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Article *in* Journal of Communication Management · July 2013

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Received 19 September 2011
Revised 9 May 2012
13 July 2012
9 August 2012
Accepted 10 August 2012

Social media governance: regulatory frameworks for successful online communications

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Abstract

Purpose – When comparing the annotated relevance and the actual application of social media, enormous discrepancies show. This paper aims to introduce the concept of "Social Media Governance" as a means to accelerate the establishment of social media in communication practices and seeks to analyse its status quo in German organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – The data presented here stem from a quantitative online survey among communication professionals that was carried out in Germany.

Findings – The results indicate that although many organizations claim to have strategies for social media communications, nine out of ten had no explicit regulatory frameworks. Strategic pillars, such as managerial commitment and a participative corporate culture, were reported by one third of the organizations. This is crucial, because correlation analyses have revealed that the presence of such structures has a positive effect on skill levels, strategies and the level of activity.

Research limitations/implications – In terms of theory, the concept of governance may be used in order to analyze the dynamics of introducing new modes of online communication.

Practical implications – According to structuration theory, the actions of individual agents will only succeed if everyone involved can resort to structures in the sense of a common stock of (informal) rules and resources. This research indicates that public relations (PR) practices should focus on developing basic structures for social media communications and should not be limited to communications activities.

Originality/value – While previous studies have focused on single aspects of social media governance, e.g. guidelines, very little research has been done on the overall concept. Also, the interconnection of strategic and structural aspects of social media communication has been neglected as a research topic so far.

Keywords PR, Communication management, Online communication, Social media, Governance

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

After the "digital evolution" from classical online communications to social media, a broad theoretical and practical discussion evolved around this topic, with opinions ranging from the perception of social media as a new chance for PR (Breakenridge, 2008; Kelleher, 2009; Kent, 2010; Macnamara, 2010; Wright and Hinson, 2010; Zerfass *et al.*, 2010) to fears about a loss of control (Holtz *et al.*, 2008; Pleil, 2007; Safko, 2010; Wigley and Fontenot, 2010). The basic contradiction within this topic has been identified by Ihator (2001): although new technologies offer organizations opportunities to present their viewpoints directly to key constituents, they tend to lose control over the dissemination of information. Those technologies are challenging norms with regard to controlling the flow of information (McAfee, 2009, p. 5).

As a result, organizations start to look for governance mechanisms that can handle this challenge. Corporate communication professionals have to organize the activities of various players in order to achieve overall goals. The Web 2.0 has a huge impact on

Journal of Communication Management
Vol. 17 No. 3, 2013
pp. 270-286
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited
1363-254X
DOI 10.1108/JCOM-09-2011-0050

that: "It is not just a technological enabler of existing methodologies. There is a fundamental shift in what Web 2.0 has enabled and the way it's being used" (Pavlik, 2007, p. 9). As a result of the dynamic technological developments, responsibilities are seldom assigned and training for employees as well as guidelines for online communications and key performance indicators to measure success are frequently missing (Fink and Zerfass, 2010).

The results of recent research (Li and Bernoff, 2008; Fraser and Dutta, 2008; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Vaughan and Tinker, 2009) support this idea and lead to the conclusion that more initiatives should focus on strategies and overarching frameworks for the use of social media in organizations.

This paper makes the case for social governance of social media use by organizations. The purpose of the Social Media Governance Study, which will be described in subsequent sections, is to evaluate the status quo of regulatory frameworks for social media activities in German organizations. Previous studies have analyzed single aspects of Social Media Governance, e.g. guidelines (Bell, 2010; Turner, 2010; Wright and Hinson, 2009), but research on the overall concept is still missing. The Social Media Governance Study addresses this research gap by using data from a German online survey carried out in 2010. The results will tell us how social media activities are strategically rooted and how various aspects of organizational frameworks for social media interrelate with others. The final sections of this paper discuss these findings in relation to general developments in research and practice.

2. Literature review

While there are many definitions, this paper follows Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) in defining social media as internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0.

