HOW NEW MEDIA IS USED FOR ISSUES MANAGEMENT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the

School of Communication

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Melanie Brooke Pannell Steel

December, 2010

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ABSTRACT

This study expands on strategic issues management literature by examining how new communication technologies, especially social networking, are used for the purpose of managing organizational issues. An Issues Typology is also presented in this study in the attempt to categorize overarching types of issues as well as recognize what types of issues are important to organizations. Guided by relevant literature in Internet communication, public relations and issues management, a grounded theory analysis of in-depth interviews with 20 communicators and public relations practitioners revealed the overall relationship between the utilization of new media and the practice of issues management. These results provide rich insight into to public relations practitioners' utilization of new media, actual issues management practices within organizations, the relationship between new media and issues management, and organizational definitions of an issue. Additionally, this study provides insight into the challenges that communicators face when utilizing new communication technologies. Overall, these results show that although practitioners have significant limitations in employing issues management through new media, they believe there are a number of outlets for issues management through these channels and have a strong desire to implement them.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Context of the Study

As new communication technologies emerge, and social media becomes an ever more popular medium, public relations – as an academic discipline and organizational function – must learn how to enhance organizations' relationships with publics, via social media. According to Marken (2008), social media is the most direct means for organizations to reach their audience, and perhaps more importantly, "it's also the most undiluted, most direct and most cost-effective means" (p. 10) of learning about an organization's publics. Marken (2008) highlighted two important factors of social media that allow this information acquisition process to take place: social media "provides an unfiltered view of consumer perceptions so firms can see what will impact the future of business," and it "provides a unique opportunity to connect with contemporaries and customers to gain feedback and learn from it" (p. 10).

The social media landscape is filled with apps that enable individuals to publish information, share pictures, discuss different topics, connect via social networks, and live in virtual worlds. YouTube, Skype, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Brightkite, and Digg have become household names. In fact, social media observers (Jaquith, 2007; Marken, 2008; Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009) predict that the last few years of social media growth represents merely the tip of the iceberg for both the popularity and functionality of these new communication technologies.

With the increasing functionality and availability of new communication technologies, questions emerge about whether the field of public relations will be expected to achieve traditional outcomes in this very different venue. Public relations practitioners may also realize the need and means to adapt their expectations and definitions of what comprises organization-public relationship success in the new media environment. This change stretches across all areas of public relations and issues management. However, issues management scholars have many unanswered questions about the role new technologies will play in the theory, research, and practice of issues management.

Issues management can be seen as a way to link the traditional public relations function to the management function, thus enhancing the organization's ability to be directed, reflective, and participative in both the internal and external environments (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). This is both an important opportunity and responsibility of a public relations practitioner. According to Lauzen (1997), research suggests "public relations practitioners involved in issues management hold greater intraorganizational power than those practitioners not involved in the process" (p. 65). Steyn (2006) also drew a link between the two functions by arguing that, in a strategic role, public relations assists an organization "to adapt to its societal and stakeholder environment by feeding into the organization's strategy formulation process intelligence with regards to strategic stakeholders, societal issues, and the publics that emerge around the issues" (p. 139). Thus, issues management will be defined as a strategic organizational function that includes the practice of public relations.

The challenge brought forth by both advancements in technology and the importance of issues management calls for increasing our understanding of how issues arise and how they are discussed through new communication technologies. Is it worth the organization's efforts to engage in monitoring and dialogue with stakeholders on social networking sites? Can the organization gain insights through issue monitoring of the social networking sites that will give better insights into how issues are arising and being discussed?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to expand issues management research by learning how organizations can and should use new media to forge and manage issue-based relationships with their publics. Such logic does not presume that by understanding publics' discourse, large complex and power organizations can control issues and their discussion. In fact, the prevailing logic of such knowledge is that it helps organizations, first, to understand the conditions needed for changes and locates topics that require broad and thorough discussion. Through understanding of public discourse companies can be more reflective in their management approach as well as more collaborative in their discourse and problem solving.

Although scholars in the field of public relations have readily studied how organizations have utilized mainstream Internet communication technologies to conduct public relations business and build relationships with publics (Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Park & Reber, 2008; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Xifra & Huertas, 2008), few rigorous studies within the field have examined how new communication technologies, especially social networking, are used to conduct issues management. The goal of this study was to help fill that void in research. Beyond the research implications, this study also provides public relations practitioners with organizational examples on how social media is being used to manage issues, as well as the current challenges in doing so. With this information, practitioners can potentially expand or improve upon the utilization of new communication technologies in their organization—if that effort seems reasonable and even cost effective to create, build, maintain, and repair relationships with key stakeholders.

Preview

This paper presents a literature review about public relations theory and Internet communication, strategic issues management, and examples of current new media use by organizations working to build, maintain, and even repair relationships. Based on the findings, and gaps therein, research questions are presented to guide data collection and frame analysis. The methods for conducting this study are then addressed, including the data gathering methodology, the interview protocol, sampling strategies, participants, and strategies for data analysis. Results are then presented based on how the data help answer the research questions, followed by a discussion of how the results connect with previous research findings. Finally, limitations of the study are considered as well as areas for future research.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Overview

Several topics in the relevant literature informed this study and guided the development of research questions. First, I examined the relationship between general public relations and Internet communication to determine the connection between the two areas, as well as any gaps that may be present in the relationship. This information helped establish the need for continued research regarding Internet communication in the field of public relations and, more specifically, issues management.

Second, I examined strategic issues management, with special attention to issue monitoring. The literature in this area explicated three things: (a) a typology of potential issues organizations face with their publics and their environment, (b) the process of issues monitoring and management which I explored in this study to determine to what extent the process is conducted within the dimension of new communication technology and (c) the potential outcomes of strategic issues management.

Finally, I examined current new media use by organizations. The literature in this section highlighted the theoretical need for additional research in this area as there are still many unanswered questions regarding the role these new communication technologies can and will play in the communication functions of organizations. A practical need for continued research is also highlighted, as there are organizations that are beginning to utilize new communication technologies. It is important to gauge what these organizations are doing, what type of success they are having, and any identifiable reasons for a lack of success in this arena.

Public Relations and Internet Communication

Information and commentary flow via the Internet has the potential to become perhaps the most powerful tool for public relations practitioners. According to McAllister-Spooner (2009), "the increasing presence of the Internet in the contemporary society raises important questions about the role it plays in organizational communication and the field of public relations" (p. 322). Thus, researchers began to investigate the exact relationship, or potential relationship, between the Internet and the field of public relations. Christ (2005) assessed this relationship as he has identified six areas in which the Internet has become an advantage for public relations practitioners: primary knowledge source for general information, expected source for stakeholders regarding organizational information, more precise message targeting, customized messaging, enhanced call-to-action via messaging, and established worldwide presence.

Nearly a decade ago, Hill and White (2000) recognized the use of websites as an advantage for public relations practitioners as a means to "keep stakeholders up-to-date, provide information to the media, gather information about publics, strengthen corporate identity, and a host of other public relations functions" (p. 31). Callison (2003) supported the use of the Internet by the field of pubic relations as he identified corporate use of Internet communication as an ideal way to communicate with journalists. Press members look to organizational websites for "press releases, public relations personnel contact information, and general corporate facts" (Callison, 2003, p. 30). This online information source benefits journalists who are looking for "viewable, downloadable files because attachments emailed directly to journalists could carry computer viruses" as well as the ability to cut down on unwanted corporate materials that "fill a journalists" inbox (Callison, 2003, p. 30).

This convenience also benefits public relations practitioners who can post media information in one electronic location as opposed to sending countless emails that "fill a journalists' inbox." Ultimately, according to Callison (2003), "journalists demand unique, multimedia content-rich news and information that they can accessed both in a timely manner and in a usable format" (p. 30). Internet communication provides public relations practitioners the ability to deliver on this need.

More recently, Ingenhoff and Koelling (2009) stressed the importance of Internet communication to public relations practitioners: "Facilitating interaction between an unlimited number of individuals, the Internet provides organizations with the unique possibility of engaging publics in dialogue" (p. 66). Dialogue can be defined as "the product of statement and counter statement, voiced expressions of what organizations do and what they should do" (Heath, 2006, p. 67). The presence of dialogue is important in reaching a mutual balance between organizations and their publics, thus important to public relations and issues management. For example, within the healthcare industry, blogging has emerged as a powerful way for organizations to establish dialogue with publics (Berkowitz, 2007).

Online communication offers public relations practitioners a unique venue, not only to disseminate information but also to begin to build the stakeholder relationships that are vital to successful communication. To this point, scholars (Ingenhoff &

Koelling, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Park & Reber, 2008; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Xifra & Huertas, 2008) have studied how organizations build relationships with publics through the use of websites, blogging, and other interactive Internet capabilities. Unfortunately, as shown in the following studies, the use of new communication technologies in public relations is still being widely underutilized.

Ingenhoff and Koelling (2009) affirmed this idea in their recent study of Swiss nonprofit organizations. Those organizations were using the Internet to more efficiently provide information to their stakeholders, however they had yet to invite communication from their stakeholders. As a result, one could argue that these companies missed out on better relationships with their publics, stemming from the open communication that could have occurred. Ingenhoff and Koelling (2009) are not alone in this assessment. For example, in their research of ten South African non-governmental organizations' use of Internet communication, Naudé, Froneman, and Atwood (2004) concluded that "practitioners using the Internet in their public relations efforts often do not use the interactive features of the medium to their fullest potential" (p. 87). In a study aimed at assessing university use of websites and dialogic features for building relationships with potential students, Gordon and Berhow (2009) found that both college and university websites are far from reaching their potential.

More specifically, the authors highlight the fact that "while advanced technology tools like chats, blogs, portals, instant messaging, podcasts, and RSS feeds are increasingly common features on the World Wide Web, universities have yet to fully realize the potential of such features in the prospective student recruitment process" (Gordon & Berhow, 2009, pp. 151-152). Similar themes were found in a study of environmental advocacy groups' use of Facebook (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009). According to the authors, the large majority of participants in the study seemed "to adopt the position that the mere creation of an interactive space via a social networking profile is sufficient for facilitating dialogue…these organizations are missing a significant opportunity to build mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders" (p. 318). Thus, organizations may largely miss the opportunity to improve relationships with their publics according to the above-mentioned studies.

It is important to recognize the missed opportunities, as well as attempt to understand *why* organizations have missed these opportunities. Hill and White (2000) addressed that question: "To maximize the public relations benefits of a website for an organization, it is helpful to see what a website is and is not for the practitioners" (p. 46). Until we understand the perceptions and limitations that Internet communication has on organizations, it will be extremely difficult to fully understand the role that these technologies play in public relations tasks. White and Raman (1999) supported this theme: "Understanding the thought behind the creation of websites in this sample may provide insight into better planning and execution of sites in the future" (p. 409). Hill and White (2000), in their study on perceptions about the value of the World Wide Web as a communication tool and how it fits into the communication mix, found that lack of additional resources and internal skepticism about the value of the organizational website may be one cause of underutilization by public relations practitioners.

One common theme identified by Hill and White (2000) was that participants often identified working on the World Wide Web as a low priority task. In the words of one participant, "obviously it goes to the bottom of the list most of the time because I have other programs where I have people at my door" (Hill & White, 2000, p. 38). Another participant of the study spoke about the lack of resources: "The problem was we didn't have the staff support necessary, in terms of number of staff or in terms of ability to maintain a Web page on a daily basis" (Hill & White, 2000, p. 39). The limitations of the World Wide Web, according to Hill and White (2000), go beyond the communication department of the organization. Many participants fully understand the value of the Internet communication, but often have to defend the value to others in the organization with "tangible evidence" (Hill & White, 2000, p. 43). These limitations, and perhaps others, play a role in the current relationship between public relations and Internet communication.

The above review of literature provides an important basis for understanding the potential and necessary relationship between the field of public relations and the Internet. The studies mentioned give insight to the potential advantages of using the Internet in order to achieve organizational communication efforts, the fact that many organizations are underutilizing these communication technologies, and perhaps some challenges to traditional organizational communication efforts being done within this venue. As the purpose of this study is to determine how issues management, as an extension of public relations, is being conducted within the dimension of new communication technologies via the Internet, the next section will review literature relevant to better understanding strategic issues management.

Strategic Issues Management

According to Heath and Palenchar (2009), strategic issues management "is not something pasted onto an organization when needed as a result of a crisis, especially not some short-term public relations or advertising cosmetic for dealing with business critics…it is the essence of smart organizations' organizational cultures" (p. ix). Thus, strategic issues management is an on-going organizational management function. Conceptualizing the term strategic issues management is the first step in examining issues management within new communication technologies. According to Heath and Palenchar (2009), strategic issues management can be defined as "the management of organizational and community resources to advance organizational and community interests and rights by striking a mutual balance with stakeholders and stakeseekers" (p. 15). In a more detailed definition, the authors argued that:

> Strategic issues management is the amalgamation of organizational functions and responsive culture that blends strategic business planning, issue monitoring, best-practice standards of corporate responsibility, and dialogic communication needed to foster a supportive climate between each organization and those people who can affect its success and who are affected by its operations. (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, pp. 8-9)

Stemming from the definition above, it is clear that issues management is more than a communication function. It is a multidisciplinary function that uses strategy to maximize opportunities and lessen threats in an organization's environment. This strategy involves more than influencing an organization's publics, but also to "change an organization's practices, making them more responsive to the public interest" (Pratt, 2001, p. 336). Issues management is a function that allows organizations to be proactive versus reactionary (Heath & Palenchar, 2009), which is increasingly important in the competitive state of today's global marketplace. Furthermore, strategic issues management is the systematic analysis of the factors associated with both external and internal environments to provide the basis for rethinking the current management practice. According to Theaker (2004) issues management involves the process in which "significant changes or issues which may affect the [organization] are identified and long-term strategic decisions are taken which may involve changes in policy or practice" (p. 124). Moreover, "issues managers often serve as the links between persons who discover and interpret issues and the executives who engage in issues response" (p. 115). Pratt (2001) provided a solid definition in the effort to summarize the different aspects of issues management:

> The plan should formulate goals, strategies, and tactics that will result in an optimal "fit" between the deployment of an organization's resources and the opportunities for responding effectively to its environment (e.g., consumer interests) while actively engaged in the public policy process. (p. 336)

Typology of Issues[1]

As discussed in the above literature, strategic issues management is an organizational function that works to advance organizational and community interests and rights by achieving a balance between both the organization and the environment in

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[1] Typology of Issues was originally developed by R. L. Heath in personal communication with him on December 2, 2009, and December 26, 2009.

which it operates. Having established that, it is also important to recognize that there are different types of issues that face different organizations. More over, there are different types of issues that can face the same organization at different times depending on the public. A brief review of literature content will show a range of potential organizational issues: safety recalls in the automotive industry, multinational corporations interactions with the Chinese government, the effects of tobacco use on public health, environmental efforts to protect salmon and steelhead fish populations, a large retailer's reputation in small communities, and a manufacturing company's working conditions (Chen, 2007; Hagan, 2007; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Pratt, 2001). With such a broad, and potentially diverse, definition of organizational issues, it may be beneficial to categorize overarching types of issues. To that end, the following typology of issues is being presented.

Public policy issues. Public policy issues "are contestable matters of what policy should be implemented or retained to solve some problem" (R. L. Heath, personal communication, December 26, 2009). The above logic can be demonstrated as follows: Organizations (or government) are doing this (Y facts), which creates this (X problem); therefore, they should be regulated in the following manner (Z policy) (Heath & Palenchar, 2009).

Brand equity issues. Brand equity "features the unique market value of some population's (such as customers, donors, or shareholders) attitudes toward the organization, as well as its products and services" (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 353). In regards to brand equity issues, characteristics such as reputation, consistency, and continuity are important.

Relationship issues. Relationship issues can be defined by the variables that are key to relationships between organizations and their publics. Examples of such variables include control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Grunig & Hon, 1999). The key to understanding the logic of relationships is to understand that individuals, and organizations, will keep relationships that are found to be positive and rewarding and get out of relationships that are found to be too costly and no longer rewarding (R. L. Heath, personal communication, December 26, 2009).

Mission-environment alignment issues. This issue can be characterized by whether or not “the organization shares interests, rewards, and goals with those of its stakeholders” (R. L. Heath, personal communication, December 26, 2009). Does an organization’s mission, and corresponding actions, have a positive or negative impact on the environment in which it operates? Is the company a good neighbor? Mission-environment alignment issues can often be addressed through improved standards of corporate social responsibility, which have the potential to “increase harmony with stakeholders and increase the organization’s strategic business advantage” (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 134).

Customer satisfaction issues. Customer satisfaction issues deal directly with customer interaction with the organization, the organization’s response, and the satisfaction the customer has with that response. For example, “one question is the responsiveness of the organization to inquiries and complaints” (R. L. Heath, personal communication, December 26, 2009). A customer’s judgment of the responsiveness may include both the length of time it takes to respond as well as the ability of the response to fix the original problem.

Risk management issues. Communication regarding risk can be defined as "an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions" that involves multiple messages about the nature of the risk (National Research Council, 1989, p. 21). According to Heath and Palenchar (2009), "risk communication and issues management merge at the point where key publics feel deeply that companies and governmental organizations (and even nonprofits, including activists) create or allow risks to occur that will affect the health, safety, environmental quality, and economic well-being of community residents and users of products" (p. 314). From a public's standpoint, risk management issues may involve whether or not organizations "understand the risk, take proper precautions, and implement the best policies" with regards to a specific risk (R. L. Heath, personal communication, December 26, 2009).

