Doctor of Media and Communication Studies

The Use of Social Media for Internal Communication. (Re-)emerging gatekeeping practices in a decentralizing media environment

Mark Verheyden

Promotor: prof. Jo Pierson, PhD

Abstract

This dissertation reports on the results of a six-year-long doctoral research track during which we studied how the practice of internal communication is changing in light of recent technological innovations, the introduction of social media in the professional sphere more in particular. Apart from contributing to the expansion of knowledge in some key but understudied areas of public relations and information systems scholarship, we also engage with a number of highly theoretical debates in these domains. For starters, our focus on the interactive potential of social media platforms is directly linked to the Excellence debate in public relations and its normative ideal of two-way symmetrical communication. In turn, from the information systems literature, we have built on such concepts like “affordances” and “sociomateriality” to better understand the interwoven nature of technology and social practice. Not only did these theoretical efforts help sharpen the meaning of these concepts, they also helped strengthen our grasp on the drivers underlying technology usage patterns.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, this research also holds practical relevance. First and foremost, this work is especially relevant for those professionals who are in charge of internal communication at their organization. Particularly valuable from these professionals’ perspective are the empirical chapters as they provide a good overview of how their peers handle the newest technological trends. Second, for business at large, our contributions may inform future decisions that could help better position social media tools in the organization’s
digital ecosystem. Finally, this research holds valuable insights for the IT specialists who want to create (enterprise) social media platforms that better fit the needs of the end user.

To answer our research questions, four studies were carried out between January 2014 and December 2016. In the first study, we conducted an initial exploration into how internal communication is currently organized in a variety of organizations who are active in a wide spectrum of economic sectors. To this end, we organized 54 in-depth interviews with professionals in charge of internal communication at their organization. The second study reports on 15 elite interviews with Belgian and Dutch HR leaders. The main reason for choosing this group was that their position as influential outsiders is likely to shape the role of internal communication both now and in the future. In the third study, the analysis of two surveys allowed us to compare the views of communication and human resources professionals on the topic at hand. The fourth and last study is the result of organizational ethnography at both an airline and IT company. During our work at these two sites, we closely observed the practices of the respective internal communication managers. For the analysis of all qualitative data on which we report in this dissertation, we followed Grounded Theory procedures and made use of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). In turn, we used descriptive statistical analysis to process our survey data.

A first important conclusion that consistently emerged from our different studies is that professionals in charge of internal communication use social media in ways that reinforce their traditional gatekeeping position. However, the gatekeeping process itself has become decidedly more complex than it was in the era of mass media. In addition to broadcasting, exercising control over (enterprise) social media platforms also includes such practices as filtering, monitoring, and rule-setting. The second important conclusion at which we arrived is that this gatekeeping behavior results from internal communicators’ identification with a managerial ideology revolving around the notions of control and enhanced employee productivity. Another, yet related, finding was that unclarity about the precise role of internal communication in an increasingly digital media-ecosystem resulted in the managerial role identity becoming more salient than the occupational role identity. While these findings seem to point towards intra-personal drivers behind the observed flow of events, we do want to add the concluding remark that current hiring practices and role expectations of influential
outsiders are not likely to create the conditions necessary for altering existing social media usage patterns in the context of internal communication.