

Shifting online: An exploratory study into PR consultants' attitude towards new media

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Abstract

This study set out to explore the current usage and knowledge of new media as a public relations tool and channel amongst practising public relations consultants in Australia. The research was motivated by a nationwide benchmarking study by de Bussy and Wolf (2009), which concluded that new media was an extremely low priority for Australian public relations practitioners. Taking into account the speed of change associated with new media adoption, the authors examine whether these findings are still true today.

This study takes a qualitative approach, based on a critical analysis of semi-structured interviews with WA based Registered Consultancy Group (RCG) members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) (n=7). Findings suggest a cautious attitude towards the benefits of new media amongst RCG consultants. This is largely based on the assertion that the dynamics of basic communication principles and theories have not changed and that there is consequently no perceived pressure to move into the new media sphere half heartedly.

Introduction

US President Obama's election win was largely accredited to the use of new media, in what is now referred to as *Campaign Obama*, which was recognised with two major accolades in the 2009 inaugural Cannes PR Lion Awards (<http://www.canneslions.com>). Australians may have watched the US presidential elections from the sidelines, however, recent data provided by Nielsen Media Research (Nielsenwire, 2010) highlights that they are rapidly increasing their participation in the social media environment, including content sharing, with Twitter usage growing by 400 per cent last year. Close to three in four (73%) of those Australians that are already online have looked at others' profiles on social networks. Most of the country's federal politicians are now *tweeting* about their life in the public eye. These statistics arguably lead to the assumption that Australian public relations practitioners have fully embraced new media. Based on its interactive features, new media channels arguably reinforce Grunig and Dozier's (1992) notion of two-way symmetrical communication as best practice in public relations. However, why – according to findings by de Bussy and Wolf in 2009 - are public relations practitioners apparently so reluctant to use these new tools in a professional context?

Literature Review

New Media – a brief definition

New media is commonly associated with information sharing, user generated content and collaboration. Social media in particular have changed the dynamics of communication by shifting from the broadcasting of company messages and retrieval of information to interactive facilities (Church, 2008). As audiences are becoming increasingly cynical and advertising savvy, they move online to rely on peer recommendations rather than sales messages (illustrated in the success of portals such as expedia.com).

Whilst definitions vary, the authors refer to *new media* as interactive tools, thereby using O'Reilly's (2005) description as "harnessing collective intelligence". This includes online communities, social networking (e.g. LinkedIn, Friendster, Facebook), social bookmarking, blogging (including vlogging and microblogging), video and photo sharing, mashups, wikis, podcasts, tagging, RSS feeds, *apps*, interactive maps and other online based tools.

Benefits of New Media – a brief overview

New media – at least theoretically – provide a range of advantages for PR professionals, particularly in regards to monitoring, environmental scanning (Kent, 2008; McAllister & Taylor, 2007) and knowledge management (Razmerita, Kirchner, & Sudzina, 2009). Blogs and online news provide an opportunity to stay abreast of breaking news and trends. Microblogging sites such as Twitter have been particularly highlighted in playing a key role in breaking a number of news stories, such as the 2008 natural disasters in China and Myanmar (Church, 2008) and the Iranian elections, by avoiding country wide media restrictions (Grossman, 2009). Being present online also means building relationships with journalists, who are increasingly recognising online media as information sources (Garrison, 2004).

Most importantly, new media allow public relations practitioners to engage with various stakeholder groups, a direct contrast to the asymmetrical Web1.0 broadcasting channels, such as traditional websites (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2009, 2010; Church, 2008; McAllister & Taylor, 2007; Van Der Merwe, Pitt, & Abratt, 2005). They provide an opportunity to monitor stakeholder attitudes towards a brand and enable *real time* engagement with dissatisfied customers as well as self-declared evangelists. Consequently, new media tools have been identified as particularly useful in issues and crisis management situations (Heath, 1998; Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel, 2003; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011; Stephens & Malone, 2009).

Scholars have furthermore argued that the Internet has empowered PR practitioners to expand their roles and elevate their own status in their respective organisations, by using the web as an intelligence gathering tool (Porter & Sallot, 2005), maintaining their own blog (Porter, Sweetser Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007) and by making the most of social networking tools (Diga & Kelleher, 2009).

