a dialogic approach to public relations includes efforts to build genuine, interpersonal, relationships, or, at the very least, to hold conversations that involve trust, and address issues of risk, power, hierarchy, etc. One of the keys to a dialogic public relations practice is engagement, discussed next, and understanding the assumptions of genuine dialogue (cf., Kent & Lane, 2017).

Both dialogue and engagement have been used in the literature as normative and positive concepts. The work of Heath (1997, 1998, etc.), for example, often speaks of public dialogue as a process of "engaging" or interacting with the public, while, as noted next, engagement from an organizational standpoint often means nothing more than interacting with or "dialoguing" (in the informal sense) about public issues.

Engagement has both positive, managerial, implications which see engagement used as a tool to motivate employees, attract customers, etc., as well as normative, ideal, features that see engagement as a moral or ethical activity that creates trust and goodwill for organizations, employees, stakeholders, and publics (cf. Johnston & Taylor, 2018; Lane & Kent, 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014a). According to Johnston et al. (2018):

Interpretivist and constructionist approaches to engagement focus on engagement as a process where meaning is created, or cocreated, through communication.. . . In practical contexts, such as employee, consumer, stakeholder, student, community, and civic settings, engagement describes attributes of connection, interaction, participation, and involvement, framed with favorable outcomes, from both instrumental and interpretivist perspectives. (pp. 19–20)

Engagement has been studied in public relations going back at least two decades (Kent & Taylor, 2002), and more recently in a special issue of the *Journal of Public Relations Research* from 2014, 26(5), on engagement, edited By Kim Johnston. Engagement, then, has been studied as both a positive approach, as well as a normative approach toward stakeholders and publics in public relations. What is meant by engagement varies widely.

The next section discusses social presence and conversational human voice. Understanding social presence and conversational human voice will help clarify the nature of social media and make social media a more effective communication tool for public relations professionals.

3.2. Social presence and CHV in public relations

Social presence and conversational human voice are related concepts. In public relations, the principle of "conversational human voice" has gained some traction over the last decade because CHV has been viewed as a useful mode of social media communication. Although the principle of using a "conversational human voice" (or everyday communication) in a mediated environment is described as a conversational ideal, the original concept of CHV comes from the theory of social presence and can be attributed to a forty-year-old book by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), *The Social Psychology of Communications*. Given the historical priority of social presence over CHV, social presence is discussed first, followed by a brief review of CHV in public relations.

3.2.1. Social presence theory

Social presence has been studied in a variety of disciplines: communication, education, educational psychology, computer-mediated communication, distance education, etc. (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Gunawardena, 1995; Keil & Johnson, 2002). As Short et al. (1976) wrote, social presence is the "degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (p. 65). Social presence involves genuine interpersonal interaction rather than symbolic interaction or mere "engagement." Social presence is also considered a conversational ideal.

Essentially, social presence is the degree to which a communicator views his/her interlocutor as a genuine person, rather than a generalized other (Gunawardena, 1995, p. 151)—basically the Kantian Categorical Imperative. Gunawardena goes on to suggest that the potential for social presence is an innate part of a medium, rather than something entirely under the control of the communicators (cf., McLuhan, 1964). Face-to-face communication of course has the greatest potential for social presence, while other forms of interaction such as writing would have less. Communicators can still put their personal stamp on various media, and people have been known to have very intimate relationships and exchanges via postal letters, but ultimately the medium used largely dictates what can be done.

Two key concepts characterize social presence theory: "intimacy" (which is characterized by genuine presence, physical proximity, eye-contact, gestures, physical space, etc.), and "immediacy" (or the "psychological distance between communicator and recipient") (Gunawardena, 1995, p. 2; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Keil & Johnson, 2002). Additionally, Tu (2000) has suggested that other variables such as "social context" (which includes "perception of privacy," "settings," and "purposes of communication"), and "interactivity" (or the two-way exchange of information) also characterize social presence (pp. 29–30).

