

Why are PR agencies blogging? An exploratory study of the blogging practices of public relations agencies

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Abstract

Much of the focus of academic literature on blogging in public relations has focused on blogs as relationship-building tools and, as such, tools to apply a more co-creational approach to public relations practice. However there is some indication that the extent to which blogs are being used as this type of tool may have been exaggerated. This research provides a snapshot (late 2009) of the blogging practices of public relations agencies in Sydney, Australia. The project's focus was to determine whether any inconsistencies existed between academic and practitioner perspectives about blogging practice. It also sought to identify aspects of practice that would indicate a move towards more co-creational rather than functional approaches to public relations. Evidence of both approaches were found, with the primary purpose of the blogs appearing to be seeking new business by promoting the agencies' services and their practitioners as thought leaders in the field of public relations.

Introduction

Blogging is a form of social media and is one of the fastest growing areas of communication in public relations practice (Xifra & Huertas, 2008). It has been argued that blogging is breaking down the barriers to communication, enabling more equal and democratic dialogue between individuals, groups and organisations (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Xifra & Huertas, 2008; Kent, 2008). A number of researchers have investigated the use of blogs by organisations (e.g. Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004; Lee, Hwang & Lee, 2006; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Kent, 2008; Wright & Hinson, 2009). There have been suggestions that the extent to which blogs are interactive, interlinked and oriented towards large-scale events is exaggerated by blog writers, including journalists and academics (Herring, et al., 2004). This claim has been supported by recent research by Seltzer and Mitrook (2007), Kent (2008), and Kelleher (2008). This research indicates an inconsistency between potential blog use identified

by scholars and blogging practices undertaken by practitioners. Inconsistency in reported use of blogging for corporate or organisational communication, with its purported ability to build relationships, was the primary focus of this research, which provides a snapshot of late 2009 industry practice in Sydney, Australia. It reports factors that influence blogging, the reasons that organisations engage in blogging, and the purposes of the blog as determined by their creators—public relations (PR) practitioners. It investigated and compared practitioners' perspectives of their blogs with the blog content and structure to determine whether any inconsistencies were evident. This exploratory project was seen as initial step in reducing the disparity between practitioner and academic perspectives of blogging practice in public relations with a view to better understanding and enhancing practice and theory development in this area.

Scholarly perspective on blogging in public relations

Scholarly perspectives of blogs as PR communication tools are often based on a perception of them as relationship-building tools (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kent, 2008; Kelleher, 2008). Similarly, the relationship-building potential of organisational blogs is also observed in literature written by PR and marketing practitioners (Searles & Weinberger, 2001; Scoble & Israel, 2006). Searles and Weinberger (2001) assert that internet-based communication such as blogs should be conducted to achieve “authentic” connections between real people, a view supported by Scoble and Israel (2006) and built upon by Kelleher and Miller (2006). This is consistent with the concept of relationship-building through authentic dialogue in blogs (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kent, 2008; Kelleher, 2008).

Kelleher and Miller (2006) built on the Herring et al. (2004) study and examined how organisations communicate with their publics using blogs. Kelleher and Miller (2006) observed that use of conversational human voice (CHV) or “being open to dialogue, welcoming conversational communication and providing prompt feedback” (p. 399) is significantly more important to blog readers than in other forms of computer-mediated communication. They also found that a blog may be valuable in promoting the “human face” of an organisation beyond the organisational structure. This could contribute to relationship management, seen by many in the PR field as a key area of organisational communication and one which would support the co-creational perspective of a PR practitioner's role.

Similarly, Lee et al.'s (2006) investigation into organisational blogs of Fortune 500 companies found that “candid dialogue”, similar to conversational human voice in blogs, is an enabling factor for relationships and is particularly important in the maintenance of familiarity and trust. The use of “conversational voice” is also important for Seltzer & Mitrook (2007), who, through content analysis of 50 environmental blogs, determined that structural and interactive features of these blogs enable discussion between creators and readers.