Limitations of new media

New media tools are frequently referred to as 'cheap' or even "freely available" (e.g. Cook & Hopkins, 2008), however, whilst the software itself might be free of charge, the demand on resources in terms of maintenance, commitment and time is frequently underestimated. As Kent (2008) emphasises: "*A blog will only be useful to an organisation if it has someone to maintain it, someone trained in effective dialogic communication, and someone who has the trust of individuals and publics*" (p. 39).

Furthermore, the introduction of new tools will place additional pressure on practitioners, as traditional media demands on public relations practice are unlikely to be reduced significantly (James, 2007). Finally, the fact that new media technologies are presenting a low cost opportunity, means they are highly attractive for activist groups and other low budget organisations (Heath, 1998), thereby arguably emphasising the need for constant environmental scanning, and communication, as stakeholders will turn to alternative sources if no official response is available (Stephens & Malone, 2009).

PR Literature on New Media

According to PR literature, the Internet in general and new media technologies in particular have *transformed* (Gregory, 2004), if not *revolutionised* (Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009), the communications industry. It is argued that we are seeing "a new generation of Internet-based tools that allow for far greater levels of two-way interaction, discussion and conversation" (Cook & Hopkins, 2008, p.1).

Industry reports further emphasise the novelty of social media tools, referring to a "*paradigm shift*" (Edelman & Intelliciseek, 2005), entirely new challenges and opportunities, thereby implying a new era in communication. Respondents in Eyrich et al's (2008) study had reportedly adopted "nearly" six different social media tools, the Digital Readiness Report (iPressroom, 2009) found that social media knowledge amongst US practitioners was particularly important during the recruitment process and the UK based Keynote report stated that social media marketing had become the norm in Europe (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2010). So why did a nationwide benchmarking study by de Bussy and Wolf (2009) find that Australian PR professionals appear to be somewhat reluctant in their adoption of new media tools and channels?

Cook and Hopkins (2008) claimed that Australian organisations lag behind their overseas counterparts in regards to new media integration. However, this may not be the only reason for PR practitioners' apparent caution. When revisiting some of the recent, predominantly US based studies, it becomes obvious that the initial wave of enthusiasm may have equally worn off in other countries. Porter et al. (2007) stated that US practitioners see the importance of blogs, but are not using them as standard public relations tools. Lenhart and Fox (2006) found that most of the PR practitioners in their study kept personal, rather than professional online journals. The research team consequently lost 26% of their respondents in a follow up survey as "they were no longer keeping a blog or were not willing to take another survey" (p. 2). The following quote by Somerville et al (2007)

may emphasise a crucial point that is easily forgotten and overlooked in the rush to promote new communications tools:

“New media technologies are not a panacea, they are not in themselves a solution to the complex communication issues in today’s dynamic socio-economic environment. Rather it is practitioners themselves who must take responsibility for the practical and strategic decisions about which technologies to adopt and how they utilize them” (p. 210)

Gaps in current literature

Scholarly publications on new media have traditionally been US centric (e.g. Eyrich, et al., 2008; Porter & Sallot, 2005; L. V. Porter et al., 2009; Porter et al., 2007), with a strong focus on ‘how to’ literature (e.g. Fathi, 2008; Hallett, 2008; Stewart, 2008; Steyn, van Heerden, Pitt, & Boshoff, 2008). Most studies have focused on either blogging as a communications tool (e.g. Hallett, 2008; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004; Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009; Porter et al., 2009; Porter et al., 2007; Yang & Lim, 2009; Youngs, 2009) or the use of micro-blogging, particularly Twitter (e.g. Church, 2008; Fathi, 2008; Stewart, 2008; Wylie, 2009), looking at how to make the most of the 140 characters available when pitching to journalists, responding to stakeholders or simply following breaking stories. The limited amount of empirical studies have predominantly looked at usage of new media technologies from the outside in, focused on analysing websites (e.g. Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003), corporate blogs (e.g. Kent, 2008; Youngs, 2009) or Facebook pages. However, scholarly and industry research to date has largely failed to look at new media tools beyond blogging. Industry reports (e.g. Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2010; Edelman & Intelliseek, 2005; McKinsey, 2007) provide further insight, but nevertheless leave equally as many questions unanswered.