3.2.2. Conversational human voice (CHV)

In virtually every study of CHV in public relations, the emphasis is on *symbolic* social presence rather than on *genuine* social presence (cf., Hinckley, 1994; see Kent, Harrison, & Taylor, 2006, on the related concept of symbolic representation). The faux social presence of CHV leads to a tendency to treat actual social presence as unimportant or an illusion.

Levine et al. (1999) originally described CHV in their cult, online text, *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, where human voice is described as a new manner of corporate talk distinct from traditional corporate and marketing communication. CHV, like managerial rhetoric (Sproule, 1988), involves no real engagement and just tries to *seem* more intimate.

Human voice, later to become conversational human voice in subsequent research, was about "the pure sound of the human voice, not the elevated, empty speech of the corporate hierarchy" (Searls & Weinberger, 1999, p. 7). Searls and Weinberger go on to suggest that "We are all so tuned to the sound of the real human voice that, given a chance to interact, we can't be fooled. . . at least not for long" (p. 18).

CHV is the voice of the blog (Doostdar, 2004), the internal voice of one's own organization, the voice of the trusted friend.

In essence, CHV is an evolution of managerial rhetoric (cf., Sproule, 1988), which removed any identity or personalization from organizational texts and messages to speak in a corporate voice. CHV is not genuine engagement, but the goal is to make people *think* the communication is genuine (cf., Hinckley, 1994; Kent et al., 2006). CHV is closer to a positivist, managerial, use of engagement that focuses on paying attention to people, but not really "engaging" with people dialogically.

To begin to understand the utility of social media better and to identify unique theoretical elements requires that the communicative concepts we use be tied to communication and media theory and research. Although, as noted above, our goal is not simply to create another normative "thou shalt not" set of principles, what should be clear is that dialogue, engagement, social presence, and CHV all represent communicative aspects of social media *theory* and *practice*. Of course, not every mass media concept applies in every mediated context, any more than every social media feature applies in all social media contexts. Untangling the issue of what are the key features of social media for public relations is central here.

Social media are both normative and positive, like every other media. Indeed, parasocial communication, CHV, managerial rhetoric, and other concepts are examples of how media affect people in very profound and substantial ways. The next section of the essay outlines and justifies features of social media that are needed for developing a theory of social media in public relations.

4. Toward a social media theory in public relations

As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, very little scholarship on social media theory (per se) exists (cf., Ariel & Avidar, 2015; Theunissen, 2015; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015). Most of what we draw upon are mass communication, psychology, and other theories. However, before continuing we would reiterate that although there may be no specific social media theories yet for public relations professionals to draw upon, there are instructive social media theories to be found.

For example, Guslyakova, Guslyakova, Nigmatzyanova, Rudneva, and Valeeva (2018) argued that social media influence individuals' sense of self, and identity: "new media genres such as social networks, blogging and commenting may influence university students' professional self-concept and define their future career specialization" (p. 9682)—a focus on context and effects, rather than an exploration of the medium itself. Similarly, van Dijck and Poell (2013), focus on the interplay between platforms and users, but make the case that social media are more of an extension of the mass media in general, than something unto itself.

Although "phrase searches" for key terms on Google Scholar such as "theories of social media" or "social media theory" return hundreds of results, an examination of the content identified indicates few actual articles on social media theory, and much more of a focus on the role or place of existing communication and other theories of social media. Consider Qi, Monod, Fang, and Deng's (2018) interesting essay comparing philosophical theories in social media vs. existing information science research. The authors' work is compelling but not for proposing or identifying aspects of a social media theory.

Additionally, dozens of influential scholars including Ariel and Avidar (2015), Benkler, Faris, Roberts, and Zuckerman (2017), Bruns and Stieglitz (2014), Kent (2008, 2010), Macnamara, Zerfass, Adi, and Lwin (2018), McChesney (2013), Papacharissi (2011), Siapera (2017), Theunissen (2015), and many others have written about "topics," "theories," and social phenomena within the context of social media milieu, but have not offered a "theory of social media," even a genre specific one (e.g., advertising, broadcasting, business, media, marketing, etc.). The goal of the remainder of this section is to elucidate the

social media precepts and principles that might be used to guide research and exploration in public relations as we move forward in understanding social media.