Conversational human voice in blogs also has a positive effect on lowering public perceptions of an organisational issue or crisis, another facet of PR practice. Using a controlled experiment, researchers Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) found that use of conversational human voice in an organisational blog can contribute to its credibility, a significant factor in reducing negative perceptions during crises. These findings further support the work of Lee et al. (2006) and Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) and demonstrate

that conversational human voice can potentially benefit other areas of PR practice, not solely the building of relationships. Consistent with these findings is the exploratory research undertaken by Xifra and Huertas (2008) which built upon the Lee et al. (2006) study. Xifra and Huertas' (2008) research supports the argument that use of conversational human voice in blogs contributes to two-way communication and credibility in practice.

Web and blog use also influences practitioner perception of power in their organisations (Porter & Sallot, 2005; Porter, Sweetser-Trammell, Chung & Eunseong, 2007). By empirically testing Finkelstein's (1992) categories of power, Porter et al. (2007) demonstrated that use of social media, like blogs, affects the way a practitioner perceives their power within their organisation and across the industry. It was determined that the level of perceived power grows as the use of blogs by an individual increases. According to Porter et al. (2007), the blog is first used for gaining information, then passive professional investigation. The individual then begins to actively use blogs to strategically identify issues, and finally contributes via creation of their own blog or that of the organisation. By the time the individual reaches the stage of contribution and dialogue, they perceive themselves to be an expert within the field, with greater power over those who do not engage in blogging (Porter et al., 2007).

Practitioner perception of the web and blogs can affect the rate at which these tools are adopted and the way the individual sees their level of power in an organisation (Porter & Sallot, 2005; Porter et al, 2007; Eyrich et al., 2008). Eyrich et al. (2008) provide a snapshot of perceived use of social media like blogs and how this drives PR industry adoption of these tools. Blogs appeared to be the fifth most popularly used communication tool, with email the highest. Eyrich et al. (2008) assert that there is a direct correlation between the tools that are most frequently adopted by practitioners and those perceived to be the most prevalent.

Wright and Hinson (2009) found that blog use in PR practice benefits either the organisation or the public involved, never both organisation and public simultaneously. Practitioner respondents indicated that engagement with blogs can enable organisational–public dialogue but this is only undertaken as it allows practitioners to access specific audiences, bypassing the mass media. The findings of Wright and Hinson (2009) appear to support earlier claims that blogs are not necessarily being used as dialogic and relationship-building tools because practitioners or organisations want to engage in two-way symmetrical communication (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Kent 2008; Kelleher, 2008). Similarly Xifras and Huertas (2008) found organisations do not want to give customers (publics) freedom of expression through unrestricted comment, instead preferring to filter comments that appear publicly on their blogs, potentially limiting the extent for symmetrical communication (Xifra & Huertas, 2008).

Some researchers argue that current research is limited because it focuses too heavily on establishing whether practitioners are using blogs, without taking into account the context of the blog, how it has been created or for what purpose (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Kent, 2008; Kelleher, 2008). Kelleher (2008) argues that many of the studies focus on the receiver of the information and their interpretation of the blog, without observing the blog creator's intentions; whether the creator or the sender intended the blog to be dialogic, or a relationship-building mechanism. Kent (2008) calls for more critical evaluation of blog functions, particularly as persuasive and information tools.

This is supported by Herring et al. (2004) and Marken (2006) who suggests further research is needed to identify how and why practitioners and agencies are using blogs, rather than simply suggesting potential reasons for use.

It is this gap between the suggested potential of blogs for two-way symmetrical communication and practitioners intentions for their blogging practice that informs this research. Themes in the literature, observed limitations of current research and Botan and Taylor's (2004) dichotomy of theoretic perspectives enabled the authors to build upon existing research and contribute to practitioner and scholarly understanding of blogging. By acknowledging these themes, consistencies and differences between the results of this research project and prior findings have been identified and inform the conclusions.