On the one hand, this comprises the technological, economic and juridical phenomena encompassed within Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). On the other hand, the term "social media" means that web-based applications enable users to exchange information, create relationships and communicate (Hippner, 2006). This has a social impact that reaches beyond documents or data to the networks of relations and their structures. The first version of the World Wide Web allowed most of its users to read the uploaded content, whereas the new one has evolved to a "read-write-web," with a wide variety of users contributing user-generated content and, along the way, creating collective intelligence (Argenti and Barnes, 2009). Many view this change as important as to call it a "digital evolution" (Döbler, 2008), or a paradigm shift.

2.1 The use of social media for public relations purposes

Corporations have acknowledged these trends, and increasingly use social media platforms for communications. Spending on Web 2.0 technologies has increased over recent years and, according to Forrester Research, will reach 4.6 billion US$ globally by 2013 (Young *et al.*, 2008). In 2009, 43 percent of the fastest growing private companies in the USA (Inc 500) judged social media to be "very important" for their business, while 91 percent used at least one social media tool, most commonly social networking platforms (Barnes and Mattson, 2009).

Many studies have addressed the potential positive impacts of social media (Bauer, 2007; Pleil and Zerfass, 2007; Ruisinger, 2007). In accordance, European communication professionals interviewed in the European Communication Monitor

2010 survey assessed social media as having an increasing level of importance and predicted that they would become the third most important channel or instrument for public relations by 2013. Consequently, it is considered that coping with digital evolution and the social web will be the most important issue for communications management within the next three years (Zerfass *et al.*, 2010, pp. 90-93).

However, a variety of new risks are also threatening organizations and their communications departments. Attention should be paid to the specific "dangers and methods of social engineering, common exploits, and the threats to privacy that social media present" (ISACA, 2010, p. 6). Table I sums up some of the most common risks and appropriate risk mitigation techniques. It reveals that traditional organization-centered thinking is becoming out-dated, as interactions become more complex within multiple and ever-changing arenas (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). Participants in the European Communication Monitor 2010 judged the fact that everyone within an organization is able to spread information to be especially risky (Zerfass *et al.*, 2010, p. 83).

Looking behind the social media boom, it becomes clear that only a minority of organizations have the skills, strategies or structures which are necessary for long-term social media success. Pavlik (2007, p. 3) calls for consideration of not only the impact of technology on how PR practitioners carry out their work, but also of the "implications of technology on organizational structure, culture and management." But, most organizations manage their social media implementation from a predominantly technical perspective, without addressing the more strategic and structural aspects of organizational and change management (Corso *et al.*, 2008, p. 609). More than half of the communication professionals interviewed in the European Communication Monitor 2010 were neither planning special training programs for their employees nor implementing key performance indicators in order to measure their social media activities (Zerfass *et al.*, 2010, p. 79). Optimal conditions for supporting the overarching organizational goals can only be established with coordinated activities among the plurality of actors involved. For example, Adidas has a variety of Facebook pages each focussing on a different kind of sport. Thereby and by allowing each subunit to communicate individually, they can address special target groups more appropriately. PR scholars state that conventional structures which allow only single actors, e.g. the official spokesperson, to communicate the will of the organization reveal weak points in today's dynamic and complex external environment, where polyphony and diversity are required (Christensen *et al.*, 2008) and a plurality of stimuli from the environment have to be monitored (Lenhart, 2006; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). Solis (2011, p. 282) proposes that communication becomes essential as organizations evolve from rigid structures to adaptive, internally and externally connected and even predictive business models. However, this has not been realized in many organizations, which for many years have worked with a "command and control" approach regarding the management of new technologies (Marfleet, 2008, p. 153).

In summary, despite the importance of social media, "meaningful gaps exist between what is happening and what should be happening in terms of all the social media" (Wright and Hinson, 2009). Organizations are still lacking appropriate structures, cultures and strategies for participative modes of online communication. Subsequently, new ones are needed. One possible solution – Social Media Governance – shall be introduced in the following section as a concept for studying the conditions for social media communications.

