

The Impact of Social Media on College Athletics Communications

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This year's College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA) convention program provided just the latest evidence of the impact of social media on college athletics communications. It featured no fewer than eight sessions dealing wholly or at least in part with social media. Given social media's ability to creatively lead conversations with large numbers of people and provide a forum for two-way communication with key publics, it is no surprise the subject receives so much attention. Dr. Galen Clavio has observed, "In an age of ever-tightening athletic budgets and increasing diffusion of traditional media audiences, social media provides a comparatively inexpensive personal connection with fans, through services already offered by third parties, such as ... Facebook, Twitter, and others" (Clavio, 2011, p. 310). The result, as the title of Dr. Jimmy Sanderson's (2011) book on sport and social media suggests, is that *It's a Whole New Ballgame* for sport communications professionals.

The prominence of social media has been well documented in both studies of social media consumers (see, for example, Pew Internet, 2012) and general public relations practitioners (Wright & Hinson, 2006a; 2006b; 2007a; 2007b; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2008d; 2008e; 2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2011). However, the impact of social media usage in college athletics communications and the perceptions of college athletics communicators about social media had remained unexamined until the present study. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to examine how college athletics communicators perceive (1) that social media has impacted their organizations, (2) the characteristics of social media, (3) the relationship between social media and traditional mainstream media, and (4) what their organizations are doing to assess the impact of social media.

Data for the study was gathered via an online survey conducted in partnership with CoSIDA. The survey was conducted over a six-week period starting in November 2011 and ending in January 2012. Eight appeals for survey participation were sent to all CoSIDA members between Nov. 29, 2011 and Jan. 12, 2012.

The survey instrument was originally developed by Dr. Donald K. Wright of Boston University and Michelle Hinson of the Institute for Public Relations for research on general public relations practice, and it was used with permission. Two items were added to the survey to ascertain respondents' job titles and their institution's divisional status. The complete survey instrument was also submitted to the CoSIDA staff for final review, and minor modifications were made based on their recommendations.

Of the 2,862 CoSIDA members, 529 (19%) completed the survey. Table 1 provides the breakdown of respondents based on their institution's divisional status. Table 2 displays the respondents' job titles. As evident, survey respondents included CoSIDA members in a wide range of positions and working at all competitive levels in college athletics.

Table 1. Institution's division status.

Level	Responses
NCAA D I (FBS)	21.1% (n=111)

NCAA D I (FCS)	17.7 (n=93)
NCAA D I AAA	6.9% (n=36)
NCAA D II	14.9% (n=78)
NCAA D III	26.9% (n=141)
NAIA	7.8% (n=41)
Two-Year	2.1% (n=11)
Canadian	1.3% (n=7)
Other	1.3% (n=7)
Total	100.0 (n=525)

Table 2. Job title.

Title	Responses
Associate AD for External Affairs	3.4% (n=18)
Assistant AD for External Affairs	3.5% (n=19)
Communications Director	5.7% (n=30)
Athletics Communications Director	37.2% (n=196)
Associate Athletics Communications Director	5.9% (n=31)
Assistant Athletics Communications Director	21.4% (n=113)
Graduate Assistant or Intern	8.2% (n=43)
Other	14.6%

	(n=77)
Total	100.0% (n=527)

Table 3 presents data regarding what percentage of the respondents' work time is spent on social media. The most frequent response (41%) was that social media consumed 11-25% of respondents' time. Only a quarter of the respondents indicated that they spent 26% of their time or more working with social media, and hardly any (less than 1%) reported spending no time working in that area.

Table 3. On the average, approximately what percentage of your time working in public relations and communications is spent with blogs and other social media?

Time Spent	Responses
None	0.9% (n=5)
1% to 10%	33.1% (n=174)
11% to 25%	41.0% (n=216)
26% to 50%	20.3% (n=107)
More than 50%	4.6% (n=24)
Total	100.0% (n=526)

Table 4 details the responses to questions regarding whether social media has changed the way the respondents' organizations communicate. The vast majority indicated that social media has changed the way their organizations communicate (92% agreeing or strongly agreeing) and handle external communications (89% agreeing or strongly agreeing). Responses were more balanced in regard to whether social media has changed the way organizations handle external communications with 37% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, 25% unsure, and 38% agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Table 4. Please tell us whether you agree or disagree that the emergence of social media (including blogs) has changed the way your organization:

	Strongly	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly	Total
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	Disagree				Agree	
Communicates?	1.0% (n=5)	3.6% (n=19)	3.6% (n=19)	51.9% (n=273)	39.9% (n=210)	100.0% (n=526)
Handles external communications?	0.7% (n=4)	4.6% (n=24)	6.1% (n=32)	50.7% (n=266)	37.9% (n=200)	100.0% (n=525)
Handles internal communications?	5.9% (n=31)	30.9% (n=162)	24.8% (n=130)	27.8% (n=146)	10.7% (n=56)	100.0% (n=525)