Methodology

This study involved an examination of blogging by six PR practitioners to explore their reasons for blogging, objectives, perceptions of the role and affordances of blogging, and the context that influenced their blogging practices. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with practitioners as well as textual analysis of blog content that they produced. Two theoretical perspectives informed this analysis. PR practitioner blogging was examined to identify whether it was undertaken in a functional (information transmission) or co-creational way, or both.

Six PR agencies (referred to as A–F) were selected for this exploratory study, identified using the operational definition proposed by Heath, which states that a public relations agency is:

A company hired by another organisation to provide certain services . . . under the best of circumstances the firm helps improve the client's reputation and its relationships with its publics. The services can range from strategic and managerial—such as planning and implementing annual major campaigns and providing senior level counselling—to the more tactical, such as generating news releases or printed promotional materials. (2005, p. 685)

The definition was selected as it identifies the two broad theoretical frameworks in which PR agency work is undertaken: co-creational, which is essential for relationship-building; or functional, involving tactics such as the generation of news releases, which Hanson-Horn and Dostal Neff (2008) suggest is a typical functional element of a practitioner's role. Heath's (2005) definition draws attention to both functional and co-creational perspectives that can be applied to practitioner activities within an agency context. By identifying what constituted an agency in this research, parameters were set to define what could be collected as data.

Five research questions were designed for this study of the purpose and context of blog use by PR practitioners in Sydney-based agencies, as follows:

- RQ1 What is the main purpose of the blog as perceived by the practitioners?
- RQ2 Is the facilitation of relationships important to practitioners?
- RQ3 What contextual aspects affect the development and construction of the blog?
- RQ4 What contextual aspects influence what practitioners write on the blog?
- RQ5 Do practitioners see their role and the blog from a functional perspective?

Key findings

Six key findings emerged:

1. Five out of the six practitioners indicated that the main purpose of the blog was to raise their agency's profile and to promote their agency.
2. All of the practitioners would not censor comments unless they were personally offensive or vindictive.
3. Building staff personality through the blog is an important factor for half of the participating agencies.
4. Two out of the six practitioners indicated that they engaged staff in the use of blogs so they could undertake blogging on behalf of clients.
5. The textual structures of the blog are affected by the level of understanding, knowledge and the length of engagement the practitioner has had with blogging.
6. None of the blogs or practitioners demonstrated solely functional or co-creational approaches to blogging. Instead both approaches appear to be occurring simultaneously.

The following examples have been chosen as they provide an in-depth perspective to the area of investigation and where appropriate are interwoven with findings from an analysis of each agency's blog content and structure.

Finding 1: Five out of the six practitioners indicated that the main purpose of the blog was to raise their agency's profile and to promote their agency

Each of the practitioners who participated in this research indicated promotional reasons for their blog use. The six practitioners observed that the industry was moving increasingly online, and all indicated that they felt the need to have a blog in order to establish or maintain an online presence. Contextually, Agencies B and F were updating their websites and viewed their respective blogs as an important part of this update. Practitioner B indicated that the blog was an important part of the agency image change:

It worked in nicely with us having to update our website . . . Our consultancy is also moving into digital . . . prior to the start of this year, end of last year really, most of our work was traditional public affairs, stakeholder consultation, face to face surveys, all that kind of stuff. Now we recognise . . . off the back of the Obama campaign even though it's cliché it is a really good example of how incorporating all media just further emphasises that this helps deliver your message.

Five of the six agencies indicated that their blogs were used to increase the Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) or Search Engine Management (SEM) of the websites of the agencies in order to drive traffic to the agency website. SEO is the repetition of specific words and consistent new content on a blog that is linked to an organisational website, to drive the ranking of the organisational website higher up in an online search engine (Scobel & Israel, 2006). This has direct implications for the agency as when people enter terms into search engines like Google, the agency appears higher up on the search engine rankings, increasing its potential to be noticed among the businesses listed online. Practitioner F has seen the direct results of this, stating:

It's [the blog] driving our search engine rankings right to the top. So if you search for tech PR or technology public relations or tech PR agency, chances are that we are in the first one or two rankings and that drives new clients to us.

