

Exploring the Role of Corporate Communication Professionals in Navigating the New Media Landscape

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Abstract

The advent of new media technology has brought drastic changes to the way in which corporate communications are carried out. Traditionally, corporate communication practitioners enjoyed the privilege of being the sole gatekeepers of organisational information, filtering and disseminating it to stakeholders as and when they felt like it. However, with the advent of new media technology, their roles are being modified as gatekeeping is being threatened by the pervasiveness of social media. Social media is rapidly changing the way stakeholders and companies communicate. Various publics have now been empowered to create their own content about organisations. As such, reputation management is increasingly becoming more complicated in this evolving landscape. Unlike the traditional methods of corporate communication methods, the pervasiveness of social media platforms calls for a change in the way corporate communications are carried out. As traditional media are sidestepped, corporate communication professionals, especially those trained and well-versed in the techniques of the past, need to ‘up their game’, redefine their roles and develop new strategies in order to stay relevant in the era of new media technology. This positions them strategically to enjoy benefits associated with the emerging landscape like speed of communication, the ability to target audiences accurately, and the unsurmountable opportunities for communicating all forms of corporate messages. On the other hand, the proliferation of digital media comes with its own pitfalls such as facilitating the rapid spread of fake news, fabricated stories, misinformation and disinformation that is harmful to organisational reputation. The control of information, as well as the tracking of negative and misleading statements, has been made more difficult for an organisation. Confidential information can also be inadvertently released and may even go ‘viral’. In light of this, the role of the corporate communication professionals needs to widen and become much more strategic. It is against this backdrop that this submission explores the role of corporate communication professionals in navigating this evolving media landscape. Using the Gatekeeping Theory of Mass

Communication, the study qualitatively analysed questionnaire and interview data collected from various communication professionals in Zimbabwean organisations. It concluded that information control is the major hindrance that most communication professionals have to deal with. While the corporate communications arena is changing, the role of the corporate communication professionals is changing in tandem with it. The communications role was regarded as a support service; however, it is gradually being recognised as a more strategic function, requiring the corporate communications personnel to become part and parcel of the upper management strategic decision-making process. For them to be able to carry out their work effectively, communication professionals also have to enhance their skills and expertise to match the emerging trends in the media technology.