Table I. Risks of social media and mitigation techniques

Threats and vulnerabilities	Risks	Risk mitigation techniques
Introduction of viruses and malware to the organizational network	Data leakage/theft "Owned" systems (zombies) System downtime Resources required to clean systems	Ensure that antivirus and antimalware controls are installed on all systems and updated dally Consider use of content filtering technology to restrict or limit access to social media sites Ensure that appropriate controls are also installed on mobile devices such as smartphones Establish or update policies and standards Develop and conduct awareness training and campaigns to inform employees of the risks involved with using social media sites
Exposure to customers and the enterprise through a fraudulent or hijacked corporate presence	Customer backlash/adverse legal actions Exposure of customer information Reputational damage Targeted phishing attacks on customers or employees	Engage a brand protection firm that can scan the internet and search out misuse of the enterprise brand Give periodic informational updates to customers to maintain awareness of potential fraud and to establish clear guidelines regarding what information should be posted as part of the enterprise social media presence
Unclear or undefined content rights to information posted to social media sites	Enterprise's loss of control/legal rights of information posted to the social media sites	Ensure that legal and communications teams carefully review user agreements for social media sites that are being considered Establish clear policies that dictate to employees and customers what information should be posted as part of the enterprise social media presence If feasible and appropriate, ensure that there is a capability to capture and log all communications
A move to a digital business model may increase customer service expectations	Customer dissatisfaction with the responsiveness received in this arena, leading to potential reputational damage for the enterprise and customer retention issues	Ensure that staffing is adequate to handle the amount of traffic that could be created from a social media presence Create notices that provide clear windows for customer response
Mismanagement of electronic communications that may be impacted by retention regulations or e-discovery	Regulatory sanctions and fines Adverse legal actions	Establish appropriate policies, processes and technologies to ensure that communications via social media that may be impacted by litigation or regulations are tracked and archived appropriately Note that depending on the social media site, maintaining an archive may not be a recommended approach

Source: ISACA (2010, p. 7)

2.2 Governance and social media

In the social sciences, the understanding of "governance" differs widely and encompasses a variety of aspects without one binding definition. There is no consensus on which set of phenomena belongs to "governance." At the same time, the significance of the topic is agreed upon by most researchers (Van Kersbergen and van Waarden, 2004, p. 165). In general, governance includes all institutional structures and processes used to handle interdependencies between various, mostly collective, actors (Kooiman, 2007; Van Kersbergen and van Waarden, 2004). The theoretical roots of this concept can be found in both economics and political science.

The first of these scientific streams started when Coase (1937) claimed that markets alone could not be considered as perfect coordination mechanisms because they still had a number of coordination problems within the economic sphere. Williamson (1975) added to this theory by stating that other institutions may be far more suited to minimizing transaction costs than the market itself. This led to the notion that modern economies are regulated by a mixture of markets and other governance mechanisms.

Political science has explored this field from a different angle. Beginning with an analysis of interstate relationships, it was affirmed that "governance without government" occurred (multilevel governance).

The scientific roots of the term "governance" demonstrate its perspective: on the one hand, neither political actors nor the state can apply their goals to society, nor can the market as such alone guarantee the efficiency of production and distribution in the economic sphere. On the other hand, alternative modes of dealing with interdependencies besides the market and the state come into play (Benz, 2007). With changes in the location of rule production, the style of governance changes as well. The current trend has turned toward negotiation and the management of information in networks (Van Kersbergen and van Waarden, 2004, p. 155). Governance as an umbrella term refers to the logic of action and the causal relations between structures, interests and interactions (Kooiman, 2007). This special perspective has recently been applied in different social sciences, such as political science, law, sociology or economics.

This concept has also been transferred from the societal to the organizational level. Corporate governance means the overall framework for the guidance and control of a company in a relationship with multiple stakeholders (Tricker, 2009; Hopt, 1998). Van Kersbergen and van Waarden (2004) underline the importance of corporate governance by stating that the "relations between actors pose specific risks and uncertainties" and that there is a need for different mechanisms "to reduce these in order to make cooperation possible or easier" (p. 152).

This can be further split up into singular aspects that should be considered within the realm of corporate governance. For the purpose of this paper, the relevant relations are the communications between an organization and its stakeholders via social media. Hence, the resulting organizational framework shall be called Social Media Governance. Social Media Governance then refers to the formal or informal frameworks which regulate the actions of the members of an organization within the social web. Therefore, the term needs to be reevaluated and conceptualized in order to analyze current practices. With the development of Web 2.0, new constellations of actors in and around organizations have emerged and this has resulted in changing institutional arrangements and regulatory structures. As a consequence, former borders between national and international, public and private and internal and

external are dissolving. Hence, new concepts of legitimization are necessary (Donges, 2007, p. 12).