Similarly, Practitioner A viewed his agency blog as an opportunity to differentiate the agency not only from competitors but also from its globalised parent company. Practitioner A indicated that "the idea for the Sydney blog was to express the individual character of the people behind the Sydney office and highlight the work we are doing locally". This use of the blog for differentiation and promotional purposes is emphasised throughout the interview with Practitioner A, who demonstrates that he is aware that potential clients might read the blog and suggests:

We would expect that any client or prospective client who is researching Agency A as an agency would be looking at things like our blog and our Facebook page looking at it as more localised information about our clients that we work with and what we do.

Practitioner C stated he is concerned with Search Engine Optimisation but also states that the purpose of the agency blog is to "demonstrate [Agency C's] skill and understanding of the industry that we work within . . . it's a demonstration of your knowledge as much as anything else as opposed to it's just published because we can, because blogs are out there". Similarly, Practitioner D indicated that she felt Agency D needed to start blogging because of what she was reading online and in print publications. Practitioner D viewed the D blog as "a PR tool first and foremost . . . because being a PR company you know it is important to know all the opportunities for yourself and your client".

Practitioner E was the only participant who suggested relationships and dialogue were the primary reasons for his agency's blog and that these relationships were not limited to the blog context.

[Blog E] is about having a relationship with our readers and we do it through a number of different channels . . . but the point is you build the relationship between [Blog E] and the reader and then you try and work out how you can make that conversation work wherever people are willing to have that conversation.

Blog E was the only blog analysed that received regular and extensive commentary from outside of the organisational context. However, the blog is also used to generate interest in Agency E's events and information, indicating that while Practitioner E states that the blog is solely about relationship building, there is a strong functionalist aspect to the blog.

Finding 2: All of the practitioners would not censor comments unless they were personally offensive

Dialogue is an important aspect of the co-creational theoretical perspective of public relations. Dialogue is enabled across blogs through "threaded conversation" or a comments tool, enabling audiences to make comments on blog posts. Each of the six agency blog structures were examined for inclusion of comment tools and whether the practitioners would pre- or post-moderate comments and why. All of the practitioners indicated that they would not remove content or comments unless they were personally offensive. Practitioner D is yet to remove a comment but indicated she wouldn't do so " . . . unless it was something completely off the air or completely offensive in some ridiculous way or whatever . . . no but that's what blogging is about, free speech, free opinions".

Practitioner E suggested that comment removal depended on more than personal offence:

Once they're [the comments] up if something is personally insulting to someone, it will get taken down—if it's an anonymous comment it's more likely to get taken down. Whereas where someone's put their name to it, you know we'll give them a little more lee-way, and if I get somebody who is persistently rude about someone for instance I can then take their IP address and put it in a pre-moderation tube which means that from then on that if they do say something, it comes to me for moderation before it goes live.

This use of pre- or post-moderation tools in reference to how practitioners determine what is publicly available on the agency blog is indicative that, although there is opportunity for dialogue, the power over the blog content rests primarily with the agency/practitioner and means there is an asymmetrical relationship with the audience.

Finding 3: Building staff personality through the blog is an important factor for half of the participating agencies

Agencies A, B, and F indicated that their blogs enabled them to demonstrate staff personalities. Practitioner B suggested:

It's a great way of showing personality . . . it really gives a sense of who we are without having to be this rigid corporate . . . Our website was designed, and our old one was too, to be a bit different and . . . because we are out of the box, and we like to think that each of the people that work at [Agency B] are all quite different.

Similarly Practitioner A stated that Blog A was “meant to represent the voice of everybody in [Agency A]. We also want it to be a true reflection of the personality of the people here in the office”. This emphasises the relationship between the Blog A posts and the practitioners working at Agency A.

