

Social Media Governance: Regulatory Frameworks As Drivers of Success in Online Communications

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Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of “Social Media Governance” as a means to accelerate the establishment of social media in communication practices. While previous studies have focused on single aspects of Social Media Governance, e. g. guidelines, very little research has been done on the overall concept. The data presented here stem from a quantitative survey that was carried out in Germany as a joint project between the University of Leipzig and Fink & Fuchs Public Relations, supported by Pressesprecher magazine. The results indicate that although many organizations claim to have strategies for social media communications, nine out of 10 had no explicit regulatory frameworks. Strategic pillars, such as managerial commitment and a participative corporate culture, were reported by one-third of the organizations. This is crucial, because correlation analyses have revealed that the presence of such structures has a positive effect on skill levels, strategies and the level of activity. According to structuration theory, the actions of individual agents will only succeed if everyone involved can resort to structures in the sense of a common stock of (informal) rules and resources. This research indicates that public relations (PR) practices should focus on developing basic structures for social media communications and should not be limited to communications activities. At the same time, in terms of theory, the concept of governance may be used in order to analyze the dynamics of introducing new modes of online communication.

Introduction

After the “digital evolution” from classical online communications to social media, a broad theoretical and practical discussion evolved around this topic, with opinions ranging from the perception of social media as a new chance for PR (Kelleher, 2009; Kent, 2010; Macnamara, 2010; Breakenridge, 2008; Wright & Hinson, 2010; Zerfass, Tench, Verhoeven, Vercic, & Moreno, 2010) to major fears about an inevitable loss of control (Holtz, Havens, Johnson, & International Association of Business Communicators, 2008; Pleil, 2010; Safko, 2010; Wigley & Fontenot, 2010). The basic contradiction within this topic has already been identified by Ihator (2001). She states that although new technologies offer organizations new opportunities to present their viewpoints directly to key constituents, they tend to lose control over the dissemination of information. New technologies are challenging norms with regard to controlling the flow of information between individuals as well as across organizational boundaries (McAfee, 2009, p. 5). In sum, there exists a great deal of recent research in this field, containing mixed opinions. However, researchers with both positive and negative perceptions see technological development as a major change within the field of communication.

Despite these intense discussions, the actual rate of the implementation of social media communications has not lived up to expectations in every organization, and it is not clear whether PR will lead the way. Corporate communication professionals are challenged to organize the activities of the various players who are involved in such a way as to achieve overall goals. Within the scope of Enterprise 2.0 (see, for example, McAfee, 2009), nearly every organizational function and academic discipline offers different solutions. The term Enterprise 2.0 refers to corporations that increasingly implement social software in their everyday business and consequently have to face “the social and organizational changes associated with it” (Corso, Martini, & Pesoli, 2008, p. 599). While Web 1.0 provided new capabilities or pathways through which to send information to the public, Web 2.0 seems to be different. “It is not just a technological enabler of existing methodologies. There is a fundamental shift in what Web 2.0 has enabled and the way it's being used” (Pavlik, 2007, p. 9). One of the key characteristics of social media is that they spread anarchically in most organizations (Fitch, 2009). As a result of the dynamic evolution in recent years, responsibilities are seldom assigned, and qualifications and training for employees as well as guidelines for online communications and key performance indicators designed to measure success are frequently missing (Fink & Zerfass, 2010).

Therefore, the shortcomings of pure activism as a result of the hype surrounding social media in practice are revealed. The results of recent research (Li & Bernoff, 2008; Fraser & Dutta, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Vaughan & Tinker, 2009) support this idea and lead to the conclusion that more initiatives should focus on strategies and overarching frameworks for the use of social media in organizations.

In order to achieve this aim, this paper proposes to use the concept of Social Media Governance. The general concept of governance itself has a long research history. In social science, this term encompasses all of the institutional structures and processes for handling the interdependencies between various, mostly collective, actors (Kooiman, 2007; Van Kersbergen & van Waarden, 2004). This paper transfers the concept to the field of social media communications. Therefore, the term needs to be reevaluated and conceptualized in order to analyze current practices. As clarified in the next section, Social Media Governance refers to the formal or informal frameworks which regulate the actions of the members of an

organization within the social web. The purpose of this empirical study, which will be described in subsequent sections, is to evaluate the status quo of regulatory frameworks for social media activities in German organizations. Previous studies have analyzed single aspects of Social Media Governance, e. g. guidelines (Bell, 2010; Turner, 2010; Wright & Hinson, 2009), but research on the overall concept is still missing. This study addresses this research gap by using data from a German online survey carried out in 2010 and by asking on an overarching level: how is social media communications strategically applied in German organizations? The results will tell us how social media activities are strategically rooted and how various aspects of organizational frameworks for social media interrelate with others. The final sections of this paper discuss these findings in relation to general developments in research and practice.

Literature review

As a great deal of confusion exists concerning the rapidly developing field of social media communications, every study on this topic has to start by clarifying what is understood by the research object. While there are many definitions, this paper follows Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) in defining social media as Internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0.