Studies may indicate limited new media adoption, but essentially fail to investigate the causes behind it. There is an apparent lack of in depth insight and primary investigations into PR professionals’ attitudes towards new media, particularly within the Australian context. One exception is de Bussy and Wolf’s (2009) State of PR study, which concluded that although practitioners were relatively familiar with new media tools, they were perceived as an extremely low priority within a professional context. Main reasons stated for the lack of new media adoption were “not considered relevant to target stakeholder(s)”, “lack of familiarity”, “lack of training”, “lack of time”, “budget restraints” and “fear of criticism or negative feedback voiced via social media”. As this was a largely quantitative study, the researchers identified a need to gain a more in-depth insight into how the industry’s adoption of new media might have changed, as well as associated barriers.

Two other notable exceptions are recent, critical approaches which have examined attitudes of public relations practitioners in the region – specifically in New Zealand (Toledano, 2010) and Singapore and Malaysia (Fitch, 2009; Fitch, 2009b). Practitioners in New Zealand, surveyed in 2009, were seen to be “struggling” to adapt to the new media environment, with more than half of respondents not using social media to communicate with stakeholders (Toledano, 2010). Toledano (2010) argued that this vacuum could well be filled by new professionals with different skills and the profession is at a “crucial crossroad” (p 233). Meanwhile, when surveyed in mid-2006, practitioners in Singapore and Malaysia were found to be ambivalent towards new media (Fitch, 2009).

Methodology

This formative study took a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews (six face-to-face and one by phone) with seven of WA's eight Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) registered consultancies. Only one registered consultant, a sole trader, did not respond to interview requests. The interviews were conducted in the middle of 2010, and ranged in time from 32 to 105 minutes. Registered consultancies were chosen because they are perceived as the *experts* clients turn to for current and timely advice. Consultancies have an advantage by working across a range of accounts and therefore might conceivably have their fingers on the *new media pulse*. In addition, RCG members could arguably be seen as being committed to professional development and ethical practice by virtue of their membership. Interviewees were predominantly the most senior consultant and/or owner of the business. In one case a consultant was interviewed who was perceived to be the agency's expert on new media integration. The qualitative research approach is guided by the underlying principle of gaining rich, in-depth information (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). This was deemed to be appropriate to uncover the reasons behind, or caution in adoption of new media, by focusing on the meaning rather than the measurement of social phenomena (Hussey & Hussey, 1997). Rich and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) were gathered from all participants.

For this study, an interview guide was prepared and ethics approval gained from the researchers' University Ethics Committee. An information sheet was provided to participants and informed verbal consent was gained. Digital recordings were made of all interviews, with a tape backup recording, plus handwritten notes. Each interview was transcribed and coded independently by the two researchers in Nvivo8.

Limitations

Insights from this study are drawn from a limited sample size ($n=7$), due to the modest size of the West Australian consulting industry. The WA PR industry differs from its interstate neighbours in that it is primarily focused on the resources and energy sector, due to the State's continuing mining boom. In contrast to Sydney and Melbourne, FMCG clients are highly limited, as are non-mining related company headquarters. Consequently, WA based consultants focus largely on business to business communication, lobbying and shareholder campaigns. All RCG members represent independent consultancies. Only one national and one international consulting network are represented in the state, one of which is a registered member in the network's home state (NSW). Consequently, Perth based consultancies tend to be boutique sized.

Findings and discussion

Web2.0 – “A term I am not familiar with”

During our interviews we referred to the term Web2.0, which has been frequently used to describe new media tools and channels. Although most of our interviewees had heard about it, they remained rather sceptical about its value and application:

“Web2.0 is a phrase that I hear from time to time and it seems that the little that I have read about it... there seem to be these experts writing about it who all have different views about what it is and what it’s trying to be. So when faced with those kinds of things I tend to say, ‘S*** – when you work it out, you let me know’. I don’t know whether it’s just a phrase that’s been bandied around or if it’s any different to internet usage.”

