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## Online Public Relations and Issues Management

Maebh Fahy

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Online Public Relations  
and Issues Management

Maebh Fahy



00158998



DECLARATION

Institiúid Teicneolaíochta Chorcaí  
Cork Institute of Technology

Master's Degree (MA) in Public Relations with New Media

is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for assessment for any academic purpose other than in partial fulfillment for the award above.

## Online Public Relations and Issues Management

Signed..... (Student)

Dated.....

Maebh Fahy  
MA in Public Relations with New Media

Supervised by Emmett Coffey  
September 2012

Submitted to the Cork Institute of Technology in part fulfillment of the requirements for the MA in Public Relations with New Media

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Cork Institute of Technology

## DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of

Master's Degree (MA) in Public Relations with New Media

Is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for assessment for any academic purpose other than in partial fulfillment for the stated above.

Signed..... (Student)

Date.....

## ABSTRACT

This is a study into online issues management for Public Relations. It focuses on key themes related to the issues management process such as reputation management and two-way symmetrical communication.

The project highlights how Web 2.0 technologies and social media platforms have impacted strategic public relations. It focuses on media relations, transparency, engagement and monitoring and the how these tools are integrated into social media by public relations professionals.

Primary and secondary resources have been used in this project to provide insights into the chosen field of study.

Primary research carried out was in the form of semi-structured interviews and used professionals in the industry.

Secondary resources drew from a range of academic sources and used the insights of theorists such as Grunig and Hunt, Theaker, and Kitchen as a framework for analysis and understanding.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This purpose of this project of this project is to the impact of issues management on the public relations profession.

As new technologies emerge, relationship dynamics change and thus new research and understanding of traditional aspect of the public relations industry is necessary. This project focuses on themes related to traditional issues management and attempts to understand their function and role within an online context.

The themes that this project focuses on are reputation management, ethical communication and strategic issues management processes. Keeping these themes in mind, this project with look at emerging online relationships, with a particular focus on media relations. It will also look at transparency and the function it play in the overall issues management process, both online and offline. This project will then critically analyse social media platforms and how they can be utilised as tools for issues management.

This project uses a number of professionals in the hotel industry to provide insight into their online engagement. However, the interviewees were chosen based on their expertise in the area and not on their particular field. The hotel industry is a multi-service industry and offers a number of services to consumers. For this reason, it was chosen as an area with different functionalities and thus targets different demographics. In this way the service industry provides a framework for analysis for the project.

### **1.2 Research Objectives**

Online public relations is an emerging field in the overall public relations discipline, research must use traditional public relations theories to provide a framework for analysis. The research objectives are:

1. To understand complex and emerging relationships between public relations professionals, journalists and bloggers.
2. To understand the role of transparency in the overall online issues management process

3. To analyse social media platforms to understand their role in issues management
4. To understand the importance of online issues management to the overall strategic communications process

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The research objectives lead to a number of research questions that will be explored throughout this project.

#### **Research Question One: What role does media relations play in online issues management and how has Web 2.0 affected this?**

Media relations are a vital part of the public relations process however, with the decline in newspaper circulation and the rise in citizen journalism and blogging, it is essential to determine the impact on media relations.

#### **Research Question Two: How do traditional issues management themes integrate into an online environment?**

This question will explore themes associated with traditional issues management such as reputation management and transparency and how the role they play in online relationships.

#### **Research Question Three: In what way do social media platforms facilitate the issues management process?**

Online relationships can impact social media platforms and in turn social media platforms can impact issues management. This research project will analyse social media so as to understand its usefulness to the overall issues management process.

### **1.4 Thesis Structure**

The structure of this thesis adheres to the guidelines as outlined by the academic institution.

### **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The literature review explores previous academic studies and theories that have contributed to the overall understanding of the researcher for this project. It focuses on

key themes related to public relations, strategic communication and issues management and will provide a framework for later chapters.

### **Chapter Three: Research Methodologies**

The Research Methodologies chapter outlines the research methods undertaken by the researcher for this project. It provides a justification for the research methods used.

### **Chapter Four: Findings**

The findings chapter uses knowledge gained from primary and secondary research and uses this to explore the field of study. It will use the research objectives and questions as a guideline for layout and analysis.

### **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

The concluding chapter of this project will highlight the understanding the researcher gained from this study and makes recommendations based on these insights.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to define salient issues and overview the context for the research outlined later. Public Relations (PR) is a changing, evolving area interlinked to many other branches of knowledge and has been significantly influenced by the Information Communications Technology (ICT) revolution, particularly Social Media. The PR industry ranges across a wide continuum of roles, elements and activities. The ‘communications process’, per se, has developed over the decades with rich, diverse theories, approaches, research projects, etc., exploring personal, organizational, social, business, political, etc., dimensions. Proactive and reactive management approaches are included in Issues/Crisis Management, Marketing, Reputation Management, and Influencing Others activities. Ethical principles and approaches ground Public Relations in acceptable and transparent across-the-industry values and norms. The surge of recent years in person-specific communications’ technologies has established the personal interconnectivity of PR. Recent international and national social/political/economic events reflect this ‘personalization’. Thus, corporate and personal PR are inextricably intertwined.

### 2.2 Public Relations

As an emerging discipline, PR has many diverse definitions. The question, ‘What is Public Relations?’ does not have a straightforward or simple answer. Instead, one must look at many of these definitions and use them as a basis of understanding for the industry.

“At present public relations is an emergent discipline with porous boundaries to a range of other disciplines; marketing, management, organization studies, communications, journalism, media studies ” (L’Etang, 2006). It “is used in a huge range of industries and in each one slightly different skills and competencies have emerged among practitioners. As a result, there is no one universally agreed definition of PR” (Tench and Yeomans, 2006).

In 1978 the First World Assembly of Public Relations in Mexico defined PR as “the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organizational leaders, and implementing planned programs of action which will serve both the organization and the public interest” (Tench and Yeomans, 2006). As the industry grows, updated definitions emerge. In 2003, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) defined the industry as ‘influencing behavior to achieve objectives through the effective management of relationships and communications’ (Tench and Yeomans, 2006). This may be simplified to “Public Relations is about reputation- the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you” (Theaker, 2008). Another brief definition comes from Kitchen, as quoted in Tench and Yeomans (2006), who defines PR as “communication with various publics”.

### **2.3 PR, Propaganda and Persuasion**

Of course, like any industry, PR is not without its critics within a broad spectrum of views. For example, there are those who view PR as a means of propaganda. According to Jowett and O’Donnell, quoted in Tench and Yeomans (2006), propaganda is the “deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perception, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist”. Grunig and Hunt, as quoted in Tench and Yeomans (2006), reinforce this idea. They claim that “Public Relations serves a propaganda function in the press agency /publicity model. Practitioners spread the faith of the organization involved, often through incomplete, distorted, or half-true information”.

In contrast, Jaksá and Pritchard and Andersen, quoted in Tench and Yeomans (2008) *Exploring Public Relations*, assert that not all persuasion is bad, just because a communicator seeks to instigate change does not mean it is propaganda. Anderson highlights that persuasion can benefit people or publics so long as the communicator seeks a “voluntary change in the attitudes and/or actions of...receivers”.

The Public Relations concept and process is fraught with such potential for conflict and disagreement, especially in areas of socio-civic importance, crisis issues, potentially negative public developments, health related areas of concern, etc. The art and science of informing and influencing people is, perhaps, inherently controversial. Personal and



social attitudes, perceptions, prior experiences, personal values and beliefs may operate as ‘intervening variables’ and distort the ‘encoded message’. Thus, the ‘message decoding’ process may result in a warped misrepresentation of the original communication.

## **2.4 Ethical Persuasion in Public Relations**

While some critics may assert that PR is a form of propaganda through persuasion, there are frameworks that provide ethical models for persuasive communication. These models enable the PR industry to differentiate itself from propaganda.

To understand ethical persuasion it is first imperative to define ‘Ethics’. ‘Ethics’ is a difficult term to define, its roots and boundaries span across cultural and societal beliefs and cultural constructions. However, for the purpose of this project, The Oxford Dictionary provides the most useful definition “[usually treated as plural] moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour or the conducting of an activity” (Oxford Dictionary, 2012).

However, frameworks have been developed to enable people to persuade ‘ethically’. One such framework for ethical communication is the T.A.R.E.S test. At the core of this framework lie Truthfulness, Authenticity, Respect, Equity and Social Responsibility. In their article, ‘The TARES Test: Five Principles for Ethical Persuasion’, Barker and Martinson describe how the *TARES* test may be used by PR professionals. They state that persuasion and communication must ‘serve a deeper, morally based final’. Barker and Martinson also argue that the role of PR will create a ‘dysfunctional role in the communications process’ should ethical frameworks, particularly the TARES test, be ignored. Barker and Martinson outline the five stage of The TARES Test as: “Truthfulness (of the message), Authenticity (of the persuader), Respect (for the persuadee), Equity (of the persuasive appeal) and Social Responsibility (for the common good)” (2001).

In this manner a benchmark’s template for PR work, communications, activities, etc., exists which can ethically locate the industry in a transparent, accountable and ‘principles – grounded’ sphere.

## **2.5 Communications Models and Theories**

PR is closely linked to ‘communication’, be it strategic, ad hoc, proactive or reactive communication.

“A simple communication model will include a sender who selects the information (encodes) to create a message that will be transmitted to a receiver who selects a meaning from the message (decodes)” (Theaker, 2008). Of course a model such as this may be limited as there may be only two parties involved and the communication is linear. There is limited feedback and no interactive conversation. Other writers advert to a range of other variables and factors. One such example is Tench and Yeomans who believe that traditionally communications theories focused on persuasion as the sole outcome of communication. However, in more recent times, according to Tench and Yeomans, other outcomes have been taken into consideration. These outcomes include informing or instructing individuals and demand and active receiver (2006).

While Tench and Yeomans highlight different outcomes of communication, it is still limited in its reliability and scope. The Systems Theory gives a greater insight into the agency of both the sender and the receiver of the message. The Systems Theory “sees the world as living, interacting organisms. It is an holistic approach which can be seen to provide an understanding of any set of relationships” (L’Etang, 2006). According to Theaker “many public relations scholars...refer to systems theory to explain the structure and operation of organisations and their interactions with the environment” (2008). Systems Theory emerged in the 1950s and as theories are developed and enhanced it has faced some criticism.

L’Etang (2006) argues that the systems theory underestimates an organisation’s agency and ability to take action. L’Etang also argues that the theory diminishes the importance of power and further critiques the systems theory by claiming it is a totalizing theory where everything is connected.

### **2.5.1 Two-way Symmetrical Communication**

In 1984, Grunig and Hunt developed their four models of public relations practice. The different models in this theory are the press agency/publicity model, the public information model, the two-way asymmetrical more and the two-way symmetrical

model. L'Etang and Pieczka assert that the final aspect of this model, the two-way symmetrical model, is “*ethical and best*” (2006). Kitchen claims that each of the four aspects describe a set of “values and a patter of behaviour” that are undertaken by the PR practitioner, however, Kitchen states that the difference between these models through the “direction and purpose of the form of public relations they describe” (1997).

Theaker provides a brief overview of Grunig and Hunt’s Four Models of Public Relations Practice. In the text, *The Public Relations Handbook*, Theaker gives an outline to each model. The press agency/publicity model is when a press agent seeks to secure coverage on behalf of a client. Theaker states that in this model truth is not an absolute requirement. However, in the public information model accuracy is essential. This model seeks to inform and has little, if any, interest in persuading or changing attitudes. Communication in both these models is one-way. Communication is linear and both are concerned with pushing out information. Theaker suggests that two-way asymmetric model introduces the idea of feedback to an organisation. However, the feedback is imbalanced as the change that emerges from this feedback results in a change to the original message so it may influence behaviour. The organisation itself remains unchanged. This leads us to the two-way symmetrical model or as described by Theaker the ‘ideal’ of public relations. This model describes an equitable communication process whereby each party is willing to alter their behaviour inline with the needs of others. In other words, the organisation will seek to change itself based on feedback from publics (2006).

## **2.6 Reputation Management**

The role of Public Relations professionals is manifold and a key area of the profession is reputation management. Gibson et al. claim “reputation is arguably the single most valued organizational asset. Consequently, a positive and linear relationship exists between reputation and organizational success” (2006). Thus, a coherent, structured, principles – led and focused Public Relations strategy and action plan is very important in organizations.