4.1. Emergent features of social media in public relations

To speak of a theory of social media for public relations requires scholars to recognize the unique milieu and circumstances in which public relations operates. We believe that *modern public relations professionals co-create meaning and shape reality via an interactive research and communication process conducted for the mutual benefit of individuals, groups, organizations, and the stakeholders and publics with whom they have social, cultural, intellectual, economic, and communicative relationships.* Public relations is reified by engagement with internal and external individuals, groups, and publics. Thus, when public relations, via social media, is reduced to positive, management-centric, one-way communication, pandering, and deceptive communication, our responsibility as co-creators of meaning is abdicated and we are transformed into online propagandists.

Here, as noted previously, our assumptions about public relations necessarily guide how we develop our own ideas about social media theory and what it should and should not do. A managerial focused definition of public relations might focus attention on achieving organization-centric communication goals, rather than being relationally focused, but a focus on mutuality and cocreation directs attention to normative principles.

To fulfil our responsibility to our stakeholders and publics, public relations professionals need to be more aware of the role played by social media in that process. In developing a social media theory in public relations, several assumptions emerge from a consideration of key social media research, reviewed above, that ties to long-held and well-supported research and beliefs associated with dialogue, engagement, social presence, and CHV. We begin with a normative principle:

(1) **Social media should serve the interests of all stakeholders/ publics, not just organizational interests**.
    We see this statement as self-evident given the many existing definitions of public relations that see public relations professionals as having organization to public responsibilities. However, let us turn this statement around for a moment and consider the implications of some of the most influential definitions of public relations: "Social media should serve the interests of the organization using them." This sort of capitalist argument is entirely in line with many of the older definitions of public relations which see what professionals do as serving organizational interests as "communication managers" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), as people who "adapt or alter their environment to achieve organizational goals" (Long & Hazleton, 1987), to "pursue mutual benefits in order to achieve organizational mission and vision" (Heath & Coombs, 2006, p. 7), etc. Thus, if we take the historic definitions of public relations on their face, seeing social media as an extension of organizational communication and media relations is easy.
    One could also argue that social media are used by organizations primarily to gather personal data and make a profit (as recent events with Facebook and Cambridge Analytica show), but the origin of social media is quite different (McIntyre, 2014), and treating social media as an neutral, asymmetrical, research tool ignores other important definitions of public relations that involve co-creation, and genuine interpersonal relations (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2006). Although the use of social media has emerged as a marketing/advertising/business-tool, the telos of the Internet is connectivity, information sharing, education (cf. Kent, 2001), etc., and the field of public relations needs to decide where we stand (cf. Kent & Saffer, 2014).
    Our definition of public relations advanced above represents a modern definition that considers contemporary beliefs about the

potential of public relations to co-create reality and contribute to a better ("fully functioning") society (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2006). However, if an older definition for thinking about public relations is used, one that described public relations professionals as "managing communication," for example, then no conflict exists between treating social media as a mere channel for messages rather than as a strategic communication tool with its own logic and possibilities, and no progress is made on understanding social media theory for public relations purposes. The managerial approach runs counter to the intent or telos of social media and the internet. If social media can do more, why would we seek to limit those possibilities? The next principle also represents a normative concept.