With one exception, consultants downplayed their involvement and use of new media. In the State of PR study (de Bussy & Wolf, 2009) these consultants could easily have selected the “not at all” or “seldom” tickbox when asked about their use of new media, without further consideration. However, a different picture emerged in this study when a deeper exploration was conducted during the interviews. This arguably demonstrates the potential of qualitative research. Despite initially rating themselves as no expert in the field, most of the registered consultants had a designated new media staff member, all had conducted research into the field and were (at times cautiously) looking into where new media could be adopted for their clients.

Reasons for not engaging in social media

Several different reasons were cited for not actively engaging with new media. The main themes generated were a lack of control over social media, tools not being appropriate for clients, associated resource commitments and current lack of expertise. Outsourcing was seen as an alternative.

One consultant specifically stated age related reasons for his reluctance:

“Well you’ll get a slightly different view from me than most, A) because I am older and B), because the social media and the web and whatnot is something I don’t really get involved in. XXX, my sort of PA, who has gone off to have a baby was great with all that sort of stuff. I don’t want to get too involved in the web based stuff – because I am of that vintage.”

Those consultants who were not using new media either felt the tools were not appropriate or that their clients were reluctant:

“A lot of our clients are very reticent to use new media in anything but a cautious way because there is no capacity to control it. So the major mining companies will have a website but they are reluctant to adopt new media. Our earnest clients will not touch that area at all.”

Along similar lines, one registered consultant explained: “We explored it a lot...we thought about it a lot...resourcing...risks... And for the kinds of clients we have we don't think that it is necessarily the right kind of medium.” And from yet another interviewee: “We don't – we fall into the sort of category that are not experts in those techniques, because our clients have little or no need for it and we have discussed it with all of them. Some of them are very backward in terms of what they want to do.”

Associated Risk

The concept of “risk” or lack of control was a theme that emerged strongly, being mentioned by more than half of the consultants. As one active professional user of blogs and Twitter explained: “I think it's just being really careful. You don't have a hell of a lot of control over social media. I think you just need to analyse whether or not it suits the client.” Another consultant made a similar point, emphasising the steep learning curve associated with new media:

“It's a different discipline, different rules apply and it is still evolving. Protocols and governance around new media is a whole subject on its own – people are just coming to grips with it now. So as a whole it is significant. It's still evolving – protocols and governance. It's a whole other dimension to reputation management in an environment that is essentially chaotic and entirely free of any barriers to entry.”

Both authors were somewhat surprised to hear that clients were not generally perceived as *pushing* for new media integration in their public relations programs. Instead, it seemed that clients trusted their consultants to recommend appropriate tools and channels, thereby confirming that registered consultants appeared to have a solid reputation and strong relationships with their clients.

Training and resources were the final, major consideration that reportedly prevented consultants from becoming involved with new media. Not only was there the perceived need for consultants to gain new skills, but participants furthermore recognised the ongoing time and resource commitment that new media engagement would require. As one interviewee explained:

“[...] I also believe if you go into that new media space you have got to be willing to commit to it long term and you need to resource it... the resourcing is a huge commitment for clients.”

This consultant later made the interesting observation that you can send out a media release to a journalists and see if “it works”, but “...you can't set up a blog or Twitter account and then ‘bail out’ or leave it sitting empty”.

The authors felt that this following quote summarises participants' reluctance to invest in new media within a professional context:

“It's quick, it's immediate, it's time consuming – it's ferocious in terms of time resource. It is difficult to monitor or control. It's raising a whole new market place - the implications for our industry and for our line of work are very significant just because it needs to be part of the mix.”

These comments echo the conclusions by Kent (2008) that public relations professionals should not get “trampled by the blogging stampede” until scholars, researchers, and especially professionals actually understand them better. Although specifically focused on blogs, Kent’s comments could apply to the entire suite of new media tools, when he states that it will only be “useful to an organisation if it has someone to maintain it, someone trained in effective dialogic communication, and someone who has the trust of individuals and publics” (p. 39).

Reasons to engage in social media

Staying ahead

The reasons for caution and research were detailed and underlined by all consultancies that participated in this study. However, two of the seven consultancies also talked about their efforts to “stay ahead” - or at least keep up - with trends:

“It’s part of the mix – it’s part of launches – or just day to day business – we’ve got to think how do you make it a little bit different - we’re quite proactive in recommending it and just opening their eyes. I see it as our obligation – you go to the doctor, you want to come out with a cure. We constantly give ideas of how do we stay ahead of the game.”