Tench and Yeomans state that “*Organisational Reputation* is arrived at by considering the sum total of images an individual has accumulated over a period of time that help that individual form an opinion about an organization” (2006). Image in this instance

refers to “the impression perceived by an individual of an organization at any moment in time. Organisational image can change from individual to individual and also throughout time.” (Tench and Yeomans, 2006).

L’Etang believes, *inter alia*, that elements such as trust, reliability, sincerity and authenticity all contribute in an inter – linked process to building and sustaining an organization’s ‘reputation’. “ Reputation is dependent on trust and transparency and the interplay between these concepts of identity and images” (2008) Trust as a process and product is dependent on so many variables. High trust in this consumer society takes significant time, positive consumers’ experiences, proactive management, quality internal and external customers’ services and commitment to high value product delivery. However, once lost, trust may be very difficult to regain and may place the organization/individual in a divisive, reactive position.

### **2.6.1 Transparency and Reputation Management**

Transparency plays a vital role in the management of reputation, issues and crises. The contemporary surge in global online inter - connectedness locates openness and transparency as key aspects of the Public Relations industry. The old *cliché* that ‘ No man is an island’ is particularly apt today.

Bridgen reinforces this point by stating “Practitioners stress the need for transparency and authenticity in online conduct which, in this context, encompasses clarity and truthfulness in terms of who the practitioner is representing and the purpose of their online engagement” (2011). We may observe here the manner in which high ethical behaviour of Public Relation’s professional s (for example, guided by application of the TARES approach) is a vital aspect of Reputation Management.

However, reputation management does not rely solely with the PR professional. Within any organization, the delivery of high quality products, services, etc., is a contribution and responsibility of every single contributor at all levels working together as a united team.

## **2.7 Issues Management**

Issues management can be vital to an organisation. It may seem initially to be reactive in nature and contribution. However, Theaker defines it as “a long-term strategic management process” (2008).

Heath and Bowen give an historical overview of issues management. They state that the concept gained popularity in the 1970s. Heath and Bowen maintain that the rise in issues management was a result of PR relying heavily on the publicity/promotion model and because of the challenge of activism in the 1950s and 1960s, organisations recognised the threats and opportunities posed by public opinion (2002).

PR relies on strategic communications with key stakeholders and so issues management “could be thought of as a foresight-oriented, proactive part of public relations” (Ihlen, 2002). However, Heath and Bowen suggest the issues management not limited to a communication function it is instead “a fully articulated program of situational analysis, strategic planning, and savvy responses based on efforts of the organisation to achieve higher standards of corporate responsibility that reduce the rationale and motivation for external and internal critics” (Heath and Bowen, 2002).

Fermes, Klewes and Lintemeiner, as quoted in Theaker, developed The Issues Life Cycle. This life cycle has four phases: emergence, dissemination, establishment and erosion, and highlights how an issue may develop if it is not dealt with (Theaker, 2008). Carty, quoted in Theaker (2008), suggests that the Issues Life Cycle is cyclical rather than linear. Organisations and publics do not necessarily progress at the same pace, and instead, the issue may rotate several times throughout the life cycle. Carty also contends that the longer an issue remains an issue the stronger the experience for the public and thus issues that are not managed will further damage an organisation’s reputation.

Essentially, the contributions cited above (and many others) reflect the importance of an articulated Public Relations strategic plan closely linked to the overall organisation’s policy and operational process.

### **2.7.1 Seven-Step Issues Management Programme**

Regester and Larkin identify a seven-step programme for issues management. The first step is monitoring whereby an organisation monitors the business environment and

conversations concerning their organisation. The second step is identification where an organisation seeks to identify emerging issues and places them within the issues life cycle. From here Register and Larkin suggest an organisation prioritizes issues so they can determine how far it may reach and the damage it could potentially have on reputation, profit etc. Once issues have been prioritized, organisations should analyse the important issues to determine their full effects. After the analysis, a strategic decision should be implemented. At this stage, PR professionals and/or organisations should be determining their message, identifying their resources and target public(s) developing the communication plan. This should then be implemented, at this stage companies should advocate their position so as to avoid negative feedback. The final step, as outlined by Register and Larkin is evaluation. Organisations must capture results and use them for future issues that may emerge (2008).

## **2.8 Crisis Management**

Issues ineffectively or incorrectly managed by an organisation, may develop and fester into significant crises. Tench and Yeomans claim, “Crisis public relations management is one of the most critical aspect of modern communications...a crisis is an event that disrupts normal operations...can ruin hard-won reputations” (2006). It is clearly linked to the ‘ trust ‘ dimension of Public Relations adverted to earlier.

Theater’s advice “ Tell it first, tell it fast” (2008) is one of the mantras of effective crisis management. This is particularly relevant in contemporary e-society. The Internet and Web 2.0 technologies present new challenges to crisis communications. It is perhaps the work of Crandall, Parnell and Spillan that best outline these emerging theories of online crisis communications. They assert that the “Internet has provided a new channel of distribution, a more effective means of gathering and disseminating strategic information”. However, the Internet has also created new problems for PR professionals. According to Crandall, Parnell and Spillan outline that it “has also provided a means to create havoc in business...[it]...can create a crisis prone environment”. They also assert that the shared and instant information available on the Internet, i.e. the information symmetry that exists online, means the public know more about an organisation and its processes and which may foster a crisis from customers, media or other stakeholders (2009).

These recent challenges of enhanced consumers' access, the speed and pace of distributed communications, the globalization of knowledge and information and the 'immediacy' of negative impact all indicate the value of professional, fit-for-purpose Public Relation's planning and action delivery. All the above endorse the contributions that integrated knowledge, skills and affective dimensions (attitudes, values, beliefs, etc.) make to the contemporary Public Relation professional's training and role.

## **2.9 Media Relations in Communication Planning**

Media relations is a key function within the field of PR as they disseminate information to large groups of people through their publication. Publicity for clients can also be used as an evaluation tool for clients or organisations which in-turn justifies the cost and role of the PR professional.

In the text *Media Relations: Issues and Strategies*, Johnson defines media relations as the "ongoing facilitation and coordination of communication and relationships between an...organisation and the news media" (2007). PR professionals seek to "influence the mass media because of the media's credibility with the target audiences" (Theaker, 2008). Theaker is suggesting that the media become a third party influencer of a message, should a journalist review your product or service then it becomes all the more credible to your target market. Theaker reiterates this point in *The Public Relations Handbooks* by asserting that large corporations seek to get the media on their side because they are "independent of view and opinion...[which] acts as a public endorsement of their activities" (2008). However, It is not enough to get coverage, of course that is a vital part of the PR process, for the coverage to be effective it is necessary for a "journalist to be credible" (Tench and Yeomans, 2006).

Getting publicity through the use of media should not be confused with advertising. Both aim to have a product or service placed or featured in a media platform. However, advertising is the paid placement of a product. Tench and Yeomans define advertising as the "the use of paid-for media to inform and persuade" and they define public relations as the "use of third-party endorsement to inform and persuade" (2006). Gaining publicity through media relations is often referred to as 'free advertising', however, in *The Public Relations Handbook* Tench and Yeomans dispute this definition. It is argued that the lack of payment for inclusion does not make the process

free. Instead, costs come from the development of effective stories and/or images delivered to the media outlet at the best time. Costs also come from the development of good media relationships and for these reasons the process is not a 'free' one. However, it is more cost effective than placing an advert in a media platform.

The use of media as a third-party influencer and message disseminator presents many advantages. According to Johnson, the media can be used to raise awareness and get your message heard. It saves money for an organisation as it does not require paid placement and adds credibility. Furthermore, it adds legitimacy and can help build public support and mobilise public opinion (2007). While these advantages are present opportunity for both an organisation and a PR professional, the role of media relations in the communications process is not without its disadvantages. Johnson asserts that the use of media means the PR professional may lose control of the message, meaning, once information is released to a journalist or media outlet it is up to them how to deal with and negotiate it; there is no guarantee your message will be the one broadcast. This may lead to sensationalism or the overall accuracy of the message may be compromised (2007). It is perhaps for because of these disadvantages that good media relations is vital for the communication process. PR professionals need to recognise that journalists and media people "should only write or broadcast stories that are of interest to their audiences" (Tench and Yeomans, 2006) and that they are bound by their own codes of conduct. "In reporting news and information, newspapers and magazines shall strive at all times for truth and accuracy" (Press Council of Ireland, 2012).

For successful media relations in the communications process the PR professional must realise not only the importance of the media but also the delicate balance in the relationship. It is not about pushing information on print or broadcast outlets; it is about providing them with the message in a timely, but respectful manner

## **2.10 Marketing and Public Relations**

Principles of Marketing highlight overlapping functions with Public Relations and the distinctions between both areas. The Institute of Marketing defines marketing as: "The management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably" (2008)



The overlap of marketing and public relations is recognized by Haywood; “If Public Relations is all about creating favourable opinion...then it obviously should have a very close relationship with marketing, which must be about managing customer relations favourably and profitability” (1998). Haywood goes on to argue that “if the organisation needs to meet customer requirements, then it needs marketing...Similarly it cannot meet those needs unless it has processes of two-way communications in place- in other words, public relations” (Theaker, 1988).

Further, it is contended that Marketing and Public Relations are often confused with each other and that the marketing planning cliché 4Ps (place, price, promotion, product) add to this confusion. It is claimed “ Public Relations can play an essential role in creating successful products – if the other elements are right“ (Theaker, 2008). Similarly, Baines, Egan and Jefkins assert that “Public relations is concerned with numerous activities, with industry, the charitable and public sectors and with commerce; much does not have a direct link with marketing” (2004). Kitchen (2008) stresses that PR and marketing should be viewed as different but essential, inter-related functions within an organization. Kitchen states that they are “two major management functions within an organisation, but how they are organised depends upon managerial perceptions, organisational culture and historical precedent”. Kitchen highlights how marketing focuses on exchange relationships with customers and, in contrast, PR deals with a wide range of publics who are affected by an organisation. Kitchen asserts “subsuming PR into marketing delimits organisational ability to function in highly competitive environments”(1997). Haywood differentiates between marketing and PR through commercial goals and reputation management and that marketing people tend to be commercial and profit driver. Haywood also maintains that marketing professionals are more attracted to short-term goals and that, for many, long-term goals are second in their agenda. Haywood acknowledges that PR people are, in theory, driven by goals of consumer satisfaction, better price and increased profit. However, according to Haywood, few PR professionals are *actually* driven by these goals and in reality are motivated by admiration and respect and ultimately want the best reputation they can achieve (1998).

Clarity of role, delineation of activities, acceptance of the value of both areas’ organizational contributions, the multi – disciplinary nature of both professions and they

being linked in an over-all corporate policy and operational plan may assist in greater synergy between them.

## **2.11 Web 2.0 and Social Media**

The Oxford Dictionary defines Web 2.0 as “The second stage of development of the Internet, characterized especially by the change from static web pages to dynamic or user-generated content and the growth of social networking” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2012).

Web 2.0 technologies have had a dramatic and significant impact on how business is conducted. Berthon *et al.* contend that “Web 2.0 technologies have caused three effects: (1) a shift in locus of activity from the desktop to the Web, (2) a shift in locus of value production from the firm to the consumer, and (3) a shift in the locus of power away from the firm to the consumer” (2012).

The individualization, rapidity of adaptation, national and international collaboration, and transfer of ‘control and power’ is evident in the recent claim that “A platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion” (Estanyol, 2012). This dramatic, continuously developing and growing shift is commented on by Berthon *et al* who claim that the Web 2.0 can be thought of as a “series of technological innovations in terms of both hardware and software” that facilitate content creation and now allow they lay user to be centre stage. The main contrast between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 can be described as technology “that has enabled a shift in focus from companies to consumers, individuals to communities, nodes to networks, publishing to participation, and intrusion to invitation” (2012)

Web 2.0 technologies have spawned and greatly assisted the rapid rise of social media. Social media is defined as Social Media “websites and applications used for social networking” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2012). Here, Social Networking refers to “the use of dedicated websites and applications to communicate with other users, or to find people with similar interests to one’s own” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2012). Phillips and Young expand on this definition of social media platforms and state that they are “micro-websites that allow people to exchange interactive, user-submitted content among a

network of friends...they are quick to set up...don't require writing skills or pose the challenge of content creation" (2009).

