Social media has made a major impact around the world. From assisting in connecting people on a day-to-day basis to being a catalyst in democratic revolutions, social media has changed the perspective and relationship that individuals have with the media and with each other. Social media, including social networking, blogs, video platforms, and micro-blogs, is used to create instant one-way and two-way communication between individuals, communities, and corporations. This type of communication between groups is powerful, and has made online services such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Pinterest, Google+, and LinkedIn a part of users’ daily lives. In the spring of 2013, Facebook had more than 1.1 billion users (Facebook, 2013), Twitter was the fastest growing social media site with nearly 21% of the world’s internet population using it every month (Smith, 2013), and YouTube visitors watched 6 billion hours of video every month (Bullas, 2013). Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) examined how social media is being used by organizations in Europe and Australia and the challenges of openness, strategy and management. Consistent with studies of social media in the United States, the types of social media most used by organizations in these countries were social networks (e.g., Facebook), microblogging (e.g., Twitter), and video sharing (e.g., YouTube).

As more users access social media mobile through smartphone technology, the presence of social media will only grow stronger. People are using social media, not only for information and interpersonal communication, but also as an extension of experiencing and participating in society. Activities such as watching television, cheering on your team at a sporting event, and attending a concert, all now include participation in social media. According to Nielsen’s 2012 “State of the media” report, due to the ubiquity of smartphones, tablets and ultrabooks as well as the proliferation of social media networks like Facebook and Twitter, 88% of the 70 million tablet owners and 86% of the 100 million smartphone owners in the USA use their mobile devices while watching TV at least once a month (Nielsen, 2012). Even more significant, roughly half of both groups use their “second screen” to express their opinions about what they’re watching on a daily basis (Turner, 2013). Because of the growing tide of interest and activity in social media, both scholars and practitioners have begun to explore the uses and impacts of this area. In this chapter, we will discuss the scholarly research of social media from a theoretical perspective, and the role of social media in the field of strategic communication. We will then examine social media and strategic communication through Communities of Practice.
Social Media Research

In the burgeoning field of social media research, there has been numerous studies looking at the impact and influence of social media on our society (Khang, Ki, and Ye, 2012). Scholars have begun to explore how social media has the ability to influence various aspects of media, politics, societal norms, and even dating. One drawback to this flurry of recent research, however, is that scholars are often relying on common-sense and pure data analysis to explain social media as opposed to using grounded scientific theory. Upon reflection on this thought, one might ask if the scientific community is figuratively grasping at the social media straw without the theoretical groundwork needed to expand the current knowledge base (Anderson, 2008). This may be due to the relative newness of social media, and the possibility that some theories just don’t apply and new concepts should be developed.

It could be argued that some research may not be approaching social media from a theoretical perspective, but rather is trying to connect the social media dots, to provide much needed context for theory development. Although this method of research is one of the first steps in hypothesis and theory building, social media research has been examined since 1997, when the blog first emerged (McCauliff, 2011). For nearly 15 years, scholars have been attempting to explain the influence and impact of social media. But, if we are to truly understand the influence of social media, scholars must take the time to systematically collect data, analyze patterns, and construct a basis for theory in social media. This process of theory construction can undoubtedly lead to a greater understanding of this developing digital world. If the current theories do not work or provide meaningful context to how social media works, then existing theories must be reconstructed or new theories posited.

Fortunately, most scholars are using theory as a basis of their research. One study that examined social media research in 17 of the top advertising, communication, marketing, and public relations journals found that 436 articles were published on the topic between 1997 and 2010 (Khang et al., 2012). The proportion of these articles varied from 5.5% to 43.6% of all the articles published during this period and also indicated a variety of topics—methodologies, effects, forms, theories, advancements, and social media itself were examined. However, only 40% of the articles used explicit theoretical frameworks. Although this may offer a certain level of theoretical rigor to these articles, Khang et al. noted “the majority of articles examined either utilized or replicated existing theoretical frameworks, rather than suggesting alternative frameworks that could entail better solutions for understanding and applying social media phenomena” (p. 292). The process of using existing theoretical frameworks to explain scientific anomaly is not a new concept. According to Kuhn’s work on the structure of scientific revolutions (1970), these anomalies are often explained by using existing frameworks until a new paradigm can be established. As such, social media currently fits into this phase, and it is essential for scholars to establish, utilize, and explore theoretical frameworks that can better explain the phenomena of social media (Khang et al., 2012).