Table 5 provides data regarding how respondents perceive the relationship between social media and traditional mainstream media. A majority (77%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media and traditional mainstream media compliment one another. However, results were more balanced in regard to the question about whether social media and mainstream traditional media are in conflict with 49% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, 16% uncertain, and 35% agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Table 5. Do you agree or disagree that social media (including blogs) and mainstream traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television):

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Compliment each other?	0.2% (n=1)	12.2% (n=64)	10.8% (n=57)	56.5% (n=297)	20.3% (n=107)	100.0% (n=526)
Are in conflict with each other?	4.8% (n=25)	43.6% (n=229)	16.4% (n=86)	30.6% (n=161)	4.5% (n=24)	100.0% (n=525)

Table 6 presents data regarding the respondents' perceptions about the impact of social media. Most respondents (81%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media have enhanced the practice of public relations. A slim majority (52%) agreed or strongly agreed indicated that blogs have enhanced the practice of public relations, although many (31%) were uncertain about that statement. There was little disagreement that social media, including blogs, influence the traditional mainstream media as 92% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Most respondents (66%) agreed or strongly agreed that traditional mainstream media influence social media, including blogs. And a strong majority (92%) agreed or strongly agreed that since social media, including blogs, have made communications more instantaneous, they have forced organizations to respond more quickly to criticism.

Table 6. Do you agree or disagree that...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
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Social media have enhanced the practice of public relations?	1.3% (n=7)	6.3% (n=33)	11.9% (n=62)	53.7% (n=281)	26.8% (n=140)	100.0% (n=523)
Blogs have enhanced the practice of public relations?	2.7% (n=14)	14.9% (n=78)	30.7% (n=160)	42.5% (n=222)	9.2% (n=48)	100.0% (n=522)
Social media (including blogs) influence the traditional mainstream media?	0.2% (n=1)	2.1% (n=11)	5.9% (n=31)	50.6% (n=264)	41.2% (n=215)	100.0% (n=522)
Traditional mainstream media influence social media (including blogs)?	1.5% (n=8)	14.0% (n=73)	18.4% (n=96)	50.1% (n=261)	15.9% (n=83)	100.0% (n=521)
Since social media (including blogs) have made communications more instantaneous, they have forced organizations to respond more quickly to criticism?	0.2% (n=1)	2.1% (n=11)	9.5% (n=29)	42.8% (n=224)	49.4% (n=258)	100.0% (n=523)

Table 7 displays results pertaining to the respondents' perceptions of the characteristics of social media. Most (69%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that social media are more accurate than traditional mainstream media. Similarly, a majority (72%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that social media are more credible than traditional mainstream media. Most (62%) also disagreed or strongly disagreed that social media are a more trusted information source than traditional mainstream media. A majority (62%) indicated uncertainty about the statement that social media tell the truth. Results were clearly mixed about whether social media advocate a transparent and ethical culture with 33% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, 42% uncertain, and 25% agreeing or strongly agreeing. A strong majority (88%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media offer organizations a low-cost way to develop relationships with members of various strategic publics. A majority (58%) also agreed or strongly agreed that social media serve as a watch-dog for the traditional mainstream media. And finally, most (75%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media are impacting corporate and organizational transparency.

Table 7. Do you agree or disagree that social media (including blogs)...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Are more accurate than traditional mainstream media?	15.6% (n=82)	53.0% (n=278)	27.4% (n=144)	3.3% (n=17)	0.7% (n=5)	100.0% (n=525)
Are more credible than traditional mainstream media?	17.7% (n=93)	54.2% (n=284)	25.0% (n=131)	2.1% (n=11)	0.9% (n=5)	100.0% (n=524)

Are a more trusted information source than traditional mainstream media?	13.7% (n=72)	47.9% (n=251)	29.8% (n=156)	8.2% (n=43)	0.5% (n=2)	100.0% (n=524)
Tell the truth?	3.6% (n=19)	16.8% (n=88)	61.6% (n=323)	17.6% (n=92)	0.4% (n=2)	100.0% (n=524)
Advocate a transparent and ethical culture?	6.7% (n=35)	26.7% (n=140)	41.8% (n=219)	22.5% (n=118)	2.3% (n=12)	100.0% (n=524)
Offer organizations a low-cost way to develop relationships with members of various strategic publics?	0.2% (n=1)	1.5% (n=8)	9.9% (n=52)	60.0% (n=315)	28.4% (n=149)	100.0% (n=525)
Serve as a watch-dog for traditional mainstream media?	2.5% (n=13)	13.8% (n=72)	26.1% (n=136)	46.9% (n=246)	10.8% (n=57)	100.0% (n=524)
Are impacting corporate and organizational transparency?	0.2% (n=1)	5.5% (n=29)	19.8% (n=104)	57.1% (n=299)	17.4% (n=91)	100.0% (n=524)