On the one hand, this comprises the technological, economic and juridical phenomena encompassed within Web 2.0. O'Reilly (2005) characterizes Web 2.0 according to six trends: programs become platforms; the wisdom of crowds; data inside; customer integration/user-based content; being ubiquitous and dynamic; and browser-independent content. The major change in comparison to the first development phase of the World Wide Web (see, for example, Contractor, Eisenberg & Steinfield, 1990) is that social media allow the rapid mass creation and interactive exchange of user-generated content. Many view this change as important, and have termed it a "digital evolution" (Döbler, 2008), or a paradigm shift. Whilst Web 1.0 is seen as a static collection of documents that do not change once they have been written and uploaded, the content of Web 2.0 is constantly changing. Every link and every comment alters the new web, by rapidly creating a network of content and users (*ibid.*). The first version of the World Wide Web allowed most of its users to read the uploaded content, whereas the new one has evolved to a "read-write-web", with a wide variety of users contributing user-generated content and, along the way, creating collective intelligence (Argenti & Barnes, 2010).

On the other hand, the term "social media" explicitly means that web-based applications enable users to exchange information, create relationships and communicate (Hippner, 2006). This has a social impact that reaches far beyond the actual documents or data. The networks of relations and their structures may change. According to Hippner (2006), social media applications have certain things in common, as the focus always lies on the individual user or group. People, relationships, content and ratings are intended to be demonstrated publicly. Groups and platforms are run following the principles of self-organization. Social feedback, e. g. via rating systems, acts as a major motivator. In general, the so-called "wisdom of the mass" is not embedded within the aggregation of multiple pieces of information, but within the linkages and structure between them. These principles apply in varying degrees to all different social media platforms, including wikis, weblogs, social networks or social sharing platforms. In addition, other applications may also correspond to this description, but cannot be categorized precisely into one of the aforementioned types.

Instead, they fit into all of the categories. Examples are tagging, clouds or newsfeeds.²⁶ Together, these tools have changed the perception and use of the web into a virtual space where users no longer passively consume, but actively create, change and share information.

The use of social media for public relations purposes

As noted by market research (Nielsen, 2010), the global web traffic to social media sites has steadily increased over recent years. The number of people visiting these sites rose by 24 per cent in 2010 to three-quarters of all web users. All together, people spend over 110 billion minutes per month on social media sites. This is dominated by Australian web users. On average, each Australian web-user uses the social web seven hours and 19 minutes each month. The biggest social media platforms have become powerful brands and expansive networks. MySpace has more than 100 million users, and the outperforming platform Facebook reached the level of 500 million members at the end of 2010.²⁷ The blog search tool Technorati tracks 133 million blogs and, in some countries, the use of social networking sites accounts for more than 75 per cent of all web traffic (Postman, 2009, p. VII)

Corporations have acknowledged these trends, and increasingly use social media platforms for communications. Spending on Web 2.0 technologies has increased immensely over recent years and, according to Forrester Research, will reach 4.6 billion US\$ globally by 2013. Social networking, mash-ups and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) are expected to have the greatest share in this spending. Currently, the majority of the budget is spent on employee collaboration tools. However, it has been estimated that these trends are in the process of turning. By 2013, investments in customer-facing Web 2.0 technology will be nearly one billion US\$ more (Young, Brown, Keitt, Owyang, Koplowitz, & Lo, 2008). One prominent example of a company increasingly their investment in social media is Pepsi Co. in the United States (US). The company broke its 23 year-long tradition of advertising in the Super Bowl in 2010. Instead, it spent 20 million US\$ on launching the Pepsi Refresh Project, an interactive social media campaign.

The case of Pepsi indicates a general tendency in business: in 2009, 43 per cent of the fastest growing private companies in the United States (Inc. 500) judged social media to be “very important” for their business, while 91 per cent used at least one social media tool, most commonly social networking platforms. Social networking and blogging have grown steadily over the last three years, while message boards, online video, wikis and podcasting have leveled off or declined (Barnes & Mattson, 2009).

Many studies have addressed the potential positive impacts of social media (Bauer, Große-Leege, & Rösger, 2007; Picot & Fischer, 2006; Pleil & Zerfass, 2007; Ruisinger, 2007), which range from the implementation of companies’ own formats to the incorporation of third-party applications. In accordance, European communication professionals interviewed in the European Communication Monitor 2010 survey assessed social media as having an increasing level of importance and predicted that they would become the third most important channel or instrument for public relations by 2013. One out of four professionals thinks that social media are important for the profession today. Communities, videos and weblogs are particularly highly appreciated. Consequently, it is considered that coping with

²⁶ For a more detailed description see, for example, the work of Ebersbach, Glaser and Heigl (2010).

²⁷ Numbers retrieved from www.myspace.com/pressroom/fact-sheet and www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics.

digital evolution and the social web will be the most important issue for communications management within the next three years (Zerfass et al., 2010, pp. 90-93). From the perspective of strategic communication, new communication platforms revolutionize the dynamics and dimensions of communication within organizational settings and between organizations and their stakeholders. Examples of social media applications can be found in all phases of the communications management process. Analyzing communication in social communities can enhance monitoring and evaluation, while collaboration platforms may help to establish advanced planning routines. During their implementation, communications professionals can apply different measures such as spreading image videos via Youtube or establishing the Chief Executive Officer as an expert on Twitter. Thus, customers may become more committed and more loyal to the company, its products and services (Lattemann & Stieglitz, 2007). Hence, the possible advantages that practitioners expect are multiform. Unparalleled access to information, enhanced brand awareness and perception, better engagement with stakeholders, collaboration, a richer experience for users and improved web metrics are just some examples that have inspired many companies to implement social media for corporate communications (Postman, 2009).

