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Community change: Water management through the use of social media, the case of Australia’s Murray-Darling Basin

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1. Abstract
Social media can influence behavior, disseminate knowledge and impact on social change during times of conflict. Communication literature is important when considering community members’ perception of priority areas of the media, however, limited attention has focused on communication theory in depth, through the use of Social Media. This qualitative study explores the Australian Government Department, The Murray-Darling Basin Authority, and their effective use of social media to engage with a community previously in conflict with the Government.

2. Introduction
Communication to manage knowledge in the event of disasters, conflicts and to foster behavior change has been discussed in the literature in a number of contexts, and the idea of communities connecting through communication has also been established. This paper provides a brief analysis of communication theory through the examination of social media use by an Australian Government Department, particularly during a period of conflict. A case study of the use of social media by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority in Australia has been developed, though qualitative interviews and content analysis of media and agency reports. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) is part of the Australian Government
‘Environment’ Portfolio and was established to support the water resources of the Murray-Darling Basin and its communities.

The Murray-Darling Basin is Australia’s largest river system. One of the largest and driest river systems in the World (MDBA, 2013), the Basin is relied on for its water resources. Two million Australians live in the Murray-Darling Basin area and another 1.3 million people rely on the resources of the river system (MDBA, 2013). Prior to the ‘Murray-Darling Basin Plan’ being released in 2012, it was viewed that consultation needed to be enhanced in the case of the Murray-Darling (Crase, Dollery and Wallis, 2005), and social media has been used to enhance communication between stakeholders.

This paper explores the Murray-Darling Basin Authority’s use of social media through a theoretical perspective.

3. Research objective and method

Given the analysis of the literature and the previous conflict in the Murray-Darling Basin, the main research objective for this study is: how has the Murray-Darling Basin used technology to connect with their previously alienated stakeholders and meet the needs of the community? More specifically, this research explores agenda setting through social media, a previously neglected area of the literature.

In addition to netnography observation (Kozinets, 2010) of the social media pages by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA), an interview conducted with a representative from the MDBA. The study utilized grounded theory, with no pre-prepared questions. Some themes for discussion were taken to the interview, relating to the use of social media, particularly in enhance relationships with the communities. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority use a blog, Facebook, Twitter and a YouTube channel.
4. Findings

Two main themes were discussed in the interviews: the use of social media for connecting communities to the organization and conversational control.

The evolution of communication in the Murray-Darling Basin

Considerable difficulties and disagreement between states, industries and communities has been reported in the Murray-Darling Basin for “the best part of a century” and a national plan was seen as the most proactive step (Crase, 2012:1). The conflict has been called “a century of squabbling” (Sheldon, 2012:1) and concerns arose as to whether the Murray-Darling Basin plan, released in 2012, would put an end to this conflict. Although there was reported outrage after the plan was released (Kinsford, 2011), communication has improved since then. Within that context, social media was utilised as a way to improve communication. The following quote, from the interview, demonstrates how the MDBA have utilized social media effectively:

“Overall, the MDBA has made some great strides in its use of social media. The tools were used in an increasingly interactive way, live tweeting, answering questions and adopting a more proactive stance. The MDBA also began blogging, a process that proved especially successful for providing plain English explanations of Basin Plan issues and quickly updated Basin Plan consultation information. Internally, approval was given for all staff to access social media, subject to completion of social media training.”

In a time of high emotions and conflict, communication can be problematic. Messages can be misheard or shared incorrectly. By having a more structured, but informal, communication mechanism, through the use of a blog, communication can be more effectively managed,
while still maintaining the conversational flow. During the public consultation phase, community members had the ability to communicate on the Plan.

Over recent years, communication with the MDBA and relevant communities and stakeholders has evolved. Many people in the communities are now using social media to communicate with the MDBA. This communication is conversational, two-way dialogue and has resulted in an increased connection between all parties. It also alerts the media to important matters and journalists may then circulate stories on related topics further than the social media sites may reach.

**Conversational control**

In addition to connecting communities and stakeholder, the use of social media tools allows the Murray-Darling Basin Authority the opportunity to influence the flow of conversation. This is particularly the case with the MDBA’s blog, which allows ‘articles’ to be posted and comments regarding the articles. Prior to the use of the blog, a message forum was utilized, but this provided no guidance on the topics for discussion. Particularly during periods of conflict, it is important to influence the conversation flow.

The objective of the MDBA’s social media is ‘to create an integrated, holistic online presence. MDBA's online websites and tools will be interconnected’. Interconnected social media means that Twitter may highlight aspects, such as something on the MDBA YouTube channel. The blog will allow comments and more information will be provided through the web site. This ensures consistency of the message and appropriate messages for the specific social media tools. As stakeholders are increasingly online on social media, it is essential to use social media to engage and converse. This requires the organization to communication openly and be engaging in order to build their online communication. The MDBA has
designed their communication to be consistent, regular and timely, using the technology to enhance relationships.

The data has indicated that human relationships and communication between community members is enabled through the use of social media. Based on the success of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority’s social media, it is possible for organizations to learn from their communication. Community relationships are facilitated through the use of social media. This enhances relationships between organization representatives and the community. Conversation and information is enhanced through the use of social media and alienation of stakeholders is reduced. The example of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority social media use achieves these objectives and has enhanced relationships within the community.

6. Conclusion

With time and the use of social media, communication has improved connections between community members. Social media may enhance relationships in the event of a conflict between community members, as indicated by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority Example. Theoretically, it is essential to understand how social media has been utilized effectively, because it has implications for the emerging area of social media literature. This also has implications for practice, as managers apply their knowledge of social media to enhance communication in the event of a conflict.

Applying communication theory to the case of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, it is possible to see that strategic communication can be problematic, supporting the belief of Craig (1999). This means that organizations should take a more conversational approach to their use of social media. Given communication with the community members and the Murray-Darling Basin Authority was negative, change was required. The Commonwealth’s
own communication strategy in 2010, the *Guide for the Murray-Darling Basin Plan* “provoked despair, anger and anxiety” within the communities (Commonwealth of Australia 2011, p. 4). By opening the communication between organizations and community members through the use of social media, relationships seem to have improved and communication is more effective, as community members feel more consulted. Further research should also explore the community perspective of this social media use, as only the organisation perspective was explored in this research.

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7. References


Crase, L. (2012) Basin Plan is historic, but let’s not lose the whole story, The Conversation, 30 November 2012


NOTE: A full version of this paper can be obtained from the author