Theories Used in Social Media Research

In the 436 articles examined by Khang et al. (2012), several theoretical patterns began to emerge. The most frequently applied theories were social information processing theory, uses and gratifications theory, relationship management theory, agenda setting or framing theory, and diffusion of innovation theory. The following section will explore the main theoretical frameworks in which to explain social media. These frameworks should contribute to our existing knowledge on social media and how users interact with it.

Social Information Processing Theory

Introduced at the dawn of social media, social information processing theory (SIP) explains how interpersonal relationships develop online without the standard nonverbal cues that exist in face-to-face
conversation (Walther, 1992). According to Walther, computer-mediated relationships develop at a slower pace than traditional relationships; however, once established these relationships hold to the same standards and values. Walther established that by interpreting textual or verbal cues in computer-mediated messages—as opposed to the normal nonverbal cues from face-to-face conversation—people form impressions of others with linguistic impressions. These impressions then build over an extended period of time depending on the interaction and feedback between the sender, receiver, and channel being used. The more positive the impression is, the faster the relationship forms. This process is known as the hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1992).

SIP has been used by a variety of scholars to explain relational intimacy online (e.g., Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006), to understand marketing on social media (e.g., Lin & Peña, 2011), as well as to understand user interaction within different age groups (e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). However, critics of the theory have argued that a lack of defined visual cues can be detrimental to establishing a solid and real relationship, something that must be overcome at some point. Tokunaga (2009) argued that relationships cannot be maintained online for an extended period of time, nor can this theory apply to a collectivist society.

When this theory is used to establish and understand strategic communication in social media, it can explain the interaction and attachment that individuals form toward a certain product or person. As a brand establishes itself online, it implements relationship-building efforts designed to create socio-emotional connections with the end user to a product or concept (Lin & Peña, 2011). By utilizing the framework of SIP, textual and nonverbal cues are created and interpreted by people who are already interested in a product or service. Much like parasocial interaction, these messages are often positively interpreted and a stronger more realistic relationship is established in the mind of the consumer, thus helping to explain the popularity and interaction of users in blogs, and on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

A popular way to explain and interpret media usage in communication research is through uses & gratifications theory (UGT), which attempts to understand how and why people use specific media (Blumler & Katz, 1974). Within this theoretical framework, the importance of the individual, how they use media, and what they get out of it is very prevalent. UGT posits that every individual has different reasons for engaging with media—typically to satisfy their needs for information, entertainment and mood management (Shao, 2009). Additionally, the attributes of the media (such as its timeliness, level of involvement, and interactivity) and the context of use (space and time), play a significant role in how users engage with it.

UGT posits that individuals actively seek out information that will enhance their knowledge or provide companionship, or will allow for relaxation, diversion, or escape from reality. By interacting with others on social media sites, users can often satisfy their own needs by creating content used for enhancing socializing and status seeking, entertainment, information, self-expression and self-actualization (Park, Kee & Valenzuela, 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

Critics of the research have argued that UGT is not theoretically sound as it does not examine psychological antecedents to behavior, the data is difficult to collect, and that users often don’t select their own media (Straubhaar, LaRose, & Davenport, 2011). However, social media research has relied greatly on UGT because it helps explain the popularity of the medium. Additionally, it refutes some critics in that social media allows users to have control of the message, affording greater gratification to users (Shao, 2009). However, the ability to create the message and allow for greater gratification has led to privacy issues. At times, when an individual or group in the public eye gives an opinion that is controversial or disliked by the general public, unintended consequences and backlash can occur (Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009), leading, thus,
to the argument that private and public individuals’ uses and need for gratification on social media are different.