Threats and Vulnerabilities	Risks	Risk Mitigation Techniques
Introduction of viruses and malware to the organizational network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data leakage/theft • “Owned” systems (zombies) • System downtime • Resources required to clean systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that antivirus and antimalware controls are installed on all systems and updated daily. • Consider use of content filtering technology to restrict or limit access to social media sites. • Ensure that appropriate controls are also installed on mobile devices such as smartphones. • Establish or update policies and standards. • Develop and conduct awareness training and campaigns to inform employees of the risks involved with using social media sites.
Exposure to customers and the enterprise through a fraudulent or hijacked corporate presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer backlash/adverse legal actions • Exposure of customer information • Reputational damage • Targeted phishing attacks on customers or employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage a brand protection firm that can scan the Internet and search out misuse of the enterprise brand. • Give periodic informational updates to customers to maintain awareness of potential fraud and to establish clear guidelines regarding what information should be posted as part of the enterprise social media presence.
Unclear or undefined content rights to information posted to social media sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enterprise’s loss of control/legal rights of information posted to the social media sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that legal and communications teams carefully review user agreements for social media sites that are being considered. • Establish clear policies that dictate to employees and customers what information should be posted as part of the enterprise social media presence. • If feasible and appropriate, ensure that there is a capability to capture and log all communications.
A move to a digital business model may increase customer service expectations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer dissatisfaction with the responsiveness received in this arena, leading to potential reputational damage for the enterprise and customer retention issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that staffing is adequate to handle the amount of traffic that could be created from a social media presence. • Create notices that provide clear windows for customer response.
Mismanagement of electronic communications that may be impacted by retention regulations or e-discovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulatory sanctions and fines • Adverse legal actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish appropriate policies, processes and technologies to ensure that communications via social media that may be impacted by litigation or regulations are tracked and archived appropriately. • Note that, depending on the social media site, maintaining an archive may not be a recommended approach.

Figure 1: Risks of social media and mitigation techniques

Source: ISACA, 2010, p. 7

In addition to these new opportunities, a variety of new risks are also threatening organizations and their communications departments. Attention should be paid to the specific “dangers and methods of social engineering, common exploits, and the threats to privacy that social media present” (ISACA, 2010, p. 6). Figure 1 sums up some of the most common risks and appropriate risk mitigation techniques. It reveals that traditional organization-centered thinking is becoming out-dated, as interactions become more complex within multiple new and ever-changing arenas (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). Participants in the European Communication Monitor 2010 judged the fact that everyone within an organization is able to spread information to be especially ominous (Zerfass et al., 2010, p. 83). When employees who are not adequately trained get involved in social media dialogue, many risky situations arise. “Indeed, many managers and communication professionals still think that anonymous postings to blogs and discussion groups cannot be tracked back to their source. They can, and

anonymous posters are regularly exposed by blog moderators. Such exposure always makes the organization that posted the message look desperate or stupid” (Kent, 2008, p. 37).

As soon as one looks behind the scenes of the social media boom, it becomes clear that only a minority of organizations have the skills, strategies or structures which are necessary for long-term social media success. Most organizations manage their social media implementation from a predominantly technical perspective, without addressing the more strategic and structural aspects of organizational and change management (Corso et al., 2008, p. 609). More than half of the communication professionals interviewed in the European Communication Monitor 2010 were neither planning special training programs for their employees nor implementing key performance indicators in order to measure their social media activities (Zerfass et al., 2010, p. 79). However, optimal conditions for supporting the overarching organizational goals can only be established with coordinated activities among the plurality of actors involved. Along these lines, Pavlik calls for consideration of not only the impact of technology on how PR practitioners carry out their work, but also of the “implications of technology on organizational structure, culture and management” (Pavlik, 2007, p. 3).

Conventional structures that allow only single actors, e.g. the official spokesperson, to communicate the will of the organization reveal weak points in today’s dynamic and complex external environment, where polyphony and diversity are required (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008) and a plurality of stimuli from the environment have to be monitored (Lenhart, 2006; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). However, this has not been realized in many organizations, which for many years have worked with a “command and control” approach regarding the management of new technologies (Marfleet, 2008, p. 153)

In summary, despite the importance of social media, “meaningful gaps exist between what is happening and what should be happening in terms of all the social media“ (Wright & Hinson, 2009). Organizations are still lacking appropriate structures, cultures and strategies for participative modes of online communication. Subsequently, new ones are needed. One possible solution – social media governance – shall be introduced in the following section as a concept for studying the conditions for social media communications.

Governance and social media

In the social sciences, the understanding of “governance” differs widely and encompasses a variety of aspects without one singular binding definition. There is no consensus on which set of phenomena belongs to “governance”, while, at the same time, the significance of the topic is agreed upon by most researchers (Van Kersbergen & van Waarden, 2004, p. 165). In general, *governance* includes all institutional structures and processes used to handle interdependencies between various, mostly collective, actors (Kooiman, 2007; Van Kersbergen & van Waarden, 2004). The theoretical roots of this concept can be found in both economics and political science.

The first of these scientific streams started when Coase (1937) claimed that markets alone could not be considered as perfect coordination mechanisms because they still had a number of coordination problems within the economic sphere. Williamson (1975) added to this theory by stating that other institutions may be far more suited to minimizing transaction costs than the market itself. This led to the notion that modern economies are regulated by a mixture of markets and other governance mechanisms.