When considering the practice of Social Media Governance, two different understandings are relevant: a concept of governance focussing solely on social media policies and a wider understanding of governance based on broad regulatory frameworks.

2.3 Social Media Governance based on guidelines

Social media guidelines, sometimes also called blogging policies or social network guidelines, describe and provide advice on how social media communications shall be dealt with by all of the members of an organization and how it can enable all of them to become communicators in participative online environments (see, e.g. Bell, 2010; Turner, 2010; Wright and Hinson, 2009). Boudreaux (2011, p. 274) has analyzed social media guidelines and finds them "critical to helping employees understand the boundaries of their social media activities relating to their employer."

Even if a corporation does not want to actively engage in the social web, there is a need to educate employees and formulate clear guidelines on the use of social media both, on the job and for private activities. Often, juridical concerns about privacy issues and the spread of internal matters inspire such regulatory activities. The digital reputation of an organization is at stake when it is talked about on social media platforms. The efficiency of business processes are at risk when employees spend too much time on social networking sites. This has led to an increasing number of firms prohibiting all social media use in the workplace (ISACA, 2010). Marfleet (2008, p. 153) describes such a procedure as "short-sighted," as it "will inevitably backfire as individuals choose to work for those organizations that support them in working in a way they want to and which encourages creativity and experimentation." Put differently, prohibitions leave many employees unsatisfied and ignore the positive aspects of engagement with social media. Consequently, some organizations use social media guidelines instead. Only a minority of organizations tackle these new challenges with profound policies. Although training and certificates are mandatory for many aspects of an organization, similar aspects with regard to social media are supposed to evolve independently. According to a study based in the USA, only one-third of the Inc 500 companies have implemented formal guidelines concerning blogging etc. for their employees (Barnes and Mattson, 2009). In Europe, <30 percent of all organizations had implemented such guidelines in 2010 (Zerfass *et al.*, 2010, p. 79). On the other hand, some thorough examples already exist that can be viewed online and used as benchmarks to learn from Boudreaux (2011). Adidas (2012), e.g., has established different guidelines addressing different target audiences appropriately.

2.4 Social Media Governance based on a broader regulatory framework

A different perspective acknowledges the fact that rules alone cannot succeed. The concept of Social Media Governance which is proposed here corresponds to the notion of an overall framework as implied by corporate governance theory. A strategic use of social media in communications requires resources such as trained employees, modern information technology and appropriate budgets, as well as favorable organizational cultures and structures. The latter require, among other things, the assignment of responsibilities, monitoring processes and appropriate feedback and editorial routines. The importance of such structures can be explained using structuration theory (Giddens, 1984; Zerfass, 2008, 2010), in the sense that if structures are implemented in

an organizational setting, they enable and limit the communicative actions of individuals working in these settings. At the same time, rules and resources are reproduced and modified in the course of communicative actions. Therefore, the establishment of a structural framework should be the first step for organizations when exploiting social media, before training employees and developing and implementing online activities. It becomes necessary to attune staff to a learning process that exploits the opportunities provided by social media, reduces risks and ensures the growth of the organization. Eberle (2011, p. 248ff) uses the example of HOK, a global architecture firm, to explain how social media skills can be integrated in a talent management strategy. Only with specific expertise can communication professionals understand what it means when someone like Dave Carroll posts a video of your airline workers breaking his guitar, or what should be done when influential bloggers criticize your product, like e.g. in the case that has become known as the "Dell-Hell." There is no easy solution to the question of assigning the responsibility for these tasks. A competence center, such as a social media board, could be the most effective way of dealing with overarching issues, collecting examples of best practices and enabling other departments through the provision of information and advice. However, as social media increasingly influence the everyday processes of different departments, social media skills must be part of the basic skills of all employees. If so, it becomes possible, that employees act as ambassadors for their company, which can be seen, e.g. in the successful case of the Daimler-blog (Daimler, 2012). Still, decentralized freedom of action must be balanced with overall guidelines.

