

Studying Social and Digital Media Use in Public Relations Practice: An Annual Longitudinal Analysis

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- This is a report of our 12th annual study examining how social and other digital technologies are impacting public relations practice.
- Our methodology involves a web-based survey that's part of an annual longitudinal trend analysis. Once again in 2017 we received terrific cooperation from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and invitations to participate in this year's survey were extended to a sample of PRSA members.
- Our data set includes more than 5,800 respondents since our first published report in 2006; more than 4,300 since we dramatically revised our questionnaire in 2009; and more than 3,700 since we started asking questions about Facebook and Twitter in 2010.
- Our 2017 analysis is based on 556 usable responses and results show public relations practitioners continue to agree strongly (and more so year after year) that social and other digital media are changing the way public relations is practiced. This impact continues to be much more pronounced for external than internal audiences. Our major finding this year are:
 - The amount of time public relations practitioners are spending working with social or digital media continues to increase each year. In 2015, 29% of our survey respondents spent more than 25% of their working hours with blogs and social media. In 2016 that percentage increased to 38% and it moved up to 40% in 2017.
 - Meanwhile, the number of public relations people spending more than 50% of their working time with social or digital media remained at 14% in 2017, the same percentage as 2016, up from 10% in 2015.
 - The public relations or communications function remains primarily responsible for monitoring and managing digital media communication in 64% of the companies (or client companies) affiliated with this year's 556 respondents. This figure remains relatively unchanged over the past four years.
 - Each year, subjects in this research project are asked how frequently they access a number of social networking, micro-blogging and video sharing sites as part of their work in public relations. Respondents are specifically instructed not to count time spent for personal use.
 - We've been asking this question annually for the past eight years and Facebook has been the most frequently used site every year except 2014. Facebook ranked as the most frequently used of these sites again in 2017 with a mean score of 4.36, a slight increase from 4.32 in 2016 but up considerably from means in earlier years.
 - Twitter placed second in this tally in 2017 with a mean score of 4.29 up from 4.19 in 2016. LinkedIn was third at 3.60, Instagram fourth at 3.40 and YouTube fifth at 3.24.
 - Although the use of these top five social and digital media remained fairly constant from 2014 through 2016, the use of YouTube decreased some in 2017 while Instagram continued to be used more.

- For the past two years, we've also attempted to specifically identify social and digital media public relations practitioners do not use. Results in 2017 indicate only four percent use neither Facebook nor Twitter and only nine percent do not use LinkedIn. Other percentages in this tally are YouTube 11%, Instagram 30%, Google+ 45%, Pinterest 49%, Flickr 51%, Snapchat 54% and Tumblr 63%.
- Each year this survey asks several questions about how research, measurement and evaluation are being used in the digital space. In 2015 we were excited to report that (for the first time since we started asking these questions in 2009) more than half of the organizations represented by our respondents were measuring what members of various strategic publics have communicated about them via digital media. Unfortunately, in 2016 that measurement use figure fell to 49% and in 2017 it fell even lower to 47%.
- We also ask questions about specific use of public relations research, measurement and evaluation in the digital space. Results show, most of the measurement currently taking place focuses on outputs and content analysis with only about one-quarter of the organizations employing outcome-based methodologies.
- Of this year's respondents, 22% were employed by PR agencies, 17% worked in corporate PR, 12% percent held non-teaching positions in education (six percent held teaching positions), 11% came from government, another 18% worked the non-profit PR sector, seven percent came from health care and seven percent answered "other" to this question. The 2016 gender breakdown was 68% female and 32% male. In terms of age this year, nine percent were younger than 30, 24% were between 30 and 39, 22% fell in the 40-to-49 age category, 29% were 50-to-59 and 16% were 60 or older.
- The completely revamped the literature review portion of our paper includes a section reporting on how Facebook, Twitter and other new media are being used by the American public. Highlights of this section include data indicating more than half the American public used social media to get news about the 2016 presidential election. This section also cites studies claiming Facebook use is more than three times that of Twitter in the USA.