Practitioner B also suggested that the blog enabled the development of an agency personality, “we are different from traditional agencies and our competitors . . . I think the blog also gives a personality to our website as well”. This position is directly countered by Practitioner F, who suggests “. . . you can't really build a relationship with the brand, you know what I mean? I mean people like to say that but you can't go down the pub and have . . . a drink with the brand”. Half the participants discussed this aspect of “personality”, showing that it is significant, but their views on how this should be undertaken and whether it is effective differed.

Finding 4: Two out of the six practitioners indicated that they engaged staff in the use of blogs so they could undertake blogging on behalf of clients

Practitioners A and F are actively using their agency blogs as a training platform for staff, implying that before the staff can consult on client blogs, they must first engage with the organisational blog within their agency context. Practitioners A and F indicated their blogs enable them to sell the practice to clients. Practitioner F stated:

If we do it, our people are across it and we can sell it. We actually understand the medium and we can actually sell it without bluffing basically. You know we are walking the walk talking the talk basically using it to train staff to then sell it on to clients.

Similarly Practitioner A suggests that when “they [the Agency A staff] actually go and consult to clients they have some real experience about how it works and how to write comments/posts, doing that sort of thing”.

Finding 5: The textual structures of the blog are affected by the level of understanding, knowledge and the length of engagement the practitioner has had with blogging

All interviewees indicated they were responsible for the blog content and were endeavouring to keep uploading content and ideas. Through an analysis of the blog content, the style and content of each of the six blogs during the time the practitioner had engaged with it was observed. The initial four to six blog posts of each agency blog were long winded. Posts became progressively shorter and started to incorporate multimedia, which often began as photos relevant to the blog post and then videos from YouTube. Blog D was the least developed of the six agency blogs and comprised of long text-based posts. Blogs B and C included multimedia relevant to blog posts, including graphics, logos of brands that were discussed—e.g. Twitter, and videos they had located on YouTube, which were posted to the blog with varying relevance to posts.

Practitioner A also used YouTube but had also begun to integrate YouTube into his agency blog by filming Agency A events and office parties and uploading these to Youtube and the blog simultaneously. This also links to the use of Blog B to demonstrate personalities of the staff members. Blog E was the most advanced with content including pod- and vod-casts where Practitioner E speaks to other practitioners and important people within the media and marketing industries to discuss industry issues and contextually relevant events.

Relevant to this finding is that Practitioners A, B, E and F were the only practitioners who had previously used blogs for their own personal communication before starting their agency blogs. Practitioner E was the only practitioner who voiced any concern with maintaining audience–agency relationships despite also using the blog for purposes consistent with the functional perspective of public relations.

Finding 6: None of the blogs or practitioners demonstrated solely functional or co-creational approaches to blogging. Instead both approaches appear to be occurring simultaneously

Data analysis of the interview transcripts and the blogs indicated that it was impossible to categorise the practice of blogging as solely co-creational or functional in approach. Instead both approaches seem to be occurring at exactly the same time, demonstrated by the first four research findings. This demonstrates a potential limitation of this dichotomy in public relations theory.

Discussion

Blogs created by PR agencies are clearly being used to promote the agencies and their practitioners as thought leaders in order to portray a positive perspective of the agency. The desire to be positioned as a thought leader implies that there are power relationships inherent in blogging that are yet to be fully understood. The use of blogging by agency practitioners on behalf of their agencies indicates that for five of the participant practitioners the promotional purpose of their blog could be categorised as functional. Botan and Taylor's (2004) suggestion that the field of public relations is moving towards a co-creational perspective is not evident in this finding.

Censorship and blogging

The finding that no practitioner would censor comments unless they were personally offensive indicates that the “threaded conversation”, or ability to make comments on the blog, is an integral part of the blog structure and its relationship-building potential. Despite practitioners having the power to censor communication that maybe negative to the organisation, the attitude of practitioners is to allow rather than stifle communication via commentary. The practitioners’ decisions not to censor communication, with the exception of comments that were rude or personally vindictive, indicate that the structural feature of threaded conversation appears uninhibited in the six participant blogs. This demonstrates a more co-creational approach to blogging and audience participation.

