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## Keeping up with the digital age: How the American Red Cross uses social media to build relationships

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### ABSTRACT

Forty individuals from the American Red Cross were interviewed to explore the use of social media in communicating with key publics. Results show that practicing public relations through social media is effective and necessary in the emerging digital age, as shown through the Red Cross' development of a two-way dialogue with younger constituents, the media, and the community. This two-way dialogue has been accomplished primarily through Twitter and Facebook, with barriers such as lack of staff and time, and opportunities to improve National Headquarters and local chapter relations. The insights shared by the American Red Cross are useful for both public relations scholars and professionals to help them understand and apply social media practices to build strong, lasting relationships.

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## 1. Introduction

The interactive features on the Internet and blogosphere have become a staple in society, with two-thirds of the world's Internet population having visited a social networking or blogging site, and the time spent on these sites growing at more than three times the rate of overall Internet growth (Nielsen, 2009). The nature of social media makes them helpful tools for public relations practitioners, as they allow organizations to create dialogues with audiences, such as through Facebook, where, more than 700,000 businesses have active pages (Hird, 2010). Engaging in social media is beneficial for organizations since 38 percent of active Internet users think more positively about companies that maintain a corporate blog (Universal McCann, 2008).

Despite the growing popularity of social media, there are only a handful of studies exploring the usage of social media in public relations (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Kent, 2008). This study explores how social media are effectively utilized in public relations through analyzing 40 in-depth interviews with American Red Cross employees that manage social media communication. The American Red Cross is an ideal organization because it is a well-known, respected leader in managing social media (Preston, 2009; Society for New Communication Research, 2008). The findings of this study emphasize the increasing importance of social media channels and provide insight into building relationships using social media.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Nonprofits usage of social media

Social media usage is beneficial for nonprofit organizations for several reasons. Not only does it help deepen existing relationships, but it also allows individuals to self-organize around causes through collaborating with each other (Kanter, 2009). Waters (2009) found that nonprofit organizations predominantly use social media to streamline management functions, educate the public about programs and services, and communicate with constituents.

Many organizations are still not fully utilizing social media. Waters, Burnett, Lamm, and Lucas (2009) found that nonprofit organizations are failing to fully utilize the interactive function of Facebook, which could potentially cultivate relationships. Additionally, Waters (2009) discovered that nonprofit organizations lag behind others in social media adoption, waiting to see how others use this new technology.

### 2.2. Social media and public relations

With the increasing usage of social media for public relations practice, research in the academic literature is increasing. Eyrych, Padman, and Sweetser (2008) measured the adoption of social media tools by public relations practitioners, finding that though an average of six tools were being utilized, professionals were more inclined to use more traditional tools as opposed to more technologically complicated channels. Another study focused on blogs (Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009), finding similar results: Public relations practitioners have yet to fully adopt new technologies for professional use.

The adoption of social media channels by practitioners is important as it affects their relationship-building capabilities. Yang and Kang (2009) discovered that interactive blogs create a personal connection with users, facilitate positive attitudes towards the company, and encourage supportive word-of-mouth intentions. Publics who use blogs to interact with organizations perceive blogs as stimulating dialogue and building trust and satisfaction (Kelleher, 2009). In terms of the media relations function of public relations, Waters, Tindall, and Morton (2010) discovered a new trend of “media catching,” where public relations practitioners are contacted by journalists as a result of the journalists following the organizations using social media, as opposed to the more traditional method of practitioners reaching out to journalists.

### 2.3. The Internet and relationship-building

Taylor and Kent (1998) pioneered the study of how organizations build relationships through the Internet with two-way dialogic communication channels. Taylor and Kent noted that the Internet provides an opportunity to create organizational-public relationships (OPRs) through dialogic components allowing input *by* and communication *to* publics. Examples of dialogic components proposed by Taylor and Kent (1998) include comment forums and contact e-mail forms. Since the initial development of dialogic communication, additional channels have emerged such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. Though the media to foster online dialogic communication have expanded since Taylor and Kent’s original study, the basic principles of relationship building through dialogic communication on the Internet still hold true. The principles include: (a) include useful information on the site; (b) frequently update sites and generate new content to engage publics and encourage return visits; (c) make the sites easy to use and navigate; and (d) strive to keep publics on the site.