(2) **Genuine social media communication should be based on dialogic engagement rather than faux engagement or message reception**.
    If almost any definition of social media is considered, social media are described as something wholly different than mainstream media, primarily because of the potential for interactivity and relational interaction. Calling essentially one-way "social media" tools such as Twitter "social" merely because they reach people directly (like newspapers or television) is deceptive—although we may need to make a distinction between interactive and non-interactive social media down the road. Social media offer the potential for interaction, even if most communication does not make full use of it.
    The faux engagement of social media has been taken up by a number of scholars. Taylor and Kent (2014a) wrote about how professionals should focus on the interests of stakeholders and publics per se, rather than just assuming that stakeholders and publics share the same interests and values with the organization. Similarly, Kent and Theunissen (2016) argued that many studies of dialogic social media employ "D-I-N-O" (dialogue in name only), focusing on the interests of the organization above the interests of its stakeholders and publics. Indeed, Kent (2001), before the invention of social media, pointed out that the interactivity and connectivity of the internet was largely illusory. Social media are often not "social," as Taylor and Kent (2014a) suggested. As we know from interpersonal communication research a person can be "alone in a crowd." More importantly, as Lane and Kent (2018) argued, stakeholders and publics do not have to be exploited. Just because social media tools are called "social" by scholars and professionals, does not mean that professionals should accept that the use of social media involves no exploitation.
    As engagement was previously described, engagement is a process of nurturing relationships, trust, mutuality, etc. much as social media were *intended* (Kent, 2001; McIntyre, 2014). The question of whether "social media" should be reduced to asymmetrical communication practices is one professional communicators need to address. However, social media do have more "potential." When using existing media (print, broadcast, etc.), professional communicators usually select the tool that is best for the job (Tan, 1985), but with social media communication professionals often treat their messages like an extension of broadcasting rather than a unique communicative tool (cf. Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2012; Fenton, 2009; Flew, 2014).
    The legacy print and broadcast media are primarily one-way media, with minor exceptions such as talk shows and radio call-in programs, live tweeting during events, etc. Reducing social media to such narrow applications actually limits their utility to public relations as a strategic communication tool. If all we understand about social media is that they can be used to send out messages during crises, or used in marketing applications to build stronger brand recognition or word-of-mouth recall, then we already know all that we need to know about social media. As Kuhn suggested, we can be satisfied focusing on "mop up work."

Exploring social media using an input/output/throughput (systems theory) model hardly seems a worthy public relations goal, when we consider that public relations helps shape the reality of people both intentionally and unintentionally. Social media still appear to have tremendous potential for rhetorical purposes such as persuasion, genuine relationships building via dialogue and engagement, as well as a number of purposes that we have barely examined (face negotiation, identity formation, etc.) (cf., Kent & Saffer, 2014). Our third principle is largely a positive, technical feature of social media; however, the implications and impact point to normative concerns.

(3) **Social media communities are comprised of self-selected networks**.

Some of the earliest scholarship on the internet talked about how the technology was a pull rather than a push medium—meaning not a broadcast tool (Boutie, 1996; Yavovich, 1996). Additionally, given that the average person now has nearly eight social media accounts (Statista, 2018a), 59-percent of Facebook users have 200–500 friends, and 21 % have more than 500 (Statista, 2018b), while on Twitter, the average user has more than 700 followers (Brandwatch, 2017), there is strong evidence that social media are probably governed as much by, or more by, network theories than they are by mainstream mass communication theories.

The broadcast media make content and "programming" decisions, and through that, advertising decisions are made in order to reach viewers or listeners with their content, and thereby attract advertisers and make sales. Over the last two decades, an economic model has been imposed, or superimposed, over a technology whose logic and structure are very different. Consider Sproule's (1988) seminal article on "Managerial Rhetoric" which appeared more than a decade before any mainstream social media and argued that organizations had already moved away from any actual human connection between organizational communicators and publics toward a depersonalized, managerial model where slogans, images, pre-packaged ideology, interpersonal attraction, pseudo events, entertainment as persuasion, and segmented, depersonalized publics were more common. The communicative framework for our contemporary, depersonalized, image driven, social media have been in place for more than three decades.

That broadcast media have evolved to be about advertising and marketing is no secret. However, with the exception of some demographic similarities, none of the existing print or broadcast media are social network based. Public relations professionals need to explore what this means and how to utilize and employ network theory and principles when using social media and the internet beyond using network data analytically to reach stakeholders and publics with organizational messages—something we already do very well.