Social networking may be used by organizations to get, generate and spread information and knowledge. Additionally, it is used by individuals to share, diffuse and create new knowledge bases. Contemporary social, political, organisational, civic, economic, consumer events and developments etc. have highlighted the influence of the burgeoning social media. Tauten states succinctly that "Instead of social networking, its knowledge networking; no more social media, it's knowledge media. The goal is the management of knowledge to gain competitive advantage" (2010). This is just one of the challenges for the contemporary Public Relation's professional.

### **2.11.1 Facebook**

The largest social networking website at the moment is Facebook. Facebook's mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected (Facebook, 2012). In Ireland, 47% of Irish adults have a Facebook profile and over half of these use the social media website everyday (amas.ie).

For businesses the fastest and easiest way to reach target markets and public is through Facebook groups. According to Meerman Scott in *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*, "people join Facebook groups because they want to stay informed, and they want to do it on their own time...the best way to maintain a Facebook page is to make valuable information available" (2010). Facebook also provides monitoring tools for groups through the 'insights' section. Insights help organisations track and analyse user activity. According to *Mashable.com* there are two types of insights available: User Insight and Interactions Insights. User Insights include total page likes, daily active users, sources, user demographics etc. Interactions Insights provided feedback on post likes, comments, page mentions and post impressions. (2012)

### **2.11.2 Twitter**

Twitter is a social media platform and acts as a "real-time information network that connects [users] to the latest stories, ideas, opinions and news about what [they] find interesting" (Twitter.com, 2012). Twitter involves "bursts of information" called Tweets (Twitter.com, 2012) and allows users to connect and join in conversations in

real time. In May 2012, Ireland's Twitter following grew to 15% of the population (ipsosmrb.ie, 2012).

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## 2.12 Online Public Relations vs. Traditional Public Relations

Since the rise of Web 2.0 and the instant exchange of information Public Relations, as with many other disciplines, has been dramatically affected and thus traditional roles of PR have significantly changed and developed. Gregory asserts that, "the advent of an online world means almost every aspect of the discipline [Public Relations] needs to be rethought" (2009). Globalization is now accepted as a natural aspect of the Public Relations industry.

In, *PR 2.0*, Breakenridge discusses traditional roles of the PR practitioner stating that the profession requires PR professionals to be "news and information hoarders" and that staying up to date and in tune with current affairs, particularly in areas that affect their clients is one of the key functions of the PR industry (2010).

However, in *PR 2.0*, Breakenridge also highlights how the Internet has altered this traditional form of PR. It is stated that PR relies on relationships and carefully targeted messages and Breakenridge highlights how traditional PR, before the rise in Web 2.0, relied on third party influencers, such as the media, to endorse a brand or product. However, with the growing influence of the media, PR professionals can now reach people and communities without the dependence of traditional media, and in effect, this has had an impact on the PR industry (2010).

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## 2.13 Conclusion

The broadness and multi-disciplinary nature of the development of Public Relations serve to highlight the importance of clarity of understanding, the application of high ethical standards, strategic policy and operational action planning, professional learning and development and acceptance of coherent team roles in organizational policy and process all contribute to successful Public Relations. Public Relations deals with a myriad of social, personal, corporate, economic, political, organizational, consumer, etc., areas and issues. Trust building and retention, influencing others are just some of the activities associated with the PR role. The potential for disagreement, misinterpretation, misrepresentation, conflict etc., is inherent in the role. Concepts and

processes of communication have evolved (shifted dramatically) over recent decades, years and months. Knowledge generation and sharing, rapid technological diffusion, increased access, globalization, international connectivity, more emphasis on transparency and accountability, the individualized power differential and many other factors are all current challenges for a Public Relation's professional. Perhaps the unifying aspect of all of these is 'High Trust' at personal, organizational, corporate, community, consumer, etc., levels.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

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### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline research methods used to gather data for the purpose of the overall project. It will provide a brief overview of qualitative and quantitative research methods and how they may be used to collect data. From here, it will look at interviews, and more specifically, semi-structured interviews and how they can be used in a research project such as this to gain insight into the field of online issues management. This chapter will also deal with data gathering and analysis using semi-structured interviews before focusing on the limitations of this type of research method.

The research objectives for this project are to understand how Web 2.0 technologies have impacted the issues management process. To assess the role of transparency in the overall issues management strategy and how social media facilitates this. This project also aims to show how social media may be used as a tool for issues management, to understand how brand loyalty can emerge through social media relationships and to highlight the importance of two-way symmetrical communication within online consumer-business dynamics.

### 3.2 Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods

It is said, “academic research aims to generate theories and models, to describe and analyse trends” (Tench and Yeomans, 2006). Both quantitative and qualitative use different methods to gather data for research and thus, both have distinct functions and outcomes. Ultimately, the purpose of the research will dictate the method, or methods of data analysis the researcher chooses.

Daymon and Holloway assert that quantitative research is

“influenced by an interpretive worldview...quantitative techniques seek to distance the researcher from the data in order to be ‘objective’...at the analysis stage...numbers and statistics are favoured over words and the organization of language” (2011).

### **3.2.1 Quantitative Research Methods**

Quantitative research tends to have a much larger sample and the results yielded can, in this way, offer a greater scope. Results do tend to be numerical and statistical, which in turn limits analysis and understanding. Quantitative research methods allow for larger groups of people to be tested and depending on the research, are more cost and time effective. However, quantitative research methods as a means of data collection can be restrictive. In the text *Exploring Public Relations*, Tench and Yeoman assert that quantitative research is limited only to predefined questions that guide respondents and does not allow for deeper analysis. (2006). Daymon and Holloway state “quantitative studies...tend to be structured from the beginning; procedures are predetermined before primary research begins. This means that theory is tested out through research, rather than emerging from the research” (2011). The area of online issues management is one that is still in its infancy, it is an emerging field and for this reason it is difficult to measure through large-scale sampling.

### **3.2.2 Qualitative Research Methods**

Quantitative research methods are often best used in areas that require linear focus and measurable results. However,

“to study complexity, power relations, and the co-construction of meaning in a holistic or critical sense requires a different, more flexible type of research where the process of discovery is blended with intuition...It is in this type of research that qualitative methods can perhaps best reach their potential” (Daymon and Holloway, 2011)

Qualitative research tends to “explore areas about which no knowledge exists yet and results are expressed in words...[it] aims to identify and explore in depth phenomena such as reasons, attitudes, etc.” (Tench and Yeomans, 2006).

Qualitative research methods tend to place importance on the human experience, on aspects that cannot be controlled or measured but are instead open to subjectivity, understanding and analysis. It provides “a rich, contextualized understanding of human experience through the intensive study of particular case” (Polit and Beck, 2010).



It is for these reasons that qualitative research lends itself better to this research project. Relationships between businesses and consumers online are, like all relationships, dynamic and complex. Also, social media strategies and online issues management for businesses are still emerging and it is a field that is not yet fully understood, attempting to define it through numbers or statistics will limit the validity and reliability of the results. However, gaining an insight into the emerging field from semi-structured interviews will allow for understanding in this area. Keegan, quoted in Damon and Holloway, suggests, “the rigorous, reflective, reflexive, intuitive, contextualized subjectivity, embodied in excellent qualitative research...is [qualitative research’s] greatest strength” (2011).

### **3.3 Primary and Secondary Research Methods**

When carrying out research it is essential to use a combination of both primary and secondary research so the researcher will have a greater understanding of their particular subject and field.

According to Rugg and Petre (2007), research is all about finding new information. However, they distinguish this new information as ‘new to everyone’ and ‘new to you’. ‘New to everyone’ relates to the primary research as it comes from the researcher and provides a new focus or argument in the relevant field. While it may stem from research already conducted and might conform or negotiate current ideologies, it is still a new understanding or insight. Primary research methods may include surveys, interviews, focus groups etc. and will be used to get insight into a research topic. ‘New to you’ is related to secondary research. Secondary research is information the researcher may discover or learn in the course of their research project but it has already been published and made available and so it is not a ‘new discovery’ in the field, but it is new to the researcher.

#### **3.3.1 Primary Research Methods**

For the purpose of this study the researcher used a combination of primary and secondary research methods. Primary research methods used were semi-structured interviews and the interviewees were sourced based on their professional knowledge and understanding of PR, social media, and issues management. These interviews yielded interesting results and offered insight into strategic communication and online

issues management. Interviewees were based on their knowledge of social media and all use social media as part of their profession. Half of the interviewees either work in or own agencies that advise clients on social media strategy. These interviewees also have an understanding of PR and the role it plays in online communications. The other three interviewees were selected based on their use of social media on behalf of their organisation and were chosen not because of their knowledge of PR but in spite of it. The interviews were designed as an attempt to understand the functional role of social media within a corporate structure and to gain insight into how smaller businesses, which may not have an understanding of PR, use social media tools as a means of engagement.

The interviewees were selected as a sample of professionals who use social media as a tool for businesses. The type of sampling undertaken by the researcher is referred to as *probability or representational sampling*. With probability sampling the “chance of each case being selected from the population is known and usually equal for all cases” (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). For this study, the researcher selected the interviewees as a sample representing Irish professionals who work in this field. Another type of sampling available to the researcher is *non-probability sampling* meaning the “probability of each case being selected from the total population is not known” (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). For the purpose of this project it was vital the researcher had an equal sample of professionals from different backgrounds to represent the overall professional population in this field.

### **3.3.3 Secondary Research Methods**

Secondary sources include “sources of data and other information collected by others and archived in some form” (Stewart and Kamins, 1993). Secondary research was collected from both print and electronic sources including books, trade publications, electronic databases available via the CIT online databases collection and other online resources such as Google Books and Google Scholar. The researcher uses secondary research to inform themselves on topics related to their field of study and for this reason literature was collected from a variety of sources. Stewart and Kamins assert that secondary information “offers relatively quick and inexpensive answers to many questions and is almost always the point of departure for primary research (1993:1). When undertaking secondary research, the researcher must be aware of the leading

experts or authorities in their chosen field and find information that contributes both academically and professionally to the overall field of study.

### **3.4 Interviews**

The interview may be quantitative or qualitative in nature. Interviews involve a two-way communication between the researcher and the subject. There are three levels of interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured.

For the purpose of this research, the researcher contacted a number of professionals in the field. Interviewees were selected based on their relevance to the study.

The interviewees were initially contacted via email (See Appendix). Depending on time and location constraints, interviews were conducted over the phone, over Skype and face-to-face. Each interviewee was made aware they were being recorded and asked to sign a consent form by the researcher.

#### **3.4.1 Structured Interviews**

Structured interviews involve asking the same set of questions to a number of participants and in this way, the results are easily compared and/or contrasted and thus structured interviews are related to quantitative research methods. As Bryman and Bell assert, “in quantitative research...the researcher has a clearly specified set of research questions...the structured interview is designed to answer these questions” (2007). Due to the nature of this project and the quantitative qualities of structured interviews offer limited scope and insight into social media relationships and are thus not an option for this project. In this field of study the researcher needed to create an open forum where interviewees can express their experiences and understandings with relative freedom.

The structured interview is a set of pre-defined and pre-determined questions and thus it does not allow for flexibility within the interview. A structured interview is best served when the theoretical information has already been determined. Issues management is a well-researched topic, however, with the emergence of social media and online communications, traditional approaches to issues management are changing. The purpose of this project is to explore this new process and understand how online communications have impacted traditional PR and thus a structured interview would not best serve this purpose.

### **3.4.2 Unstructured Interviews**

The unstructured interview is the opposite of the structured interview. There is no predefined outline and instead the researcher allows the interviewee to dictate where the conversation goes. They are qualitative in design as they “explore people’s views of reality and allow the researcher to generate theory. In this way...[the unstructured interview] complements quantitatively orientated, closed-ended interview research, which tries to test hypotheses” (Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). Professionals in the field of online relationships and issues management come from different backgrounds, some have marketing experience, others PR experience and often, as this is an emerging field, professionals have no qualification in either field, but merely know their organisation through experience. As this project focuses specifically on issues management, interviewees may not have sufficient theoretical or background knowledge to discuss the topic at length and so some guidance is necessary.

The unstructured interview is perhaps most effective when used with a quantitative research method. However, as this field is in its infancy and is an emerging theory within the issues management discourse it would be difficult to get the necessary quantitative data to back-up the unstructured interview. Also, due to time constraints associated with this project and lack of previous research in the area of online issues management, unstructured interviews are unsuitable to this project.