Political science has explored this field from a different angle. Beginning with an analysis of interstate relationships, it was affirmed that “governance without government”

occurred (multilevel governance) (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992). Policy research also went from talking about planning to controlling to governance, demonstrating that the state cannot apply control over society, but that there are many more coordination mechanisms that need to be considered (Benz, 2007, p. 13).

The scientific roots of the term “governance” demonstrate its essential perspective: on the one hand, neither political actors nor the state can apply their goals to society, nor can the market as such alone guarantee the efficiency of production and distribution in the economic sphere. On the other hand, alternative modes of dealing with interdependencies besides the market and the state come into play (Benz, 2007). This causes other transformations as well. With changes in the location of rule production, the style of governance changes as well. The current trend has turned towards negotiation and the management of information in networks (Van Kersbergen & van Warden 2004, p. 155). McAfee (2009, p. 6) highlights that, with a new style of leadership, people themselves can experiment within boundaries established by the actual leaders, while the latter stay in the background. If these leaders show their subordinates the way and motivate others to follow, this may be in the organization’s best interests. In other words, the concept of governance focuses on a mixture of non-hierarchical and hierarchical forms of coordination. Governance as an umbrella term refers to the logic of action and the causal relations between structures, interests and interactions (Kooiman, 2007). This special perspective has recently been applied in many different social sciences, such as political science, law, sociology or economics. However, the foci in these different areas vary. While the political sciences analyze the interplay between action, interaction and institutional frameworks, the discussion on governance in economics revolves around governance configurations and their costs, efficiency and competitive advantages (Lütz, 2006, p. 19)

This concept has also been transferred from the societal to the organizational level. Corporate governance means the overall framework for the guidance and control of a company in a relationship with multiple stakeholders (Tricker, 2009; Hopt, 1998). Van Kersbergen and van Waarden (2004) underline the importance of corporate governance by stating that the “relations between actors pose specific risks and uncertainties” and that there is a need for different mechanisms “to reduce these in order to make cooperation possible or easier” (p. 152).

This can be further split up into singular aspects that should be considered within the realm of corporate governance. For the purpose of this paper, the relevant relations are the communications between an organization and its stakeholders via social media. Hence, the resulting organizational framework shall be called Social Media Governance. Social Media Governance then refers to the formal or informal frameworks which regulate the actions of the members of an organization within the social web. With the development of Web 2.0, new constellations of actors in and around organizations have emerged, and this has resulted in changing institutional arrangements and regulatory structures. As a consequence, former borders between national and international, public and private and internal and external are dissolving. Hence, new concepts of legitimization are necessary (Donges, 2007, p. 12).

When considering the practice of Social Media Governance, two different understandings are relevant: a concept of governance focusing solely on social media policies and a wider understanding of governance based on broad regulatory frameworks.

Social Media Governance based on guidelines

Social media guidelines, sometimes also called blogging policies or social network guidelines, describe and provide advice on how social media communications shall be dealt

with by all of the members of an organization and how it can enable all of them to become communicators in participative online environments. Both practitioners and researchers have recently begun to discuss these issues (e.g. Bell, 2010; Turner, 2010; Wright & Hinson, 2009).

Even if a corporation does not want to actively engage in the social web, there is a need to educate employees and formulate clear guidelines on the use of social media both, on the job and for private activities. Often, juridical concerns about privacy issues and the spread of internal matters inspire such regulatory activities. The digital reputation of an organization is at stake when it is talked about on social media platforms. The efficiency of business processes are at risk when employees spend too much time on social networking sites. This has led to an increasing number of firms prohibiting all social media use in the workplace (ISACA, 2010). Marfleet (2008, p. 153) describes such a procedure as “short-sighted”, as it “will inevitably backfire as individuals choose to work for those organizations that support them in working in a way they want to and which encourages creativity and experimentation”. Put differently, prohibitions leave many employees unsatisfied and ignore the positive aspects of engagement with social media. Consequently, many organizations use social media guidelines instead. For younger employees using the social web in particular, smartphones or an iPad today represent a natural component of everyday life, and so banning them becomes impossible. Hence, when these activities offer the employer an advantage, the associated risks are commonly ignored. This way, many applications have been developed which have added value. However, such isolated solutions often undermine existing organizational arrangements. Only a minority of organizations tackle these new challenges with profound policies. Although training and certificates are mandatory for many aspects of an organization, similar aspects with regard to social media are supposed to evolve independently. According to a study based in the US, only one-third of the Inc. 500 companies have implemented formal guidelines concerning blogging etc. for their employees (Barnes & Mattson, 2009). In Europe, less than 30 per cent of all organizations had implemented such guidelines in 2010, according to reports from communications professionals (Zerfass et al., 2010, p. 79).

Organizations have to be careful when constructing social media guidelines. Prohibitions in the form of abstract descriptions will not be able to encourage and guide employees, but might increase feelings of uncertainty. As such policies usually also address private usage of the social web, it is recommended to call them “recommendations”, thus clearly expressing the organization’s attitude towards social media. When creating such guidelines, employees or employee representatives should be involved in order to achieve high levels of acceptance. The demands placed on guidelines are high: they need to address different heterogeneous audiences and still be comprehensible, flexible and dynamically adaptable to a range of new situations. This final aspect in particular plays an important role, as not all of the possible scenarios involved in such a rapidly evolving field as Web 2.0 can be conceptualized in advance. Therefore, various scopes of action might be permitted (Ulbricht, 2010).