Relationship building and blogging

A number of tools for building relationships with audiences are available in blogging. The use of staff personalities emerged as a potential tool for relationship-building. The building of staff personalities is also reflected through the use of conversational human voice in the blog, which, consistent with the current academic literature in the field, involved treating the blog as a conversation with a view to using this to build or enhance relationships. Half the practitioners involved in this study are using the blog in this way; however, two out of the six practitioners also indicated that they engaged staff in the use of blogs so they could train staff, demonstrate skills to potential clients, and eventually undertake blogging on behalf of clients. In some cases the use of tools previously viewed as enabling dialogic symmetrical relationships are being used for more functional purposes such as attracting clients to the agency and broadening the scope of services that can be offered to clients.

Context and changes in blogging

Textual structures of the blog are affected by the level of understanding, knowledge and the length of engagement the practitioner has had with blogging. While each of the participating agencies has a blog, each practitioner has different levels of experience with blogging. The length of time in which they had been involved in blogging was reflected in the structure of their blog posts. This showed that the construction of blog posts is relative to the amount of knowledge and understanding their author has of blogging, in addition to the purposes that the organisation and author/practitioner may attribute to the blog.

Limitations of the dichotomy of perspectives

None of the blogs or practitioners demonstrated totally functional or co-creational approaches to the practice of blogging. Instead both perspectives seem to be occurring concurrently, demonstrating a potential limitation or perhaps another dimension of the Botan and Taylor (2004) dichotomy of perspectives.

A Venn diagram was developed to conceptualise how these approaches overlap when assessing the blog practice by practitioners in their agency context.