### **3.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews are best placed to suit of project of this nature and in this area. Semi-structured interviews involve a set of pre-defined and specific questions, however, the interviewer will also react and improvise based on the interviewees answers. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy “ the researcher has a particular topic for the study, but...allows for the conversation to go wherever the research participant takes it, and each interview becomes highly individual” (2011). This allows for flexibility for the interviewer within the interview and should the interviewee say something of interest that the interviewer had not previously anticipated, then the interviewer has the option to react and has the opportunity to get a greater insight and understanding of the interviewees’ experiences and understandings.

“The primary goal of qualitative enquiry is to reveal and interpret what it means to be involved in or effected by public relations and marketing communications; this includes how stakeholders and practitioners make sense of communication activities, relationships and their worlds and the subsequent implications for individuals, communities...and ultimately society” (Damon and Holloway, 2011).

If we consider the goal of qualitative enquiry as outlined above, the necessity of semi-structured interviews is evident. The purpose of this research is to understand how professionals in the field make sense of social media relationships, the importance of reputation management and overall contributing to the body of knowledge that exists for online issues management. The researcher had other qualitative research options available and could have used focus groups to gather similar information. However, as the professionals interviewed were in competing businesses, they would not have willingly participated in a focus group with other industry professionals.

### **3.5 Limitations to Research**

While qualitative research allows for analysis and understanding, it does have limitations. It can be time consuming and may require financial resources, researchers need to be qualified and the researcher influences the results (Tench and Yeomans, 2006). Damon and Holloway suggest that qualitative research methods are limited in that they are too subjective and the results yielded from qualitative studies may be difficult to replicate and thus studies of similar nature may produce very different results. It is also suggested that there is a lack of transparency in qualitative research methods as the certain details, such as how conclusions were reached and how data was analysed are often missing from the published work (2001).

There are also limitations that are directly relative to this project. Firstly, it there is a time constraint on the project, which means research and analysis must be conducted within a certain timeframe. Secondly, as interviews are recorded, the researcher must have access to a recording device. Finally, the researcher may have to travel to meet the interviewee and so must have access to a method of transport.

### **3.5.1 Validity and Reliability**

Validity and Reliability must be taken into consideration when undertaking research so that the results from the research provide accurate and reliable results and can contribute to the overall body of knowledge in the field.

To yield reliable results from a research, the researcher must be aware of how sensitive their interview is and the effect it may have on their interviewees. Cohen, Manion and Morrison assert that the researcher might pose a significant threat when they are discussing sensitive topics. The interview might “be seen as an intrusion into private worlds...[and] an interviewee may reduce his or her willingness to ‘open-up’...if the dynamics of the interview are too threatening” (2007). As this project focuses on interviewees’ professional roles, it must be viewed as a sensitive topic. The researcher was aware that individuals participating in the study may not be willing to share sensitive information about their organisation and so the interview was designed to ensure participants that there would be no threat to their professional credibility. Interviewees were provided with a brief overview of the study before the interview took place and had the option to be referred to under an alias. Ensuring the interviewee trusts the researcher is vital for yielding reliable results. Interviewees should not feel as though they have to hide information from the interviewee.

In research design, validity of the research methods must also be taken into consideration. Validity may be defined as the “ability of research to reflect an external reality or to measure the concepts of interest” (Elliott, 2005). Elliott argues that there are two types of validity: Internal Validity and External Validity. Internal Validity is the “ability to produce results that are not simply an artifact of the research design” (Elliott, 2005). The researcher must remove them self from the overall project to yield accurate results. Interview questions cannot be based on bias or pre-conceptions from the researcher and cannot be used to prove a researchers point. Instead, the research design should be based on theoretical knowledge but with a view to exploring the field. External validity is a measure of how far the findings relating to a particular sample can be generalized to apply to a wider population” (Elliott, 2005). For this project, the researcher took into account the varied backgrounds of those employed in the field of study in Ireland and then selected the sample who had varied backgrounds but currently held similar professional position and so could be used as a guide for the industry.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

The purpose of this project is to explore how social media has impacted issues management for PR. It looks at different relationships between organisations and as such it needs to allow for a difference of opinion and experience to be shared. To reflect the overall industry in Ireland, a sample of professionals was used. The interviewees varied in terms of their professional background and thus the interview needed flexibility to accommodate these differences.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS



## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore how Web 2.0 and how social media platforms enable the issues management process. It will look at core tools for the issues management with a particular focus on transparency and emerging media relations. This chapter draws on understandings from primary and secondary resources to explore the issues management process online and focus in on service based industries in Ireland.

Over the past few years there has been an increase in the amount of people setting up online social media profiles, and it is not just younger people, studies show that the 31% of the 45 to 54 year old and 29% of the 55 to 64 year old Irish population are online (Mrlukeabbott.com, 2012). Twitter has also seen an increase of 3% this year in Ireland so, as of May 2012, 15% of Irish people are using Twitter (ipsosmrbie, 2012). With this mass movement to online social media platforms, PR professionals have new tools and new technologies available to them that can aid the issues management process. To understand how social media can impact this process, it is first necessary to look at Web 2.0 trends and how they have impacted on relevant aspects of the industry.

This chapter will begin by looking at new forms of media relations in a Web 2.0 world and the implications for issues management. From here, it will look at the overall theme of transparency with a particular emphasis on Covert Transparency. The chapter will look at how effective transparency is to issues management and determine the level of transparency allows for on social media platforms. Finally, it will focus on social media and how it can help organisations in terms of reach, engagement and monitoring and how these themes impact reputation and communications strategy. Then it will look at both Facebook and Twitter as separate tools within the issues management process and attempt to define which platform provides a better channel for businesses or PR professionals in terms of issues management.

## 4.2 Media Relations in a Web 2.0 World

As the world moves online, so does business and industry. It is not just PR professionals who have been impacted by the social revolution; with the rise in blogging journalists must also make the move online. Traditional print news is often too slow and publications need an online space where they can share breaking news stories in an instant.

PR professionals have traditionally used journalists and print publications to promote their brand and communicate their message to a mass audience and, when necessary, to help deal with issues or crises. Newsom, Turk and Krukeberg note: “every public relations practitioner should establish a positive relationship with the media, which elicits, extra consideration when the institution he or she represents may be under attack” (Quoted in Sriramesh, 2009).

However, people no longer need to be journalists to be published. In the world of web 2.0, anybody can set up a blog site and so bloggers must now be considered within the media relations process. This presents both opportunity and threats for organizations. Opportunity as they now can reach large and diverse audiences easily; their message does not have to go through as many chains of command and editorial coverage can be gotten without the need for advertising or paid placement. This can help promote products and services and many bloggers are now held with the same esteem and respect as journalists.

In recent years, PR and marketing professionals have begun engaging with bloggers by sending them to events, offering them products and/or services and treating them as the ‘new’ media professionals. Doreen O’Mahony uses the example of an American fashion blogger, Tavi Gevinson, who began blogging at the young age of 13. Doreen O’Mahony states that Tavi is invited to fashion events and sits up from with fashion journalists from Vogue, as “PR and marketing people knew how influential she was to the fashion world that kind of experience happens a lot in other situations as well like technology and politics” (Doreen O’Mahony Interview).

#### **4.2.1 Treating Bloggers as Media Professionals and the Implications**

While bloggers present a new opportunity in terms of reach and engagement, they should also be viewed as a threat for organisations. Bloggers are not obliged to write new and up-to-date reviews and they are not bound by codes of conduct. In Ireland, bloggers can publish what they want and when they want and this needs to be considered for issues management. As bloggers have no code of conduct in Ireland, they do not have a moral or ethical obligation to be honest and just and so a message can easily be distorted. Doreen O'Mahony highlights that journalists have the "ability to put a story into context and analyse it without liable...whereas some bloggers might be a little bit cheekier". As bloggers can express what they want, research is key. A PR practitioner needs to know whom they are targeting and how they will communicate a message. Otherwise, the message could be distorted or presented in a negative light.

PR professionals and marketers also send bloggers free products or offer them samples as a result of this they may feel obligated to publish content in a positive light. On one hand, this is useful for promoting a message however, it also presents an opportunity for issues to arise from an over positive or biased blog post. For example, if a hotel were to offer a free weekend to a particular blogger and that blogger were to write an overly positive post and exaggerate the service and it places pressure on the hotel to meet such a demand. Should that demand not be met, guests or visitors may feel frustrated and may take to other online or offline spaces to vent their anger. Aula defines risk as Risk is increased when the gap between an organization's reputation and its reality grows. "Risk is increased by a change in the expectations of consumers" (2010). This needs to be taken into consideration when using bloggers as media professionals. According to Damien Mulley there is not "too much noise and too many positive tweets" coming from bloggers. Damien Mulley also states that bloggers never have a negative thing to say about anything and he states that they refer to themselves as 'positive' people, who have nothing negative to say (Damien Mulley Interview).

Offering free goods or services is associated with traditional media relations and however, often people are not aware that the coverage in a print publication or on a blog site were a result of a 'freebie'. This could lead to issues, as it could be perceived as bribery and also may undermines aspects of ethical persuasion. Ethical persuasion, as outlined by Barker and Martinson, is a "communication activity that unites people...[while it] permits maximum individual choice" (2001). Within the context of

traditional media relations, offering free goods and services to journalists is generally accepted. They are still bound by their own profession and code of conduct and thus have to be objective. Bloggers on the other hand may not exercise the same objectivity. Followers of a particular blogger may assume that they are reviewing based from an independent perspective. Respect for the Persuadee, one of the five steps in the TARES Test, is relevant here. This means that professional persuaders regard other human beings as worthy of dignity, that they not violate their rights [or] interests...for raw self-interest or...client-serving purposes” (Barker and Martinson, 2001). Using bloggers, as media professionals is an unethical form of persuasion as it assumes that all bloggers have the knowledge and understanding that journalists have and places them in an unfair position.

While bloggers are a good way for PR professionals to get publicity, research is essential. PR professionals need to understand a blogger, trust their objectivity and writing ability to ensure their message does not get distorted. The issues management process is a complex one and people often exaggerate or publish false information online and as a result, PR professionals need to be extra cautious with blogger relations to avoid any controversy or emerging issues.

#### **4.5 Transparency in an Online World**

In today’s world transparency is important to consumers and therefore must be important to organisations. Transparency is also vital to the issues management process as it removes the ‘large, faceless corporation’ stereotype and can help humanize the business. Wright and Hinson, (Quoted in DiStaso and Bortree, 2011) “found that most (81%) public relations professionals believed that social media offered organizations low-cost ways to impact organizational transparency”. Social media platforms help create a sense of transparency. When used correctly the ‘personality’ of the business and the human aspect can create a sense of transparency; people feel as though they are connected to the people in the business.

This section explores the different levels of transparency that social media enables, with a particular focus on covert transparency and the impact of this on issues management. It will look at how transparent businesses really are on social media platforms and

determine the ethical implications of this type of communication. Finally, this section focuses on using employees to develop a transparency.

#### **4.5.1 Becoming Transparent Online**

When discussing online PR, transparency must be taken into consideration. Phillips and Young note: “it is one of the core elements that drive online public relations...Transparency...implies openness, communication and accountability” (2009). By nature, social media platforms are open and available to anyone and are communication driven. For these reasons social media platforms are one of the best available tools for creating transparency. There are different forms of transparency, as outlined in chapter two. However, the one that is most evident online is Covert Transparency. Covert Transparency is when organisations “push or manipulate information” (Phillips and Young, 2009). Due to the nature of social media, most information is pushed on followers. This is not necessarily a negative trait; those who follow company profiles are willing to have this information pushed on them.

Di Staso and Bortree (2011) carried out a survey on how businesses use social media to communicate transparently. In the study, 91% of the companies had used social media in the past year. Out of those who had used social media in the past year only two said they had used it to communicate transparently. The majority of the respondents said they used to communicate what the organisation does and why. The results of this study reflect primary research findings from interviewees who rely on social media channels to promote their brand, without necessarily being transparent.

However, manipulation of communication has ethical implications and it is vital that the PR practitioner is aware of these implications. The CIPR state that an organisation should be transparent when updating information. “If a practitioner is working with a community to update company or client related information it is important they are upfront about who they are and their intentions” (CIPR.co.uk, 2012). This is important to online transparency and ethical communication. Honesty and integrity are important to overall transparency; they lie at its core. PR practitioners need to be aware of this when constructing messages or campaigns on social media platforms.