Table 8 summarizes results regarding what respondents believed people receiving information from mainstream media and social media sources expect in regard to that information. A strong majority (90%) agreed or strongly agreed that people who receive information from mainstream media expect these news outlets to be honest, tell the truth and advocate a transparent and ethical culture. Results were more mixed in regard to whether held the same expectations of social media outlets. A slim majority (52%) agreed or strongly agreed, but 26% were uncertain and 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 8. Do you agree or disagree that...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
People who receive information from mainstream media expect these news outlets to be honest, tell the truth and advocate a transparent and ethical culture?	3.0% (n=16)	2.3% (n=12)	5.0% (n=26)	53.8% (n=282)	35.9% (n=188)	100.0% (n=524)
People who receive information from blogs and other social media expect these outlets to be honest, tell the truth and advocate a transparent and ethical culture?	1.5% (n=8)	19.9% (n=105)	26.2% (n=138)	45.0% (n=237)	7.4% (n=39)	100.0% (n=527)

When respondents were asked if, to the best of their knowledge, their athletics department ever commissioned or conducted a research or measurement study that focused on information employees communicated on blogs, the overwhelming majority (98%) indicated “no.” When asked if, to the best of their knowledge, their athletics department ever commissioned or conducted research measuring what members of other strategic publics have communicated about their organizations via blogs or social media, 73% indicated “no,” another 8% indicated “yes,” and 19% were uncertain.

Table 9 presents data regarding the type of measurements respondents indicated practitioners should be conducting. Strong majorities (83%-89%) agreed or strongly agreed with each of the four statements, which were that practitioners should measure:

- The amount of communication that is being disseminated about their organizations through blogs and other social media.
- And/or analyze content of what’s being communicated about their organizations in blogs and other social media.
- The impact information disseminated about their organizations through blogs and other social media has on influential, opinion leaders and members of other strategic audiences.
- The impact information disseminated about their organizations through blogs and other social media has on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behaviors.

Little disagreement (3%-5%) existed on any of these items.

Table 9. Do you agree or disagree that public relations practitioners should measure...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
The amount of communication that is being disseminated about their organizations through blogs and other social media.	0.4% (n=2)	5.3% (n=28)	9.4% (n=49)	66.8% (n=350)	18.1% (n=95)	100.0% (n=524)
And/or analyze content of what’s being communicated about their organizations in blogs and other social media.	0.6% (n=3)	4.4% (n=23)	6.1% (n=32)	69.7% (n=364)	19.2% (n=100)	100.0% (n=524)
The impact information disseminated about their organizations through blogs and other social media has on influential,	0.1% (n=1)	4.4% (n=23)	12.2% (n=64)	68.3% (n=357)	14.9% (n=78)	100.0% (n=523)

opinion leaders and members of other strategic audiences.						
The impact information disseminated about their organizations through blogs and other social media has on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behaviors.	0.0% (n=0)	3.4% (n=18)	12.7% (n=66)	68.8% (n=357)	15.2% (n=79)	100.0% (n=521)

Lastly, respondents were asked if they were aware of any situation in which their organization's legal function impacted how the organization managed any aspects of blog or social media communication. While 33% were unsure, only 6% said "yes" and 61% said "no."

As stated in the introduction, this project had four goals. The first was to determine how college athletics communicators perceived the impact of social media on their organizations. A high level of agreement existed that social media have significantly impacted how athletics programs communicate, particularly with external publics. The picture was less clear in regard to internal publics, although the potential for such communication with internal publics seems high. Strong agreement also existed that social media have enhanced the practice of public relations, but blogs less so. Conversely, the immediacy and reach of social media are forcing organizations to respond more quickly as public relations issues emerge. Clearly, social media are presenting college athletics communicators with both opportunities and challenges.

The second goal was to ascertain how college athletics communicators perceived the characteristics of social media. In general, they believed social media to be less accurate, credible and trusted than traditional mainstream media outlets. They were uncertain regarding the degree to which social media tell the truth, although the question was admittedly broad and did not ask respondents about different social media sources (e.g., mainstream media outlet, fan blog). Respondents indicated that social media provide important tools for developing relationships with key publics and are impacting organizational transparency. Social media may also provide platforms to respond to the traditional mainstream media when organizations deem responses necessary.

The third goal was to determine how college athletics communicators perceived the relationship between social media and traditional mainstream media, and the response patterns were quite interesting. On the one hand, general agreement existed that social media and traditional media compliment one another; on the other, there was no consensus regarding whether the two were also in conflict with another. Strong agreement was expressed about social media impacting traditional media, but the level of agreement was more tepid in regard to whether traditional media affected social media. Respondents did indicate,

however, that the general public has higher expectations of the traditional mainstream media than social media in regard to honesty, truthfulness and transparency.

The fourth goal was to learn what college athletics communicators indicated their organizations were doing to assess the impact of social media. Relatively few reported that their organizations were conducting research to determine what members of key publics were communicating about their organizations via social media. However, strong agreement existed that organizations should be assessing everything from the volume and content of social media communications to its impact on key individuals and publics. This represents an area in which considerable disparity exists between current practice and best practice.

This study addressed just a handful of the issues associated with social media in college athletics. However, the results did bring to light a number of the key dynamics currently in play. They also provide a baseline for future evaluations of the usage and impact of social media in the field.

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