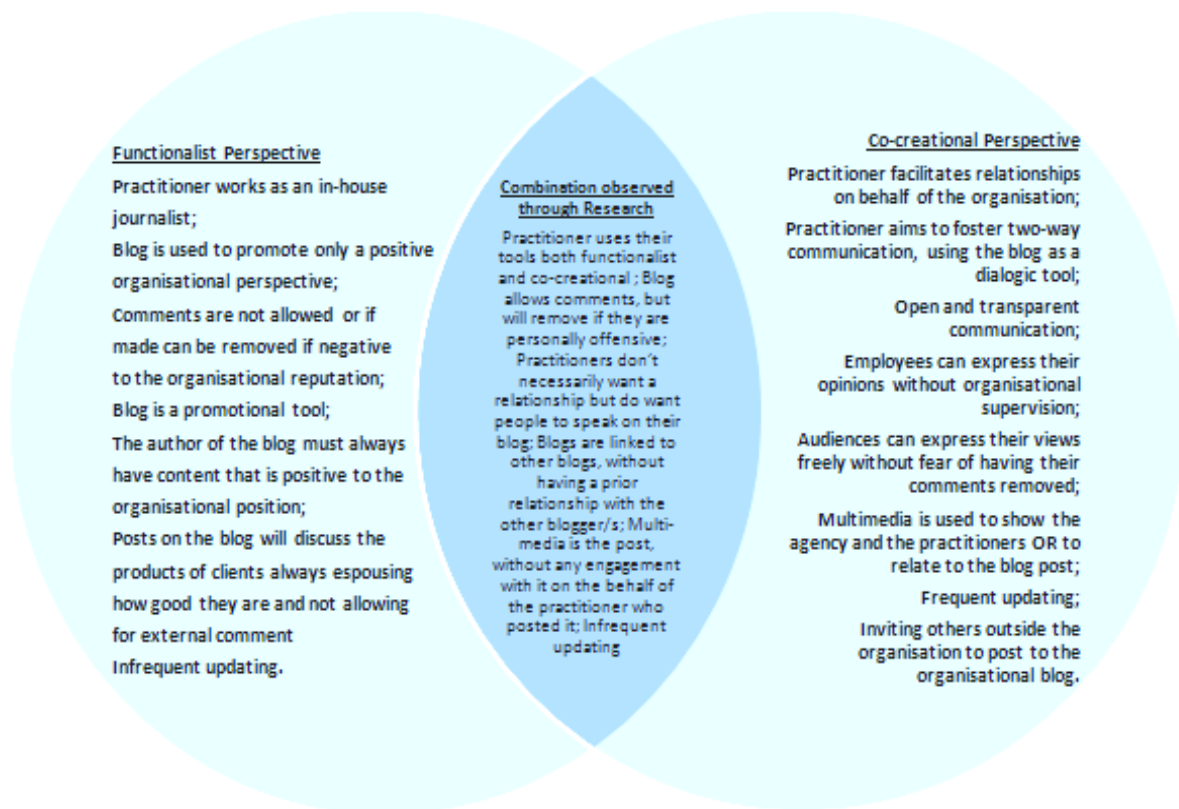


Figure 1 A Venn diagram demonstrating aspects of the agency blogging that are functional, co-creational and indicative of both occurring concurrently

Conclusions

The scholarly perception that blogs could be used as dialogic or two-way communication platforms fails to take into account how these communication platforms may also be used for functional reasons as documented in this research. This perhaps supports the balanced zone perspective of Flynn where he states:

in the give and take of public relations where the interests of the organizations compete at times with the interests of the stakeholder groups, those organizations that achieve their goals and objectives do so by maintaining an optimal balance between internal and external interests (2006, p.195)

This research project indicates that the practitioners in this study use blogs in what could be described as a combination of both co-creational and functional approaches. Perhaps future work in the field will find that agency blogging centres on finding the right balance between internal and external interests.

There are a number of emergent research areas for blog use by PR practitioners and it is noted that there are a number of researchers already producing annual investigations into this area of practice. However, this exploratory study does point to some areas that future researchers may like to consider, such as: widening the current research focus area to include functional as well as co-creational perspectives of practice; or looking for evidence of other theoretical perspectives emerging from the research data, such as Flynn's balanced zone perspective (2006), Roper's (2005) work relating to PR

practitioners as discourse technologists or social constructionist approaches (e.g. Gordon & Pellegrin, 2008; James, 2009, van Ruler & Vercic, 2005). Practitioner perspectives should also be incorporated in future projects to ascertain how they are describing and viewing their own practice. It is recommended also that future projects should look at undertaking ongoing analysis of blogging practices and blog content to ascertain whether blogs continue to change over time. Future research could examine whether the practice changes further as practitioners become more familiar with the platform and further develop their own individual ways of engaging with it. This research could also examine whether practitioners become more or less functional in their approach to blogging or if both the functional and co-creational perspectives continue to be observed concurrently, as observed in this research.

There are also a number of points emerging from this study that practitioners could consider. There appears to be some benefit to exploring the blogging platform through personal use before engaging with it in a professional capacity. Utilising good writing skills and conversational human voice in blog entries, applying an understanding of how the blog structure works and understanding the possibilities offered by the inclusion of non-text content by way of links and images appear to contribute to the success of an agency blog. Also, consideration of how commentary on agency blog entries, both positive and negative, will be handled by the agency prior to setting up the blog could be advantageous.

Based on limitations of this exploratory study, interviews of a wider selection of practitioners should be conducted and a focus on how blogging fits into the wider strategy of organisational communication should be undertaken. If possible, this wider study should also include audience perspectives to establish whether the perceived meanings constructed by audiences are consistent with the author/practitioners intended purpose or meaning. However, it would also be interesting to revisit the research questions of this study with the same participant sample to observe whether or not perceptions of how blogging is undertaken change over time. Finally, a comparison and analysis of research could be undertaken to examine the reasons some agencies adopt blogs in the future and whether their late adoption of the practice has adversely affected their ability to promote themselves as thought leaders.

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