Crisis response issues. A crisis can be defined as a risk manifested. Heath and Palenchar (2009) defined a crisis as "an untimely event that can be anticipated to occur, which may prevent management from accomplishing its efforts to create the understanding and mutually beneficial relationship with interested parties needed to negotiate the mutually beneficial exchange of stakes" (p. 280). A crisis response issue deals with whether or not the organizational response to a crisis increases or decreases the legitimacy gap between the organization and the affected stakeholders. In crisis response issues, issues managers should ask, does the organizational response to a crisis satisfactorily address "the interests of others hurt by the crisis" (R. L. Heath, personal communication, December 26, 2009)?

Strategic Issues Management Process

Once an organization understands the value of strategic issues management, it is important to introduce practical steps meant to guide the organization through the management of issues. The model of strategic issues management is based on the following five steps regarding organizational issues: identification, prioritization, analysis, communication, and evaluation (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). Additional explanation of those five steps is provided below.

Identifying issues involves, first and foremost, an understanding of both the internal and external "environments in which an organization operates and in which its products or services are distributed" (Pratt, 2001, p. 337). With this understanding, issues managers are more easily able to identify potential issues that may arise in either environment. Furthermore, identifying potential issues can be accomplished through environmental scanning. Simply stated, environmental scanning "is the communication activity through which organizations learn about trends and events in their environment" (Lauzen, 1995, p. 187). Through the use of scanning, organizations are able to observe, determine patterns, and recognize future trends occurring in their operational environment. Aligning with this process, Sung (2006) stated that "organizations should be sensitive to their environment and pay attention to issues at every stage, from emergence to dissipation" (p. 176). Scanning plays a pivotal role in creating sensitivity and awareness. According to Lauzen (1995), environmental scanning can be formal or informal. Formal scanning activities include media content analysis, surveys of publics, and focus group studies. Informal scanning activities, on the other hand, include interacting with media contacts and monitoring written and phone complaints.

The identification process alone does not necessarily benefit the organization strategically; instead this process merely serves as the first step. In fact, "it is only within the context of issues management that the gathering of information is translated into strategic decision making" (Lauzen, 1995, p. 190). The *prioritization* of potential issues is the next step in the process of issues management. This step of the process involves evaluating and prioritizing potential issues according to their relation to the organization's overall mission. Along with an organization's overall mission and goals, its budget and other available resources will determine how many issues the organization is able to manage. Because of this, evaluation and prioritization are vital. If an organization is only able to proactively manage a small percentage of their overall potential issues, it is important that the small percentage represents the most important potential issues.

Analyzing issues involves "developing an organizational position on each vital issue" as well as identifying "key publics and influential personal whose support are vital" to the issue (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 31). It is important to note that issues management does not allow an organization to manage an issue; it instead is designed to manage an organization's response to, or in the face of, that issue. Successfully managing an organization's response to an issue requires careful information acquisition, strategic planning, and allocation of resources to best benefit both the organization as well as the key stakeholders in the environment in which it operates.

The *communication* step of issues management is the action taken by the organization regarding various issue once they have been identified, tracked, and analyzed in accordance with the organization's mission and current strategic plan.

According to Heath and Palenchar (2009), "the strategic communication plan becomes meaningful when resources are allocated to reach key publics with properly designed messages to meet these publics' needs to understand and formulate appropriate opinions and behaviors in the mutual interests of all parties" (p. 37). This step can, and often does, include adapting the business plan in a way that aligns the environment and the organization's mission. Thus, the communication step of issues management can only be successful if the issue is properly analyzed within the organization.

The process of issues management is not complete until the above steps are *evaluated* for their effectiveness. Organizations need the ability to determine whether certain communication plans are achieving the goals desired. According to Heath and Palenchar (2009), constant monitoring of key measures is needed for plan evaluation. These measures "need to address the success of the total plan and its successful implementation by levels and units" (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 38). Overall, success can be measured by "the extent to which stakeholders reward the organization's policies by granting them support or oppose those policies and work to constrain or redirect the organization to alternative standards" (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, pp. 38-39). Once the evaluation is complete, strategies can be reassessed and communication plans can be redesigned where needed. This step allows for issues management to be a self-correcting organizational function. Thus, issues management acts in a cybernetic fashion. This means that issues management uses feedback as a method or regulation and control, thus learning how to achieve the desired goals of the organization.

The above process is constantly in motion. While an organization is evaluating the results of one communication campaign, it will also begin to monitor for new and emerging issues. Thus, issues management goes beyond the monitoring, identifying, evaluating, communicating, and evaluating of one issue. Issues managers must utilize tools that allow them to gain footing in the ever-changing organizational environment. For example, it is possible that the communication plan designed to address one issue has created an additional issue. Heath and Palenchar (2009) supported this idea, characterizing strategic issues management as a process, as cyclical, and as conducive for new media technologies. Unfortunately, public relations scholars have conducted relatively little research about how organizations use new communication technologies to manage issues and build relationships with publics.

Outcomes of Strategic Issues Management

In order to fully understand the potential impact of the strategic issues management process, it is important to look at the potential outcomes. As mentioned in the literature above, strategic issues management "blends strategic business planning, issue monitoring, best-practice standards of corporate responsibility, and dialogic communication needed to foster a supportive climate between each organization and those people who can affect its success and who are affected by its operations (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, pp. 8-9). Thus, organizational success in issues management should result in a "blending" of those key areas. In the sections below, strategic business planning, corporate responsibility and dialogic communication, or rhetorical engagement, will be further discussed in relation to successful issues management. Relationships will also be discussed in additional detail as they play a key role in both issues management and public relations.

Strategic business planning. Strategic issues management and strategic business planning have an important and intertwining relationship. As Heath and Palenchar (2009) simply stated, "strategic issues management cannot have full impact if it is not part of strategic business planning" (p. 29). However, it is through successful issues management that organizations can become aware of their surrounding environment and properly plan for the achievement of the overall organizational mission and vision. According to Pratt (2001), an organization's strategic plan should "formulate goals, strategies, and tactics that will result in an optimal 'fit' between the deployment of an organization's resources and the opportunities for responding effectively to its environment" (p. 336). It is through the successful management of issues that organizations are able to find such a "fit" during the planning process.

Corporate social responsibility. According to Heath and Palenchar (2009), "improved standards of corporate responsibility can be used to increase harmony with stakeholders and increase the organization's strategic business advantage" (p. 134). Through the successful process of issues management, organizations can better understand the environment in which they operate and better understand how to create such "harmony."

Rhetorical engagement. According to Heath and Palenchar (2009), "rhetoric is instrumental in that one person engages another in an exchange of symbols to accomplish some goal" (p. 136). More specific to issues management, rhetorical engagement "entails multiple and varied voices who advocate various issues and policy positions – who challenge the best efforts to achieve consensus" (Heath, 2006, p. 67). Given this understanding, the rhetoric of issues management is best thought of as dialogue (Heath, 2006), which, according to Kent and Taylor (2002) “is not a process or a series of steps, but rather a product of on going communication and relationships” (p. 25). Thus, one key outcome of successful issues management is dialogue or a conversation towards “consensus.” The ultimate goal of this dialogue is to lessen, or dissolve, the differences between an organization and its environment.

Relationships. Much as issues management is defined as the ability to balance the interests of both an organization and its publics, “the relationship perspective of public relations suggests that balancing the interests of organizations and publics is achieved through management of organization-public relationships” (Ledingham, 2006, p. 465). Maintaining these organizational-public relationships can be seen as key to overall organizational success. Moreover, Grunig and Hon (1999) argued that “the process of developing and maintaining relationships with strategic publics is a crucial component of strategic management, issues management, and crisis management” (p. 8). Grunig and Huang (2000) elaborated on the potential outcomes of maintaining relationships:

> When public relations helps the organization build relationships with strategic constituencies, it saves the organization money by reducing the costs of litigation, regulation, legislation, pressure campaigns, boycotts, or lost revenue that result from bad relationships with publics. It also helps the organization make money by cultivating relationships with donors, customers, shareholders, and legislators who are needed to support organizational goals. (p. 33)

Current New Media Use By Organizations

Although this study argues that public relations practitioners, and issues managers, currently underutilize new communication technologies when indentifying and managing issues with their publics, various organizations have employed new media in efforts to improve relationships with publics. For example, "corporate giants such as Comcast, PepsiCo, JetBlue Airways, Whole Foods Market and others are beefing up direct communications with customers through social media tools," using social media like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Swartz, 2009, p. 1). Swartz (2009) explained that these new communication technologies help companies "quickly and inexpensively respond to customer complaints, answer questions and tailor products and services" (p. 1). Waters, Burnett, Lamm, and Lucas (2009), in a study on nonprofit organizations' use of Facebook, found that this particular communication technology was being utilized across several industries, including arts and humanities, education, healthcare, human services, public/society, and religion. Similarly, political campaigns understand the potential of new communication technologies. Jaquith (2007) pointed to blogs, MySpace press releases, and donations via cell phones as important factors in future political victories. For apps within the company, Gibson (2009) described social media software as the new "water cooler" for companies that have dispersed operations globally: "Enterprises are coming to the realization that new tools are needed to build a corporate culture in which knowledge is quickly located and shared…and a virtual water cooler is just that thing to bring that about" (p. 18). Finally, Marken (2008) estimated that companies will spend a total of $2.8 billion on social media by 2012.

Seo, Kim, and Yang (2009) recently studied new media use in transnational nongovernmental organizations and found that organizational websites are still viewed as the most important new media tool. However, the authors expect that transnational organizations will soon broaden their use of new media tools based on answers received during the study. The authors report that the participating organizations are currently conducting research "on how many people in their target audience use which specific new media modes so they can reallocate resources accordingly," as well as investing more time in social networking venues such as Facebook and Twitter (Seo et al., 2009, p. 124). Seo et al. (2009) concluded these findings by arguing that these organizations "may well have enhanced their use of new media after investigating what will be the best use of their limited resources to reach the most people in their target audience" (p. 124).

Research Objectives

The purpose of this research was to understand how organizations are utilizing and should utilize new communication technologies for issues management and how these organizations define success in these efforts. This research also addressed the potential challenges that new media bring to organization-public relationships and issues management programs. The theoretical implications of this study include an evolved understanding of the functionality of issues management because of the advent of new communication technologies. Theoretical implications produced directions for future research based on additional characteristics of issues management and further dimensions of the typology of issues because of consequences to opportunities. Practical applications of this study stem from actual organization data concerning new communication technology use. Issues managers can potentially learn from the experiences of organizations and perhaps model their own use of social media accordingly. For organizations not yet utilizing such communication techniques, they have the opportunity to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of using new communication technologies to manage issues and determine the best direction in regards to this potential tool.

Research Questions

This research proposed that the field of public relations must learn how strategic issues management is and can be conducted within these new conditions. This key question is the extent to which new communication technologies are used to scan, identify, prioritize, remedy, and evaluate issues that may emerge among strategic publics. This exploration will also help expand the typology of issues. In order to better understand how, and to what success, organizations are involved in this new circumstance, the following Research Questions (RQs) were addressed:

RQ1: To what extent are new media/communication technologies utilized by organizations for the purpose of issues management?

RQ1a: To what extent are new media/communication technologies utilized by organizations for the purpose of identifying potential issues?

RQ1b: To what extent are new media/communication technologies utilized by organizations for the purpose of prioritizing potential issues?

RQ1c: To what extent are new media/communication technologies utilized by organizations for the purpose of analyzing issues?

RQ1d: To what extent are new media/communication technologies utilized by organizations for the purpose of communicating about issues?

RQ1e: To what extent are new media/communication technologies utilized by organizations for the purpose of evaluating the issues management process?

RQ2: How do organizations define issues?

RQ2a: Which issues are most salient to organizations (among public policy issues, brand equity issues, relationship issues, mission-environment alignment issues, customer satisfaction issues, risk management issues and crisis response issues)?

RQ3: How are organizations' uses of new communication technologies to manage issues connected to strategic business planning, a change in corporate social responsibility, and a rhetorical engagement on issues?

RQ4: What are the challenges when organizations utilize new media/communication technologies in the management of issues?

Chapter III

METHODS

Methodology

As the purpose of this study was to explore something that has received little previous investigation, data were collected and analyzed using qualitative methods to discover a range of responses to the research questions. According to White and Raman (2000), qualitative approaches are "preferable in exploratory research where the goal is to understand a process or phenomenon" (pp. 407-408). As the purpose of this study was to better understand how organizations use new media to forge and manage relationships with its publics, a qualitative approach was appropriate. In addition, qualitative data are a "source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1). The "rich descriptions" in the form of "fruitful explanations" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1) added the necessary depth needed to more fully understand this new communication phenomenon.

Methods

Originally, I was going to employ two types of qualitative information gathering methods -- individual interviews and focus groups -- at two different organizations with the understanding that this process would strengthen the internal validity of my findings by triangulating sources as well as information gathering techniques (Potter, 1996). Unfortunately, due to a lack of access to participants willing to participate in focus groups from these original organizations, I was unable to follow through with my original plan. Instead, I employed only one type of qualitative information gathering method – individual interviews – at 20 different organizations. This process benefited my study as using more than one data source or setting can "enrich the range of subjective participant views available" (Merrigan & Huston, 2009, p. 75).

There were several advantages to holding face-to-face interviews. By holding face-to-face interviews, I had an easier time establishing rapport and trust with the participants (Merrigan & Huston, 2009). More importantly, I was able to "probe" for more in-depth responses and clarify any questions from the participants (Merrigan & Huston, 2009, p. 111). A probe involved either asking a participant to elaborate further on an answer in order to achieve sufficient data or to further explain to ensure that I accurately understand a participant's answer. The probes did not stray from the original interview protocol, but rather reiterated certain key words or ideas for the participants.

Two drawbacks from this type of method include a greater time commitment as well as producing data that are less representative and thus less likely to be generalizable (Merrigan & Huston, 2009). In other words, I was able to collect rich data from a limited number of individuals at a relatively limited number of organizations. While these data are highly detailed and extremely representative of the participating organizations, it will be difficult to generalize to other organizations. This type of generalization is often a goal of using quantitative methods, such as surveys. However, as explained earlier in this section, the goal of this study was to obtain rich detail and fruitful explanations at the participating organizations in order to help understand this new communication phenomenon. Later, these findings can be applied in surveys in order to produce generalizable patterns of new media usage in issues management. For this particular study, the total involvement was 20 individuals at 20 organizations. At each organization, that included one individual interview.

Interview Protocol

The purpose of the interviews was to explore the concepts of new communication technologies in regards to issues management. First, interview questions gauged the organizations' overall use of new communication technologies, including which technologies are being implemented. This exploration included how these new communication technologies are currently being used in regards to organizational issues. The interviews then explored the types of issues the organization is managing as well as the potential outcomes produced from the practice of issues management. Finally, the interviews helped to determine any challenges that arise from using these new communication technologies for such tasks.

My interview protocol was developed through researching previous protocols published in similar studies (Porter & Sallot, 2003; White & Raman, 2000) as well as culling relevant concepts from issues management literature. With interview questions developed from both issues management literature and the area of new communication technology, the data that I collected was able to accurately address the research questions presented in this study. The interview protocol was meant to serve as a guide to the interview process. However respondents were allowed to elaborate on questions as they wished, and follow up questions were asked where appropriate (White & Raman, 2000).

This process differed from that of a structured interview. In a structured interview, the interviewer would only ask questions on the interview protocol with no variations. In return, the interviewee would strictly answer the questions asked without additional elaboration. Instead, this study employed a semi-structured process, which allowed me to probe in places unanticipated prior to the interview but which the participant felt were important to them, as related to the communication concepts being discussed. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

Prior to interviewing my participants, I interviewed 3 individuals with similar backgrounds and qualities of my participants to determine the quality of my interview questions. This pre-testing helped me determine whether or not I was getting the data that I was intending to get, thus increasing my validity. Pre-testing also allowed for me to practice asking the questions as well as to determine if any questions are unclear and need revising. Once the pre-testing was complete, I determined that no changes needed to be made to my interview protocol prior to collecting data with my participants.

Procedures

As my original method included two individual interviews at each organization, I was first going to perform an interview with the highest-ranking member of the communication group. This would have allowed me to determine the use of new communication technologies on a strategic planning level. Next, I was going to perform an interview with a member of the communication team involved in the day-to-day communication actions of the organization (in essence, I was going to interview people according to their managerial versus technician positions in the communication group). The second interview would have given me a better understanding of the communication tasks that utilize new communication technologies as they are implemented and monitored on a daily basis. Again, due to limited access to multiple individuals at each organization, I was only able to perform one interview at each organization. In order to collect as much information as possible, I used a single interview to gauge both the use of new communication technologies on a strategic planning level as well as how the new communication technologies are used on a daily basis. Thus, I was still able to accomplish the same informational goals with a single interview. However, since all participants were not recruited because of their combined managerial and technician roles, the data may be limited in the extent to which it can speak to both the managerial and technical employments of new communication technologies in strategic issues management across the sample.

While all participants were asked the same questions from the same interview protocol, information provided in the early interviews allowed me to either narrow down or expand the interview guide prior to the later interviews. This type of early data analysis is part of grounded theory, in which "the analysis begins as soon as the first bit of data is collected" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 5). This process of early analysis is "necessary from the start because it is used to direct the next interview and observations" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 6). I then asked the most relevant questions and received the most applicable data from each participant in this study. This process of constant-comparison is also an early form of coding which allowed me to compare "each incident to other incidents in order to decide in which categories they belong" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 219). Thus, as coding categories became apparent in the early interviews, I was able to become more aware of what to look for regarding data categories present in the later interviews.