Tone plays a vital role at this stage of issues and strategy planning. Information can be easily released and messages readily broadcast, however, depending on the social media platform, the tone of the message will vary. Twitter, for example, is a conversational tool and so the tone of the message must reflect this if it is to be successful. Covert Transparency is about pushing information on publics and while followers are open to receiving such information, the tone has to be open and the personality of the brand has to be evident if it is to effectively 'humanise' the business. In fact messages that are too formal or too 'corporate' are counter productive to the overall issues management process. People will not simply ignore your message, you risk them taking offence to it. The McDonald's hashtag campaign best highlights how social media campaigns that are too corporate based can create issues in an online environment.

McDonalds began this campaign with the hashtag #meetthefarmers, the idea behind this was to highlight how the company uses fresh products and to give personality to the people behind food produced, the farmers. Farmers were encouraged to join the conversation and tell their story via Twitter. Following on from this, McDonalds opted to promote the hashtag #McDStories and it was here the tone of the conversation changed. People instantly lashed out at the corporation and began discussing their McDonalds' 'horror stories'. The hashtag was removed within a few hours and replaced with the initial hashtag, #meetthefarmers, but the damage was done and the conversation continued with people publically expressing their negative experience of McDonalds. (Source: Investor Place, 2012).

This case study highlights the potential for crises online and how social media platforms can accelerate issues through the issues life cycle. This case study also provides a powerful example of intricate online relationships. The second hashtag was highly branded and was focused more on marketing the company and less on the 'faces' behind the brand. The initial hashtag however, was an example of Covert Transparency; McDonalds used the farmers to put the people into the brand and pushed this message on Twitter. For any service industry, it is an important lesson to learn; overly promoting your message or advertising your brand can lead to issues online.

#### **4.5.2 Using Employees as a tool for transparency**

The McDonalds case study reflects not only how an overly branded campaign can have negative consequences in the issues management process, but also the success of using

employees as a driving force for an online campaign. Employees for online transparency as they help establish the personality of the brand. During the interview with Vicky she referred to this, Vicki noted that “if we use a staff member or a photo the numbers go way up, so we try to use that as much as possible” (Vicki Wray Interview). The Castle Hotel Macroom is a small, local business and yet it provides valuable insight into the importance of transparency for any online business. Vicki noted that this has an impact on offline relationships, stating that people often come to the hotel and say “Oh that’s the girl on Facebook”. It highlights how people want to see who is behind the organisation and not simply what offers they have or what is happening in the news. This understanding is important for issues management, as PR professionals need to be aware of what motivates their followers. However, identifying the powerful impact of using employees is only one aspect of the issues management process. PR practitioners have to feed this back into the communications strategy.

Interestingly, Rochestown Park Hotel use positive reviews on mediums like Trip Advisor to reward employees. However, this is part of the offline internal communications strategy. Doreen O’ Mahony compares communications strategies to “the segments of an orange” stating that you have your traditional parts, and gives the example of marketing, have to be integrated into your online strategies. Doreen O’ Mahony states that: “social media is almost like one of those segments now and its up to you ...to decide as to where you want to fit that in”. Concluding that: “you should never do one thing in isolation” (Doreen O’ Mahony Interview). Doreen’s insights provide an interesting reflection on Mandy’s previous statement. Rochestown Park Hotel wants to increase traffic on its Facebook page and ultimately fill rooms in the hotel. The staff can become a tool for promoting this, as proved by Vicki Wray. Hotels become people’s ‘home’ be it for one night or a number of nights/weeks and the staff will be providing the service, in essence social media can introduce members of staff ever before they arrive at the hotel.

However, there are implications of this type of communication that could lead to emerging issues. Firstly, an organisation has to be aware of what the staff member wants. Employees cannot be forced to engage online and this needs to be considered. Also, if organisations are to use staff as a method of promoting the brand personality, they need to ensure that the people behind the brand reflect the organisational values offline as well as online. This is important not just for transparency but also for the

overall reputation of the organisation. Once again, reflecting Doreen O' Mahony's previous statements. In this way, transparency plays a key role in the overall reputation of the organisation, which in turn can aid the issues management process. People are less likely to listen to negative comments and are not as quick to engage in negative feedback if they feel as though they know and understand an organisation.

Transparency is an interesting tool within the issues management process. Within the transparency theme there are different levels of transparency-Controlled, Covert, Overt etc. On some levels, transparency is about providing information on the company, its ethical values, where it sources its products. However, the type of transparency used in social media profiles is less open than this. Social media allows for businesses to provide a personal element to the business and to create or manipulate information and push it to the public.

#### **4.3 Social Media Platforms and Issues Management**

Blogging is only one of aspect of Web 2.0 that needs to be considered in the issues management process; social media is another. Facebook is a multimedia-sharing platform where users have the options to 'like', 'share' and discuss dynamic and rich content with other users and businesses. Twitter on the other had tends to focus more on conversation and updates are limited to 140 characters. While users have the ability to share images and videos, it is less obvious in the feed and so Twitter is more like large, diverse and dynamic conversation between real people, in real time from anywhere in the world. Interestingly, Twitter's limit to 140 characters per post may be drawback, as lengthy messages cannot be published, however, it does mean that tweets have to be engaging and straight to the point if they are to be noticed.

Both platforms have positives and negatives and should be treated independently, it is not a case of one over the other, instead it is about understanding who you are targeting and how you wish to target them and they are not the only two social media platforms available. However, for consumer relations, they are the two most popular and will be the focus for the purpose of this research. Sticking with the themes reach, engagement and monitoring, both platforms offer varying levels and have different outcomes that will be explored further on.



This section critically explores how the social media platforms enable engagement and monitoring through targeted advertising and monitoring tools available and how these features impact the issues management process in terms of reputation building and strategy planning.

#### **4.3.1 Social Media and Reach**

Due to the viral nature of social media platforms and the instant and constant sharing of information, they play a vital role in communications and issues management.

Everyday, 172 million people worldwide visit Facebook and 40 million people visit Twitter (mashable.com, 2012) which means everyday businesses have the opportunity to engage with 212 million people. While many Irish businesses may not want or need this level of engagement, the opportunity still exists and therefore must still be considered. Damien asserts that businesses are in competition with businesses around the world: “even if your very geographically centered even if you are a local shop your competing against the likes of Amazon or Tesco nowadays or even Supervalu who can deliver the stuff to you” (Damien Mulley Interview). The Irish Independent newspaper has the largest circulation figures in Ireland at 125,986 copies circulated (journal.ie, 2012) everyday and so, for PR professionals promoting a message, the number is still limited in reach compared to social media.

Print publications do not lend themselves well to two-way symmetrical communications as easily as social media does. For the hotel industry, whose main aim is to fill rooms, they can engage with people locally, nationally and internationally quite easily through social media platforms and they are not limited to publics who read one publication over another. In this way, Facebook and Twitter provide opportunity an opportunity for PR professionals and businesses to reach their publics, which is important within the issues management process.

Facebook allows for businesses to gain large following on both an international scale and local. However, accessing these followers can be difficult. For established businesses they can rely on their offline customers to ‘like and share’ posts in the hope that others will notice the page and will also like it. While there can be some success with this and indeed the Castle Hotel in Macroom has used their position in the local community to build such a following. Building up a following in this way can help the issues management process as it is people who already know the business and for them

to 'like' the page must feel some affiliation to the company offline. Damien compares the Facebook profiles of Barry's Tea and Lyon's Tea. In the interview Damien asserts that while Lyon's Tea have a greater number of followers, this has developed from advertising. Barry's Tea on the other hand have grown their following 'organically' and Damien states that despite the greater popularity, Lyon's Tea will see no real benefit to their bottom line (Damien Mulley Interview).

It is vital that the organisation has a coherent brand message online and offline. It is from often from this type of following that organisations get 'brand ambassadors' people who know and trust the company. Followers are important to businesses; they show the popularity and while they are not the be all and end all; local businesses want to drive both their following and engagement levels. During the interviews conducted as part of this research project, all participants agreed that following was important. However, given the choice they would choose great level of engagement over the number of followers. Facebook advertising enables businesses to push messages to potential followers through page placement or sponsored stories. Facebook advertising can be very successful and has many benefits for businesses in terms of gaining a following, however, the loyalty from these followers may not be as great. As the page was 'pushed' upon them and followers may have noticed it on their homepage and simply clicked 'like' without too much thought or effort and so were not active in their engagement. They feel no particular loyalty to a business and so if an issue were to arise, they may be easily swayed against an organisation. Facebook advertising is beneficial as it targeted. Businesses can reach audiences through a range of themes such as age, gender, location, relationship status etc., but for the PR professional developing online strategies for issues management they should be attempting to grow their following organically through reputation and engagement so to access followers who will actively engage with the organisation both online and offline.

The use of advertising serves more of a marketing function. It is useful for businesses and PR professionals, however, it serves the 'bottom-line' of social media, which is to get followers and boost engagement. As such, targeted advertising may be a good way to increase your social media position, but it is a marketing and MPR function.

Facebook pages have a large reach due to the amount of people with Facebook profiles both in Ireland and internationally. However, the challenge for organisations is how to

engage with these people and develop online relationships. Facebook allows for people and pages to share diverse content through simple text based status updates or video and image uploads. This diversity can keep a page dynamic and interesting for followers, which is beneficial for any business page. However, content should not be published without thought and strategy, it is essential that an organisation know whom they are targeting and what they are trying to say with the relevant content and that it reflects the overall reputation of the business. The CIPR reminds PR professionals: “a social media presence becomes part of a brand legacy. Posts, pictures, images, tweets, status updates (content in general) can stay online forever. Think about what message to share via social media channels” (CIPR.co.uk). It is necessary that PR professionals are aware that what is posted by them on any social media page reflects who they are as an organisation. Published content on Facebook can have either positive or negative consequences for businesses and so in this way planning and understanding is vital. Reputation is an important part of the issues management process, it must not be forgotten in an online environment. However, PR as an industry is about strategic communication so planning and developing an online communications strategy is not that different to traditional strategies. The forum has changed and there is more content to choose from, more ways to get it right and more ways to get it wrong.

Twitter allows organisations to reach a large audience with relative ease. An update on Twitter, better known as a ‘tweet’ can reach a large audience depending on how many followers a business has on a profile. Retweets are perhaps the best way for an organisation to build a new following. Retweets are when a follower of your page tweets your update to their followers which gives an organisation extra coverage and can also act as a third party influencer as it may be a show of support for a message. However, Twitter is constantly updated and for this reason a message posted lunchtime may be lost in the conversation in a relatively short period of time. For this reason, PR professionals need to understand when their followers are online. For example, if you are targeting teenagers you can assume they are in school and so evening updates will probably gain more visibility than updates in the morning or afternoon. Taking this into consideration, a PR professional who is trying to promote a business via twitter it is important that they understand whom they are targeting ever before they set up the profile. For issues management the constant changing home feed may also mean that negative comments or emerging issues may get lost in the conversation. However, this does not mean they should be ignored or taken lightly. Engagement and feedback are

still essential. Twitter is perhaps the easiest way for organisations to enter into two-way symmetrical communication with followers. Images and video are not as noticeable on Twitter and conversation is one of the key elements of the social media platform.

#### **4.3.2 Social Media and Engagement**

While reach is an important aspect of social media, PR and, the issues management process, engagement also plays a key role. Two-way symmetrical communication, as defined by Grunig and Hunt, is a communications process in which an organisation is shaped and changed within the communications process. From feedback an organisation receives, it will not merely change the message; it will change the processes behind the message. Two-way symmetrical communication is important to the issues management process as feedback becomes part of the overall issue management strategy and can help identify future issues. Organisations who ignore emerging issues or allow them to go through the issues life cycle risk crises, damage to reputation or activism. The CIPR advises organisations to “always admit errors and openly ‘put them right’. It is advisable to tackle an online crisis as soon as possible to stop it escalating out of control” (CIPR.co.uk, 2012). The responsibility of ensuring issues are dealt with in a timely and effective manner generally lies with the PR professional and so using social media channels as a means of two-way symmetrical communication has become a vital part of the issues management process and overall PR function.