It should be acknowledged that the goal of control which is inherent in social media guidelines might clash with the desire of employees for autonomy. This is relevant because participative online platforms are often conceptualized as democratizing organizational communication.

Social Media Governance Based on A Broader Regulatory Framework

A different perspective acknowledges the fact that rules alone cannot succeed. The concept of Social Media Governance which is proposed here corresponds to the notion of an overall framework as implied by corporate governance theory. A strategic use of social media in communications requires resources such as trained employees, modern information technology and appropriate budgets, as well as favorable organizational cultures and structures. The latter require, among other things, the assignment of responsibilities, monitoring processes, and appropriate feedback and editorial routines. The importance of such structures can be explained using structuration theory (Giddens, 1984; Zerfass, 2008, 2010), in the sense that if structures are implemented in an organizational setting, they enable and limit the communicative actions of individuals working in these settings. At the same time, rules and resources are reproduced and modified in the course of communicative actions. Therefore, the establishment of a structural framework should be the first step for organizations when exploiting social media, even before training employees and finally developing and implementing online activities. It becomes necessary to attune staff to a learning process that exploits the opportunities provided by social media, reduces potential risks, and ensures the future growth of the organization. There is no easy solution to the question of assigning the responsibility for these tasks. A competence center, such as a social media board, could be the most effective way of dealing with overarching issues, collecting examples of best practices and enabling other departments through the provision of information and advice. However, as social media increasingly influence the everyday processes of different departments, social media skills must be part of the basic skills of all employees. Decentralized freedom of action concerning the choice of tools, communication style and content must be balanced with overall guidelines.

In spite of the theoretical basis for such an understanding of social media governance, it has not been empirically researched until now. This is where the study presented in this work comes in.

Research questions and hypotheses

This study attempts to depict the status quo of strategic social media communications in German corporations and political and non-governmental organizations. Therefore, the underlying research question is: how is social media communications strategically applied in German organizations? From this question, more specific questions have been derived:

RQ1: How common are social media activities in organizations?

RQ2: To what extent are social media skills and strategies developed by PR managers?

RQ3: What kinds of regulatory frameworks for social media exist today?

RQ4: Are there any correlations between structural frameworks for social media and the level of the corresponding communications activities within organizations?

Accordingly, the following hypotheses were generated after the literature review:

H1a: Social media applications are used within the field of PR by a minority of organizations;

H1b: The history of social media use in PR is very short, and no more than a quarter of all organizations have been active in this area for more than one year;

H2a: The social media skills of most PR professionals are at a medium or low level;

H2b: A lack of knowledge and experience in conceptual approaches to social media are the main obstacles within the range of competencies which are needed for social media;

- H2c: Only a minority of organizations has already developed social media strategies;
 H3a: The regulatory frameworks for social media are weak in most organizations;
 H3b: The resources needed for social media communications are mostly lacking;
 H4: The intensity of social media activities in organizations correlates positively with the existence of rules and resources for this field.

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, the concept of Social Media Governance was used as an umbrella term. This study, entitled “Social Media Governance 2010”, was one of the first studies to aim to analyze the broad concept of social media governance, by not only referring to specific guidelines but also the overall organizational framework. The focal areas of this research were therefore: strategies for the launch of social media communications; skills and responsibilities within the organization; tools and applications in corporate communications; the relevance, opportunities and risks of communications in the social web; and the existing regulatory frameworks for interactive communications.

An online survey was conducted across Germany, the largest country in Europe, in June 2010. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions, each based on scientific hypotheses incorporating existing theories and previous empirical findings. The subjects received a personal invitation to participate as well as a reminder via a mailing list provided by the magazine “Pressesprecher” and the largest branch association of public relations professionals in Germany, the Bundesverband deutscher Pressesprecher (BdP). It can be assumed that the members of the organization and the magazine readership together represent a fairly good cross-section of the population of PR professionals in Germany, whose size and structure are not known. Descriptive and inferential statistics were computed with the help of SPSS software in order to describe the general frequencies of social media activities and to explore relationships. Group differences were tested with variance analyses, and dependencies with correlations. For this purpose, the correlation coefficient was determined, using either Pearson's correlation coefficient or Spearman's rho, depending on the data scale (Wilcox, 2010).

The response was 1007 fully completed questionnaires. This is, to our knowledge, the largest sample for a social media survey of the population of PR professionals in Germany until now. The respondent pool consisted of communications professionals in joint-stock companies (17.8 per cent) and private companies (44.7 per cent), public sector organizations and associations (23 per cent), as well as non-profit-organizations (14.5 per cent). A total of 37.1 per cent worked as heads of PR or corporate communications, 59.8 per cent as PR managers or spokespeople and 3.1 per cent as trainees. The average age of the respondents was 40 years old. The participants in the survey were divided into three groups. Filters in the questionnaire ensured that the sections which concerned the use of social media etc. were only answered by those engaged with the relevant issues.

An index of social media activities (I_{SMA}) was calculated as the sum of all social media tools, networks and applications employed by the PR department through the addition of three different questions in the questionnaire. The index values ranged from 0 to 27. Low activities were characterized as $0 \leq I_{SMA} \leq 3$ (average value), medium activities as $4 \leq I_{SMA} \leq 7$ and intensive activities as $8 \leq I_{SMA} \leq 27$.