Interviews took place at the participants' organizations with the exception of four interviews. For either the convenience of the participant or unavoidable conflicts, two interviews were held at third party venues and two interviews were conducted over the phone. Holding the majority of the interviews at the participants' office locations was convenient for the participants and was helpful in having participants agree to participate in the study. In addition, I was already asking the participants to take time out of their days, and I did not feel like it would be acceptable to ask them to travel any distance. The amount of time taken for the interviews varied for each session as I was using a semi-structured format. Having said that, the average time for the interviews was about 30 to 45 minutes. This was an appropriate time range as anything less than that may not have given sufficient time to collect the depth of information this study sought, and any longer than that amount of time may have led to exhaustion by the participant. Prior to the beginning of the interview, the participants were asked to sign an informed consent form that was approved by the University of Houston's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. This informed consent can be found in Appendix B.

During the interviews, I took notes as well as audio recorded the sessions with permission from the participants. Recording the interview sessions provided me with the most accurate data possible. Having said that, I was unable to record two of the interviews due to either participant refusal or technical difficulties that resulted from the interview medium (phone connection). With those interviews, I took extremely detailed notes as to get the most accurate data possible.

Once the recorded interviews were complete, I transcribed each one of the sessions individually in order to prepare for data analysis. In order to transcribe the sessions, I manually transferred the audio recordings to my computer word-for-word. I then printed these documents so that I had one hard copy and one electronic copy of the interview at all times. At this point, I participated in a form of informal data analysis with "in-process writings" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 212). Lindof and Taylor (2002) recommend inserting asides and commentaries into transcribed sessions in order to express concerns regarding "the efficacy of method," "the author's own emotions, thoughts, or understandings," or simply to remark on "details that inform the researcher's understanding" (p. 212). These in-process writings helped me greatly when it was time to formally code and categorize my data. Also, by writing about my emotions, thoughts, and understandings of each participant as I went through the process, I was able to both recognize and attempt to dismiss my bias about the results of this study.

Issue Typology

As part of my interview process, the participants were provided a one-page document outlining my conceptualization of the issues presented in the Issue Typology. This Issue Typology was created based on relevant strategic issues management literature as well as personal communication with R. L. Heath. As discussed in the Literature Review, case studies have shown that definitions of an organizational issue can be a broad and potentially diverse. Thus, it may be beneficial to categorize overarching types of issues. For this reason, an issues typology was presented to participants as part of the interview protocol.

The Issue Typology document was presented to participants only *after* they were given the opportunity to discuss different issues that affect their particular organization. The purpose of presenting this one-page issue definition guide was to help the participants accurately pin-point the issues that were faced by each organization according to the conceptualization presented in this study. This one-page document was presented to the participants with two assumptions. The first assumption was that not all organizations would be familiar with or have experience with each issue presented in the Issue Typology. Secondly, the document was presented with the assumption that some participants would see the presented issues as overlapping. Both of these aspects were still helpful to the outcome of this study as one goal was to further understanding and accuracy of the presented Issue Typology. Thus, any information given regarding the application of the Issue Typology was helpful. The one-page issue definition guide can be found in Appendix C.

Once participants had the opportunity to discuss different issues that might concern their organization and utilize the one-page issue definition guide to better pin-point those issues according to the conceptualization presented in this study, it was necessary to operationalize and identify those issues. As identified in the Literature Review, issue categories included the following: public policy issues, brand equity issues, relationship issues, mission-environment alignment issues, customer satisfaction issues, risk management issues, and crisis response issues. In order to operationalize the types of issues, key words were identified for each issue that allowed me to both probe for these issues during the interviews as well as code for these issues during the data analysis stage of this study. For example, brand equity issues were identified by key words such as "brand equity," "misperceptions," "image," "reputation," "brand," "products," and "services." A complete list of the key words used to identify all seven issue types can be found in the data analysis section of this chapter.

Sample

Originally, this study was to employ purposive sampling by selecting two organizations with a history of new communication technology utilization. Purposive sampling involves choosing participants because there is "good reason to believe that 'what goes on there' is critical to understanding some process or concept" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 122). As the goal of this study was to investigate how new communication technologies are being utilized by organizations in order to manage issues, it was preferable that the participants and their organizations be familiar with, and participate in, these actions. Thus, purposive sampling would have allowed me to select participants based on potential new communication technology use in order to produce relevant data for this study. Also stemming from both location and anticipated access, the study sought to include Planned Parenthood and Whole Foods Market.

As both of these organizations were unwilling to participate in this study, I next attempted to include two organizations will similar utilization of new communication technologies. Again, I was unable to secure the participation of two organizations for the purpose of access to multiple individuals. I then sought to include individual communicators with the ability to speak about their organizations' use of new communication technology as well as organizational issues. Thus, I recruited 20 individuals from 20 different organizations for participation in this study through the use of both purposive and snowball sampling. While the original plan to include multiple individuals from a limited number of organizations would have given me a great amount of depth within each one of the participating organizations, I was simply unable to attain such access. Having said that, interviewing single individuals at a larger number of diverse organizations was beneficial in providing a more diverse sample.

Participants

In the participant recruiting process, I sought to include individuals functioning within the public relations or communication roles at their respective organizations or individuals involved in communication consulting at different organizations. As presented in the literature review, strategic issues management is much more than a communication function. While that literature does guide this study, seeking to include members of the communication function of an organization is appropriate because of public relations practitioners' roles as boundary spanners.

By functioning on the "edge" of organizations, public relations practitioners have the opportunity to contribute to the issues management process, as well as the overall effectiveness of an organization, by building relationships with external sources of information (Lauzen, 1995). Public relations practitioners must then take the environmental data and recommend ways to develop the organization in anticipation of future issues. Thus, in its strategic role, public relations assists an organization "to adapt to its societal and stakeholder environment by feeding into the organization's strategy formulation process intelligence with regards to strategic stakeholders, societal issues, and the publics that emerge around the issues" (Steyn, 2006, p. 139).

This connection between the communication function and the strategic issues management process is particularly accurate during the issue monitoring and identification steps. Thus, the issues management process usually begins within the communication department. Also, stemming from my affiliations within the field of public relations, access to such participants was more likely than access to individuals in different roles within organizations.

Recruitment

In order to recruit participants, I was able to utilize connections with local individuals who were helpful in getting me the access needed to participants that fit the above description. Once these connections were made, I used snowball sampling to recruit additional potential participants. Snowball sampling recruits study participants "through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 124). Again, as the goal of this study was to investigate how new communication technologies are being utilized by organizations in order to manage issues, it was preferable that the participants be familiar with, and participate in, these actions within their respective organizations. Also, while recruiting participants, there was an assumption that the individuals familiar with the usage of new communication technologies at their respective organizations were also involved in the purchasing and implementation of these products. Thus, these individuals would be able to provide the most data regarding these tools and the decisions that led to their implementation. Through snowball sampling, I was able to identify such participants with the help of my original contacts.

Following the interviews, I did not provide my participants any formal incentives in order to thank them for their time and effort because of a lack of funding to do so. However, I sent a hand-written thank you card to each participant and offered to send each participant a copy of the final report.

Data Analysis

According to Rubin and Rubin (1995), the "purpose of the data analysis is to organize the interviews to present a narrative that explains what happened or provide a description of the norms and values that underlie cultural behavior" (p. 229). The overall approach regarding my data analysis was to employ an inductive method of construction. Through this method of construction, "data slowly resolve into concepts and specific research proposition through the investigator's own increasing skill at understanding" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 56). This method of construction differs from deduction, where a researcher begins with general principles and then constructs an argument showing evidence that supports those general principles (Potter, 1996). As previously explained, the goal of this study was to explore something that has little previous investigation and would not necessarily benefit from the deductive process. Instead, I let the data guide me to my conclusions (Potter, 1996).

More specifically, I analyzed my data using grounded theory. According to Potter (1996), this analytical technique "directs researchers to look for patterns in data so they can make general statements about the phenomenon they examined" (p. 151). Furthermore, "the procedures of grounded theory are designed to develop a well integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 5). This technique was relevant to this study as I was looking to the participants' answers to further explain how issues management is being practiced through new communication technologies. Thus, I was looking at my data to help me make a general statement about issues management and new communication technology. Grounded theory was also relevant to this particular study because the “social phenomena” that I was investigating is relatively new, and this theory allows the data to provide a theoretical explanation rather than having to fit the data into a prescribed theory.

As mentioned previously, the resulting data took the form of narrative answers to the open-ended questions provided to participants. The first step in organizing these data was the process of coding. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995), coding is the process of grouping interviewees’ responses into “categories that bring together the similar ideas, concepts, or themes” that were discovered (p. 238). I started this process by indentifying the themes, ideas, and concepts that I was successfully able to examine during the interview process. In the context of this study, I was looking for themes from four major categories: types of new communication technologies, types of issues, the overall issues management process, and the potential challenges organizations face when conducting issues management through new communication technologies. Types of new communication technologies included Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, blogs, podcasting, web, wikis, websites, video casts, or discussion boards. These technologies were identified and coded by their specific names (i.e., Facebook or Twitter) or generic type (i.e., social networking sites or social media).

Issue categories included the following: public policy issues, brand equity issues, relationship issues, mission-environment alignment issues, customer satisfaction issues, risk management issues, or crisis response issues. In order to operationalize the above types of issues, key words were identified for each issue that allowed me to both probe for these issues during the interviews as well as code for these issues during the data analysis stage of this study. The different issues were triggered by words like:

- Public policy issues: “policy,” and “policy change”;
- Potential brand equity issues: “brand equity,” “misperceptions,” “image,” “reputation,” “brand,” “products,” and “services”;
- Relationship issues: “relationships,” “trust,” “attitude,” “like,” “good feedback,” “open,” “understanding,” and “positive”;
- Mission-environment alignment issues: “mutually beneficial,” “shared interests,” “good neighbor,” “positive impact,” and “negative impact”;
- Customer satisfaction issues: “meeting customer expectations,” “customer,” “customer service,” “customer complaints,” “complaints,” “unhappy customers,” and “ability to fix problems”;
- Risk management issues: “risks,” “safety,” “safety policies,” “precautions,” and “understanding risk”; and
- Crisis response issues: “crisis,” “crisis response,” “emergency,” and “disaster.”

Specific issues were also identified directly by the participants using the one-page issue definition document described earlier. For all participants, issues were identified by both methods – coding for trigger words as well as direct participant identification.

In order to code for the five steps of the issues management process, I again looked for key words or phrases that potentially triggered one particular step, such as:

- Identification: “identifying,” “monitoring,” “tracking,” “scanning,” “recognizing trends”;
- Prioritization: “evaluation,” “prioritizing”;
- Analysis: “analyze,” “strategic planning,”;

- Communication: "communication," "communication plan," "messages," "message dissemination," "campaign"; and
- Evaluation: "evaluated for effectiveness," and "confirmation of achieved goals."

I checked for issues management outcomes (strategic business planning, corporate social responsibility, and rhetorical engagement) by looking for words such as "strategic business planning," "corporate social responsibility," "dialogue," "communication," and "conversation." Finally, the potential challenges were identified by words such as "challenges," "hesitancies," "struggle," "reluctant," "frustrating," "key obstacles," and "difficult."

Once I determined patterns based on the themes and concepts above, I went back through my data to identify each time they occur. In some cases, this process led me to "discover other themes, concepts, and ideas and designate new coding categories to include them" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 228). This process was complete once the data were grouped into categories that allowed for the comparison of what participants discussed and how concepts were understood. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), "as an incident is noted, it should be compared against other incidents for similarities and differences" (p. 7). Furthermore, "making comparisons assists the researcher in guarding against bias, for he or she is then challenging concepts with fresh data" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 7). Finally, such comparisons also help to "achieve greater precision and consistency" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 7).

Once I had drawn my conclusions and my analysis was complete, I performed member validation checks by taking my findings back to my participants in order to get their feedback (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I provided my results to four individuals that participated in the research and gave them the opportunity to comment on the accuracy of my findings. I selected these four participants based on the fact that their data was highly reflected in my results as well as they seemed most likely to provide feedback. All four of the participants responded that the findings appeared to be an accurate representation of their knowledge and/or experience. Regardless of the participants' responses, the data would not have changed based on their comments. Instead, if the participants had questioned the accuracy of my findings, the discussion and analysis based on my results would have reflected those concerns. As mentioned previously, this adjustment was not needed.

Personal Interest in Study

I began my public relations career about six months prior to beginning graduate school as an account representative at a small Houston, Texas-based public relations and marketing firm. While working at that firm, public relations was strictly practiced in the traditional manner despite the level of success that may or may not have been a result in this changing society. At this time, I begin to be interested in the potential of new, or non-traditional, ways of accomplishing the same public relations efforts. More specifically, I became interested in the use of new media channels such as Facebook and Twitter. My husband, who works for an international communication technology company, has also fueled my interest in new technologies. For the past two years, I have been casually observing the new communication technologies utilized by organizations in order to achieve traditional public relations goals. More recently, I have become an avid user of multiple new media channels and continue to observe how these online venues are being utilized by organizations. There is potential that my personal connection and/or interest in this area has influenced both my research and my findings.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

Summary of Participants

A total of 20 participants were interviewed for this study and 18 of the participants represented organizations located in the Greater Houston area and were interviewed in person. The remaining 2 participants were interviewed over the phone. Most of the participants interviewed had a background in communications and/or public relations, although a small number of participants (3) came from a marketing background. Also, the majority of participants interviewed were functioning in a manager role at their respective organizations. Having said that, many participants seemed to be fulfilling both the technical and manager role for their organization. On average, the participants have been at their organizations anywhere between one and six years. The industries represented by the participants included banking, education, energy, government, non-profit, and tourism as well as communication agencies and independent consultants. The majority of the participants came from non-profit organizations, communication agencies and energy-related organizations. Non-profit organizations had the highest representation in this study and included organizations involved in human services, public health, and hunger relief.

Summary of Results

The data collected offer insight about the relationship between new communication technologies and the issues management process. The results also describe the types of issues that are salient to organizations and the potential challenges organizations face when utilizing these new tools. In the following section, I will discuss these findings in detail. I will also discuss additional findings regarding organizational efficiency in the use of these new communication technologies and how organizations respond to negative comments in such venues. The results are organized according to themes that answer the Research Questions.

Research Question 1: New Communication Technologies and Issues Management

This research asked, *to what extent are new media/communication technologies utilized by organizations for the purpose of issues management?* Prior to discussing this relationship, or whether or not one exists, the participants were asked which of these new media tools they are currently utilizing. In all, participants listed the following tools and/or specific new media channels: blogs, e-newsletters, e-postcards, Facebook, Flickr, foursquare, GovLoop, Hi5, interactive avatars, LinkedIn, live polling, live streaming videos, message boards, MySpace, online publications, podcasts, Scribble Live, Twitter, viral animations, websites, webcasts, webinars, webisodes, Yammer, and YouTube. Not one new communication technology was mentioned by all 20 participants. The top four tools and/or specific media channels mentioned by participants were Facebook (mentioned by 19 participants), Twitter (mentioned by 17 participants), websites (mentioned by 13 participants) and blogs (mentioned by 10 participants). A complete breakdown of the number of times each new media tools and/or specific media channel was mentioned by participants can be found in Figure 1.

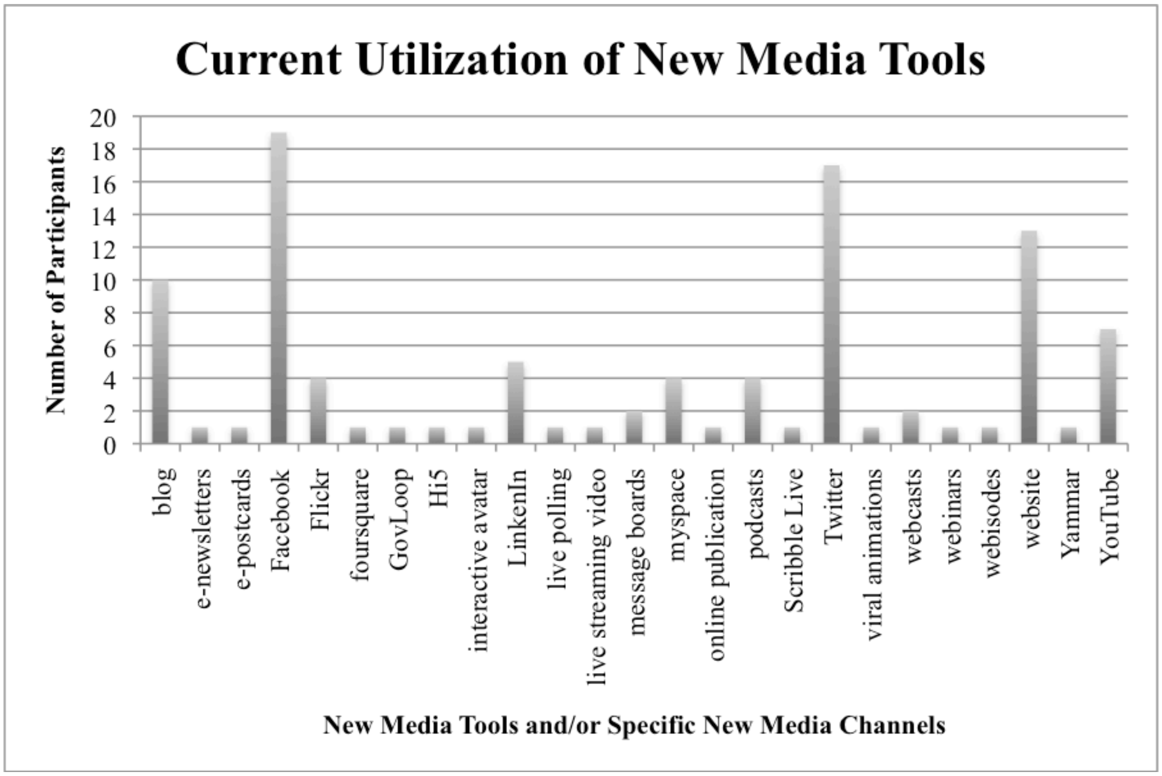

Figure 1: Current Utilization of New Media Tools

No participants stated that they were not utilizing any social media at their organization. Having said that, there seemed to be a varying degree of utilization shown by the participants. Almost half of the participants were using social media, but only two or three of the many types. In addition, many of these participants described a degree of utilization that could be termed light or moderate. The other half of the participants were utilizing more social media channels and appeared to be moderate to heavy users. Regarding the importance of organizations utilizing these new media, one participant commented that organizations that are not utilizing such tools are considered "illiterate":

If you are not on Twitter, you're not on Facebook, not on

> foursquare, you're not on LinkedIn, you're not writing a blog, if you're not involved in at least one or two or all of those, you are considered the new functionally illiterate. You are going to be dysfunctional. It's the new form of illiteracy and you can't ignore it.