This consultancy had a dedicated online division and its principal felt that the online area of the business would grow and could even take over the traditional area of communications. The consultant even mentioned exploring the creation of applications - “apps” - for clients to be used on iPhones and iPads. Another consultant talked about simply having to “keep up”, rather than stay ahead: “I think that as a PR firm we’re starting to really realise how much it’s going to be of value to clients,” she explained.

Extension of the toolkit

A serious point made by at least two of the consultants – both with more than 20 years’ experience in the consulting business – was the fact that new media tools are merely an extension of their toolkit but did not replace strategy: “I think that people feel that they have to have this stuff because it’s cool but fundamentally you have to ask: how does this serve strategy and if it doesn’t what is the point of it?” They stressed that the arrival of new media had not changed the essential rules of communication:

“I can’t stress enough: It is a tool. It is not about strategy development. It is something that we use to promote strategy – it is the strategy that achieves the business outcome – not whether it’s Twitter or a Facebook or a magazine. It is one of the tools. I am not overawed by new media. I understand enough to get on with my job.”

Not for the office junior?

The apparent dichotomy of roles for public relations practitioners between manager vs. technician found in the public relations literature (see Dozier, 1992) needs reappraisal, given the impact of new media. Indeed, the authors noticed contrasting viewpoints regarding the required seniority of internal new media experts. Most RCG representatives reported that they had dedicated in-house experts, while some were more inclined to outsource to specialist agencies. One consultant described the designated new media expert in the office as “my PA”. Two others reported nominating the most junior member of the team as “new media specialist”, based on the perceived expertise associated with Generation Y. This comment was typical:

“In my office I do have a person who manages all technology. If I want to know something I just go to him and ask him “what’s cooking”. I don’t really even talk about new media – the technology specific things I don’t talk about, so much, but I would I expect him to come into our meetings and be able to give advice.”

However, others felt the new media role should not be allocated to the least experienced member of the team:

“[There are]...all sorts of examples where it has gone horribly wrong. And I think this is something that corporates and others in governments need to come to grips with. It's not a junior job necessarily. You can't just give it to the PA and say: go and play with Twitter. It's a real and genuine communication tool and it needs to be treated with the respect. And this is not to say that PAs aren't worthy of respect. What I am saying is that it's a communications job. It's not a 'by the way, in between taking the minutes, doing the filing and running the office, can you organise the Twitter?' ”

The strategic value of monitoring

Monitoring both traditional sources and “new media” was seen as a vital role for some consultancies, in order to add benefit for their clients. As one participant explained:

“We monitor the electronic media – the web – for any number of clients because if an issue is maturing it will mature there before anywhere else and even then you might not actually hear about it. So it’s a little bit like the old grapevine. So participate on the web – or at least know what people are saying on it. If your client was developing assets up north you might want to be monitoring for growth impacts – greens and talk of heritage rock art - so you could follow conversations.”

Another consultant described the importance of intelligence gathering for clients, and cited the military as doing it well:

“On a daily basis we are keeping track of clients and what is happening in their world and what they need from us in order to communicate effectively. So we might look at new opportunities in order to connect them to their target markets...I guess that’s market intelligence, who is doing what – if you don’t have your finger on the pulse of that who’s

doing what...who are the main movers and shakers ...Because I believe public relations is all about connections.”

Twitter was not immediately mentioned by most consultants as a crucial area for monitoring, despite about half of the consultants reportedly using Twitter to distribute messages to journalists and other stakeholders. Three consultants, even one whose principal work was reportedly in crisis communications, reportedly completely ignored microblogging sites as part of their environmental scanning efforts.

Physician, heal thyself

While one of the RCG consultancies was recognised by their peers as “being an expert in the field”, others found that using new media to promote themselves (for example blogs, e-newsletters or Twitter) was something they had not enough time for, particularly as they felt that clients’ needs should come first. One consultancy had only relatively recently launched their own company website and explained why:

“We never got round to it...in the meantime we are doing a lot of writing and developing websites for our clients...but it’s a little bit of a 'doctor heal thyself" ...we've been very lucky not to have to look for work, so we didn't need it from a marketing point of view...but then it got embarrassing...even WE know we should update...What should you do - spend time on work for your client or spend time on updating your website?”