Both Facebook and Twitter allow organisations to engage in dialogue in an open forum with publics, although this may have both negative and positive consequences. On one hand, the open nature of social media platforms may be negative as everybody can see negative feedback. However, negative feedback actually presents opportunity for an organisation to engage and defend itself, which can help an organisation’s reputation. Malarky states: “We now live in a highly networked world where people no longer want to hear what companies say about themselves...[they] want to hear what other people say about companies” (Simon Mee, 2012).

Often businesses do not want issues publicly posted via Facebook or Twitter due to the open nature of the platforms; they would prefer to keep their complaints or negative feedback to other forums. Rochestown Park Hotel goes to extensive efforts to monitor this, ensuring that every customer with a complaint contacts them directly. While this method makes sense and is proactive in how it approaches complaints or issues, it

negates the power of good customer relations over social media platforms. Yes social media platforms are very open and they are visible to anyone who may land on the page or seek out information, however, so is how you deal with the complaint. Engagement is key here. If you ignore a complaint, people assume you do not care and that one complaint does not really affect or bother you and as such, you do not strive for perfection in your business. As previously stated, if you ignore issues you run the risk of them developing through the issues life cycle and may result in a business or PR professional losing control over the issue. However, businesses can now engage; they can now hold their hands up either defend the allegations or simply apologise. By engaging in this way, organisations are given the opportunity to show that they do take customer complaints seriously, that they are always striving to offer the best in goods or service and it also highlights how they engage in two-way symmetrical communication. These qualities can provide benefits to organisations and instead of the complaint being negative feedback; it presents the organisation in a positive light and minimizes the threat of issues.

#### **4.3.3 Social Media and Monitoring**

For PR professionals to be able to engage with their publics online, they have to be aware of the conversations taking place over all Web 2.0 platforms. Grunig asserts: “the digital media are ideal for environmental scanning research, and there are many tools available for scanning cyberspace for problems, publics, and issues” (2009). With the large numbers of people online and the constant exchange of information this may appear to be a difficult, if not impossible, task. However, there is a range of tools available to the PR professional that can make monitoring easy and in some cases instant. One such tool is Social Mention. Social Mention is a free tool that allows you to enter in keywords and search your desired topic or business. Social Mention allows businesses to search all social media platforms using key words and offers real time feedback. Another tool that Doreen O’ Mahony finds invaluable is Google Analytics. Google Analytics monitors the web, again using keywords, and gives daily, weekly or real time reports whenever those key words are mentioned. For Twitter, PR professionals can simply input their keyword into the Twitter search box and conversations will show up.

#### **4.3.4 Social Media and Strategy Planning**

Reach, engagement and monitoring can all aid a PR professional in online relationships. The results from each should be in turn used to plan strategies and content. However, they should not be treated as individual tools, especially for issues management. Strategy is an important part of the overall issues management process, both online and offline.

PR professionals need to recognise what their publics want or need from relationships and have to find a way to give it to them. Caywood notes that an organisation with “a solid reputation will survive a crisis better than one without” (1997). As issues management attempts to prevent crises, Caywood’s insight is an important aspect to the issues management process. A solid reputation can help an organisation deal with issues and so reputation and reputation management must be part of the overall strategic issues management process. This effect of a good reputation is particularly evident on social media platforms when people independent of the organisation defend and argue with complaints posted by others. These ‘brand ambassadors’ emerge through good online relationship management. However to achieve this level of loyalty, organisations must understand their followers, to do this, organisations must monitor the conversations and engage with them. It may be a time consuming process but it can prove to be vital to the issues management process.

#### **4.4 Facebook as a Tool for Issues Management**

Facebook insights are a useful tool for PR professionals in that they offer an insight into the followers on a particular page. From this tool, businesses can see who likes their page based on age, gender and location. The insights section also enables businesses to determine the popularity and virality of posts and is the engagement is coming from an organic source or from elsewhere. This monitoring tool is essential for online issues management. Used correctly it can spot rising trends or reduced engagement, but it is up to the PR professional to analyse these trends and determine why they are happening. Heath and Bowen (2002) note that issues monitoring consists of “several strategic processes scanning, identifying, analyzing”. This strategic process reflects the seven-step programme for dealing with issues as outlined by Regester and Larkin. Scanning, as noted by Heath and Bowen, requires constant vigilance to notice changes in societal values and/or emerging differences of opinion. As the gives feedback on posts and engagement activity in real time on Facebook pages, it is helps simplify the scanning

process. However, despite the accessibility of these figures, they must be interpreted and analysed before their effect can be fully understood. The identification process is, as described by Heath and Bowen, about “knowing an issue when you see one” (2002). Once the PR professional has analysed trends they have to be able to determine the implications. The insights tool is useful for this; however, it is very quantitative by nature. The reports are presented as graphs or percentages. In this way it is limited in function for the issues management process. The PR professional must look to the individual post or posts and determine the qualitative nature. Once a PR professional has identified an issue or issues, it must not analyse the driving force behind the issue and use this to determine the strategic outcome. A PR professional needs to understand why their followers has reacted negatively; was something posted on a page or on another website, perhaps it was said offline. For this stage in the process, Facebook can be somewhat limited. Business pages cannot gain access to profiles that are set to private and so it can be difficult to determine why someone is taking offence to your business or acting negatively towards it on Facebook or why issues have arisen. Once again this is where monitoring and engagement can be effective. If you understand your audience and have knowledge of your followers and what motivates them, it will be easier to determine who they are and what they want and need from your page. Likewise, the PR professional can determine what they do not want from a product or from a page.

Facebook as a tool for issues management for multi-service sectors has many benefits for monitoring and strategy. Facebook advertising can be utilised to gain followers and drive traffic to a Facebook page. While this is an important tool for the overall success of an online strategy it lends itself better to marketing or marketing public relations. For issues management, PR professionals need to develop meaningful relationships, often this develops from followers who already know a business and who have actively ‘liked’ a Facebook page as they relationship already exists and, through meaningful and well-placed content, the relationship can be strengthened. However, it is imperative align the content with the offline reputation of the businesses so the message does not get distorted. Insights are perhaps the most effective Facebook tool within the issues management process as they provide instant statistics on a variety of topics, enabling the PR professional to understand who their audience is and what type of content they respond to. However, the results are presented in as quantitative results. For example, using the insights tool can tell how successful one post was over another through the

amount of likes and shares it received, but the response and the feedback may not necessarily be positive and as such PR professionals to critically analyse the feedback so to understand engagement. By using both the insights quantitative results and carrying out qualitative analysis, a PR professional can use Facebook to determine trends and potential issues, which in turn can be implemented into the overall communications strategy.

#### **4.4.1 Twitter as a Tool for Issues Management**

While Twitter itself does not have any monitoring tools as such, the search bar enables anybody to search keyword and in this way PR professionals can monitor what is being said about their organisation online and can monitor and track emerging issues. Other applications have been developed that do allow for more in-depth monitoring. One such application is Hoot suite which allows users to monitor a number of twitter accounts and premium users have access to a number of reports based on account information and keywords. Twitter is limited as a tool for issues management due to the lack of monitoring tools available.

However, the discussions on Twitter and the quality of engagement that Twitter enables helps organisations and people connect on a 'one-to-one' level.

Both Facebook and Twitter have positive and negative aspects as tools for issues management and both serve different function and offer different demographics. It is important to understand these differences when developing any online communications strategy. Continuity is vital for online communications, which means that organisations need to understand their consumer base and also their branding and overall reputation before they attempt to develop online relationships. This section will compare both social media platforms and using this comparison will provide an insight into the overall functions of both platforms within the context of issues management. It will look content and the seek to understand how the different

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## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

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### 5.1 Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of the project was to understand the impact of social media on issues management. Research focused on key elements of traditional issues management and these themes to determine the effectiveness of Web 2.0 technologies and social media in the issues management process.

Media relations are key to issues management and the overall PR function. This became one of the focus points for the project, as media relations must also involve blogger relations. However, there are implications to this and as such it is a valuable insight into the issues management process. Transparency in an online, social media landscape was also a key element in this project. As transparency is a large concept, Covert Transparency was the main focus for the project. The social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter have become integral to issues management in terms of their reach, the level of engagement they enable and the monitoring tools available.

The research undertaken in this project was extensive; it covered many aspects of the issues management process and looked at these under the themes of reputation management and two-way symmetrical communication.

As a result of the research conducted for this project a number of conclusions may be drawn.

#### **Conclusion One: PR professionals understand the ethical implications of using as ‘new’ media professionals**

As Web 2.0 technologies grow and become a part of our daily lives, bloggers have become the ‘media professionals’ of the online world. PR practitioners and marketing professionals have been known to use bloggers because of their following, their perceived knowledge on a particular subject and because they do not have the same restrictions as journalists.

However, treating individuals as media professionals has a number of implications for issues management. Firstly, journalists are trained professionals. They are trained to objectively review goods and services and are bound to be truthful and honest by their codes of ethics. Bloggers do not necessarily have the same skills and qualifications and

are not best placed to be independent. In this way, blogger relations may have a number of ethical implications in the communications process and this needs to be realized by the PR professional.

### **Conclusion Two: Social media platforms create a sense of transparency**

Social media platforms help create a sense of transparency. Social media gives organisations the opportunity to connect with their followers and create an online brand personality. One effective way this is done is through employees. However, there are ethical implications of this and it is necessary to fully research and determine how employees feel about this.

### **Conclusion Three: Reach and engagement are vital parts to the issues management process**

For issues management, accessing large numbers of people is imperative to analysing and determining social trends and changing to the overall mentality of publics. Social media gives PR professionals access to large groups of diverse people and for this reason social media's reach plays a large part in strategy planning. A PR professional can use feed information into the organisation and thus it enables two-way symmetrical communication.

The level of engagement available from social media platforms also aids the issues management process. Organisations can now take their brand online and develop meaningful relationships with followers. However, an organisation must be open to negative feedback as well as positive feedback. It is vital that organisations are seen to deal with all feedback.

### **Conclusion Four: Social media platforms allow organisations to monitor their followers**

The monitoring tools available for businesses provide the PR practitioner with readily available statistics that allows them to understand what is happening on their business page. Monitoring is an integral part to the overall issues management process and results from the different social media platforms should be analysed and used both in determining future trends and recognising emerging issues.

## **5.2 Suggestions for Further Research**

As social media is a new field and a diverse dynamic environment that is constantly changing, there are a number of areas for further study.

During the course of this research it was found that organisations do not know how social media platforms and engagement effect the bottom line of the organisation and because of this, are slow to view it as an overall business strategy. Instead, they “know they must do...[they] may not know why, but [they] know they must” (Mandy Gabriel Interview). Therefore a comprehensive study is needed to make businesses understand why they should be engaging.

Damien Mulley (Damien Mulley Interview) noted that some organisations require employees to put disclaimers into their profiles; this is particularly evident on Twitter where profiles often feature an “all views are mine alone and do not reflect my organisation” disclaimer. Internal communications are a vital part of the overall function of an organisation. However, now this is being brought to online, personal profiles and as a result a research into the complex relationship between an organisation and their employees online is needed.

## **5.3 Overall Conclusions**

As the world moves online, business-consumer dynamics are changing. Issues management has been emerged in the 1980s, long before the rise in Web 2.0 and has been a vital function to the field of PR ever since. As relationship dynamics change so does the issues management process. However, the core values remain the same. PR professionals must be aware of their reputation and keep their brand messaging coherent online and offline. Monitoring, analysis and evaluation are still at the core of issues management. While the issues management process has been impacted by Web 2.0 trends, the traditional values remain.

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## APPENDIX

INTERVIEW DETAILS:

Name	Interview Method	Profession
Damien Mulley	Over Skype	Director of Mulley Communications
Doreen O' Mahony	Phone Conversation	Works at Media Manager
Greg Canty	Face to Face	Joint owner of Fuzion PR
Mandy Gabriel	Face to Face	Marketing Manager Rochestown Park Hotel
Vicki Wray	Face to Face	Events Co-ordinator and Facebook admin for The Castle Hotel Macroom
Robert Duggan	Face to Face	Digital Marketing Manager at Fota Island Resort



## SAMPLE CONSENT FORM

### Written Consent Form and Signature Sheet

#### **Consent to Use Name**

Do you agree to have your true name used in any oral presentations or written documents resulting from this research?