To better understand how organizations are using new communication technologies, this section will address the *purposes for using new media,* the *overall relationship between new media and issues management, new media and the identification of issues, new media and prioritization, new media and analysis, new media and communication, and new media and evaluation*.

Purposes for Using New Media

In order to fully understand how participants and their respective organizations are utilizing these new media technologies, they were asked to identify their use and/or purpose within the organization. The majority of uses discussed by participants can be captured with three main functions: *one-way information sharing*, *two-way information exchange,* and *relationship building*.

One-way information sharing. Over half of the participants cited their purpose in using these tools as some type of one-way communication or sharing of information. In other words, these participants discussed ways in which they were using new media to give information to their publics, but not necessarily receive communication back from their publics. Exact responses included purposes to "share organizational information," "proactively communicate," "post updates," "communicate with stakeholders," "[conduct] donor outreach," and "communicate with volunteers." Ms. Thompson[2], an account director of an independent public relations firm, further highlighted how her clients utilize new media to share information:

> It is about their fundraising, galas, what's going on in the organization, where they are going, who they're supporting, maybe they'll have like a feature on someone that they're helping, but it's more about either issues or what's going on in the actual organization. So it's more like donor based type outreach.

Two-way information exchange. A small number of participants described more of a two-way exchange of information regarding the purpose of their utilization of these new communication technologies. These participants used phrases such as "listening and responding," "enter the conversation," "engage stakeholders," and "community dialogue." In the following comment, Ms. Wilson, the public relations manager of a tourism organization, discussed how her team uses these channels to listen and respond: "We are doing a lot of listening and a lot of responding…answering people's questions…commenting back to them. We get a lot of negative comments and that's our chance to jump in there and explain the situation."

Relationship building. A handful of participants described new communication technology utilization that could be categorized as some type of relationship building function with the organizations' stakeholders. These exact descriptions included "customer service," "to create awareness," "education," "to stay connected with stakeholders," and "to support community initiatives." Ms. Wilson, the public relations

[2] Participants were given pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

manager for a tourism promotion organization, discussed how they are utilizing Facebook "to engage people and reconnect them with [the location] and their memories and sharing their stories."

Ms. Harris, the external website and social media manager for a global energy organization, discussed how her organization utilized Facebook in order to "promote a global community service event" and, at the same time, build relationships with employees and their surrounding communities following a recent bankruptcy and merger. According to Ms. Harris, it was a "newly merged company" and they were "trying to make sure that there was buy in from the [new organization's] employees who had not formerly participated in [the] event." Ms. Harris also commented that this was an important event because "morale was so bad around the whole bankruptcy issue." Thus, they were really trying to "engage employees and their family members." In regards to the communication surrounding this event, Ms. Harris' organization decided to utilize Facebook:

> To communicate with all of our employees, the communities, we just felt like the social networking aspect of Facebook was the best way to engage people to volunteer, to engage the communities to get excited about it and to generate some positive publicity for us.

Since the successful utilization of Facebook for the specific community service event discussed above, Ms. Harris' organization has started to utilize Facebook to reach additional audiences for the broad purpose of relationship building year round:

> I'm trying to captivate the audience of who our current employees are,

> who their family members are, who might be following us because they are interested in working here, maybe a community member that doesn't know about some of the good things we do and it's not all about just the bad things they might hear in the news media.

Overall Relationship Between New Media and Issues Management

Several participants also made comments regarding the overall relationship between new communication technologies and issues management. Mr. Brown, the president and CEO of a mobile marketing and technology agency, made the comment that new communication technologies can be used for every step of the issues management process, but "only some organizations are using it for its full potential." Another consultant, Ms. Jackson, discussed the fact that she saw only a limited utilization of new media for the purposes of issues management. She elaborated on why she thought this was the case: "I'm not seeing a lot of it. But that could also be predominantly because a lot of our clients are [business-to-business]. Our clients are just not necessarily there." Furthermore, Ms. Robinson, a strategic communications specialist who works with government related organizations, made the following comments regarding new media utilization for her clients:

> I don't think they are there yet when it comes to managing issues. I think they are just in the early stage of trying to reach out to their stakeholders via these new tools. Should they get a flood of feedback/engagement about a particular issue, they would address it, but also probably revert to other standard tools – website, press release, etc. versus newer social media tools.

New Media and Issue Identification

This sub-research question asked, *to what extent are new media/communication technologies utilized by organizations for the purpose of identifying potential issues?* Half of the participants interviewed confirmed that their organizations are utilizing new communication technologies for the purpose of monitoring and identifying potential organizational issues. Another 3 participants commented that this step of the issues management process is something that their organizations or their clients' organizations could potentially accomplish by utilizing such tools. Tools and social media channels mentioned by participants for the purpose of such monitoring and identifying included Twitter, Facebook, blogs, Google, Google Alerts, Social Mention (a real-time social media search and analysis tool) and third party monitoring services. Overall, participant responses in this area highlight three reasons why new communication technologies are used in monitoring/issue identification: *new media is an additional "layer" of monitoring*, *new media monitoring helps organizations stay ahead of issues*, and *new media monitoring is an early warning system in crisis*.

New media is an additional layer of monitoring. Several participants discussed the fact the new media simply provides an extra component to the monitoring that they already do as an organization. For example, Mr. Jones, director of media and public relations for a non-profit, discussed how new communication technologies were an additional "layer" to the organization's monitoring activities:

> It's absolutely another layer because as a communicator you want to have a broad spectrum of what's going on and how your organization is being talked about and the impression it leaves with people. And so the

influence of the online community and the influence of the everyman on what it is that you're doing is tremendous right now.

Ms. Lewis, the manager of communications for a global oil and gas organization, reiterated this idea by stating that issues can absolutely be identified via new communication technologies, but "it's not the only way." According to this participant, these tools are viewed more as an extension of the monitoring process, and "they are not standalone."

Ms. Thompson, an account director at an independent public relations firm discussed how one of her clients utilized new media as an additional way to monitor one particular area of a challenging issue. According to Ms. Thompson, one client that she worked with "from a crisis standpoint" was a national restaurant chain who had an incident in California "where an employee served underage people alcoholic drinks and those people left the restaurant and someone was killed." Ms. Thompson's firm aided the client in working through not only the media's reportage, but also from a legal standpoint and a communications standpoint. Through the use of new media, Ms. Thompson was able monitor "online news postings and the comments that follow" there within the deceased person's community by seeking information to answer the following questions:

From a culturally relevant standpoint, what was the impact going to be? Was the community shocked? What was the headline going to be? "Young Valedictorian Dies In Car Wreck After Being Served," or "Underage Drinker Dies After Drag Racing On The Street," because that is essentially what they were doing. What was the community impact going to be?

New media monitoring helps organizations stay ahead of issues. In regards to monitoring new communication technologies for the specific purpose of identifying potential issues, one participant made the following comment: "If you have a fairly competent news monitoring solution, you can potentially stay ahead of those types of things." Ms. Anderson, an independent media consultant, echoed this idea by saying, "Because I am monitoring, I can catch things before they become an issue." As another example, Mr. Brown, the president and CEO of a mobile marketing and technology agency, views new communication technologies as "a constant holding customer service feedback mechanism where you get the pulse of your customers" and become aware of any issues as they arise.

Ms. Wilson, the public relations manager for a tourism promotion organization, discussed how she is able to get information faster through new media, thus allowing her to better manage potential issues:

> That has been something that has put me a step further. Instead of someone else calling me, I see it quickly, you know the instant news feed that you get and I'll be aware of [a potential issue] or whatever it might be so I can prepare myself before the journalist is about to call me or the news guy or whatever it is.

New media monitoring is an early warning systems in crisis. Other participants discussed the idea that issues identified outside of new communication technology channels can cause them to "heighten" monitoring of various new communication technology channels as they look for additional issues or concerns that may arise due to the original issue. Ms. Anderson, an independent media consultant elaborated on that idea:

> I do a lot of crisis communication training for chemical and energy Companies and they are like, “We are not going to worry about Facebook or Twitter…that has nothing to do with us.” And I’m like, “It so does.” That is how people communicate after your plant blows up. The very first pictures…the videos are off of somebody’s cell phone and they have tweeted them. No, you don’t have to be tweeting and posting, but you better know how your customers and clients are going to be using it.

Along the same lines, Ms. Harris, an external website and social media manager for an energy organization, cited an example where their monitoring activity was elevated following a crane accident at one of their refineries. According to Ms. Harris, there was an accident at one of their refineries “where there were four people that were killed and it was a crane that toppled over.” Because this type of new communication technology monitoring is a part of the Ms. Harris’ organization’s crisis response plan, they were able to get information from multiple channels:

> It wasn’t our crane…it wasn’t our fault, but it was a contractor’s crane on one of our properties so we started monitoring for information. We were getting pictures and videos uploaded through YouTube and Twitter here at corporate before we were able to get all of the full information about the incident from those on the ground.

This early warning system gives Ms. Harris’ organization the ability to quickly deal with potentially incorrect information:

> Sometimes it's not accurate and if it's not accurate, then we will have someone go ahead and call that person right then or do whatever they can to get in touch with that person and say, "That what you just tweeted is not accurate, let me give you the correct information."

New Media and Issue Prioritization

This sub-research question asked, *to what extent are new media/communication technologies utilized by organizations for the purpose of prioritizing potential issues?* Only 3 of the 20 participants discussed any new media utilization for the purpose of accomplishing this step in the issues management process. Moreover, the participants seemed to be disconnected from this step of the issues management process completely. In the tangible examples given by participants during the interviews, most individuals skimmed over this step as a subconscious action rather than a deliberate step. After further probing, it was discovered that this step of the issues management process took place via "normal organizational channels" in the issue examples given by the majority of the participants. These "normal organizational channels" included face-to-face communication, meetings, conversations with different departments within the organization, conversations with participants' supervisors and/or parameters set by an issues matrices.

Of the 3 participants that said that their organizations have potentially utilized new communication technologies for the purpose of prioritizing potential issues, only one participant had a solid example of how her organization had utilized one new media tool (Twitter) for such a purpose. According to Ms. Wilson, the public relations manager for a tourism promotion organization, she is "constantly" monitoring Twitter for references for the city her organization represents and identifies several potential issues a day. In order to decide which issues to manage, she looks for potential issues that if "resolved [could] really make an impact." For example, Ms. Wilson discussed the following issue in regards to the reputation, or brand, or the city her organization represents:

> These two girls were talking about the dirty water. Well [another local individual outside of the organization] told these two girls that they were stupid, they needed to go to biology class and learn something about the ocean, and all of this.

Ms. Wilson placed a high priority on this issue and knew that it needed to be managed because she "could feel [the conversation] getting heated back and forth" between two individuals on Twitter in reference to the city her organization represents. According to Ms. Wilson, this was also a necessary issue to manage because she saw an opportunity to "educate" these individuals on a certain aspect that is important to her organization. Ms. Wilson then began to initiate "a conversation with them on even grounds about just visiting [the location that her organization represents]" and could eventually tell that their perception had changed.

Another participant commented that her organization had utilized new communication technologies "to a degree in order to potentially prioritize" their responses to the media regarding a specific client issue. Having said that, the participant also mentioned that the information that was gathered through the use of new communication technologies would not "shape what [they] would have done or suggested doing." Finally, the third participant that saw any relationship between the utilization of new communication technologies and this step in the issues management process simply commented that these tools "could be" utilized to prioritize issues. However, that was not the normal protocol of her organization. Instead, the protocol involved handing off any potential issues to the "right person" within the organization to manage once they were identified through the use of new communication technologies.

New Media and Issue Analysis

This sub-research question asked, *to what extent are new media/communication technologies utilized by organizations for the purpose of analyzing issues?* Only 1 of the 20 participants saw the potential for utilizing new communication technologies to accomplish this step in the issues management process. And again, the participants seemed to be disconnected from this step of the issues management process completely as most participants skimmed over this step as a subconscious action rather than a deliberate step when discussing their issue example. Much like the previous step of prioritizing, this step of the issue management process seemed to take place via "normal organizational channels." Again, these "normal organizational channels" included face-to-face communication, meetings, conversations with different departments within the organization, conversations with participants' supervisors and/or parameters set by an issues matrices (guidelines that help an organization identify, prioritize, analysis and respond to different potential issues in their external environment) as was the case for Ms. Lewis, the manager of communication for a global energy organization. Her organization operates with these global issues matrices that members of her organization measure the severity and/or the needed reaction for each individual issue. And often, as Ms. Lewis mentioned, it is the business segments "that are actually going to be charged with the responsibility of managing the issues and they are going to do that with the support of the communications team assigned to that particular segment."

The one participant who recognized the relationship between the utilization of new communication technologies and analysis of an issue, an independent consultant, simply said that he did see potential for these tools to be used in this way. It is important to note that the participant did not have any specific example of this being done. Instead, he made the following comment: "Well I think if an issue is arising, then you can then ask questions to your [online audience] to clarify what their problems might be…so yeah."

New Media and Issue Communication

This sub-research question asked, *to what extent are new media/communication technologies utilized by organizations for the purpose of communicating about an issue?* The communication step of the issues management process, according to participants, seemed more likely to take place via new communication technologies than the previous two steps discussed. Within this study, many of the participants did in fact cite the use of new communication technologies to communicate in regards to issues that they were managing. A small number of participants also commented that communication through these channels has "potential" for their organization or for their clients' organizations. Based on overall participant responses, it appears as though the likelihood of *communication via new media depends on the type of issue* (i.e., relationship or brand equity) being managed as well as *the situational characteristics of the issue being managed.*

Communication via new media depends on the type of issue. For several participants, it appeared that they were utilizing new communication technologies to communicate only about certain types of issues – mainly relationship and brand equity issues. For example, Mr. Jones, the director of media and public relations for a non-profit, discussed how they have used and are currently using these tools to communicate in regards to brand equity type issues as they try “to further educate the community” on who they are as an organization. Mr. Jones also commented that they use new media to help them maintain communication with “a very specific type of donor,” thus managing that relationship. Mr. Jones elaborated on this type of communication:

> People have very specific notions of what we are and what we’re not in terms of our effectiveness and things like that. So we look to identify opportunities in these new media channels in which we could potentially change somebody’s mind.

In contrast, Mr. Jones’ organization would not be likely to communicate in regards to public policy, mission-environment alignment, customer satisfaction, risk management or crisis type issues. This is because the majority of publics that would be associated with these issues are not the target of the organization’s new communication technology utilization.

Ms. Taylor, the online communications manager for a non-profit human services agency, also highlighted that idea. For Ms. Taylor, these new tools have really helped her build relationships with both external stakeholders and employees through “more active communication.” Ms. Taylor identified the potential of utilizing this type of new media communication with external stakeholders when she first came on board at the organization:

> There was a big untapped audience in a big age bracket that didn't know about us. And so we went out and put ourselves where those people were…online. I mean we were definitely doing more now to start a conversation than we did with one direct mail piece, I don't know how you start a conversation there. Now we have more real-time and relevant communication regarding our organization and how people can get involved.

Communication via new media depends on the situational characteristics of the issue being managed. A handful of participants mentioned that their form of issue communication depends on the situational characteristics of the issue at hand. For example, Ms. Wilson, the public relations manager for a tourism promotion organization, discussed how she is more likely to communicate about an issue using new communication technologies if the issue was identified or taking place in the realm of these new media. Along those same lines, Ms. Martinez, the new media editor for a regional bank, discussed how, when her organization is managing an issue, the resulting communication avenue depends on the situation or the information that is being dealt with. For example, Ms. Martinez said that her organization is more likely to communicate via new communication technologies when the issue, information, or conversation is positive. According to Ms. Martinez, "The point isn't to continue a conversation online unless it's fairly positive."

The type of communication also depends on the characteristics of the issue for Ms. Lewis, the manager of communications for a global oil and gas organization. More specifically, for Ms. Lewis, what communication takes place regarding a specific issue is directly related to the issues matrices set up by her organization. In other words, all employees utilize the established issues matrices to determine the severity of the issue as well as the appropriate response or communication. And, according to Ms. Lewis, "the appropriate response" could absolutely be delivered via new communication technologies.