Moreover, the respondents were asked “Are there specific strategies present in your organization for initiating and using social media in business processes?” The index of social media strategies (I_{SMS}) was then calculated as a dichotomous value (0 or 1) based on the

statements of the surveyed communications managers regarding the existence of specific strategies.

Another question in the survey required the participants to judge their social media skills on a scale from 1 (no experience) to 5 (professional). In order to gain a more detailed understanding, the following dimensions were required: knowledge of the social media landscape; knowledge of social web etiquette; skills in initiating web-based dialogs; knowledge of the technical requirements for setting up social media platforms; knowledge of the legal framework; information about the interplay between social media and traditional media (print, television, radio); experience in the management of web communities; knowledge of the prevalent means of expression; experience in the development of social media strategies; and experience in the evaluation of social media activities. A value for the index of social media skills (I_{SMK}) was calculated for each survey participant as the average rating of the 10 individual skills in the questionnaire. The index values ranged from 0 (no experience) to 5 (professional). A low skill level was indicated by $0 \leq I_{SMK} < 2.5$, a medium skill level by $2.5 \leq I_{SMK} \leq 3.5$, and a high skill level by $3.5 < I_{SMK} \leq 5$.

Regulatory frameworks were operationalized using a list of the following 12 items: participative corporate culture; commitment of top management; human resources; person in charge of social media in each department; monitoring tools; social media workshops; seminars or training; social media guidelines; strategy papers; key performance indicators for measuring success; specific budget; software and hardware; and a dedicated social media department. For each item, the participants were asked whether it already existed in their organization, was planned for the coming year or did not exist at all. The index of social media regulatory frameworks (I_{SMO}) was calculated as the sum of all of the structural elements governing social media which were present in the organization. The index values ranged from 0 to 12. A weak regulatory framework was defined as $0 \leq I_{SMO} \leq 4$, average as $5 \leq I_{SMO} \leq 8$ and sophisticated as $9 \leq I_{SMO} \leq 12$.

Results

The data showed that every second organization (54 per cent of the sample) utilized social media for their communications activities, while 26 per cent had only become active within the previous 12 months (from July 2009 onwards), a further 22 per cent more than one year ago, and 6 per cent had more than three years of practical experience in the area. In contrast, 83 per cent of the respondents reported that their organization had used websites for corporate communications for five years or more. Hypotheses 1a and 1b were therefore falsified – a small majority of German organizations use social media in PR and 28 per cent (slightly more than a quarter) have been active for more than one year, which nonetheless still hints at a short overall history within the profession.

Communications departments were most commonly in the lead with regard to using social media, followed by the advertising/marketing communications, sales and human resources departments. The most frequently applied tools were video sharing and micro blogging (Twitter), and the most popular communities were Facebook and Xing. With regard to all of the social media platforms and specialized PR activities, only one-third of the subjects revealed high levels of activity, as calculated using the (I_{SMA}) index. Organizations with more experience of using social media were more likely to assess these platforms as being beneficial for corporate communications. The respondents appreciated not only technical aspects but also the character of social media as drivers for strategic communications. Advantages were seen in the opportunity to disseminate information quickly

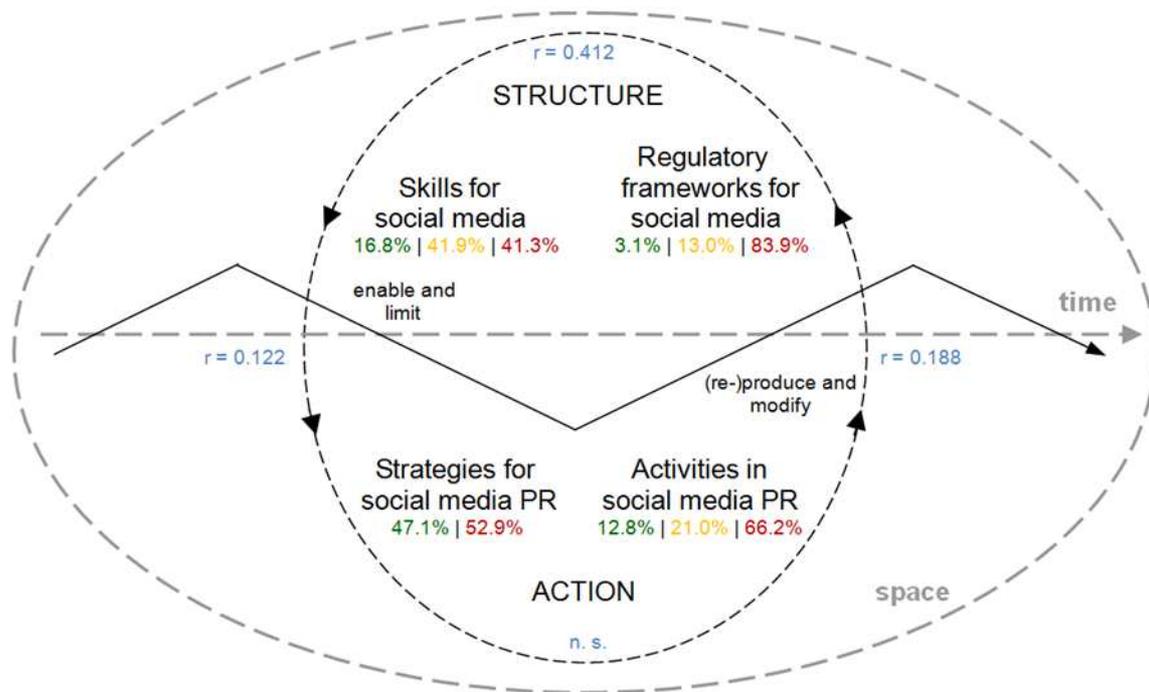
(82.3 per cent of participants) and to improve services and customer loyalty (45.7 per cent of participants).