Since 1998, there have been numerous scholars that have furthered research on dialogic communication via the Internet. For example, Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) found many organizations are not using the Internet, specifically websites, in a dialogic manner. Bortree and Seltzer (2009) found this to be true in terms of blogs and social networking sites. One of Bortree and Seltzer’s key findings was that organizations need to adhere to Taylor and Kent’s (1998) principles by responding to posts and providing useful information.

Hallahan (2008) took Taylor and Kent’s (1998) dialogic principles into consideration and applied five concepts to measure OPRs in the online environment: commitment, control mutuality, communality, trust, and satisfaction. Commitment evaluates how publics view organizations as committed to online engagement, by willing to invest resources in building relationships, and making an effort to communicate. Control mutuality refers to the interactivity occurring between the organization and publics. With communality, the organization and public identify with each other and share similar values, beliefs, and interests. Trust is difficult to achieve in an online OPR. The organization must be seen as believable, competent, reliable, and consistent. Finally, satisfaction contributes to how the OPR exceeds the parties’ expectations and meets their needs (Hallahan).

In 2008, Kent updated the original work on dialogic communication to focus on relationship building through blogs. Kent (2008) advocates that blogs provide organizations benefits such as “issue framing, relationship building, fostering trust, and identification” (p. 37). In summary, research on online relationship management shows that when practitioners understand the aspects of social networking sites, they can use them to engage and develop relationships with key publics.

## 3. Research questions

Based on the literature on nonprofits, social media, and relationship building using the Internet, the following research questions guided this study. First, we are interested in exploring how the American Red Cross utilizes social media channels

to create relationship measurement outcomes, such as commitment, control mutuality, and satisfaction (Hallahan, 2008). We are interested in exploring how these relationships are unique when built via social media platforms. Thus, we asked:

**RQ1.** How does the American Red Cross use social media to strategically build online relationships with its primary publics?

Secondly, with previous research recognizing the lack of utilization of social media by public relations practitioners (e.g., Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Kent, 2008), our study is designed to determine *why* this was the case, and whether this applies to the American Red Cross. By determining the barriers in using social media to build relationships, steps can be taken to overcome these challenges. Therefore, we asked:

**RQ2.** What barriers does the American Red Cross face in using social media to strategically build relationships with its primary publics?

And finally, our findings are intended to extend and enrich public relations literature by discovering opportunities that emerged for the American Red Cross in building relationships via social media, which also sheds light on practical insights for other large non-profit organizations. This leads to our final research question:

**RQ3.** What opportunities are there for the American Red Cross to build relationships with its primary publics through social media?

#### 4. Method

Using qualitative research methods, 40 in-depth interviews with American Red Cross employees were conducted to explore how social media tools were used to build relationships. Participants either deliver or manage social media communication. Qualitative research is ideal because it “properly seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings” (Berg, 2009, p. 8). As already stated, the American Red Cross was chosen because they are a forerunner in the nonprofit sector that utilizes social media to correspond with publics (Society for New Communication Research, 2008). Participants were recruited via e-mail and after the initial email, follow up e-mails and phone calls were used to schedule the interviews.

Large and small-sized chapters were chosen as well as representatives from National Headquarters to encompass a sample representing all regions of the country, including both urban and rural areas. We sought a wide continuum of participants: Early adopters of social media and those just beginning to use these tools to provide a comprehensive picture of social media efforts. Participants' titles included public relations specialist, director of development, director of disaster services, president, and director of blood services. Data collection was concluded after reaching data saturation.