The same sentiment was expressed by another consultant:

“Generally we are so busy we just don’t have time to think about marketing ourselves. It’s like electricians – in the home of an electrician you will get electrocuted ... and the same it is with us - we do our own PR appallingly, because we are so busy, so focused on everybody else.”

Conclusion

Over half a decade ago, Galloway (2005) referred to corporate websites, chat-rooms, email response facilities and electronic release distribution as “standard aspects” of public relations. However, five years later, Australian consultants appear to still have their doubt about the appropriateness of various new media tools for their clients, and indeed for themselves. The ‘new’ in new media might imply something novel and exciting, but as we are moving on from Web2.0 to Web3.0 (or the latest buzzword, the semantic web), it becomes obvious that new media is simply an additional tool in the PR toolbox or in the words of one of our participants, “*part of the buffet, part of the suite of tools*”. Overall, with one exception, WA based registered consultants appeared to be rather cautious, watching from the sidelines. However, on reflection the authors are wondering if participants may have been playing down the thought, energy and resources that have already gone into the use of new media.

Risk was the strongest deterrent that emerged during this study, both for clients, who may not be initiating the move into the new media environment, as well as for consultants, who felt their expertise was too limited. However, most RCG members expressed that it was their responsibility as consultant to be able to provide advice on the appropriate use of different tools, which in turn means they are under pressure to accumulate the necessary new media expertise. It is important to keep the restricted scope of the WA industry and consequently consultancy market in mind, with mining companies being arguably more reluctant to *experiment* with social media channels, than their FMCG counterpart. However, the lack of recognition of new media as scanning tool in some cases left both researchers surprised.

Arguably, the warning not to be too bedazzled by technology – “new voodoo technologies” as one consultant described them - is something all practitioners (and academics) should heed. This comment sums up the sentiment:

“To be frank with you – and I know I probably sound like a silly old fart – but I have seen all of this stuff again and again so you come to a point...It’s the most dramatic new tool, let’s face it, in the last 50 years or so but it is a communication tool none the less. That’s all it is. And in order to function across that media you need to be a good technician. But it’s no replacement for strategy – there is no such thing as a new media strategy. It’s a collection of tactics to support a strategy.”

Many of the consultants’ comments echo the reasons for lack of adoption found in the de Bussy and Wolf (2009) study. However, all consultants in this study (with possibly one exception) were doing more training and had given serious thought to the implications of new media on their businesses and their clients’ organisations. New media are certainly creating new opportunities – and new challenges - for all concerned.

This study has contributed to the research field in a number of ways. It would appear to be the first in-depth study into the adoption of new media in Australia. Until now, studies have largely focused on the US and many have been technical *how-tos* rather than scholarly research (Kent, 2008). The study provides a rich and thick description of consultants’ current concerns and struggles related to grappling with the new media *revolution*.

Limitations and future studies

Clearly this study has limitations, given that it is focused on registered consultancies in Western Australia, a reasonably small sample of seven interviewees. However, qualitative researchers are interested in deep exploration in order to provide rich, holistic descriptions. Small samples are therefore more usual – investigated in-depth and over time (Creswell, 2003; Daymon & Holloway, 2002). The personal interpretation brought to qualitative data cannot be escaped (Creswell, 2003). This risk of bias, whilst acknowledged, was lessened, with both researchers independently coding data for themes.

It is important to note that this study relied on responses from senior consultants/owners, with their own business interests at heart, who therefore might not have been entirely honest and transparent about their concerns or plans.

The research team is planning to expand on current findings by interviewing non RCG members, including the State's biggest consultancy (which is registered in NSW, but not in WA).

For future studies, it would be interesting to compare findings with other Australian states, investigating potential differences based on the West Australian focus on resources and infrastructure clients and limited fast-moving-consumer-goods accounts. A cross-cultural study would also be of value, looking at registered consultants in other countries.

The authors recommend repeating these interviews over time to document any shift in attitude towards new media (for example Singapore).

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