In spite of the theoretical basis for such an understanding of social media governance, it has not been empirically researched until now and little scientific theories exits about what social media governance, in the sense of a list of different aspects that need to be realized for social media communication, could look like.

3. Research questions and hypotheses

The Social Media Governance Study attempts to depict the status quo of strategic social media communications in German corporations and political and non-governmental organizations. Therefore, the underlying research question is: how is social media communications strategically applied in German organizations? From this question, more specific questions have been derived:

RQ1. How common are social media activities in organizations?

RQ2. To what extent are social media skills and strategies developed by PR managers?

RQ3. What kinds of regulatory frameworks for social media exist today?

RQ4. Are there any correlations between structural frameworks for social media and the level of the corresponding communications activities within organizations?

Accordingly, the following hypotheses were generated after the literature review:

H1a. Social media applications are used within the field of PR by a minority of organizations.

H1b. The history of social media use in PR is short, and no more than a quarter of all organizations have been active in this area for more than one year.

H2a. The social media skills of most PR professionals are at a medium or low level.

H2b. A lack of knowledge and experience in conceptual approaches to social media are the main obstacles within the range of competencies which are needed for social media.

H2c. Only a minority of organizations has already developed social media strategies.

H3a. The regulatory frameworks for social media are weak in most organizations.

H3b. The resources needed for social media communications are mostly lacking.

H4. The intensity of social media activities in organizations correlates positively with the existence of rules and resources for this field.

4. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, the concept of Social Media Governance was used as an umbrella term. The focal areas of this research were therefore: strategies for the launch of social media communications; skills and responsibilities within the organization; tools and applications in corporate communications; the relevance, opportunities and risks of communications in the social web; and the existing regulatory frameworks for interactive communications.

An online survey was conducted across Germany, in June 2010. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions, each based on scientific hypotheses incorporating existing theories and previous empirical findings. The subjects received a personal invitation to participate as well as a reminder. Descriptive and inferential statistics were computed with the help of SPSS software.

The response was 1,007 fully completed questionnaires and consisted of communications professionals in joint-stock companies (17.8 percent) and private companies (44.7 percent), public sector organizations and associations (23 percent), as well as non-profit-organizations (14.5 percent). A total of 37.1 percent worked as heads of PR or corporate communications, 59.8 percent as PR managers or spokespeople and 3.1 percent as trainees. The average age of the respondents was 40 years old.

An index of social media activities (I_{SMA}) was calculated as the sum of all social media tools, networks and applications employed by the PR department through the addition of three different questions in the questionnaire. The index values ranged from 0 to 27. Low activities were characterized as $0 \leqslant I_{SMA} \leqslant 3$ (average value), medium activities as $4 \leqslant I_{SMA} \leqslant 7$ and intensive activities as $8 \leqslant I_{SMA} \leqslant 27$.

Moreover, the respondents were asked "Are there specific strategies present in your organization for initiating and using social media in business processes?" The index of social media strategies (I_{SMS}) was then calculated as a dichotomous value (0 or 1) based on the statements of the surveyed communications managers regarding the existence of specific strategies.

Another question in the survey required the participants to judge their social media skills on a scale from 1 (no experience) to 5 (professional). In order to gain a more

detailed understanding, the following dimensions were required: knowledge of the social media landscape; knowledge of social web etiquette; skills in initiating web-based dialogs; knowledge of the technical requirements for setting up social media platforms; knowledge of the legal framework; information about the interplay between social media and traditional media (print, television, radio); experience in the management of web communities; knowledge of the prevalent means of expression; experience in the development of social media strategies; and experience in the evaluation of social media activities. A value for the index of social media skills (I_{SMK}) was calculated for each survey participant as the average rating of the 10 individual skills in the questionnaire. The index values ranged from 0 (no experience) to 5 (professional). A low skill level was indicated by $0 \leqslant I_{SMK} < 2.5$, a medium skill level by $2.5 \leqslant I_{SMK} \leqslant 3.5$, and a high skill level by $3.5 < I_{SMK} \leqslant 5$.