All 40 interviews were conducted over the phone. On average, the interviews lasted 23 min ( $SD = 10.89$ ). All 40 interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using Pardun and Krugman's (1994) procedure of open coding to identify emerging themes and potential categories. Then axial coding was used to fit data into the categorical themes and identify data that explicates the concepts presented in the literature review.

#### 5. Results

##### 5.1. Using social media to build relationships with publics

The participants discussed common strategies of developing open communication and relationships with external publics. They talked about having open two-way dialogues as essential components to building relationships. For example, a participant from a western chapter stated: “You want to be a part of the conversation.” This sentiment was echoed by another participant from the midwest region who said: “Don't just issue a press release, try to have a conversation.”

The interviewees consistently referred to a two-way communication loop. A National Headquarters' participant stated: “We're also interested in what the general public has to say.” This was repeated by a midwestern participant who said: “We want to know what's going on out there, so we know what we're doing right and what we're doing wrong.”

A primary reason stated for fostering two-way communication was to find out how publics think the organization can be improved. A western region participant said: “I found that most people have really positive things to say about the Red Cross that we weren't seeing.” A northeastern region interviewee echoed this statement:

I want to know what people are saying about us quite simply. If they are unhappy with what the Red Cross is doing, I want to be able to address those issues as quickly as possible. And if they are happy with what we're doing, I want to make sure our volunteers keep doing that, what they're doing.

The social media tools the American Red Cross uses the most to build relationships are Twitter and Facebook. A southern participant believes that social media is becoming more useful: “It's actually better, we get more response from our postings on Facebook and Twitter than our more traditional – even from the chapter's main website.”

Twitter is used by the participants who not only post tweets on local events, but also follow local media reporters and other chapters. A midwest region interviewee stated: “I love keeping a pulse on all different technologies, Twitter makes that especially easy, people are sharing a lot more. Even chapter-to-chapter we're able to share our story ideas.” Another participant from the midwest region prefers Twitter over other social media such as Facebook: “Twitter is so simple, you can only make one point at a time, it's easy to read and scan through, and that's where the brand has more power.”

However, some participants use Facebook more to spread awareness about the American Red Cross. An individual from the southern region said:

I'm more concerned with how long they stay on the page, how many active users they have. . .our blood services has a national Facebook page where you can be a fan. We have over 14,000 people. . .we just launched in April. But when you look at active users it's a much smaller number, and it varies from week to week. I think the active users are a little more important than unique visitors.

The interview participants are using social media to develop and build relationships with a variety of audiences, some of which they have current relationships with. Their primary publics include volunteers, the media, younger audiences, and the community.

In terms of volunteer engagement and relationship building, social media are used for basic notification, as a southern region chapter participant stated: "We use it with notifying our donors, and with volunteers about upcoming events, volunteer opportunities." In comparison, other regions use social media in multiple ways such as a generating new volunteers and communicating vital information to disaster volunteers in a crisis.

One of the most vital relationships the American Red Cross has is with the media. As social media have developed, they have provided a new avenue to create relationships with the media. One northeastern region chapter participant stated:

The number of reporters who are on a shift at any given time now are fewer and fewer. So this has been a good way to reach them. Twitter specifically is a nice way to reach them when they are in the field.

Not only is the American Red Cross sending messages to the media through social media, but they also monitor local media's social media feeds. A southeastern region interviewee provided an example of why that is important:

We may not get the phone call [for services] until somebody remembers to call us, but if we're subscribed to the local TV and the local newspaper Twitter flow, then we're getting immediately when they put it [a disaster/crisis situation] on their website. . .which allows us to react much more quickly. . .It really has changed the dynamic of information flow.

Additionally, media are monitoring the American Red Cross' feed and then contacting the organization to develop stories, such as when a midwest chapter found:

Media follow our Twitter stream and someone had a story idea from there. They saw how many fires I was posting. 'Gee, are there that many fires? Let me look, last year we had half as many fires.' We got a story out of that.

One of the challenges the American Red Cross faces is reaching younger audiences to get them to volunteer. The interviewees see social media as a vital way to reach this public as demonstrated through statements from a northeastern region participant who said: "If we want to have an ongoing dialogue and relevancy to that base of people [youth market], we need to make use of the tools that they're using."