New Media and Issue Evaluation

This sub-research question asked, *to what extent are new media/communication technologies utilized by organizations for the purpose of evaluating the issues management process?* Much like the prioritization and analysis steps of the issues management process, few participants discussed how they had utilized new communication technologies for the purpose of evaluating the issues management process. And, much like those previous two steps, there seemed to be an overall disconnect between the participants and this step of the issues management process. In other words, it appeared that the majority of participants did not make a conscious effort to evaluate their management of issues. Ms. Martinez, the new media editor for a regional bank, highlighted this idea when she commented that her organization could potentially utilize these tools for the process of issue management evaluation, but that her organization did not have a "methodical" evaluation process.

In all, only 4 of the 20 participants confirmed that their organizations have utilized new communication technologies for the purpose of evaluating the issues management process. For example, Ms. Wilson, the public relations manager for a tourism promotion organization, cited an occasion when she used one new media tool (Twitter) to evaluate her management of an issue. For this particular issue, Ms. Wilson had used Twitter to respond to and "educate" two individuals on certain aspects of the city her organization represents. Prior to her communication, the individuals had an extremely negative perception of the city and were openly discussing their perception via this new communication technology. Ms. Wilson viewed her management of this issue as successful by what she saw take place on Twitter following her communication. Along those lines, Ms. Wilson made the following comments: "Then I watched their posts…so I followed them for a little while and I could tell that their perception had changed. It was pretty cool."

Two other participants, each representing a different energy organization, also discussed how they were utilizing new communication technologies for the purpose of evaluation. Ms. Lewis, the manager of communications for a large oil and gas organization, discussed how her organization used these tools to "judge the tone" of conversation following an issue and/or issue response. The other participant confirmed that, through the monitoring of new communication technology channels, "you really understand what's being said and what the sentiment is over the course of whatever issue that maybe." This view of evaluation via new communication technologies was not only found in the energy industry. Mr. Jones, the director of media and public relations for a non-profit, commented that his organization also utilizes new communication technologies to determine "the impression that [the organization] leaves with people." As this organization faces both brand equity and relationship issues, the participant is potentially using these tools to evaluate his organization's management of these issues. While these participants did discuss "judging the tone" and determining "the impression," none of them discussed exactly how they were able to determine the "tone" of their publics.

Research Question 2: A Definition of Issues

This research question asked, *how do organizations define issues?* As established in the Literature Review, it is important to recognize that there are different types of issues that face different organizations as well as there are different types of issues that can face the same organization at different times depending on the public. Although participants were not asked about their organizations' utilization of new communication technologies in reference to this research question, it is still an important research question as it provides additional understanding in regards to the relationship between organizations and issues. This additional understanding may give researchers further insight to strategic issues management within an organization, with or without the utilization of new communication technologies.

This research question also asked which issues are most salient to organizations among the following issue types: public policy issues, brand equity issues, relationship issues, mission-environment alignment issues, customer satisfaction issues, risk management issues and crisis response issues. Prior to identifying these salient issues, the participants were asked to give their definition of an issue. Of the 20 participants, 5 individuals had a difficult time understanding the term "issue" as it was referenced in the interview. All of the participants were asked the following question: "How do you believe your organization defines an issue?" For the participants that struggled with this question, they directed it back to the interviewer with questions such as: "Can you give me examples of what you're talking about," "Like what," and "Issue…as in?" Thus, the interviewer had to discuss issue type examples in order to help the participants have a better understanding of what was meant by the term "issue."

It was also apparent through body language and tone that these participants felt uncomfortable, and perhaps disappointed, that they were unable to answer this seemingly academic question. Overall, these participants seemed to tense up and look around the room for answers. There also seemed to be a shift in there voice inflection and it sounded as though they were questioning there own answers. Some participants also had a difficult time separating the discussion of overall issues from the discussion of new communication technologies. As the interview questions in this section were referring to overall organizational issues, these participants continued to relate the discussion back to the utilization of new communication technologies. Thus, some participants appeared to narrow down their view of issues and had to be encouraged to broaden his or her thought process. This was most likely due to the structure of the interview questions as the issues section of the interview protocol directly following a lengthy discussion of new communication technologies.

Of the remaining 15 participants, 10 gave issue definitions or scenarios that featured a negative take on the term, such as:

- Something is an issue if "it's potentially harmful to the people…to anybody…to our image…to our clients…if it looks like it could be harmful, we want to address it."

- An issue "would be anything that would be threatening to [the organization's] brand."
- An issue is "anything that would be not beneficial to the mission."
- An issue is "something that keeps the organization from fulfilling its mission."

As shown in the examples above, these participants also defined issues as deterrents to fulfilling missions and threats to organizational assets (i.e., brand, image, clients, etc.) A few other participants featured definitions of issues that were not inherently negative. These participants used phrases such as "anything that could potentially impact." Along those lines, one participant gave the following definition:

> An issue is anything that could or can or is or may potentially impact an organization. Which means that you have to stay ahead of the curve of whatever it is that these are and monitor almost on a daily basis and know what those potential issues are.

Salient Issues

As previously mentioned, this sub-research question asked, *which issues are most salient to organizations (among public policy issues, brand equity issues, relationship issues, mission-environment alignment issues, customer satisfaction issues, risk management issues and crisis response issues)?* In order to determine what types of issues are important to organizations, participants were asked identify important issues among the issue typology presented in this study. In addition, issue types were identified as important as participants specifically discussed issue scenarios that were relevant to their organization or organizations with which they had experience. Below is a break down of the seven issues presented in the issue typology and how participants, overall, responded to each. It is important to mention that some participants saw similarities between two or more of the issue types. In fact, a few of the participants also saw all of the issue types fall under one “umbrella” issue. Those similarities are discussed below in the appropriate issue type section. Overall, the most salient issue types were *brand equity issues* and *relationship issues*. The least salient issue was *mission-environment alignment issues*.

Public policy issues. The majority of the participants agreed that public policy issues were important to their organization or client organizations for which they had consulted. Three agency consultants commented that public policy issues were potentially important for organizations for which they work. Moreover, consultants had a lot of experience with this type of issue, especially with clients in the healthcare industry. Along those lines, Ms. Thompson, an account director at an independent public relations firm, commented that public policy issues were especially important for her firm’s public advocacy clients.

Three of the non-profit practitioners commented that they were involved in public policy issues only indirectly. One of the participants elaborated on this idea: “We touch on it…there are some great umbrella organizations for what we do that really get into advocacy and lobbying. So we let them do what they do best.” Non-profits were not the only groups to discuss this indirect relationship to public policy issues. Mr. Walker, a media advisor for a global oil and gas organization, alluded to an umbrella organization for his industry saying, “Sometimes [public policy issues] are organization specific issues…sometimes they are energy industry specific issues. If they are broader, typically

API, which is the American Petroleum Institute, will be a more unifying voice for the industry."

Brand equity issues. Brand equity issues were the only issue type to be identified by all 20 participants. Also, this type of issue seemed to be the most familiar and understandable for the participants. In regards to examples of brand equity issues, participants provided various views of how this type of issue takes shape within their organization. Ms. Harris, the external website and social media manager for an energy company, discussed this issue type as it has been prevalent during recent bankruptcy and merger events. Ms. Garcia, a campaign director for a non-profit, cited brand equity issues stemming from a recent change in the organization's name. Finally, Ms. Martinez, the new media editor for a regional bank, discussed issues of this type in reference to commonality of her organization's name. According to Ms. Martinez, consumers have a difficult time differentiating their brand from others with a similar name.

Ms. Thompson, the public relations account director, commented that brand equity type issues are present with every client with which she works. She then elaborated on the importance of this type of issue:

> Brand equity, I would say, would probably be not an issue that comes up, but the underscoring theme that we are always trying to push for our clients. It's their brand equity…what's the brand they've been building or do they need a new brand or do they need a refreshed brand?

Two participants saw an overlap between brand equity issues and crisis response issues. One of those participants, Ms. Jackson, founder and CEO of a strategic marketing consulting company, elaborated on this relationship: "These are pretty close together a lot of times for our clients. If something becomes negative or takes a down turn…that's a crisis to them."

Relationship issues. This type of issue was identified as important by nearly all of the participants interviewed. Furthermore, participants discussed this type of issue in reference to many different types of relationships, including relationships with both internal and external stakeholders. For example, Ms. Taylor, the online communications manager for a non-profit, discussed the importance of communication in regards to relationships with employees. The participant elaborated on this relationship: "With employees it's vital because we are such a large group and a lot of people work at different offices…we have like sixty offices." According to Ms. Taylor, it can be difficult to keep all of the employees updated and involved with things going on inside of the organization.

Another participant, who works for an energy organization, cited potential relationship issues with their communities, local public leaders, families and employees. This participant discussed the importance of keeping a positive relationship with these external stakeholders because they "can shut [the organization] down" if issues arise and they do not have a positive relationship. As another example, Ms. White, the communication coordinator of a non-profit, underscored the importance of relationships with volunteers. According to the participant, her organization has a volunteer base of 90 full-time employees a year and they "literally could not operate without" them. Thus, maintaining positive relationships with these groups is extremely important to this participant and her organization.

Mission-environment alignment issues. Less than half of the participants identified mission-environment alignment issues as important and salient in their respective organizations. Having said that, this issue type was also the most difficult for participants to understand. Every single participant needed clarification and additional explanation in order to understand the description of this issue type. The most solid examples of this issue type came from participants working in the energy industry. For example, Ms. Harris, the external website and social media manager for an energy organization, gave the following comments regarding this issue type:

> Our neighbors can shut us down. If our health, safety, and environmental performance, the way that we're going to operate our facilities, if they don't share the common interests or the goals with the neighbors or the community or the policy makers in that area, then there is a conflict there between the mission and the environment and they can shut us down.

Along the same lines, Mr. Walker, a media advisor in the energy industry, summed up his experience with this type of issue with the following comment: "There are always folks that may not understand the benefits or simply are not interested in having that in their backyard."

Customer satisfaction issues. The majority of participants identified customer satisfaction related issues as important. And although not all participants identified this issue as important, the customer satisfaction issue type was one of the easiest for participants to understand. Overall, the examples given for this type of issue varied greatly by the type of organization represented by the participants. For example, Mr. Jones, the director of media and public relations for a non-profit focused on community quality of life, discussed customer satisfaction issues stemming from the community services they provide to community members. In other words, are community members satisfied with the services that they provide? As another example, Ms. Wilson, the public relations manger of a tourism organization, discussed customer satisfaction issues as the most important type. For Ms. Wilson, customer satisfaction issues involve visitor perceptions of the community her organization represents (i.e., did they enjoy their visit? Will they return? Will they speak highly of the community to others?). Also, the identification of customer service issues were not limited to participants representing business-to-customer type models. Ms. Harris, who works for an energy organization functioning in a business-to-business model, cited customer satisfaction issues as important when dealing with their business customers.

Some participants viewed relationship issues in conjunction with other issues. For example, Ms. White, the communication coordinator for a non-profit, saw similarities between relationship issues and customer satisfaction issues. Mr. Brown, the president and CEO of a mobile marketing and technology agency with experience working with healthcare organizations, expressed the need to place all of the issues from the typology under the customer satisfaction umbrella: "I think all of these [issue] examples lead to customer satisfaction. I mean if you're not living up to your brand promise, if your policies are affecting your clients, your physician customers are unhappy. So I think a lot of these kind of funnel into customer satisfaction…just everything goes to that."

Risk management issues. The majority of participants interviewed also cited risk management issues as important to their organizations or the organizations represented by their clients. A handful of participants discussed potential risk management issues that involved natural disasters, such as hurricanes. This type of example is most likely the result of most of the participants being located in the Greater Houston area where hurricanes can be a threat. A different example of this issue type was identified by Ms. Martinez, the new media editor for a regional bank, who cited the importance of risk management issues in regards to financial risks.

Also, several participants saw the need to tie risk management and crisis response issues together. Ms. Jackson, a marketing consultant, elaborated on that idea:

> I would tie that into crisis response. We are either putting crisis plans in place to help them mitigate risk, and that's how it ties together. Sometimes we're saying, "Look, because of the industry you're in, you're likely to have an incident of some kind so let's put a crisis plan in place." And so that's kind of risk management I guess.

Crisis response issues. Crisis response issues were identified as important by a large majority of the participants interviewed. The participants' understanding of the crisis response issue type also seemed to be the most diverse when compared to the other six issue types. This became evident in their examples. Mr. Moore, the senior media relations specialist for a health education organization, cited the importance of crisis response issues in regards to "information distribution during a hurricane." Another example of hurricane response came from Ms. White, the non-profit communications coordinator. For Ms. Thomas, the director of development for a non-profit, a crisis response issue came out of a scenario in which the organization's property arrangement was in jeopardy. Finally, Ms. Anderson, an independent media consultant, gave a specific crisis response example relating to a chemical release at a manufacturing plant.

For several participants, crisis response issues were simply one of the other issue types that had become intense and difficult. Thus, “crisis” seemed to be used as a generic description for that type of scenario. For example, Ms. Rodriguez, the director of communications for a non-profit in the health industry involved in organ procurement, described a crisis response issue that involved a negative story in the media and her ability to respond quickly and accurately to the benefit of her organization: “The media called me and said, ‘We’ve learned that [the organ procurement organization] informed a lady that her husband passed away.’” This was a potentially negative story because it painted her organization as insensitive and over-anxious to retrieve the deceased’s organs. Ms. Rodriguez elaborated on the situation:

> I then had to go and hunt down answers. Come to find out that our organization did follow protocol but we called this family before EMS had a chance to tell the next of kin that her husband had died. Unfortunately, the media headline was “Widow learns of man’s death through organ donation center,” or whatever…not positive.

To compound the situation, Ms. Rodriguez had only been at the organization for two weeks and was afraid of being “inadequately prepared” when responding to the media and potentially making the organization more “vulnerable.” She wrote a statement and issued it upon request. According to Ms. Rodriguez, the organization did receive some “bad publicity:”

> And we did get some negative publicity out of it, but come to find out – and this is what people don’t know – the deceased did end up being a tissue donor and the family was aware of this. But it wasn’t the widow

> raising the problem, it was a neighbor who felt the need to stick up for the widow. I didn't want to go back out there with this piece of information…I didn't want to bring it up…I didn't want to stir it any more…I just let it die.

As mentioned in the previous sections, participants saw an association between public policy and crisis response issues, brand equity and crisis response issues, and risk management and crisis response issues. Ms. Anderson, an independent media consultant, lumped all of the issue types into the crisis response category:

> All of these issues come to the same that is paying attention, being aware, monitoring what's being said and having a plan in place before it happens. I call it CPR for business. Do you have a crisis plan? Do you have a spokesperson? You know, all of these things don't become as much of an issue or a crisis if you have a plan in place before hand.

Research Question 3: New Communication Technologies Connection To Strategic Business Planning, Corporate Social Responsibility, and A Rhetorical Engagement on Issues

This research question asked, *how are organizations' uses of new communication technologies to manage issues connected to strategic business planning, a change in corporate social responsibility, and a rhetorical engagement on issues?* These three items are important to this study, as they have been identified as outcomes to the strategic issues management process (Heath, 2006; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Pratt, 2001). In this study, the majority of participants saw a connection between *strategic business planning* and the use of new communication technologies, only a handful of participants saw a connection between *corporate social responsibility* and the use of new communication technologies and most of the participants saw that the use of new communication technologies had resulted in *rhetorical engagement*, or dialogue, with a targeted audience.

Strategic Business Planning

The majority of participants that addressed this connection did, in fact, see the utilization of new communication technologies as part of their organization's strategic business plan. In fact, only 2 participants interviewed said that there was absolutely no connections of this kind for their organization. Of the participants that discussed how these new media are a part of their strategic business plan, a common theme was that new communication technologies were a new channel for the same strategic business goals. Overall, participants' comments regarding this relationship can be discussed in terms of two main themes: *new media is a new channel for the same goals* and *new media and strategic business planning should be connected*.

New media is a new channel for the same goals. For most of the participants, the use of new communication technologies was just another way "to achieve the same organizational goals." One participant voiced this idea with the following comments: "I would say that these are not new strategies for [our organization]…these are new channels for us to extend our communications plans." Ms. Wilson, the public relations manager for a tourism promotion organization, discussed how new media has become a tactic for her organization:

I think, within our strategic plan, a lot of that has to do with the issues of

> relationships and customer service and building those relationships and those are areas where we are able to accomplish those and use them as tactics.

New media and strategic business planning should be connected. Multiple participants, speaking from a consultant point of view, agreed that the use of new communication technologies and an organization's strategic business plan have to be connected in order to have successful utilization. Two of those participants commented that, from their experience, the two are often not connected. Mr. Brown, the president and CEO of a mobile marketing and technology agency, made the following comments along those lines:

> You have to have a strategic view for social media before you can just go out and create a Twitter page. Unfortunately, a lot of companies don't. A lot of companies hear from their buddies or they see their competition have a Twitter page and they hire a small company or they have someone build their Twitter post for them without really knowing what the purpose is.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Prior to asking the participants how they utilized new communication technologies in relation to corporate social responsibility (CSR), they were asked to define or discuss that term. Several participants coming from the non-profit industry had a difficult time relating to this term due to their organization's lack of direct CSR experience. Mr. Jones, director of media and public relations for a non-profit, commented that CSR looks a little bit different for their organization in that typically they “are the recipient of whatever that CSR policy is.” Mr. Jones also made the following comment: “I don’t know that we even have our own CSR policy…I don’t think we do.” Another participant, the founder and CEO of a strategic marketing consulting company, commented that CSR is not something that her clients typically deal with:

> I think that tends to be more important with huge companies. I mean it seems to me that the companies that really focus on those kind of things are the companies that have to do with environmental impact issues, energy companies…we don’t tend to have a lot of energy company type clients. I mean energy, chemical, the bigger companies…the bigger you get the more evil you are sometimes in the public and the public’s perception.