Regulatory frameworks were operationalized using a list of the following 12 items: participative corporate culture; commitment of top management; human resources; person in charge of social media in each department; monitoring tools; social media workshops; seminars or training; social media guidelines; strategy papers; key performance indicators for measuring success; specific budget; software and hardware; and a dedicated social media department. For each item, the participants were asked whether it already existed in their organization, was planned for the coming year or did not exist at all. The index of social media regulatory frameworks (I_{SMO}) was calculated as the sum of all of the structural elements governing social media which were present in the organization. The index values ranged from 0 to 12. A weak regulatory framework was defined as $0 \leqslant I_{SMO} \leqslant 4$, average as $5 \leqslant I_{SMO} \leqslant 8$ and sophisticated as $9 \leqslant I_{SMO} \leqslant 12$.

5. Results

The data showed that every second organization (54 percent of the sample) utilized social media for their communications activities, while 26 percent had only become active within the previous 12 months (from July 2009 onwards), a further 22 percent more than one year ago and 6 percent had more than three years of practical experience in the area. In contrast, 83 percent of the respondents reported that their organization had used web sites for corporate communications for five years or more. *H1a* and *H1b* were therefore falsified – a small majority of German organizations use social media in PR and 28 percent (slightly more than a quarter) have been active for more than one year, which nonetheless still hints at a short overall history within the profession.

Communications departments were most commonly in the lead with regard to using social media, followed by the advertising/marketing communications, sales and human resources departments. The most frequently applied tools were video sharing and micro blogging (Twitter), and the most popular communities were Facebook and Xing. With regard to all of the social media platforms and specialized PR activities, only one-third of the subjects revealed high levels of activity, as calculated using the (I_{SMA}) index. Organizations with more experience of using social media were more likely to assess these platforms as being beneficial for corporate communications.

Even though the incorporation rates of social media were quite high, the professionals evaluated their own social media skills (assessed using the index I_{SMK}) to be low (41.3 percent) or medium (41.9 percent), as expected according to *H2a*. Most of the deficits were stated to be in the areas of technical expertise (mean score 2.21 on a five-point scale), evaluation (2.24), strategy development (2.35) and the management of web communities (2.38). This supports *H2b*: the main obstacles within the range of

competencies needed for effective social media communications are a lack of knowledge and experience of conceptual approaches to social media. This lack of expertise comes into play when evaluating the risks of social media. With regard to these risks, the majority (66.2 percent) of the respondents mentioned the loss of control of communications processes and 64.1 percent the need for quick reactions.

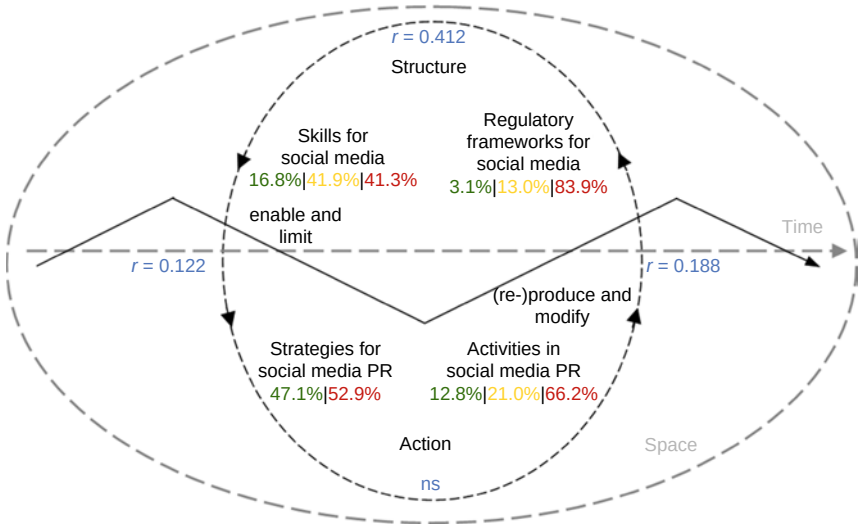
Shortfalls were found in terms of social media strategies in PR, as implied in *H2c*. Only 47.1 percent of all communications managers indicated the presence of strategies with a positive I_{SMS} value – the highest numbers were found within joint-stock companies. This correlated with the lack of structural prerequisites for strategic planning. At the time of the study, only 4.6 percent of companies had established a specific social media department. If established, these departments had little authority: only one-third of the departments were responsible for the development of strategies and only 12.5 percent had sovereignty over their budget.