The Red Cross has also used social media to build relationships with the community. As one participant from the Midwestern region put it:

We started out on some of the social networks to connect with volunteers, but then we experimented with connecting with folks during disasters, and we have wound up to the point where we're using most of our social media as general outreach to the community.

In some cases it appears to be a trial and error method to create a relationship. For example, a participant from the northeastern region stated: "You are just trying to get as much information out there as possible so people will hopefully see it and hopefully, the right person will see it."

## 5.2. Barriers to using social media to build relationships

The most frequently cited barrier to using social media was resources, specifically time and staff. A concern is: "If you're going to go to the effort to have social media, you need to make sure someone is updating that information" as stated by a participant from the northeastern region. Thus, staff have to be responsible for maintaining their sites, monitoring their sites as well as reviewing outside sites for information. The participants are stretched thin with small staffs unable to fully support large social media efforts. This is shown by a midwestern region participant who stated: "It is not a priority at all. . .simply because we do not have the staff to do it." A southern region interviewee also stated: "You start out with the best intentions, but it's been ages since I have read blogs I've bookmarked."

Another major challenge participants faced in trying to utilize social media to build relationships was getting the buy-in of the chapter or board members. "It is a big challenge to get our board members to understand why we need to do this and why we think social media is important," stated a participant from the southern region.

Some felt that one reason it was difficult to generate approval and understanding was because board members were from an older generation. This translated into a view that an obstacle to using social media is that it alienates the older generation, which makes up the majority of the volunteer and donor base. A southern region participant stated that it is "absolutely

a challenge. One is that people like me, older generations, are not familiar with what those social media concepts are all about”.

### 5.3. Opportunities for using social media to build relationships

One area participants wanted to build a relationship was between chapters and National Headquarters. However, chapters did not identify ways to build that relationship through social media, but *around* social media. The chapters see an opportunity for National Headquarters to provide technical assistance, guidance, and content for the chapters. A participant from a northeastern chapter stated: “One thing I would like for National to do is give us some guidance on how chapters can use social media for all of their departments.” A representative from National Headquarters recognized the need for more trainings when they commented that National Headquarters should “have a social media 101 type meeting. . .getting an explanation of what it is and how the Red Cross is using it, how they could use it.”

There were external areas where the organization identified social media as a channel to develop relationships. These include engaging donors, providing teachable moments, informing the community about services, developing a broader view of the community, and getting more people involved.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

As social media tools become mainstream, organizations must update their strategies and tactics to build relationships. It is evident that the study’s participants realize the importance of social media and how these tools can be harnessed to build stronger relationships with publics such as volunteers, the media, and the community. The American Red Cross is using a wide variety of tools such as websites, blogs, Twitter, and Facebook to develop relationships focused on recruiting and maintaining volunteers, updating the community on disaster preparedness and response, and engaging the media. By having a two-way dialogue through social media, the American Red Cross reports providing faster service for the community, generating more media coverage, and receiving positive and negative feedback from stakeholders to improve the organization.

The American Red Cross shows the success of using social media dialogically, demonstrating *Taylor and Kent’s (1998)* principles through active responses to posts and allowing the organization to gain ideas from its various publics. This increases the overall impact of the organization, achieving strategic value for the American Red Cross.

As also seen in *Waters et al. (2010)*, the news media have started following the American Red Cross chapters on Facebook and Twitter and have directly contacted the organization to generate stories, instead of the traditional route of the organization distributing press releases. Thus, these social media seem to offer an ideal platform to facilitate communality, where the organization and its publics identify with each other and share similar values, beliefs and interests (*Hallahan, 2008*). Furthermore, as the preferred social media of the American Red Cross, Facebook and Twitter also seem ideal for control mutuality where the organization directly interacts with journalists as well as volunteers and community members on a more limited basis.