Yes / No

Signature to agree to use name

\_\_\_\_\_

#### **Consent to Record Interview**

May I record this interview

Yes / No

Signature to agree recording

\_\_\_\_\_

#### **Consent to Quote from Interview**

I may wish to quote from this interview either in presentations or articles resulting from this work. (A pseudonym will be used in order to protect your identity, unless you specifically allow me to identify you by your true name, as specified above.

Do you agree to allow me to quote from this interview

Yes /

No

#### **Consent to Follow-Up Interview(s)**

I may wish to contact you in the future in order to clarify items or ask you for further information. This may be done by phone or email.

Do you agree to allow me to contact you for a follow up?

Yes / No

#### **Please read and initial the following statements**

\_\_\_\_\_ I understand that this research is intended for the study of a Masters in Public Relations with New Media for Maebh Fahy at the Cork Institute of Technology.

\_\_\_\_\_ Subject to the conditions stated about, I understand that Maebh Fahy may keep and use my identifying information, as well as the content of the interview.

\_\_\_\_\_ I understand that the use of this interview may include a published paper, or papers, or Master's thesis.

I approve of the use of my personal information as agreed upon with the above conditions.

Subject to the confidentiality conditions, I authorize Maebh Fahy to use this interview for the purposes of research, which may be published.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

## SAMPLE E-MAIL

Hi \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Maebh Fahy and I am a student in CIT. At the moment, I am writing a thesis on using social media as a tool for reputation and issues management in consumer relations.

As part of the thesis, I hope to interview someone within the relevant field to get some insight into the subject and I thought of you. I would be grateful if you would agree to do an interview with me?

The general gist of it would be looking at consumer relations and how organisations can use social media to engage with consumers. Questions would include with how can social media be used as a tool for issues management, social media tools for developing an online brand and building up loyal followers and how to engage followers online.

I appreciate summer isn't the best time to catch people but if you could spare some time for an interview I would really appreciate it.

I am based in Cork City and can come and meet you at a place and time that suits you, or if you would prefer, I can conduct the interview over the phone.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Kind regards,  
Maebh Fahy.



## INTERVIEW ONE: DOREEN O' MAHONY

MF: To begin with, I would like to get an overview of what you think online relationships are and what they involve

DOM: Ok well I suppose, do you mean in terms of social media or do you mean your online presence in general like your website, your blog and all that?

MF: I suppose more in terms of social media and engagement and relationships and that aspect of it

DOM: Ok well I think everybody nowadays, well most companies even if they don't have their own online presence, as in if they don't have a Facebook page or if they don't have a LinkedIn or any of that stuff there are people who are on them and who are talking about them so there is no choice nowadays I think you have to be on there. Now I don't think that every company needs to be on Facebook, but I do think that every company needs to have some sort of online presence so that they can control and manage their own reputations. So like if it's a business that is just looking for business, like a corporate company, then their customers probably won't be on Facebook but they probably will be on LinkedIn or they might be on Twitter. So I think its about figuring out where your audience is and then figuring out how you're going to communicate with them and how you're going to engage with them. So I do think that it is important to figure that out at the start and I think its important to monitor your own reputation online so whether that's setting up a Google Alerts system or setting up tweet deck and monitoring your Twitter and that kind of thing, I think that's important as well. In terms of engagement then, I think its up to the individual business then as to whether they want to put time and effort into engaging with people and I think that depends on what sort of business it is and whether its footfall they are looking for or whether it's a hotel or restaurant and they want other people to know about them and they want to communicate with that audience. I do think its important that if it is consumers that you're looking for and most of those consumers are now going to be looking for your business through their iPhones or through the internet because that's how they are doing their searches now so you have to make sure you are there, and if you are there, you have to engage with them.

MF: Do you think there is a lot of strategy and planning for online communications?

DOM: Yes I do, I think what you should do is sit down and figure out how much time you want to spend on it, figure out what your goals are, what medium you're going to use; whether its Twitter, Facebook etc., are you going to use more than one platform

and to give it a bit of a personality which you sign off from the beginning. So if your on Twitter, you might say who is Tweeting; whether it's a person or a company, its good to just let people know who it is and again I think its important to sit down as a group who are interested in the social media side of things and get them to figure out what the goals are and then to figure out how your going to achieve those goals. So is the goal is to get a certain amount of people on your Facebook or Twitter, is it to get engaging, is it to get people looking at your offers or business online and then maybe making a phone call afterwards to your business or is it to see your business online and then walk into your business and you can do a lot of things to develop strategies, you can use a lot of tools to measure how effective it is and I suppose you have to decide as well how much money your going to put into it, I mean I know they are free tools but you might want to get them designed properly, you might want to hire a graphic designer, you might want to create a competition tab or something like that and you need it to be coded properly and you need to decide who your audience is, if they are women aged between 40 and 50 or something like that you can actually target them through Facebook or Twitter. So ya, I think its important to sit down at the start, figure out what your goals are and develop the creative together to try and achieve those goals because sometimes people just go blindly into it and they don't really see if it is working for them and I think it is important to figure out and maybe put one or two people working on it, like it is very time consuming, What I think though is that if you sit down at the start of each month and decide what your offers are going to be or what your going to talk about this month then you can actually plan a calendar of the things your going to be talking about and that way your not going on everyday and going 'what are we going to talk about today?'. So let's say for example if it's a hotel and the hotel has certain events that are happening then they sit down as a team at the start of the month and figure out what those events are and when they are going to be talking about them and that way they are not going into it blind everyday.

MF: Facebook allows for a lot of engagement, would you think Facebook advertising takes away from that level of engagement that Facebook enables for businesses and their consumers?

DOM: Well I don't actually because I think that sometimes because people aren't always on Facebook all the time, so we'll say if you do a post and say only 25% of your followers are online at the time then you don't want the other people to be missing out on what it is you're talking about. Now I don't think you should just advertise and say

‘We’re open’ or something like that but if your advertising something like a giveaway or a special offer or something that will obviously benefit the people on your page then its not going to be annoying for them but its actually going to reach more people that are in your target audience. I think once you have a good hook then it can actually benefit your page, it can grow your page and it can give people who are actually on your page something that they might not have otherwise seen or a special offer or something like that.

MF: Do you think social media can help build transparency or is it just a perceived transparency?

DOM: I think it can if it’s managed. It was the same with Trip Advisor, there was an article in the Irish Times at the weekend about Trip Advisor and it was about how some hotels or some restaurants will actually go back and they will take each response because you know the way a lot of people will post things on Trip Advisor and its not true or it might be a competitor or something like that but this article was talking about some restaurants have made a point of going on and responding to every particular query down to who was right and who was wrong and so I think that it can be transparent but I think its absolutely up to each company because some people will say ‘oh lets just give a generic response, whereas some people will say ‘God I cant believe that actually happened, we will address that complaint’. Like I have managed complaints that have been made, we’d always get to the root of it, we’d always either ask the person for their mobile number and ring then and find out what actually happened and address it. Or if its something like ‘the waitress should smile more’ we’ll feed that back to people and I think in that way it is transparent and again its up to the manager, because some managers may not answer every message or they may not take it on board. I think if its good criticism then it can actually benefit the business, its just another way of getting feedback to you.

MF: It’s the internet and anybody can come on and say what they want, do you think its important to make sure you respond to all of the negative as much as the positive?

DOM: Well in some cases it’s hard to know who’s actually behind the actual scene. I suppose if it’s a positive thing you could just leave something like ‘thanks a million, great to hear that feedback’ but if its very negative I think it should be because that’s your reputation and its up to you to protect it and I know its very time consuming and its not to get into a ‘tit for tat’ conversation but to be sincere and kind of say ‘listen blah

blah blah'. There is actually a very funny one in the Sunday Times if you can get it, there is some very good responses that people have made and its quite justified I think but I do think its important to put the effort into it because it is your reputation and it might stop somebody from going there.

MF: In terms of people trolling on the Internet, do think these are important, even if the incidences may never have happened?

DOM: I think each restaurant will know themselves, they will definatly be able to get to the bottom of it. I have heard of places where people say, like I was talking to a café recently and somebody came in and said, sorry they had done a post about it afterwards and said something like 'oh the breakfast was really expensive, it was...' and then they had given a price but the person in the café was saying there is no way they would have been charged what they were charged and even if they had just looked at the menu none of those prices were real. So she was saying that she didn't think the person had been in there and in that case I think it was probably a competitor or something or maybe somebody with a gripe so I think it is important to address those issues because that information is not factually correct but I think that in the case of Trip Advisor or something like that, they are going to have to get stronger as well on how they police it because it is damaging for businesses but with something like Twitter and Facebook you can monitor them and you can hide or respond with them.

MF: and it's probably easier to deal with over social media than something like Trip Advisor

DOM: Ya and I do think though that an awful lot of people, if they do have a complaint they will use the message function over Facebook now and then that way not as many people will be seeing their complaint, you know for like genuine complaints made they will probably use the message function.

MF: Do you think that people are concerned about their own privacy so aswell?

DOM: Well I think with Facebook its your own face and your own profile that's coming up, it's harder to hide behind that whereas with Trip Advisor you can make up your own fake profile.

MF: Do you think that social media has a place for issues management compared to more traditional forms? Do you think it makes it easier?

DOM: I wouldn't say that it makes it easier because of the fact that there is so much time that goes into it so you do need to plan for it, but I do think it should be part of a PR tactic. Managing the online reputation now is as important as managing the offline

reputation and you're probably reaching different audiences and in a lot of cases people probably think it's a pain in the ass because its so time consuming and it wasn't there 10 – 15 years ago but now everything is so fast, everything is happening so fast that you just have to be there and you have be seen, so I don't think that its easier and I do think that in some cases it will be harder. There was that incident with Starbucks months ago when the people who were doing the Starbucks Twitter page said something about the Queen's Jubilee, 'How are you enjoying the Queen's Jubilee celebrations?' but they sent it to their Irish audience, instead of there English audience. So basically they were asking Irish people 'How is your Jubilee?' and how great it was, so that turned into a complete PR crisis management situation for them so that was something that started online but they ended up having to deal with it offline, it was all over the print media, it was all over the news, it was all over the world in fact it was on em, if you Google it you will find it on American TV so you know you just have to be so careful you know.

MF: So do you think the two are almost intertwined then, that one functions with the other?

DOM: I think that, in some cases they are intertwined in the cases where you are managing your reputation, your still trying to let people know what your product or service is, you're just using a different platform for it but you just have to really careful that they marry well together, that they complement each other- one can lead to a disaster if you're not careful.

MF: Where do you think social media and social media strategy lies in terms of the overall business? Is it a marketing function, PR function, management function?

DOM: I'd say it depends again on what the business is and it depends on who your audience is because when you are doing any marketing strategy that's what you sit down and determine at the start, you try to figure out who you are talking to so it's quite a big question but I do think its very important. Some businesses might use it to promote a service and mightn't care so much about the online or about the PR but they might want to provide a good customer service to their clients and some might use it to get feedback from customers so its very difficult to answer that question, you know?

How we describe it is, we say its kind of like the segments of an orange, and you have your traditional part, you have your traditional marketing and social media is almost like one of those segments now and its up to you at the start to decide as to where you want to fit that in, you should never do one thing in isolation you should always try and.

MF: Integrate it all into one?

DOM: Exactly

MF: For something like Facebook, how important do you think ‘likes’ are to a business? Or how important should they be?

DOM: I think that if you are a business in Cork and you have a lot of engagement from Cork fans, I don’t think its about quantity of the numbers on your page at all because there’s no point in having loads of people liking your page if they are in the UK or if they are in Dublin or Turkey or some place like that, you know the way some people think they can buy their likes, those people are not going to walk into your shop and buy your product, unless its an online business. So I think if you are, it depends on what kind of business you are and if you are a little coffee shop in cork and you want to promote your coffee shop to a Cork audience, then that’s who you need to conferring to, you need to be concerned. This is great we have 300 people on our page, that’s a good number because 150 of them are interacting with us on a weekly basis. There’s no point have thousands of people on your page if they are not interacting with you, you know?

MF: Do you think because of the insights that Facebook has on offer that it makes it easier to use Facebook as a business over twitter, LinkedIn etc.?