TABLE 1
Regulatory frameworks for social media communications

	Proportion (per cent) of organizations		
	Present	Planned	Not considered
Commitment of top management	33.1	29.1	37.8
Human resources	28.4	25.8	37.8
Dedicated social media department	4.6	4.5	90.9
Software and hardware	46.2	18.1	35.7
Person in charge of social media in each department	27.2	21.3	51.5
Specific budget	11.7	19.1	69.2
Social media guidelines	19.1	36.3	44.6
Social media workshops, seminars or trainings	21.9	32.3	45.8
Monitoring tools	24.3	28.4	47.3
Key performance indicators for measuring success	12.7	32.0	55.3
Strategy papers	17.4	41.7	40.9
Participative corporate culture	35.2	27.1	37.7

Even though the incorporation rates of social media were quite high, the professionals evaluated their own social media skills (assessed using the index I_{SMK}) to be low (41.3 per cent) or medium (41.9 per cent), as expected according to hypothesis 2a. Most of the deficits were stated to be in the areas of technical expertise (mean score 2.21 on a five-point scale), evaluation (2.24), strategy development (2.35) and the management of web communities (2.38). This supports hypothesis 2b: the main obstacles within the range of competencies needed for effective social media communications are a lack of knowledge and experience of conceptual approaches to social media. This lack of expertise comes into play when evaluating the risks of social media. With regard to these risks, the majority (66.2 per cent) of the respondents mentioned the loss of control of communications processes and 64.1 per cent the need for quick reactions.

Shortfalls were found in terms of social media strategies in PR, as implied in hypothesis 2c. Only 47.1 per cent of all communications managers indicated the presence of strategies with a positive I_{SMS} value – the highest numbers were found within joint-stock companies. This correlated with the lack of structural prerequisites for strategic planning. At the time of the study, only 4.6 per cent of companies had established a specific social media department. If established, these departments had little authority: only one-third of the departments were responsible for the development of strategies and only 12.5 per cent had sovereignty over their budget.



Social Media Governance 2010 / n = 1,007 communication managers / **Green values**: Share of participants with high skills, existing strategies, intensive activities and sophisticated regulatory frameworks (index values). **Yellow values**: medium skills, medium activities, average regulatory frameworks. **Red values**: Low skills, no strategies, low activities, weak regulatory frameworks. **Blue values**: correlation coefficients according to Pearson's or Spearman's r at a significance level of $p < 0.05$; n. s. = not significant / Depiction of actions and structures based on Giddens, 1984; Zerfass, 2010.

Figure 2: Dynamics of social media in PR

Equally, the establishment of regulatory structures for social media was lacking. According to the I_{SMO} index, 3.1 per cent of the organizations had a sophisticated regulatory framework, 13.0 per cent had average structures and 83.9 per cent had structures which could be classified as weak. Thus, hypothesis 3a was confirmed. More specifically, there was a deficiency in terms of key performance indicators for social media (87 per cent of the organizations), specific budgets (88 per cent), social media guidelines (81 per cent), professional development opportunities such as seminars and training courses (78 per cent) and staff resources (72 per cent) (see table 1). Many essential factors, such as managerial commitment and a participative corporate culture, were only reported by one in three of those corporations which were surveyed. Hypothesis 3b was verified; the resources needed for social media communications were lacking in most organizations. The best conditions were found in stock companies and non-profit organizations.

Correlation analyses revealed the essential role of governance or regulatory frameworks in relation to the other aspects of social media use. Figure 2 shows that three of the four dimensions correlated positively, thereby supporting hypothesis 4. The intensity of social media activities in organizations is linked to the existence of rules and resources in this field. Astonishingly, strategies for social media PR and concrete activities were not significantly interlinked. Hence, the creation of plans does not necessarily support action and vice versa. The correlation between activities and regulatory frameworks was significant, but quite low (r

= 0.188). If a regulatory framework existed, it had a positive impact on social media skills ($r = 0.412$) and in turn on the development of strategy ($r = 0.122$). Social media skills themselves correlated positively with the level of activity ($r = 0.225$). Table 2 indicates the frequencies of the indices for social media activities, strategies, skills and frameworks and, therefore, the current status of strategically-applied social media communications in German organizations.