Equally, the establishment of regulatory structures for social media was lacking. According to the I_{SMO} index, 3.1 percent of the organizations had a sophisticated regulatory framework, 13 percent had average structures and 83.9 percent had structures which could be classified as weak. Thus, *H3a* was confirmed. More specifically, there was a deficiency in terms of key performance indicators for social media (87 percent of the organizations), specific budgets (88 percent), social media guidelines (81 percent), professional development opportunities such as seminars and training courses (78 percent) and staff resources (72 percent) (see Table II). Many essential factors, such as managerial commitment and a participative corporate culture, were only reported by one in three of those corporations which were surveyed. *H3b* was verified; the resources needed for social media communications were lacking in most organizations. The best conditions were found in stock companies and non-profit organizations.

Correlation analyses revealed the essential role of governance or regulatory frameworks in relation to the other aspects of social media use. Figure 1 shows that three of the four dimensions correlated positively, thereby supporting *H4*. The intensity of social media activities in organizations is linked to the existence of rules and resources in this field. Strategies for social media PR and concrete activities were not significantly interlinked. Hence, the creation of plans does not necessarily support action and vice versa. The correlation between activities and regulatory

	Proportion (%) of organizations		
	Present	Planned	Not considered
Commitment of top management	33.1	29.1	37.8
Human resources	28.4	25.8	37.8
Dedicated social media department	4.6	4.5	90.9
Software and hardware	46.2	18.1	35.7
Person in charge of social media in each department	27.2	21.3	51.5
Specific budget	11.7	19.1	69.2
Social media guidelines	19.1	36.3	44.6
Social media workshops, seminars or trainings	21.9	32.3	45.8
Monitoring tools	24.3	28.4	47.3
Key performance indicators for measuring success	12.7	32.0	55.3
Strategy papers	17.4	41.7	40.9
Participative corporate culture	35.2	27.1	37.7

Table II. Regulatory frameworks for social media communications



Notes: Social Media Governance 2010/n = 1,007 communication managers/Green values: Share of participants with high skills, existing strategies, intensive activities and sophisticated regulatory frameworks (index velues). Yellow values: medium skills, medim activities, average regulatory frameworks. Red values: Low skills, no strategies, low activities, weak regulatory frameworks. Blue values: correlation coefficients according to Pearson's or Spearman's at a significance level of $p < 0.05$; ns = not significant/Depiction of actions and structures on Giddens (1984); Zerfass (2010)
Source: Own figure

Figure 1.
Dynamics of social media in PR

frameworks was significant, but quite low ($r = 0.188$). If a regulatory framework existed, it had a positive impact on social media skills ($r = 0.412$) and in turn on the development of strategy ($r = 0.122$). Social media skills themselves correlated positively with the level of activity ($r = 0.225$). Table III indicates the frequencies of the indices for social media activities, strategies, skills and frameworks and, therefore, the current status of strategically applied social media communications in German organizations.

6. Discussion

The results of this research show that one important factor with regard to the dynamics of social media use in PR is the regulatory framework. Pure activism, such as the implementation of Facebook and Youtube channels is not enough,

Table III.
The status quo of social media communications in German organizations

Index	Category	Proportion (%) of organizations	Category	Proportion (%) of organizations	Category	Proportion (%) of organizations
$I_{SMA\ (Activities)}$	Intensive	12.8	Medium	21.0	Low	66.2
$I_{SMK\ (Skills)}$	High	16.8	Medium	41.9	Low	41.3
$I_{SMS\ (Strategies)}$	Present	47.1	–	–	Not present	52.9
$I_{SMO\ (Regulatory\ framework)}$	Sophisticated	3.1	Average	13.0	Weak	83.9

and neither is a focus on social media strategies. Wider organizational structures need to be considered, as has been stated in previous studies (Li and Bernoff, 2008; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The Social Media Governance Study suggests a list of aspects that need to be considered and clarified before starting social media activities. The current state of practice, as attested by the study, however, reveals gaps: 80 percent of organizations lack developed governance structures. The study presented here is a first attempt to develop an extensive understanding of the status quo of social media governance. Organizations can use the study results and the list of Social Media Governance items to identify their weak points, to find out where more initiatives should be undertaken and to clarify where to invest.