Other participants did have a true working definition of the term. For Ms. Harris, the external website and social media manager for an energy organization, corporate social responsibility “is all about sustainability”: “Everything is about sustainability. Sustainability of resources, sustainability of the environment, of our products, of the economic and financial aspect of us being an employer and a contributor to society.”

After the participants were asked to define CSR, they were asked about the relation to new communication technologies. More than half of the participants said that, from their experience, there was little to no connection in these two areas. As mentioned above, several of the non-profit participants did not have direct CSR experience, and therefore were unable to relate to this question in the interview protocol.

Having said that, a handful of the participants have been able to utilize new media for the purposes of furthering their organization's corporate social responsibility. Four of those participants viewed new communication technologies as an "additional solution to support and highlight" corporate social responsibility efforts. Mr. Walker, a media advisor at a global oil and gas organization, discussed how the use of new communication technologies had allowed his organization to not only increase the "visibility of what's being done and the good works" that his organization is involved in, but also to highlight and increase awareness for some of their domestic and global partners. According to Mr. Walker, "social media has really allowed [his organization] to get out there and just show people the great works of some of these programs."

One participant did feel that the use of new communication technologies had resulted in an adjustment of corporate social responsibility because organizations now have to be "transparent." The participant further elaborated on this idea: "Transparency…you've got to be honest because there is no hiding it anymore."

Rhetorical Engagement

For the purposes of this study, rhetorical engagement was addressed in the interviews as dialogue. In order to have a clear understanding of the participants' view of dialogue, they were each asked to first define the term. Most of the participants defined dialogue as a "conversation" or "communication." Several of the participants referred to dialogue in terms such as "two-way communication" or "receiving information that you can act on."

Regarding the connection between dialogue and the use of new communication technologies, more than half of the participants said that their use of new communication technologies had resulted in dialogue with a targeted audience. Ms. Martinez, the new media editor in the banking industry, pointed to her organization's utilization of new media to support a community initiative related to women business owners and the dialogue that had resulted in the form of networking between participants and communication with her organization. Another participant, Ms. Clark, a project coordinator at a healthcare clinic, cited dialogue that had occurred with her organization's client population as a result of her utilization of new media communication. According to Ms. Clark, she is able to share health information with clients and then respond to related questions that are directed toward her "avatar." Ms. Clark commented that her organization's clients are able to get answers to questions that they would not likely come into the clinic to seek out. Ms. Lewis, the manager of communications for an oil and gas organization, commented that her stakeholders are often surprised by her organization's participation in dialogue:

> People send me messages, "I know nobody's ever going to respond." Actually, I read those things and I will respond or I'll send it on to somebody else…we do respond. I think that's always a surprise to people, and generally, the more people learn about us, the more comfortable they are with us. They still might not agree with what we're doing, but they're more favorable towards us as either a responsible exploration company or energy provider and, at the end of the day, that's what we're looking for.

One participant commented that the utilization of new media was just another way to achieve dialogue:

> Social media is one more way. It's not a replacement for it. It's not meant

> to take the place of it. It's a way of supplementing it, but it's not to replace the face-to-face dialogue or the community involvement that we would normally have.

Two of the participants commented about such a dialogue said that they were still looking for more. Two consultants agreed that there is potential for dialogue, but it depends on how organizations utilize these new communication technologies. This idea is highlighted in the following statement:

> If you are targeting a certain audience and you are trying to have a conversation with them, you need to understand very well who they are, you need to speak to them about issues that they care about, you need to make sure it's not a one sided conversation. You've got to be willing to have it be a conversation. So if the company is not willing to engage in dialogue and respond, then there is no point in doing some of these things.

Research Question 4: Challenges

This research question asked, *what are the challenges when organizations utilize new media/communication technologies in the management of issues?* Due to the lack of new communication technology utilization for the purpose of issues management found in this study, many participants identified overall challenges associated with the general use of new communication technologies. Interesting and frequent challenges identified in this study were *time and prioritization*, *utilization knowledge* (i.e., content and audience considerations), *organizational support*, *technical issues*, *measurement ability*, *cultural differences*, *generational differences*, *global utilization*, and *information overload*.

Time and Prioritization

Challenges involving time and prioritization were the most common as they were mentioned by 11 of the 20 participants. Many of these participants simply stated that they did not have the necessary time to utilize these new communication technologies to the extent that they desired. For some participants, this meant that they could not utilize all of the new communication technology venues that they saw appropriate for their organizations. For other participants, this meant that they did not have the time to monitor and/or update these tools to the extent they felt was necessary for successful utilization. Furthermore, participants' comments in this area can be categorized into three distinct themes: *the need for an independent new media role*, *social media is not free,* and *social media has a low priority*.

The need for an independent new media role. A small number of participants directly referenced the idea that the utilization of new communication technology could "easily" become a separate and independent role from their own in the organization. According to these participants, having a role dedicated to new communication technologies would allow the organization to spend the time needed to be successful in their utilization. Ms. White, a non-profit communication coordinator, discussed the need for a dedicated role because her schedule doesn't allow her to "get as deep as you can" with the use of new communication technologies. Ms. Thompson, an account director at an independent public relations firm, also sees this as a challenge because "most organizations don't have the time or the resources to dedicate someone towards [new communication technologies]."

Social media is not free. Other participants mentioned the idea that these new communication technologies have a "free" element associated with them when actually they cost valuable resources (i.e., people, time, and effort). One participant elaborated on this idea:

> I think the biggest challenge with a lot of these things, for us as an organization, is often that they can just be extremely extremely time consuming and, you know, there is the element of "Well, it's not costing anything." But time is money and so you have to find ways to put parameters around it. You've got to find ways to limit the time and energy that you put into it.

Ms. Robinson, a strategic communication specialist in the government industry, also vocalized this element when she shared a quotation she had recently heard regarding this challenge: "Social media is free like a puppy is free."

Social media has a low priority. Participants also discussed the idea that the utilization of these new communication technologies can easily be put on the "backburner" and fall to the bottom of the list of priorities. One participant identified the challenge of prioritization with the following comment: "…because our office uses these as supplemental tools, sometimes they are the very last things to get updated." Ms. Taylor, the online communications manager for a non-profit, also vocalized that these new communication technologies get "put on the backburner" even though they are her main responsibility.

Utilization Knowledge

Half of the participants mentioned challenges directly associated with how to use the new communication technologies. Participants identified this particular problem with phrases such as “struggling to determine what works,” “lack of knowledge,” “figuring out what to say,” and “determining the best tools to use.” Based on the participants’ comments, this challenge can be further categorized in terms of *determining an overall approach to new media* as well as *determining content and finding the right audience*.

Determining an overall approach to new media. Several participants discussed the difficulty in determining how to successfully utilize new communication technologies for their organization or their industry. Ms. Davis, a public relations practitioner, discussed this challenge in reference to her experience in the energy industry:

> I think most companies are still struggling with how to use social media…I think there’s a struggle to determine what works for us as a company. And especially the company I worked for was a natural gas pipeline company, so how would you use this, you know, internally or even externally?

Another participant discussed this aspect of new media in terms of her clients trying to “enter the conversation:”

> With clients, it’s often just them understanding how to use it. They can get sucked into it and have a time problem too, but they also just don’t know what they’re doing. Sometimes they know how to use them in the basic function, but again, if they are trying to enter the conversation and they are not having a dialogue, they are having a monologue and no one is

> listening, they are not willing to engage, they put the wrong information out there…those kinds of problems happen a lot too.

Ms. Garcia, a campaign director at a non-profit, seemed frustrated by a lack of overall approach from her organization in regards to these new communication technologies. This participant kept shaking her head and sighing as if she knew they needed to do more with this new media, but didn't know what. According to Ms. Garcia, her organization was struggling to "figure out how to take the next step." Once the interview was complete, she asked her own question, "What do you think we should be doing?"

Determining content and finding the right audience. Several participants mentioned the difficulty they experienced with determining content. Ms. Thompson, an account director at a public relations firm, highlighted this challenge to her clients: "I think people just have a hard time figuring out what to say. What is meaningful?" Other participants highlighted the challenge of finding the right audience for their message. Mr. Moore, the senior media relations specialist at a health education organization, elaborated on this challenge:

> I guess the challenge is making it of interest or finding the right people that are interested in your message. You have to figure out who you are going to approach with the message and make it pertain to them. Just getting the right information to the right people…that's the big challenge.

Organizational Support

Enlisting organizational support was a challenge mentioned by several of the participants in this study. Challenges reflected getting *upper management support* and having a *lack of internal support and information* from within the organization to share via these new communication technologies.

Upper management support. Ms. Martinez, a new media editor at a regional bank, specifically mentioned the challenge of getting her upper management buy in, as this has been an ongoing battle for her. She has been dealing with this challenge by showing her management the returns, or potential returns, associated with these tools and tying the use of new communication technologies in strategically. Thus, to this time, this participant has only been able to introduce the use of these tools within a small context as an additional solution. According to the participant, this is "a way to give upper managements small bites of the idea as opposed to trying to sell them on the entire realm of social media/new communication technologies" all at one time. The participant hopes that continued, incremental success in these small contexts will result in more support and, eventually, an expanded use of these new communication technologies.

Lack of internal support and information. Beyond the support of upper management, participants mentioned the need for support from others within the organization. Ms. Taylor, the online communications manager for a non-profit, discussed how she worked to train other employees to support her efforts online:

> I'll go and I'll train the new people on what I'm doing and that we have an official presence out there and that I want their support. I understand that it is my employees that are my easiest and best supporters and so I want to, from the get go and during their training days, I teach them about it and tell them it's out there and that it exists and, you know, help if they want.

Ms. Taylor also mentioned the challenge of lack of information throughout her interview. This participant is in charge of all online communication, but often does not have the information she needs to fully utilize the new communication technologies in a timely fashion. The following comment elaborates on this challenge:

> If I had all the information…it'd be easy if I knew everything about all of our programs and I could do it, but the challenge comes because all of a sudden I need more resources to be able to do something right…and that I don't really have.

Technical Issues

A handful of participants mentioned challenges that stem directly from the technical aspects of utilizing new communication technologies. Some participants mentioned "knowledge of the apps" as a challenge they were facing when it comes to the use of these tools. These participants simply felt that they did not have a solid understanding of the technology and, thus, were struggling to utilize them properly. One participant highlighted this challenge and said that her organization is still "just trying to learn how to do different things with it."

Two participants discussed issues stemming from the inability to maintain ownership of their Twitter handle once an employee, with the password information, had left the organization. One organization that has experienced this situation is currently not using Twitter at all because they are not able to utilize the social media channel with the handle that matches their brand. The participant made the following comment: "I'm not willing to compromise on it. If we have to continue fighting it then we will continue fighting it, but I'm not willing to give up on it yet."

Measurement Ability

Two participants mentioned the challenge of measurement when it comes to utilizing these new communication technologies. According to these participants, the lack of ability to measure the use of these tools contributes to the lack of their utilization. Mr. Jones, the director of media and public relations for a non-profit, elaborated on this challenge: "If I can't measure it, I can't put a dollar amount on it, which means I can't justify why we should be doing it." This participant did comment that his organization was utilizing new media for the purposes of "putting the message in front of a specific donor" and to "further educate the community at large." Having said that, they appeared to be only utilizing new media for the communication step and potentially the evaluation step of the issues management process. In order to "justify" greater utilization, Mr. Jones is currently researching and "working on a very specific type of analytic that would be able to, not only look at what [they] are doing social media-wise and gauge [their] efficiency, but look at the communications package in total and gauge efficiency."

Cultural Differences

Some participants mentioned challenges that stemmed directly from organizational culture issues. For Ms. Robinson, a strategic communications specialist who works largely with government related clients, the organizational culture differences between the government and the realm of social media were inhibiting advancement in the utilization of new communication technologies. According to Ms. Robinson, the utilization of new media requires a quick and immediate response, which simply does not fit the slow and formal culture of the government. Thus, she is trying to determine how to merge these two cultures, but commented that true "social" technology features can be "hard to sell" to her government clients. To combat this, she "leverages pockets of interest." In addition, social media requires a bit of transparency. This again is not something that government related entities are used to portraying. Thus, most of her clients are still trying to figure out how to manage issues via these new communication technologies.

Another participant, Ms. Wilson, the public relations manager for a tourism promotion organization, also voiced concerns stemming from the immediacy that is required in the realm of social media. According to Ms. Wilson, "You have to answer immediately too, you know, so that takes some guts sometimes, depending on what it's about." Ms. Wilson further discussed how this "immediate action" is a bit different from traditional public relations efforts.

Generational Differences

Generational, or age, differences were also mentioned by a few participants in terms of younger employees having an easier time utilizing the different new communication technology channels. Participants mentioned this specific challenge in terms of both the time that had to be dedicated to training and actual utilization of the tools. One participant attributed the following challenge to the age of her colleague being discussed:

> Her biggest challenge is what to post. Like she is scared out of her mind that she is going to post something that will have a bad reaction or whatever. That's her biggest challenge – actually getting the brave-ness up to post something.

According to the participant, she feels that younger colleagues, who are more active on these tools on a daily basis, have already dealt with this challenge.

Global Utilization

Mr. Walker, the media advisor for a global energy organization, mentioned challenges that dealt directly with global utilization. Obviously, these are challenges that a small, local non-profit would not face. According to Mr. Walker, one such challenge was "simply integration." The following comments elaborate on this challenge:

> It's just getting some of our business units from around the world…not only just educated on, you know, what we're doing and what they can do and how they can contribute, but also to get them thinking about ways in which they can, you know, use what they are doing and what they're developing at the local level to, you know, to leverage the channels that we've launched.

On a related note, Mr. Walker made the following comment: "When you're so globally diverse like that…social media channels aren't universal." Finally, Mr. Walker identified the language and dialect barriers that can come up in this situation:

> What we're trying to do is build in those capabilities globally. I don't speak Mandarin Chinese or Portuguese so it's impossible for me to be engaging in those communities and share content that people would be interested in. What we're trying to do within our business units around the world is build in that capability and provide them with the understanding of the value of doing it so that they can engage locally and share [the organization's] story there whereas we may not be doing that here.

Information Overload

The final challenge to be discussed is information overload as mentioned by a handful of participants. This challenge was mentioned directly when discussing the monitoring aspect of new communication technologies. Regarding this issue, one participant made the following comments: “There are so many articles and things that I want to read. I have a second monitor for Twitter and it just gets…I could spend all day with all that stuff.” Ms. Lewis, the manager of communication for a large oil and gas organization, discussed the “huge amount of online conversation” pertaining to her organization. According to Ms. Lewis, “even on a weekly basis, it’s truly impossible to narrow down on them all.”

Additional Findings: Organizational Efficiency in the Use of New Communication Technologies

In order to have a full understanding of organizational utilization of these new communication technologies, participants were asked to identify what they thought their organizations’ efficiency was with these tools. To determine their level of efficiency, participants were asked to think about goals that had been set for the use of these new communication technologies and whether or not those goals had been met. Only 2 participants commented that their organizations were efficient in the use of these new communication technologies in reference to the goals that were set. One participant made the following comment regarding room for improvement:

As far as content production and putting out content and reaching desired

> audiences, I think we are pretty good at that. I don't think anybody can rightfully say that they have completely reached that level or you can't really ever obtain that, because how I view these is that they are ever evolving and that there are always new ways to integrate various new social media elements into it, various multimedia elements into it. As so really, for us, it's always about learning and developing and evolving.

The remaining participants can be placed into one of two different categories: *mediocre efficiency* or *not efficient/without goals* regarding the use of these new communication technologies.

Mediocre efficiency. Half of the participants interviewed described their efficiency as mediocre. To be more exact, these participants used terms and phrases such as "fairly efficient," "intermediate," "pioneering stage," "we could be better," "want to be at another level," and "still learning." Ms. Wilson, the public relations manager for a tourism promotion organization, made the following comment regarding efficiency:

> On like a scale of like beginner, intermediate and master, I'd say that we are probably at intermediate level with Twitter and Facebook. And lower intermediate with the rest, but we're learning all of those continuously right now so that we can excel in them.

Mr. Moore, the senior media relations specialist at a health education organization, made the following comments regarding his organization's efficiency with the use of new communication technologies:

> I would say we would be on the pioneering stage of it. We are adapting,

> we are looking at what other organizations are doing and kind of taking the best practices, going to different seminars to learn more about it, but we are basically, I would describe it as kind of feeling our way around with it. We are looking for best practices and copying some of those and just feeling our way through it right now.

When Mr. Moore was asked directly if he could see a change in organizational results stemming from the use of these new communication technologies, he replied, "I think we're still in the feeling out stage. I don't know if all the results are in yet." Ms. Taylor, the online communications manager for a non-profit, said that her organization "could be better" regarding efficiency in this area. She then elaborated on that idea:

> Sometimes I realize after the fact, wow, I could have used that for this event or outreach that we did and I just had this other stuff that was a higher priority. Sometimes it gets put on the backburner even though it was like my main responsibility coming in. So I think it could be better. Sometimes, you know, it gets neglected.

Not efficient or without goals. Regarding overall efficiency, only 1 participant responded that his organization was not efficient at all with the following comments: "So from an efficiency standpoint, we're not – to be perfectly candid – as an organization. In terms of efficiency, we're just not. Which isn't to say that we're not trying." One participant made the comment that her organization had yet to set goals regarding the use of these tools: "I don't think we've set any goals – to be honest – with it. I think that's probably something that we need to do, but it's almost kind of a side thought."