In terms of barriers and opportunities, the largest barrier is availability of human resources, specifically not enough staff or time. With a ratio of 45 volunteers per paid staff member (*Frequently Asked Questions, 2009*) the American Red Cross relies on its volunteer base. Because there are few paid staff members with time to execute social media, this can reduce the effectiveness of the organization because often the tools are not being applied to their fullest extent. The reality of not having enough staff or time is a barrier for many other nonprofits and corporations, calling for the need for more staff to be assigned social media implementation. Without consistent staff strategically managing social media it is difficult, if not impossible, for organizations to achieve commitment, which improves organization–public relationships through showing that organizations are dedicated to online engagement (*Hallahan, 2008*).

Another challenge the American Red Cross faces is the skills, knowledge, and attitudes of its publics about social media. At this point, the American Red Cross wants to attract a tech savvy younger volunteer and donor base, yet they do not want to alienate volunteers and donors in an older age bracket not as familiar with social media. However, social networking use among older adults has nearly doubled from 22 percent to 42 percent in 2009 alone (*Madden, 2010*), demonstrating that this demographic is becoming more open in utilizing these media. Chapters can tailor communication tactics to appropriate publics, a challenge all organizations face. Such tailoring is important to improve communality with chapters’ volunteers which in turn likely will improve volunteers’ satisfaction with their online engagement with chapters.

This study provides a lesson in opportunities that can be applied to any organization with a headquarters and satellite office structure. The satellite offices look to headquarters for guidance and instruction on how to use tools, so it will be up to headquarters to continue facilitating the use of social media to help the organization succeed. Headquarters can continue to develop social media trainings and messages to create continuity across offices. In terms of guidance, headquarters can continue to develop standards that local offices can adopt to create consistency. Such guidelines could enhance trust by providing consistency across all American Red Cross Chapters.

In sum, *Table 1* presents the conclusions from this study, demonstrating how the American Red Cross builds relationships with their publics through the online space. By mirroring these categories primarily organized by *Hallahan’s (2008)* five relationship management concepts, other non-profit organizations can consider modeling their public relations practices after the Red Cross’ example.

**Table 1**  
Resulting categories on building relationships via social media.

Category	Option	Relationship management concepts				
		Commitment	Control mutuality	Communality	Trust	Satisfaction
Strategies	Dialogue	X	X	X	X	
	Two-way communication loop	X	X	X	X	
	Improving the organization			X	X	X
	Spreading awareness about the organization	X	X			X
	Volunteer engagement	X	X	X	X	X
Tactics	Distributing information	X				
	Using primarily Facebook and Twitter		X		X	
	Usage in a disaster	X	X		X	X
	Following local media		X		X	X
	Following the community	X	X	X	X	X
Barriers	Time limitations	X	X			X
	Staff limitations	X				X
	Getting buy-in from the dominant coalition	X	X	X	X	X
Opportunities	Technical assistance from National Headquarters	X	X		X	
	Engaging donors	X	X	X	X	X
	Informing the community about the organization	X	X	X	X	X
	Increasing involvement	X	X	X	X	X

## 7. Limitations and future research

Though the findings may be significant in a practical and a theoretical sense, there are limitations that need to be considered. First, as a study of one organization – the American Red Cross – the findings are specific to this organization. However, the American Red Cross is a prime example of an organization successfully using social media and their efforts can be used as a model for other organizations. As with a lot of qualitative research due to the small sample size, this study cannot be generalized to an entire population. The results based on the categories developed (see Table 1) could lead to the development of a survey to further test if these categories hold true with a large sample from other organizations.

To further extend this study, we hope to interview journalists that frequently cover stories pertaining to the American Red Cross to further investigate perceptions of the American Red Cross' social media usage. Additionally, corporations with a headquarters and local office structure can be studied to determine if they are comparable to the American Red Cross. In any case, more research needs to be conducted to determine the true value of online communication. Through the example of the American Red Cross, both public relations professionals and scholars can learn how social media can advance an organization, one stakeholder at a time.

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