TABLE 2
The status quo of social media communications in German organizations

Index	Category	Proportion (per cent) of organizations	Category	Proportion (per cent) of organizations	Category	Proportion (per cent) of organizations
I _{SMA} (Activities)	Intensive	12.8	Medium	21.0	Low	66.2
I _{SMK} (Skills)	High	16.8	Medium	41.9	Low	41.3
I _{SMS} (Strategies)	Present	47.1			Not present	52.9
I _{SMO} (Regulatory framework)	Sophisticated	3.1	Average	13.0	Weak	83.9

Discussion

The results of this research show that one important factor with regard to the dynamics of social media use in PR is the regulatory frameworks which are applied in organizations. Pure activism, such as the implementation of Facebook and Youtube channels for corporations, their brands and relevant debates (corporate social responsibility, employer branding) is not enough, and neither is a focus on social media strategies. Wider organizational structures need to be considered, as has been stated in previous studies (Li & Bernoff, 2008; Dutta, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The current state of practice as attested by the “Social Media Governance Study 2010”, however, is alarming: 80 per cent of organizations lack developed governance structures. The study presented here is a first attempt to develop an extensive understanding of the status quo of social media governance.

The results verified six out of the eight hypotheses which were derived from the literature. Previous studies have claimed that social media spread with immense speed (Barnes & Mattson, 2009; Nielsen, 2010; Postman, 2009). On the contrary, it was shown that only a small proportion of German organizations apply social media to their corporate communications. This underlines the argument by Wright and Hinson (2009, p. 19) that “meaningful gaps exist [...] between what is happening and what should be happening in terms of all the social media options”. While most organizations have well-established websites, they have only recently started using participative online platforms. This makes sense, as these platforms were created much later than websites. However, the differences in levels of experience are astonishing. Organizations’ lack of experience was found to be

significantly related to the underdeveloped social media skills of most PR professionals. As stated in their self-assessments, these professionals have the most difficulties with the technical and conceptual aspects of the Web 2.0. Similarly, the regulatory frameworks within organizations are weakly developed. Apart from studies that focus on guidelines, little research has been conducted on this field of interest. Hence, little knowledge exists that might be used for guidance and examples of best practices. Similarly, resources and strategies for the use of social media are lacking in many cases. It appears that organizations do not establish the basic structures needed for the long-term establishment of social media, even if they are already actively communicating using these means. These shortfalls endanger the success of social media, as shown by the fact that this research found rules, resources and actions to be significantly correlated. In other words, this research offers additional support for the recently-formed argument that asks for more strategic and general considerations when actively communicating using social media.

According to these results, Social Media Governance, in line with a broad understanding of regulatory frameworks consisting of guidelines, key performance indicators, clear-cut responsibilities etc., acts as the key factor in successful social media activities. PR managers should start here. It can be concluded that those who want to avoid activism and the uncontrolled growth of social media communications should invest more in structural development because it correlates with all of the other aspects. This can be explained based on the theory of structuration by Anthony Giddens (1984): governance structures enable and limit individual actions, while their iterative process of updating reproduces and stabilizes them. Ideally, organizations should first develop a base consisting of a regulatory framework for social media, and then train their staff to develop strategies and measures.

In conclusion, in this paper, the concept of social media governance was derived from social science and transferred to the field of social media communication. The emergent extensive understanding of the term was used for an empirical survey, entitled the "Social Media Governance 2010" study. As shown by the results, the framework which is used to regulate the actions of the members of an organization in the social web has emerged as a key to success. Such findings provide an important path for the future application of social media for corporate communications. The status quo in German organizations, however, indicates that there is still a great deal of room for improvement.

Limitations and future research

As this study was carried out in Germany, the results cannot be considered as being representative of other countries, e. g. those countries with different amounts of social media use in society and by organizations. Although the general trends indicated here are not necessarily to be doubted in their applicability to other regions, this needs to be tested. It would be especially interesting to draw a comparison between countries with higher rates of social media use, such as the US, and those with lower levels of usage, such as developing countries.

Another limitation of this survey was that the invitations were sent out via e-mail. PR professionals who totally disapprove of this form of communication were therefore immediately excluded from the sample. This is rather unlikely, but may be crucial because such a group could consist of a significant proportion of individuals who are very inexperienced with regard to online communications. As a result, the level of experience of social media reported in this study could be even lower in the overall population of PR professionals. The results of this study are further limited by the fact that it was based on a

survey. Answers about the level of incorporation of social media might therefore be biased because of social desirability. Hence, all of the results should be looked at with this in mind, and should be compared with insights from studies which have used other approaches, e. g. content analyses of social media platforms. Furthermore, some general tendencies indicated by this questionnaire should be looked into. Qualitative research methods would help to gather further insights into the perception of Social Media Governance and specific implementation techniques.

One fact that should be analyzed in more detail is the understanding of social media strategies. The results of this study show that many communications professionals claim to have specific strategies, but that hardly any of the prerequisites for such strategies had been implemented. Hence, how effective such strategies could be is questionable. In addition, more research could be conducted concerning the differences between the best-equipped category of organizations – the stock market companies – and other companies. Are there any links to the juridical aspects of their special communications situation? Are there differences between industries? Do companies in business-to-business markets differ from those in business-to-consumer segments?

The study reported here has focused on a new dimension of research in online PR. The preliminary results have been presented, but this study must be replicated, and more research is needed to get a clearer picture of the connectivity between the different variables and general trends. More research is needed to advance the theoretical and practical discussion about social media to a more strategic level and to explore the possibilities for PR. This might help to cope with the frequently-addressed notion of the loss of control in social media environments. With appropriate structures and resources, this could be answered by establishing joint frameworks of reference for those who are representing the organization. Social governance frameworks support leaders in PR in organizing the activities of co-workers and other players involved in such a way as to optimally achieve organizational goals.

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