Once again, if social media are nothing more than a delivery channel for marketing, advertising, branding, and quasi persuasive organizational content, we know all we need to know about social media. However, recognizing the network imperatives of social media complicates things as dialogue and engagement are concerned. Dialogue and engagement represent primarily interpersonal, ontological states whereby one individual or group attempts to connect with another, or where one connects with another non-exploitatively. Given the clear network imperatives found in social media, and general resistance or unsuitability as a push or broadcast medium—except insofar as sales and marketing are concerned—public relations scholars and professionals need to know and understand more about networks and their impact on communication if we are going to understand the network imperatives of social media. Once again, our next principle, Principle four, is both normative and positive.

(4) **Social media spaces are places of culture as much as community**.

Again, as with point four above, social media are characterized by cultural imperatives more than any previous communication medium in history. Indeed, the importance of culture and the power of the internet and social media is nowhere more apparent than studies, going back decades, of various cultural, religious, ethnic, and migrant diaspora (cf., Mitra, 1997; also various Diaspora studies journals). There are no Disney Channel diaspora, no *House, Big Bang Theory, Bachelor, Dr. Who,* or *BBC* diaspora, but there are an assortment of cultural, religious, and interest groups whose existence is facilitated through the internet and social media. Yet, public relations scholars continue to treat social media simply as televisual channels for marketing and advertising (Brubaker & Wilson, 2018; Oh & Ki, 2019; Paek, Hove, Jung, & Cole, 2013), rather than taking advantage of engagement and dialogue and trying to do more.

Most organizations are unable to segment large publics on social media. For most organizations (those that do not have access to rich analytic and marketing data—which is the case with most organizations in the world), social media contacts are just lists of names. You can only do so much audience adaptation when your messages go *out to all of your stakeholders and publics* at once: men, women, young, old, supporters, detractors, etc. Given this, social media communicators need to be more cognizant of the fact that their messages go out to "communities" who share certain interests and cultural expectations. Understanding publics as human beings has the potential to be more important from a public relations standpoint, than being able to conduct marketing through social media. Currently, 99.7 % of all organizations are small businesses. The majority of communication professionals do not work in agency or corporate settings (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2018). Thus, contemporary social media are, for most organizations, little more than the email or mailing list of days past.

Learning how to tap into the various social media cultures and shared world views requires a whole new level of understanding and theory than is needed for sales and marketing. Our community building skills will be influenced by our understating of culture, and both culture and community will be reified through social media theory. Principle five represents a positive assertion about technology and infrastructure.

(5) **The architecture of social media is not the same as other media**.

Although this may seem an obvious observation, as mentioned above, social media have a unique structure in relation to the legacy mass media but are largely treated the same. As mentioned above, decades ago, scholars trying to understand the internet took note of the fact that the internet was primarily a pull medium rather than a push medium—the model favoured by marketers and advertisers (Boutie, 1996; Yavovich, 1996). Of course, two decades of concerted efforts by search engines and advertisers to monetize the internet have allowed for an abundance of push marketing strategies to emerge (cookies, analytic tracking, popup windows, etc.), but that has been in spite of the architecture and network evolution of the internet and social media. Users generally do not want to be tracked, and no one likes cookies and popup windows except for advertisers and marketers.

Early in the life of the internet and social media there were concerns both for how to monetize the internet, as well as for when businesses would be able to make money via the internet—when would it be profitable? Amazon.com lost tens of millions of dollars and was unprofitable for six years before it turned a profit (ABCNews, 2018). We now know that the struggle is over, the internet as a tool of information sharing and knowledge creation has lost, and marketers and advertisers have won. Also worth noting is that Journalism has had a relationship to marketing and advertising for more than a century, with many of their "new technology" evolutions being based on maintaining that relationship and their business model. But what should be *our* legacy in

public relations? The architecture of social media is organic but it is not unknowable. As Kent and Saffer (2014) argued recently,

> the field has seen a gradual shift in the profession from the organizational counsellors and relationship managers Turk wrote of [in the '80 s], to social media specialists and a return to technical "communication managers" and marketers, rather than strategic thinkers. (p. 568)

Public relations and communication scholars need to learn about the unique features of social media and the internet, rather than assuming these tools are all the same. A generation of intellectuals, futurists, and creative thinkers have talked about the "possibilities" of the internet and social media, but few have been realized (Kent & Saffer, 2014). The potential to do more still remains once we realize that the internet is not just television on steroids. The sixth and final principle reviewed is normative.

