



Digital publics: Tracking and reaching them



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ABSTRACT

Even with social media we still have not reached a point where there is a *general public* in public relations. The challenge, then, is how to identify a broader range of potential recipients—or a larger public. Rather than the non-existent general public, the authors propose the term “latent diffused publics”—a term that combines the theoretical work of James Grunig and the linkages of Esman from the 1970s. The latent element of this type of public suggests that the public is out there ready to respond, but will not do so until triggered by a message. The diffused aspect refers to a public that is difficult or impossible to identify until it responds to the message. We believe that identifying a potential new type of public is more realistic as we move deeper and deeper into the era of social media communication.

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1. Introduction

The concept of publics has been thoroughly defined and researched in the field of public relations. A relatively new area, however, is digital publics—those groups of people who are targeted through digital channels, including social media. This study aims to reveal how social media channels reach those digital publics when carrying out the tactics identified in strategic communications planning. Digital natives—content marketers, brand journalists, and other professionals who are immersed in the digital media space and keep up with current trends—can benefit from and drive success with a strategic communication foundation.

First, this paper will further explore the topic of publics, including whether the public relations field’s dismissal of a *general public* should be reconsidered or redefined. Second, the literature on strategic communication will be reviewed, focusing on how social media trends affect strategic communication planning. This will lead to the two research questions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Publics

For more than a few decades, university students and practitioners of public relations have been told that there is no such thing as a general public (Freitag & Stokes, 2009; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Hallock, 2012; Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2012). Instead, messages are more effective when targeted to specific publics or stakeholders who can affect or be affected by the actions of a given organization. A general public implies everyone, so it would seem that for any message to reach such a public, everyone in a given society would have an equal opportunity to receive that message and then care enough about it to want to act. Grunig and Hunt (1984) called the idea of a general public a “logical impossibility” (p. 138)—a contradiction

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in terms because a public is always a specialized group whose members have a reason to be interested in the activities of organizations that affect them.

But today so much of what is done in public relations is influenced by social media—a term defined by Wright and Hinson (2010) as channels that deliver “web-based information created by people with the intention of facilitating communication” (p. 4). With the Internet, virtually any communication can be seen by any of the 40 percent of people on earth who could access it (Internetlivestats.com, 2014), whether or not that communication was intended for them. There is little way to limit the original message so that only so-called targeted publics see it, since anyone with Internet access can view the message and respond, if the information is posted publicly. Therefore, the concept of excluding non-targeted publics from a message has been significantly changed—maybe even obliterated. Since social media make it possible for unintended recipients to see messages and act in ways organizations may have not anticipated, it is possible that the longstanding notions of a general public need to be re-evaluated, challenged, or overthrown. This is supported by the Arthur W. Page Society (2007), which suggested that the general public has been increasingly incorporated into communication efforts.

We believe that the criteria for general publics discussed above have rarely if ever surfaced; no message has ever had such broad appeal or consequence as to affect everyone in this way, which leads us to conclude that general publics still do not exist, even within the social media arena. Despite the enormous volume of information streamed over the Internet, the majority of people never see most messages, and actually caring about or responding to the messages they do see is an even more remote possibility. Furthermore, if a message is not targeted to someone, is it really worthwhile for anyone?

The remainder of this section will delve further into the concept of publics in today’s world. We will discuss traditional definitions of publics, followed by an examination of the impacts of social media on publics. Finally, we will define and explain our rationale behind a new kind of public we believe most accurately reflects our new social media environment.

2.2. Definitions

The concept of publics is unique to the public relations industry (Newsom et al., 2012) and one that, due to its importance, “should be receiving constant attention” from the public relations field (Vasquez & Taylor, 2001, p. 139). The concept of publics can be traced back to the old mathematical models of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949), which outline the importance of messages, senders, and receivers, among other factors of the communication process. Vasquez and Taylor (2001) argued that the term *public* “is one of the most ambiguous concepts in the field’s vocabulary” (p. 139).

The term *public* “has a very specific meaning in public relations” (Newsom et al., 2012, p. 92), one that is still important and that should be distinguished and separated from the term *audiences*. “The term *audience* suggests a group of people who are recipients of something. . . An audience is thus inherently passive” (Newsom et al., 2012, p. 92). Perhaps because of this passivity, audiences also can be seen as something practitioners can still control (Grunig, 2009). By contrast, it is a mistake to view publics as message recipients to be controlled. This is problematic to the very foundations of public relations, where the intent of programs is “to stimulate strong. . . participation among people or groups of people” (Newsom et al., 2012, p. 92). Along the same lines, Dewey (1938) defined a public as people who recognize a problem or opportunity and organize to do something about it. So, publics are active; they act in some fashion toward a mutually desired goal.

Esman (1972), a scholar in international relations, brought insight into the concept of publics through his depiction of *linkages*. This theory looked at the groups with which organizations communicate toward the establishment of mutual interests. His linkages were separated into types: enabling linkages, normative linkages, functional input and functional output linkages, and diffuse linkages. Esman’s (1972) diffuse linkages are comprised of groups that are known to be in the organization’s environment but whose interest in the entity’s activities is somewhat transitory. These may include media, activist groups, community members, and other potential individuals or groups. Diffuse linkages can be difficult to identify at any given time, and it is equally difficult to build relationships with them. The groups often surface as a reaction to organizational actions they do not like; as a result, they become known only when they have placed the organization on the defensive. In attempts to be proactive, organizations do try to identify these publics, and perhaps this is where the “general,” or unidentifiable publics, come from in public relations programs.

Building upon Esman’s (1972) work, Grunig (2006) contended that organizations do not choose publics; rather, publics choose organizations (Grunig & Repper, 1992). Such a choice typically comes because connected individuals gain some mutual dissatisfaction with the way an organization is operating. In such a framework, the given public arises out of society in reaction to an organization’s behaviors. Sometimes, major problems may exist because of an organization or even with society in general, but potential publics do not know about them yet. Grunig (2006) referred to people in this situation as *latent publics*. Their predispositions are such that they would act upon the problem if they knew it existed. Once they become aware of the problem, their predispositions or attitudes about the situation impel them to do something. Therefore, a latent public could be considered as a kind of *public-in-waiting*, according to Grunig. How are these definitions and types of publics impacted by the new social media environment?

2.3. Influences of social media on publics

In the past decade or so, with the rise of blogs, comment sections for news stories, social media networks, and Google’s search engine, the opportunity for instantaneous feedback and widespread communication has increased immensely. No longer do organizations need to rely on media gatekeepers to disseminate messages. Instead, consumers of digital media

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