Additional Findings: Organizational Approach to Handling Negative Feedback on Social Media Sites

As the goal of this study was to get a solid grasp on organizational use of new communication technologies, an interview question was dedicated to understanding how organizations handle negative comments or conversations on their online presence. More specifically, the following question was asked: "As an organization, do you find usefulness in redirecting or interfering when someone gives bad feedback on your social media sites?" Areas of interest regarding this scenario include the fact that participants generally had *minimal experience*, many organizations do have a *plan of action*, and that, generally, *online communities "police themselves."*

Minimal Experience

The majority of participants in this study responded that they have had little to no experience with negative comments or conversations on their online presence. More specifically, fewer than half of the participants that addressed this interview question had any experience at all. And, according to the majority of these participants, that experience was minimal. Mr. Jones, the director of media and public relations for a non-profit, discussed his nominal experience with this type of situation:

> In the last year and a half that I've been here, there has only been one instance that I saw something that I though was so egregious that it required a response. And by the time I had formulated that response, a volunteer had already come, I don't really know who it was, but some other commenter had already kind of come to our defense and kind of righted the wrong so to speak. That's the beauty of it in a lot of ways.

One consultant was not surprised that many individuals and/or organizations have had minimal experience in this area. Ms. Anderson, an independent media consultant, gave her reason for such a finding:

> For the most part, people are good. There is just not going to be that much nasty stuff posted on your page that people are so afraid of. For the most part, it just doesn't happen. And when it does, you should be monitoring. If you are going to utilize these things, of course you have to monitor them.

Organizational Plan of Action

Over half of the participants interviewed for this study did have a plan of action in place for dealing with negative comments or conversations on their online presence. For the most part, whether they had experienced this type of situation or not, the participants seemed prepared to be "engaging" in response to negative comments when necessary. Mr. Walker, a media advisor for a global oil and gas organization, made the following comments regarding how his organization is prepared to handle negative feedback:

> We don't shy away from any conversations. On our Facebook page, we do receive negative comments. You know, in social media channels, it's all about having a conversation and it's all about transparency and it's all about an open dialogue and you're not going to obtain that if you're taking down posts and censoring things. That's not what we're in the business of doing.

The consultants that were interviewed seemed to agree that being "engaging" is the appropriate plan of action. Without any direct experience, Mr. Brown, the president and

CEO of a mobile marketing and technology agency, had the following advice regarding how to respond in this type of situation:

> Well, you can't turn the ship around. You have to be active with your response so that people see kind of a transparent series of postings that are not only yours but also your irate customers and let them make their decision.

Ms. Jackson, the founder and CEO of a strategic marketing consulting company, agrees that a response is necessary, but that there should be limits:

> If [the comment is] negative, you should always respond at some level and we generally say, "Let's try to respond at some level, but getting into kind of a pissing match is not going to help anybody." So, trying to find how to do damage control becomes a little bit of an art.

Some participants, realized that their plan of action might actually be different than their response. With little to no experience with this type of situation, participants were not always sure of how it would all play out. Ms. Harris, the external website and social media manager for an energy organization, discussed how her action in such a scenario may actually be more engaging than what their "game plan" calls for:

> The game plan that we've talked about is that the comment would be removed. In reality, I think if it happened, it depends on what it was, but I would think that if it was something that could easily be corrected and that we should take responsibility for and say, "No, that's not the way it happened," then I think that we would.

Online Communities "Police Themselves"

According to several participants, like Ms. Harris who is quoted above, their organizational response is dependent upon the severity and context of the negative comment. The organizational response also seems to be dependent upon gravity of the comment as well as the public's response to that comment. Along those lines, Ms. Wilson, the public relations manager for a tourism promotion organization, commented that their response to this type of situation "depends" on how it unfolds. She elaborated on that idea:

> It depends on how big of an issue it is and how the responses after that are. We are all an open public in this situation, everyone else knows that there are idiots out there and that guy made a dumb comment that is irrelevant so most people ignore it. If I can tell that the comment is going to be ignored, then I might just let it rest. But if I notice other people jumping back in and all of a sudden the conversation is going the wrong way, then I would definitely take the initiative to steer it in the right direction.

Mr. Walker, the oil and gas media advisor, also discussed the "irrelevant" comments and how those are potentially handled by the online "communities":

> There are organizations that are anti-[organization name] and what we do is we simply present the facts or respond to them in a factual manner and usually the communities tend to police themselves. Folks that are out of bounds or off line are not presenting information or just spouting hyperboles, you know, they generally shake out of conversation pretty

> quickly. It allows us to continue having a productive dialogue and that's really what we're going for at the end of the day.

In other words, these participants have learned to count on the online community to recognize and filter out "irrelevant" comments so that they can continue with positive, or "productive" conversation, with their stakeholders.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion Summary

The purpose of this study was to continue the examination of how new communication technologies, especially social networking, are being utilized for the purpose of issues management. One of the strengths of this study was, in fact, furthering that examination. Moreover, there were several interesting findings with useful implications that resulted from this study. These can benefit both the theory and practice of public relations and issues management. Those findings include details on new media utilization by organizations, the role of the issues manager within an organization, the lack of a deliberate issues management process, the weak relationship between new media and strategic issues management, and the negative definition of an issue. This section includes an in-depth discussion of those findings along with additional findings and implications. Practical implications, limitations of the study, and areas for future research are also discussed.

Public Relations and Internet Communication

As mentioned above, this study generated some interesting findings regarding the utilization of new communication technologies. These findings have the potential to further the understanding of the relationship between public relations and Internet communication. More specifically, the results of this study have interesting implications in the following areas: *social media is not free,* the *actual purpose for new media utilization,* and the fact that *organizations still underutilize new media functions*.

Social Media is Not Free

As cited in the Introduction to this study, Marken (2008) has said that social media is the most direct means for organizations to reach their audiences, and perhaps more importantly, "it's also the most undiluted, most direct and most cost-effective means" (p. 10) of learning about an organization's publics. However, several participants in this study directly discussed the idea that social media is not free and perhaps not as cost-effective as one would think. In fact, social media costs organizations valuable resources, including people, time and effort. This idea was best illustrated by one participant who stated that "social media is free like a puppy is free." This suggests an interesting discrepancy. Perhaps this "cost" provides organizations with such a challenge because social media is perceived to be free or "cost-effective." Thus, organizations dive into the utilization of new communication technologies by committing time and personnel prior to realizing the true price of such endeavors.

Having said that, Marken (2008) argued that social media "provides an unfiltered view of consumer perceptions so firms can see what will impact the future of business" (p. 10). The results of this study support that idea as participants sighted new communication technology utilization for the purpose of "judging the tone" of stakeholders or "really understanding what's being said and what the sentiment is over the course of whatever issue that maybe." This utilization can be attributed to the "unfiltered view" that Marken (2008) discussed. According to participants in this study, that "unfiltered view" gives them the opportunity to feel the "influence of the everyman."

Actual Purpose for New Media Utilization

In 2000, Hill and White recognized the advantage of public relations practitioners utilizing websites as a way to "keep stakeholders up-to-date, provide information to the media, gather information about publics, [and] strengthen corporate identity" (p. 31). According to the participants in this study, additional new media tools are still providing a way for organizations to accomplish those tasks. Having said that, certain types of utilizations were more common among participants than others. More specifically, sharing information, or keeping "stakeholders up-to-date," was mentioned the most by participants in this study. In fact, only a very small number of participants discussed communication with the media as their purpose in utilizing new communication technologies. This finding does not fully support Callison (2003) who identified organizational use of Internet communication as an ideal way to communicate with journalists. While a few participants did recognize this purpose as part of their new communication technology utilization, it did not appear to be a driving force for the majority of participants. This discrepancy, in part, may be due to the new communication technology tools being discussed. Callison (2003) is mainly referencing corporate websites while many of the participants for this study were discussing the utilization of an array of new media tools, such as social networking sites.

Regarding additional ways that organizations can utilize new communication technologies, Ingenhoff and Koelling (2009) discussed the importance of Internet communication as a way for public relations practitioners to engage "publics in dialogue" (p. 66). As discussed previously in this paper, the presence of dialogue is important in reaching a mutual balance between organizations and their publics, thus important to public relations and issues management. While more than half of the participants directly stated that they could see that the use of new media technologies had resulted in a dialogue with a specific audience, only a small number of participants described a utilization purpose that could be seen as dialogic. These dialogic purposes included "listening and responding," "entering the conversation," "engaging stakeholders," and "community dialogue." Thus, it could be argued that, although Internet communication provides a venue for dialogic communication with stakeholders, as discussed by Ingenhoff and Koelling (2009), the majority of organizations are still not utilizing it for that purpose. Instead, organizational communication via new communication technology channels still seems to be more of a one-way, or push oriented, type of communication with stakeholders.

Organizations Still Underutilize New Media Functions

Several studies (Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Park & Reber, 2008; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Xifra & Huertas, 2008) have discussed how organizations build relationships with publics through the use of websites, blogging, and other interactive Internet capabilities. This study confirms the theme that organizations are beginning to utilize new media in order to build relationships. More specifically, participants in this study cited the use of Facebook, Twitter, websites, and blogs as tools they are using to communicate with their stakeholders. Having said that, the Literature Review of this paper also references three studies (Gordon & Berhow, 2009; Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009; Naudé, Froneman, & Atwood, 2004) that discuss how these new communication technologies are still being widely underutilized by public relations practitioners. The findings of this study support that idea.

While it does appear that certain organizations are beginning to utilize different new media capabilities for greater dialogic purposes, these organizations have yet to reach the full capabilities of these tools. Having said that, it seems as though some organizations are taking a step in the right direction. In a study of environmental advocacy groups' use of Facebook, Bortree and Seltzer (2009) reported that the large majority of participants in the study seemed "to adopt the position that the mere creation of an interactive space via a social networking profile is sufficient for facilitating dialogue…these organizations are missing a significant opportunity to build mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders" (p. 318). The participants in this study were not satisfied with the "mere creation of an interactive space" in an attempt to engage in stakeholder dialogue. Instead, many of the participants seemed to be utilizing their new media channels to publish information relevant to the organization, their industry and/or their stakeholders. In turn, the organizations were looking for some type of "conversation" to begin via comments on the new media channel. Therefore, many of the organizations may not be fully utilizing all of the new communication technology tools (i.e., chats, instant messaging, blogs, podcasts, etc.), but they are beginning to post information relevant to the interest of their stakeholders and invite a response from those groups.

Strategic Issues Management Within an Organization

This study also produced findings relevant to the role of strategic issues management within organizations. More specifically, implications can be drawn in two distinct areas: the *communicator is not always the issues manager* and there is *a lack of a* *deliberate use of the issues management process*. These two areas will be discussed next in greater detail.

Communicator is Not Always the Issues Manager

Theaker (2004) discussed issues management as the process in which "significant changes or issues which may affect the [organization] are identified and long-term strategic decisions are taken which may involve changes in [business] policy or [strategic] practice" (p. 124). While participants in this study did discuss the identification of potential issues through new communication technologies, they did not seem to connect those potential issues to "long-term strategic decisions" that could be made by the organization as a result. For example, the founder and CEO of a strategic marketing consulting company made the following comments in reference to her clients' ability to monitor for potential issues: "They do…in a limited sense. I think it's interesting to see what the conversation is, but in terms of long-range, big picture planning, it would be hard for me to say that that's a valuable tool." Another participant, an online communications manager, commented that another person in her organization deals with bigger issues and anything that she deals with "would be considered small potatoes." That may have been due to the fact that the individual participants that were interviewed were not involved in making the "long-term strategic decisions" for their respective organizations. This also may hint at a deeper implication, that communicators should at least be aware of, and working toward, an organization's long-term strategic plan.

To that end, Theaker (2004) also commented that "issues managers often serve as the links between persons who discover and interpret issues and the executives who engage in issues response" (p. 115). A number of participants discussed the process of identifying potential issues and then strategically passing each potential issue on to the "right person" for management of that issue. Thus, it appears that these individuals are only participating in the first step of the issues management process. That may imply that, for some organizations, the actual process of issues management does not completely fit within the communications function of the organization. Research by Lauzen (1997) suggests "public relations practitioners involved in issues management hold greater intraorganizational power than those practitioners not involved in the process" (p. 65). Therefore, some public relations practitioners may still be missing out on this "intraorganizational power" by simply identifying potential issues and passing them on to the "right person" for proper management.

A Lack of Deliberate Use of the Issues Management Process

As discussed in the Results section, the majority of the participants seemed to be disconnected from three of the strategic issues management steps: prioritizing, analyzing and evaluating. In fact, as previously discussed, most of the participants seemed to skim over these steps as a subconscious action rather than a deliberate step. In other words, many participant examples of managing organizational issues did not include the acts of prioritizing, analyzing, and evaluating. When directly asked about these three steps of the issues management process, the majority of participants seemed to agree that these steps may be taking place in a simplified manner, but they had not thought enough about them to identify them as part of their process. For example, one participant discussed how her organization might use new communication technologies for the purpose of issues management, but it really was not that "methodical of a process." According to this participant, "it is more of an organic process." This may represent a gap between strategic issues management literature and the actual practice of issues management. However, as mentioned in the previous section, this disconnect may also stem from the fact that issues management is not truly taking place within the communicator role.

Issues Management and New Media

Beyond the implications regarding the actual strategic issues management process, this study also presents findings related to the relationship between issues management and new communication technologies. To that point, the following areas will be discussed in this section: *no strong relationship between issues management and new media, the use of "normal organizational channels," new media as an important tool for monitoring,* and *new media as an additional channel for the same business goals.*

No Strong Relationship Between Issues Management and New Media

Overall, based on the participant interviews, there does not seem to be a strong relationship between the *entire* issues management process and the utilization of new communication technologies for most organizations. Perhaps the role of new communication technology in regards to issues management has been over estimated. If organizations are simply using these new media channels as supplementary tools, as stated by many of the participants, it is not realistic to expect that each part of the issues management process is taking place via such channels. For example, one participant commented that the use of new communication technologies for prioritizing issues would not "shape what [they] would have done or suggested doing." Thus the organization is utilizing these tools, but they potentially have little to no impact on their management of issues. This may mean that the expectation that each part of the issues management process could potentially be accomplished via new media is not realistic. Also adding to this potentially unrealistic expectation is that fact that issues management seems to present a different reality than what is presented in issues management literature. Thus, while the utilization of new communication technologies may seem to go hand in hand with the issues management presented in the literature, it does not fit well with the issues management that was observed during this study.

The Use of "Normal Organizational Channels"

Several participants in the study directly discussed or alluded to communication and the management of issues via "normal organizational channels" as opposed to new communication technologies. The implication is that face-to-face communication is normal, but perhaps communication through new media tools is not normal. This potential stigma of being "not normal" is interesting due to the fact that the use of new communication technologies is so wide spread for both personal and organizational use. Regardless of what the perception of new media is, the implication is that issues management is done differently, according to perhaps "older" communication channels and "newer" communication channels. This not only has meaning about the capabilities of new communication technologies, but also, about potential opportunities for these new technologies.

New Media as an Important Tool for Monitoring

According to Heath and Palenchar (2009), issues management is a function that allows organizations to be proactive versus reactionary. Participants in this study cited the use of new communication technologies to help them "stay ahead" of potential issues.

Especially important in this regard was the participants' use of new communication technologies to monitor for issues. The majority of participants in this study understood the importance of monitoring new media for potential issues as this step of the issues management process appears to be the most likely to be practiced via these new media. One participant in this study highlighted the fact that if an organization is not monitoring its environment through new communication technologies, it is considered "functionally illiterate." According to her, failure to use new media for this purpose is "the new form of illiteracy." This has major implications for any organization that is not currently utilizing new communication technologies for the purpose of monitoring the environment in which it functions. It should be argued that organizations simply cannot afford to be "illiterate," in any sense, in today's competitive public policy and product/service marketplace. Furthermore, for organizations that have yet to adopt the practice of monitoring their environment via new communication technologies, this finding should serve as an important motivating factor for adopting such a practice.

New Media is an Additional Channel for the Same Business Goals

As discussed in the Literature Review, strategic business planning has been cited as a potential outcome for issues management (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). Thus, an important aspect of this study was to gauge the current relationship between new communication technologies and strategic business planning. Many of the participants did, in fact, see the utilization of new communication technologies as a part of their organization's strategic business plan. However, the majority of these individuals discussed the fact that new media was nothing new when it came to their actual business plan. Instead, new media serves as new channels, or tactical implementations, in which the organizations can achieve the same business goals.

With that finding, one could argue that there is not a groundbreaking or unique relationship between the new communication technologies and issues management, but another tool in the standard toolbox. With the use of these new media tools, organizations are potentially participating in a few aspects of the issues management process (i.e., identifying, communicating, and evaluating.). Having said that, this study provides little evidence that organizations are utilizing new communication technologies for issues management, from start to finish, as described in strategic issues management literature. There is also the potential that organizations, especially those involved in this study, are not practicing strategic issues management, from start to finish, apart from new communication technology utilization. Thus, it would make sense that they are not utilizing new media tools for such a purpose.

Issues Typology

It is important to both the study of public relations and issues management to recognize that different organizations are faced with different issues. More over, different issues can face the same organization at different times depending on the public. With a broad array of potential issues facing today's organizations, it can be argued that developing an issue typology would be beneficial to both fields of study. As one such benefit, this study advanced the understanding of what types of issues were important to organizations. Furthermore, this study found that some of the issues described in the Literature Review were salient across all participants, whereas other issues were minor or absent across most participants. Finally, to add to the practical understanding of issues management, this study provided detailed definitions of an issue, based on participant understanding.