DOM: Well I would never really say to you its one over the other because if you are using Facebook you are only going to get the people who are on Facebook aren’t you? Like for example, I am not on Facebook personally, so if somebody was marketing to me and they were only using Facebook, they wouldn’t get me and the insights are only for the people on their page. So while its great for that medium, it will tell them who their demographic is, is it female or male and where are they living and they can use that defiantly for their feedback and try and develop it into other marketing by finding out where these people are and trying to target these people. But one has to be taken individually, but definitely its great, it’s a great tool for Facebook, but there are other tools you can use, like for example if you have Google Analytics on your website and you can find out how many people from Twitter are going on to your website or how many people from LinkedIn are going on to your website and that will help you with your overall marketing as well.

MF: In terms of using bloggers as a promotion for a product, what’s your opinion on that?

DOM: I think it’s really important to use bloggers, I think they are as influential now as journalists. Let’s say for example, I am organizing a launch for next week so on the invite list I have, it’s a restaurant actually, so I have included all of the food writers that I might traditionally use but I have had someone in the office researching the bloggers

around Cork and I have sent invitations to all of them as well because I know how important it is for our story to be blogged about as much as it is for people to read about it in traditional media.

MF: So you think they are 'the journalists online' as such?

DOM: They are, now you will be able to find out fairly quickly whether someone is actually reading someone's blog as well and you'll be able to find how influential it is just by research you know really and by monitoring it. I mean usually bloggers will have a good, if they are really good like I mean a girl in the UK, she has her own cookbook now because her blog is so successful. So you'll see those stories and you'll know who to spend your time on and who not to bother with because some people will say they are bloggers and then never blog about anything you know? So you can figure out pretty fast, just as you will in any research you undertake before you do any PR or marketing campaign, you figure out who is important. Because if you think about it, you there's a blogger in America, a young girl Tavi Gevinson, so she started blogging when she was 11 years old and after a couple of year's Vogue magazine and her were all invited to the same fashion event so she was sitting front row with all the fashion journalists because the PR and marketing people knew how influential she was to the fashion world and I think that kind of experience happens a lot in other situations as well like technology and politics and things like that. People can make or break stories so you need to find out who they are.

MF: Do you think because of they are not affiliated with any businesses and they are independent, that they are more 'believable' to the public?

DOM: Ya I think that they can be but I also think its important to find out what credentials the person has whose writing because with traditional journalists a lot of them have the ability to put the story into context and analyse it without liable or anything like that. Whereas some bloggers might be a little bit cheekier and I think it is defiantly going to get harder as the online world progresses, there are going to have to be rules put in place because you cant just go around saying anything about anybody. So in some cases people might take a bloggers opinion but that opinion might not be as well thought out or as well structured as a journalist, unless they're very very good at what they do. You know you have that with civilian journalists where, and you see it a lot on Twitter, where people who don't actually have the facts and don't actually check the facts are saying something. Like the situation happened in Cork a few years ago when that plane crash happened and I remember being on Twitter that day and there

was lots of people tweeting and saying '14 dead', '15 dead' and all this and I was just tweeting saying this is not confirmed and when it was confirmed I think it was 8 or 7 or something like that. So its important to take what some people are saying with a pinch of salt because they may not have checked their facts and that is the one thing that journalists are taught.

MF: In terms of offering bloggers free goods or services, do you think they are less likely to be objective because they are untrained?

DOM: I don't, I think they can apply the same standards of journalism. I was reading a blog the other day from a girl, I think her name is AtFreckledPast or something like that, and she did a blog the other day on dining al fresco and at the end of the blog she put a disclaimer in saying the meal had been given to her free of charge but that but it had not interfered with her report of the place and I think in that sense it depends on the blogger and I think you will take more notice of someone like her then won't you?

MF: So do you think it is up to the individual blogger to and their own credibility, because in the states and the UK bloggers have codes of conduct but they don't in Ireland?

DOM: Well I think it will go that way, as more and more people get their information online there will be tighter rules online.

MF: Going back to Facebook and getting loyal followers online, do you think there is a knack to that?

DOM: Definitely, I think that some people are really skilled at it and I think more people haven't a clue. I think if you are putting up content that is engaging, that's personal, that's not generic and that tells a story, a maybe a story that they might not have know otherwise. I think people will want to come back to that page because they will feel like they are getting something from it. Whereas I think some people put things up and you're just like 'Oh God did they just put that up, I can't believe it'. So I think ya there definitely is a skill to it and not everybody has that skill.

MF: Do you think that leads other people to defend the organisation online?

DOM: Absolutely, I have seen that happen quite a lot on twitter as well and you know it can be a good or a bad thing, you can get a lot of negativity on twitter as well. But I think there are almost like natural police online and they will almost tell the person to cop on if it is unfounded.

MF: Do you think that comes back to a sense of knowing the business and of transparency?



DOM: Ya that's true and also because social media always happens in real time, people can respond quite quickly so in that sense I guess it is transparent.

MF: Okay, I think I have gotten all the information.

DOM: You can always send me an email tomorrow to follow up if something else occurs to you.

MF: Thanks Doreen.

DOM: You're very very welcome and best of all writing it all up!

## INTERVIEW TWO: VICKI WRAY

MF: Firstly, because this has a public relations focus, what is your own understanding of PR?

VW: I suppose a lot of it is, from a business point of view its about getting our business out their to society and the public and advertise and market and I guess make us know. I suppose that's our own PR.

MF: Who would your main target focus be?

VW: Well I suppose at this time it becomes very wedding orientated but we're still looking for people, weekend stays we put out special offers to get people in the door and to try get us known but our main focus is filling the bedrooms and filling the function rooms. We have the bar below but essentially that runs itself and is 70% of our business. It's a very local business but trying to sell the rest of the hotel is what we focus on most.

MF: So for weddings for example how would you reach those?

VW: Well a lot of it is advertising, there is the lee valley and we put adverts into that or the Cork News or The CorkMan, and we might put an add in the Irish Times or the Examiner for bigger things but most of it is online.

MF: So how do you use online to target?

VW: Well I suppose Facebook is a huge amount of it. I mean we have over 2,000 followers which for us is huge but apart from that we are in a group, Irish Country Hotels, and we use them to promote our brand.

MF: Do you use local events to promote your brand?

VW: Oh yes, like lets say the Macroom Food Festival is coming up or the music festival last year and we use that to promote ourselves.

MF: Do you thing its important to engage on a local level?

VW: Oh ya completely, because the town itself, we all balance each other. We use our Facebook to promote the town and we would hope they would use theirs to promote us.

MF: How do you plan what you will put up on Facebook?

VW: Before we were doing it on a day-to-day basis but we found that we were kind of skipping here and there but now we try to programme every week so Rachel and me will sit down every week and plan that week. We try to find what's happening in the area or even as far as Cork City and we have music every Friday night so we post about that too, probably too much! We try to promote the hotel as much as we can but at the same time we want to keep it more of a personality and less sales.

MF: and do you think that helps your following, keeping with the personality?

VW: It does, because we find that if you keep pushing sales, sales, sales we don't get much back. But if we put up a picture of Macroom we get a lot more comments so we do keep to personality as much as we can. I know myself that there's another company down the road and they keep posting and posting and posting but we try to keep it as much "non-business" as we can. We'll say 1 per 5 will be a sale because we do need to market the hotel at the same time. Like we can't see as of yet that we are getting business from Facebook.

MF: So when you do post do you keep track of that post?

VW: Oh ya completely we would always follow how it's doing and what we find is that photos or staff are the ones that go way up. So we try to use that then.

MF: Do you think it works for transparency?

VW: Ya it does completely, because we have people checking in and they are like 'oh it's the girl from Facebook' or having me dress as a bride or something. So very much so it works.

MF: Have ye ever had anybody make a complaint over Facebook?

VW: not really there was one incident at the start when we didn't really know the rules of Facebook and someone left a comment at 4am saying something like 'oh your food is terrible' or something like that and we deleted it before anyone saw it, but we learnt not to delete a comment again. Now I know the other week I had an email from someone saying I never got back to them and I replied saying 'Ya I did' and then she apologized but I was able to put my slant back on it from Facebook but apart from that we've had nothing on it.

MF: Do you have a strategy in place if someone does post a bad comment?

VW: Well we know it cannot be deleted and I suppose like Trip Advisor we would reply and say 'oh thank you we will take that on board' but we would get back to it and be seen to get back to it.

MF: Ok well Vicki I think that's perfect, and I hope I didn't take up too much of your day. Thank you.

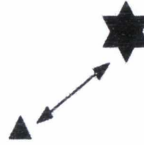
VW: Not at all! You're welcome.

APPENDIX A

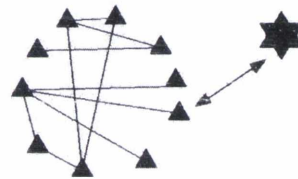
*A shift in culture, communication and value*

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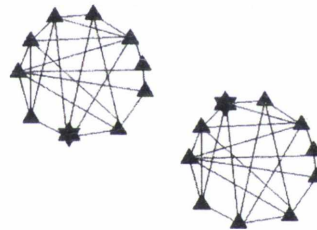
A message is made electronic



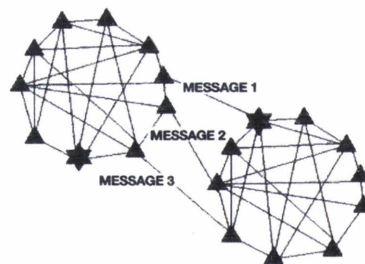
It goes into a network



All networks are connected



Control over the message is lost



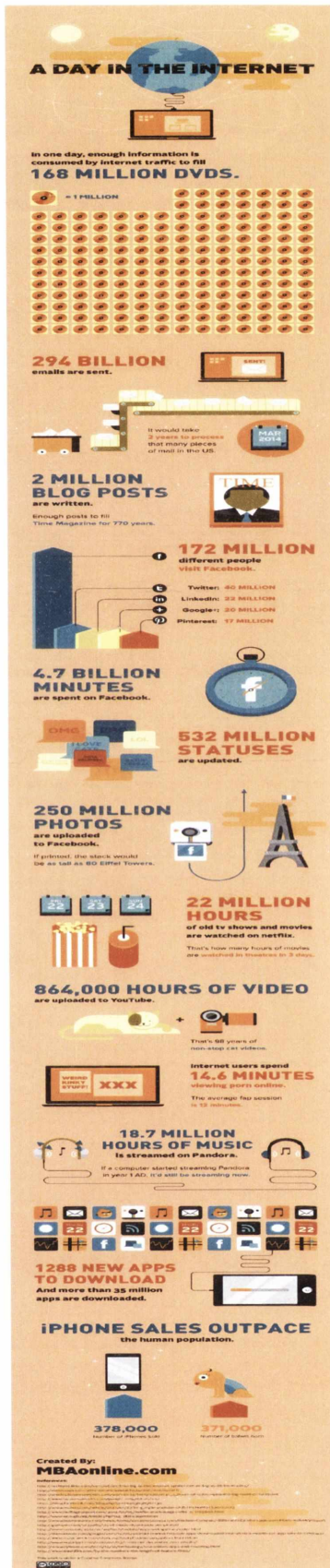
Always!

**Figure 7.2** *How information moves through the internet*

Source: Alison Clark, CIPR/PRCA Internet Commission, 2000

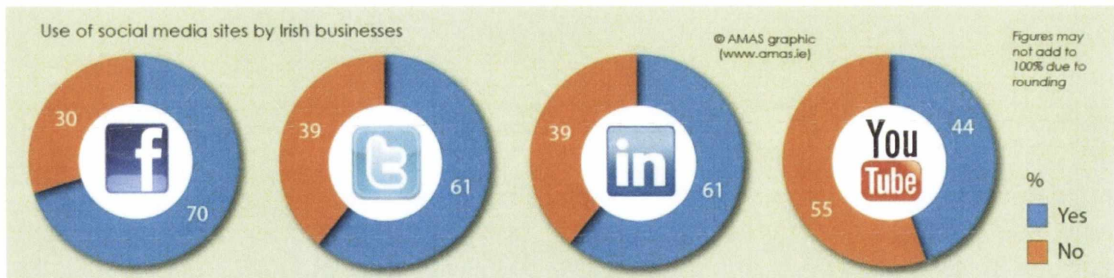
(Source: Phillips and Young pg. 60)

# APPENDIX B



(Source: Mashable.com)

# APPENDIX C



(Source: <http://amas.ie/online-research/state-of-the-net/state-of-the-net-issue-25-summer-2012/more-irish-marketers-switch-budgets-online/>)