(6) **Social media can be a relationship building tool rather than a marketplace**.

Social media are unique in that almost any area of the World Wide Web (home pages, Listservs and chat groups, blogs and social media, programming content sites like YouTube, etc.) can and do lead to communities. This has not been true of the legacy media such as radio and television. Indeed, since the introduction of cable television in the '60 s and '70 s, giving people more "choices" in what they watched (Mosco & Wasco, 1988), no real "community" of viewers existed for various television programs, only demographics. When public relations researchers talk about social media community, and building dialogue through Twitter and Facebook sites, they often just mean random retweeting of someone else's message, or "liking" an organizational message (Adams & McCorkindale, 2013; Watkins & Lewis, 2014; Watkins, 2017). There is limited effort to deal with communities. But the internet does foster relationship building; the question that remains is how to use it.

Ultimately, or ironically perhaps, what we face is an image problem. As long as we fail to imagine other possibilities, or even look for them, we will be stuck with the mental schema and metaphors that we started with. As several prominent scholars in public relations have argued recently, the time has come for us to create new metaphors and new ways of thinking about our profession. By extension, as we have argued here, the same thing applies to social media.

Consider for example Lane and Kent (2018), who argued for a long term, networked, approach to public relations based on the dialogic metaphor of the rhizome, a type of plant that spreads out, and can live for thousands of years. Similarly, Kent and Taylor (2016b) suggested a move away from an economic model as a guide for public relations to a dialogic and relational model. Furthermore, Kent and Theunissen (2016) made the case for new life through destruction of the old, using the metaphor of Shiva the destroyer to re-envision what we do as professionals and how we communicate. Each of these approaches takes as a basic assumption what we are arguing for here. To look at the possibilities, to understand the practice better, and to understand the technology. The discussion to now in the public relations literature, by many, has been for concepts like dialogic "potential," CHV as a substitute for genuine interaction, and symbolic and crisis communication practices (cf., Avidar, 2013; Dhanesh, 2017; Ott & Theunissen, 2015), rather than genuine social presence, engagement, and dialogue. Mediated communication, especially social media, is more than simply a passive tool.

Unfortunately, social media are treated by many in the field as nothing more than an electronic bulletin board where organizations post messages and try to manipulate publics (Lane, 2014, 2018; Mahin, 2017). Many academics and professionals do not even recognize social media as having any special public relations content

(cf., Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017, p. 778). Many social media researchers simply treat social media as a messaging tool, a place for "user-generated or user-manipulated content" rather than co-created content, and content designed to improve the lives of our stakeholders and publics (Abitbol & Lee, 2017; Watkins, 2017).

The discussions of dialogue, engagement, and social presence demonstrate that how we communicate in various media matters. The six assumptions described above are tied to engagement, social presence, and dialogue because these theories provide useful starting places for thinking about the unique theoretical features of social media. Future scholars need to take up this challenge of constructing a theory of social media to help professionals and scholars understand how to use social media, study social media, and understand social media's communicative impact.

5. Conclusion and future directions

This essay has taken up an issue that has been almost completely ignored in public relations since the entrance of social media as a communication tool in the late '90 s. In spite of the abundance of scholarship on social media in general, and in public relations in particular, in over two decades of research, public relations scholars have treated social media as a communication *channel* useful for crisis, issues management, customer service, marketing, branding, fundraising, social change, public interest communication, etc. (Chen, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 2016a; Smith et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2018; Zhu, Anagondahalli, & Zhang, 2017), However, as we point out here, there are no "theories of social media" for public relations yet. The time has come to expand our approach, as this essay makes clear. Social media do have clear and substantial features that impact how they should be used and the possibilities that emerge because of them.

At this early stage of theory building, covering every relevant issue is impossible; however, the six features of social media described above (networks, culture, relationships, dialogue) point to an assortment of unresolved possibilities that need to be explored if our understanding of social media is to become any more robust. We believe this essay has made progress and will continue to explore this issue in future research.

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