Negative Definition of an Issue

The majority of participants defined organizational issues in a negative manner. More over, these participants interpreted issues as deterrents to fulfilling missions and threats to organizational assets (i.e., brand, image, clients, etc.). This is a bit contradictory to the definition of issues provided by Heath and Palenchar (2009) who discuss issues management as the maximizing of opportunities and the lessening of threats in an organization's environment. Thus, when practitioners aim to manage issues, they may actually only be scanning their organizational environment for negative threats. This negative view of an issue may cause practitioners and their organizations to miss out on the proper management of opportunities.

Participant Disconnect with Issues

The discussion of issues brought to light a disconnect between the participants and the academic nature of the issue typology presented. This disconnect may have resulted from the way that the information was discussed during the interview process (see the Limitations section for more discussion about this). Having said that, the disconnect may have also occurred due to a true gap in issues management academia and amount of variety in the sophistication in the practice of public relations.

The Importance of Brand Equity Type Issues

Brand equity type issues were the only issue type identified by all of the participants in this study. Furthermore, this issue type seemed to be the most familiar and comfortable for the participants to discuss. This is particularly interesting since "brand equity" is a marketing term, and only 3 of the 20 participants came from a marketing background (the rest came from more traditional communication or public relation backgrounds). This suggests that marketing and public relations are more closely related in practice than they are in academic literature.

Diverse Definitions of Crisis Response Type Issues

Overall, participants' understanding of crisis type issues was also surprising as this type of issue seemed to have a different definition in almost every organization represented in this study. In fact, for many participants, crisis response issues seemed to be nothing more than another issue that had been elevated to a "crisis" level. Thus, several participants felt the need to combine other issue types with the crisis response category. For example, participants saw a strong relationship between crisis response issues and public policy issues, brand equity issues, and risk management issues. This finding may present the need to broaden the crisis response issue definition to include the elevation of other issue types. Thus, the following crisis response issue definition is being proposed: "A crisis response issue refers to an organization's response in a time of intense difficulty, trouble or danger. This may include, but is not limited to, times of intense difficulty, trouble or danger created by issues originally categorized as another issue type."

Practical Implications

Beyond the research implications, a goal of this study was to provide public relations practitioners with organizational examples of how social media is being used to manage issues as well as the current challenges in doing so. In fact, this study provides rich detail from multiple organizations regarding their use of new communication technologies. Perhaps most beneficial to practitioners are the *challenges* and *the potential of new media utilization as an independent role*. Those items are addressed in the section below.

Challenges

Especially beneficial to practitioners are the challenges discussed by participants in this study. According to them, major challenges include time and prioritization, utilization knowledge (i.e., content and audience considerations), organizational support, and technical issues. Prior to public relations practitioners expanding or improving upon the utilization of new communication technologies in their own organizations, they now have the opportunity to review these challenges to determine if, in fact, the use of these tools would benefit their organization.

The Potential of New Media Utilization as an Independent Role

More specific to the overall challenge of time and prioritizing was the idea that utilization of new communication technologies could easily become an independent role within the organization. Participants discussed how creating this "independent role" would better allow their organization to successfully utilize these new media tools. Although this would cost an organization in terms of salary and personnel, this is something that should be considered, especially since participants already cited the high cost of new media utilization (i.e., people, time, and effort) *without* the creation of a separate role. Thus, many practitioners are currently attempting to take care of new communication technology communication on top of their potentially already long list of responsibilities. This is another reason that participants cited prioritization as an additional challenge and discussed how new media tasks can be “put on the backburner.” The creation of an independent new communication technology role could perhaps help organizations be more successful in their new media utilization while not costing the organization many more resources. Having said that, this balance is something that should be weighed for each organization as exact needs and resources will inevitably vary.

Limitations of Study

It is important to both recognize and discuss potential limitations related to this study that may have had an impact on both the results and its implications. To that end, this section will address limitations associated with the *interview procedures, limited participant sample* as well as *non-profit organizations and corporate social responsibility*.

Interview Procedures

Although every effort was made to ensure that the participants did not feel pressured to answer interview questions in any certain way, participants may have still felt the need to provide answers that were “correct.” More specifically, participants may have felt the need to exaggerate the level of their utilization of new communication technologies in order to be viewed in a better light by the interviewer. The same possibility is true for participants in regards to their use of new communication technologies for the purpose of managing issues. At times, participants did seem to agree with the statement or question presented in the interview protocol when perhaps they would not have come up with the information on their own.

There is also the possibility that participants had difficulty understanding the terms and questions used during the interview process. This may be a limitation of this study although steps were taken to avoid such an error through relevant research and pilot testing of the interview protocol. Unfortunately, there still may have been some participants who did not fully understand the questions being asked.

Another limitation may result from the way that the salient issues and the issue typology were addressed in the interview process. Overall, this section was the most awkward and difficult to get through during interviews. Perhaps the goal of this section was not clearly identified, thus the participants were not sure how to address these questions. Another problem related to this section may have been created by the order of questions in the interview protocol. The section of the interview dedicated to organizational issues followed a lengthy discussion of organizational utilization of new communication technologies. The goal of this section was to learn about broad organizational issues and not necessarily to learn about issues only associated with new communication technologies. However, that may not have been achieved. In the end, this limitation may have been a factor due to too many elements being addressed in one interview protocol.

Limited Participant Sample

By limiting the interview participants to individuals within the communication departments of organizations, this study may not have given a full picture of the issues management process within the specific organizations. Although it can be argued that issues management begins with public relations practitioners, individual organizations may function differently. Thus, this study may report a limited view of issues and/or management of those issues based on the participants' participation in the issues management process, or lack thereof. Future research could potentially look at one organization in depth with the goal of studying the issues management process as it takes place throughout the entire organization.

Non-Profit Organizations and Corporate Social Responsibility

As corporate social responsibility standards have been identified as one of the outcomes to the strategic issues management process, it was important to determine the role that it plays in the participants' organization. Having said that, as mentioned in the results, a number of the participants involved in this study came from the non-profit industry and did not necessarily have their own corporate social responsibility standards. Thus, they were unable to relate to this question in the interview protocol. This lack of connection, potentially due to industry type, may have accounted for the low number of participants that commented that were able to utilize new communication technologies for purposes relating to corporate social responsibility.

Future Research

In the process of performing this study, additional areas of research were brought to light that may have theoretical and/or practical implications. Those areas of research should be addressed in hopes that they will eventually be pursued in a separate study. Thus, this section offers further discussion on *survey generalizability, additional* *organizational factors, "judging the tone" of stakeholders* as well as *the connection between new media utilization and organizational title*.

Survey Generalizability

An immediate goal of related research would be to use the qualitative data collected in this study to develop surveys aimed at understanding the utilization of new communication technologies for the purpose of issues management for a larger number of organizations. While this study produced rich qualitative details, a similar quantitative study would be able to capture the state of utilization on a larger scale. Such a study would also have a greater generalizability in regards to both the fields of public relations and strategic issues management.

Additional Organizational Factors

Several individual factors have the potential to play into an organization's overall use of new communication technologies as well as their use of these new media to manage issues. One of those factors is the industry in which the organization operates. As this study saw different levels and purposes of new media utilization across different industry types (i.e., energy, non-profit, banking, government, etc.), both public relations and issues management research would benefit from understanding the exact new media characteristics of each industry type. Perhaps one size does not fit all in this arena and the more specific literature is, the more helpful it can be to both theory and practice.

Another factor is potentially the specific public with which the organization is trying to communicate (i.e., media, donors, volunteers, customers, etc.). Just as new media utilization seems to vary across industry type, it also seems to vary depending on the organizations' targeted audiences. Yet another factor may be the size of the organization and the resources that they have to devote to the utilization of new communication technologies. These factors were briefly touched on by this study, but additional studies that take a closer look at these items could benefit the field of public relations and issues management by further pin-pointing the exact role that new communication technologies play in organizations.

"Judging The Tone" of Stakeholders

Several participants discussed the use of new communication technologies to "judge the tone" of stakeholders. However, little detail was given regarding how they are able to make such a judgment. Future research could study this process, including how practitioners "measure" tones used in new media as well as the advantages and disadvantages of such a process.

The Connection Between New Media Utilization and Organizational Title

It was discovered that the individuals utilizing new media for organizational use had an array of titles. A handful of participants had titles directly related to new media including "online communications manager," "external website and social media manager," and "new media editor." Other participants had titles that seemed to denote more traditional public relations roles, including "media relations specialist," "public relations manager," "communication coordinator," and "strategic communications specialist." It was also observed that there may have been some correlation between an individual's job title and her/his utilization of new communication technologies. Thus, the following question could be asked: how much does an individual's title depict his/her social media utilization on behalf of the organization? Public relations literature may benefit from the additional study of this aspect of new communication technology utilization. The titles directly related to new media may indicate an organization and/or communications department that is forward thinking and open to the utilization of new tools, thus they may have greater success with such utilization. The presence of more traditional titles may indicate an organization and/or communication department not as open to the implementation of these new tools and, thus have seen less success in their implementation.

Appendix A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Please give me a snapshot of what your organization does.

2. What is your role in the organization?

   Probe: What is your background (e.g., educational? Professional?)

3. Please walk me through your typical day at this organization.

4. What new communication technologies do you use as an organization?

   Clarification: If they do not understand the term new communication technologies, I will list examples such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, blogs, podcasting, web, wikis, websites, video casts, and discussion boards.

   Probe: What do you use them for?

   Probe: How often do you use them?

5. In your opinion, what is your organization's overall efficiency in the use of new communication technologies?

   Probe: What is an example?

   Probe: What were your organization's goals with implementing new communication technologies?

   Probe: In your opinion, to what extent or how were these goals met?

6. How would you describe your organization's overall efficiency in the use of new communication technologies to monitor news?

   Probe: Can you give me an example?

   Probe: Does this include the monitoring of stakeholders social media sites? What type of information can you gain from this type of monitoring?

   Probe: How would you compare your efficiency to monitor news now compared with your efficiency to monitor news prior to the use of new communication technologies?

7. How would you describe your organization's overall efficiency in the use of new communication technologies when identifying issues?

   Probe: Can you give me an example?

   Probe: How would you compare your efficiency to identify issues now compared with your efficiency to identify issues prior to the use of new communication technologies?

8. As an organization, do you find usefulness in redirecting or interfering when someone gives bad feedback on your social media sites?
    Probe: Why or why not?
    Probe: Can you please give me an example?

9. What is your role within the organization in regards to implementing decisions in new communication technology?

10. How do you believe your organization defines an issue?

11. What issues are important to your organization?
    Probe: To what extent are *public policy issues* important to your organization? In what ways?
    Probe: To what extent are *brand equity issues* important to your organization? In what ways?
    Probe: To what extent are *relationship issues* important to your organization? In what ways?
    Probe: To what extent are *mission-environment alignment issues* important to your organization? In what ways?
    Probe: To what extent are *customer satisfaction issues* important to your organization? In what ways?
    Probe: To what extent are *risk management issues* important to your organization? In what ways?
    Probe: To what extent are *crisis response issues* important to your organization? In what ways?

12. Please describe a recent issue.
    Probe: How did you identify that issue?
    Probe: How did you monitor and prioritize that issue?
    Probe: How did you analyze that issue?
    Probe: How did you communicate in regards to that issue?
    Probe: How did you evaluate your overall management of that issue?

13. To what extent was new media used to manage this issue?

14. Now I would like to ask you about some related public relations principles. The first is strategic business planning. Please explain to me what this term means to your organization.

15. In your opinion, what is the connection between strategic business planning and the use of new communication technologies?
    Probe: Please tell me about a recent example.
    Probe: If you do not have a recent example, can you talk about potential reasons that there is not a connection between strategic business planning and the use of new communication technologies?

16. Next, I would like to ask you about corporate social responsibility standards. Please explain to me what this term means to your organization.

17. For your organization, has the use of new communication technologies resulted in an adjustment in your corporate social responsibility standards?
    Probe: Please tell me about a recent example.
    Probe: If you do not have a recent example, can you talk about potential reasons that the use of new communication technologies has not resulted in an adjustment in your corporate social responsibility standards?

18. Finally, I would like to ask you about the principle of dialogue. Please explain what this term means to your organization.

19. For your organization, has the use of new communication technologies resulted in dialogue with your target audience regarding the issue?
    Probe: Please tell me about a recent example.
    Probe: If you do not have a recent example, can you talk about potential reasons that the use of new communication technologies has not resulted in dialogue with your target audience?

20. What challenges have you discovered in using new communication technologies to manage issues?

Appendix B

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

You are being invited to participate in a research project conducted by Melanie Pannell Steel from the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication at the University of Houston. This project is part of a master's thesis under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Vardeman-Winter.

PROJECT TITLE: How issues management is conducted using new communication technologies

NON-PARTICIPATION STATEMENT: **Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any question.**

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: **The purpose of this study is to expand issues management research by learning how organizations use new media to manage issue-based relationships with their publics. The approximate length of this study is three months.**

PROCEDURES: **You will be one of approximately 20 participants asked to participate in this project.**

You will be asked to participate in either 1 interview or 1 focus group session to help determine how your organization manages issues through the use of new communication technologies. The interviews and/or focus groups will take place at your location and will last approximately one hour.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS: **The following questions are samples of the types of questions you may be asked during the interview or focus group process:**

1. What new communication technologies do you use as an organization?
2. How would you describe your organization's overall efficiency in the use of new communication technologies to monitor news?
3. How do you believe your organization defines an issue?
4. What issues are important to your organization?
5. What challenges have you discovered in using new communication technologies to manage issues?

CONFIDENTIALITY: **Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your participation in this project. Each participant's name will be paired with a code number by the principal investigator. This code number will appear on all written materials. The list pairing the participant's name to the assigned code number will be kept separate from all research materials and will be available only to the principal investigator. Confidentiality will be maintained within legal limits.**

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS: **There are minimal personal risks associated with your participation in interviews or focus groups that are audio taped.**

BENEFITS: **While you may not directly benefit from participation, your participation may help investigators better understand how new communication technologies, especially social networking, have enabled organization-public relationships within the field of public relations. Public relations practitioners may then be able to learn better how to manage issues with their publics.**

ALTERNATIVES: **Participation in this project is voluntary and the only alternative to this project is non-participation.**

PUBLICATION STATEMENT: **The results of this study may be published in professional and/or scientific journals. It may also be used for educational purposes or for professional presentations. However, no individual subject will be identified.**

SUBJECT RIGHTS

1. I understand that informed consent is required of all persons participating in this project.

2. All procedures have been explained to me and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

3. Any risks and/or discomforts have been explained to me.

4. Any benefits have been explained to me.

5. I understand that, if I have any questions, I may contact Melanie Pannell Steel at (832) 677-4284. I may also contact Dr. Jennifer Vardeman-Winter, faculty sponsor, at (713) 743-4294, or at jvardeman@uh.edu.

6. I have been told that I may refuse to participate or to stop my participation in this project at any time before or during the project. I may also refuse to answer any question.

7. ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING MY RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (713-743-9204). ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

8. All information that is obtained in connection with this project and that can be identified with me will remain confidential as far as possible within legal limits. Information gained from this study that can be identified with me may be released to no one other than the principal investigator and his/her faculty sponsor. The results may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations without identifying me by name.

I HAVE READ (OR HAVE HAD READ TO ME) THE CONTENTS OF THIS CONSENT FORM AND HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGED TO ASK QUESTIONS. I HAVE RECEIVED ANSWERS TO MY QUESTIONS. I GIVE MY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. I HAVE RECEIVED (OR WILL RECEIVE) A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR MY RECORDS AND FUTURE REFERENCE.

Study Subject (print name): ____

Signature of Study Subject: ____

Date: ____

☐ Initial here if you agree to have the interview audio taped.

Appendix C
TYPES OF ISSUES

Public Policy Issues: Policy refers to any law, rule, or guideline that a group follows to keep order among a group's members.

- Issues arise when groups debate about what policy should be implemented or retained to solve some problem.

Brand Equity Issues: Brand equity is the value that is put on the attitudes that a population (such as customers, donors, or shareholders) holds toward the organization, as well as its products and services.

- Issues arise when a population's attitudes about the organization become negative.

Relationship Issues: Relationships refer to the connection between an organization and groups related to the organization (such as employees, customers, or the community).

- Issues arise when those in a relationship with the organization question the trust, satisfaction, and/or commitment within the relationship.

Mission-Environment Alignment Issues: Mission-environment alignment is established by whether or not the organization shares interests, rewards, and goals with those in its surroundings.

- Issues arise when the organization's mission, and corresponding actions, have a negative impact on the environment in which it operates, in the opinion of its interested parties (such as customers, donors, or shareholders).

Customer Satisfaction Issues: Customer satisfaction refers to customer interaction with the organization, the organization's response, and the satisfaction the customer has with that response.

- Issues arise when customers are dissatisfied with organizational responses.

Risk Management Issues: Risk management refers to an organization's ability to understand a risk and take proper precautions in regards to that risk.

- Issues arise when organizations fail to properly assess a risk and/or take the proper precautions in the opinion of its interested parties (such as customers, donors, or shareholders).

Crisis Response Issues: Crisis response refers to an organization's response in a time of intense difficulty, trouble or danger.

- Issues arise when an organization's response to a crisis does not match the response that was expected by the interested parties (such as customers, donors, or shareholders).

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