The results verified six out of the eight hypotheses which were derived from the literature. Previous studies have claimed that social media spread with immense speed (Barnes and Mattson, 2009; Nielsen, 2010; Postman, 2009). On the contrary, it was shown that only a small proportion of German organizations apply social media to their corporate communications. This underlines the argument by Wright and Hinson (2009, p. 19) that "meaningful gaps exist […] between what is happening and what should be happening in terms of all the social media options." While most organizations have well-established web sites, they have only recently started using participative online platforms. Contrary to the often stated competition pressure, organizations do not need to rush into actions but prepare themselves better for social media communication by establishing the necessary rules and resources. The differences in levels of experience are astonishing. Organizations' lack of experience was found to be significantly related to the underdeveloped social media skills of most PR professionals. As stated in their self-assessments, these professionals have the most difficulties with the technical and conceptual aspects of the Web 2.0. This is one important aspect that the Social Media Governance Study has revealed as needing more attention and investments, e.g., by encouraging employees or offering specific trainings. Similarly, the regulatory frameworks within organizations are weakly developed. It appears that organizations do not establish the basic structures needed for the long-term establishment of social media, even if they are already actively communicating using these means. These shortfalls endanger the success of social media, as shown by the fact that this research found rules, resources and actions to be significantly correlated. In other words, this research offers additional support for the recently formed argument that asks for more strategic considerations when actively communicating using social media.

Apart from studies that focus on guidelines, little research has been conducted on this field of interest. Hence, little knowledge exists that might be used for guidance and examples of best practices. But, the Social Media Governance Study offers a list of aspects in line with a broad understanding of regulatory frameworks, like, e.g. guidelines, key performance indicators, clear-cut responsibilities that act as the key factor in successful social media activities. It can be concluded that those who want to avoid activism and the uncontrolled growth of social media communications should invest more in structural development because it correlates with all of the other aspects. This can be explained based on the theory of structuration by Anthony Giddens (1984): governance structures enable and limit individual actions, while their iterative process of updating reproduces and stabilizes them.

In conclusion, in this paper, the concept of Social Media Governance was derived from social science and transferred to the field of social media communication and

empirically tested. As shown by the results, the framework has emerged as a key to success. Organizations can use it to compare themselves to others and to find out where to become more active and where to invest. Such findings provide an important path for the future application of social media for corporate communications. The status quo in German organizations, however, indicates that there is still room for improvement. The assembled research insights and best practices offer orientation but, at the end, all needs to be decided according to the specific conditions of an organization.

7. Limitations and future research

As this study was carried out in Germany, the results cannot be considered as being representative of other countries, e. g. those countries with different amounts of social media use in society and by organizations. Although the general trends indicated here are not necessarily to be doubted in their applicability to other regions, this needs to be tested. It would be especially interesting to draw a comparison between countries with higher rates of social media use, such as the USA, and those with lower levels of usage, such as developing countries.

Another possible limitation of this survey could be that the invitations were sent out via e-mail. PR professionals who totally disapprove of this form of communication were therefore immediately excluded from the sample. This is unlikely, but may be crucial because such a group could consist of a significant proportion of individuals who are very inexperienced with regard to online communications. As a result, the level of experience of social media reported in this study could be even lower in the overall population of PR professionals.

One fact that should be analyzed in more detail is the understanding of social media strategies. The results of this study show that many communications professionals claim to have specific strategies, but that hardly any of the prerequisites for such strategies had been implemented. Hence, how effective such strategies could be is questionable. Qualitative research methods would help to gather further insights into the perception of Social Media Governance and specific implementation techniques. In addition, more research could be conducted concerning the differences between the best-equipped category of organizations – the stock market companies – and other companies. Are there any links to the juridical aspects of their special communications situation? Are there differences between industries? Do companies in business-to-business markets differ from those in business-to-consumer segments?

The study reported here has focussed on a new dimension of research in online PR. The preliminary results have been presented, but this study must be replicated, and more research is needed to get a clearer picture of the connectivity between the different variables and general trends which support leaders in PR to organize the activities of other players involved in such a way as to optimally achieve organizational goals.

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