**Relationship Management Theory**

Since maintaining and developing relationships is one of the key tenets in strategic communication, it is not surprising that relationship management theory is a major theory in social media research. Under the framework of relationship management, the role of strategic communication is to serve as a conduit for communication between the organization and the public (Ledingham, 2003). According to the theory, strategic communication should serve as a central role between parties; have a management function that utilizes the four-stop management process of research, action planning, implementation, and evaluation; identify public attitudes, knowledge, behavior and relationships; and be constructed around the standards and policies that the organization follows when communicating with its publics. Different types of strategies, such as openness, networking, dual concern, and avoiding, can be used when maintaining relationships between publics. According to Bruning and Ledingham (2000), these strategic communication strategies are designed to initiate, nurture, and sustain mutually beneficial relationships between groups.

Due to the changing nature of communication, however, the same basic standards must additionally be maintained and adapted for strategic communications. As practitioners learn to fully integrate social media into their strategies and standards of the organizations they represent, they are also becoming more aware of the need for their expertise (Diga & Kelleher, 2009). Before 2006, it was almost unheard of for an organization to create a social media presence, and thus the standards on relationship management were not fully embraced. However, when social networking sites began to allow business pages, both for-profit and non-profit organizations utilized the resource to strengthen their existing brand. Although some organizations made the assumption that a mere profile on social media would create awareness for them, this was not the case (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). As users became savvy to social media, tepid one-way communication became unsatisfactory to the consumer and two-way strategic communication was needed to manage the relationship between organizations and stakeholders (Sweetser, 2010). In order to develop relationships with stakeholders on social networks, careful planning and research through the tenets of the relationship management theory must be utilized.

**Agenda Setting or Framing Theory**

Introduced in 1968 by McCombs and Shaw, agenda setting theory explains how media coverage influences the public agenda. The more than 400 studies that have explored how the media frames a story since the initial Chapel Hill study have relied on two underlying assumptions. First, that media does not reflect reality, but rather filters and frames it (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). Second, when the media focuses on an issue, the public will also focus on that issue and deem it an important part of the public agenda. Since media have access to information and stories that the general public does not, they often act as gatekeepers, filtering the information that goes to the general public. Additionally, accessibility, or the frequency in which an issue is covered by the media and accessible to the public, also influences the public conversation—the more it is presented, the more it is important to the public agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). This in turn, affects the agenda of public policy. Critics of classic agenda setting research point out the broad assumptions of the theory—that the public reacts en masse, that they are passive in how they consume media, and that they can be categorized into very large groups (which creates inflated results)—indicating a lack of theoretical rigor (Rogers, Hart & Dearing, 1997).

Agenda setting can be used to understand social media and its role in strategic communication. Organizations integrate their own social media (owned media: Facebook, blogs, Twitter, etc.) with
their public relations (earned media) and advertising (paid media) in order to generate buzz, which involves consumers and media outlets communicating about the organizations. Any brand, political figure, or public entity can utilize the power of these media to create the public agenda and create public policy. According to Ragas and Roberts (2009) agenda setting can be used in virtual brand communities to control the message path and dampen unexpected negative relationships between the media and public agenda. This type of agenda setting has been implemented for brands online, through social media, and even for political campaigns (Sweeter & Lariscy, 2008). Additionally, some scholars have argued that with a changing media landscape agenda setting has taken on a certain level of role-reversal and the media can now ask the public what the agenda should be (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010). Social media has shifted the theoretical perception of agenda setting and allowed organizations such as Help-A-Reporter-Out (HARO) to give importance and value to a story that the public deems important.

**Diffusion of Innovation**

As technology develops, so does the level of adoption in society (Rogers, 2003). This process of adoption of new technology in tandem with the spread of new ideas is known as diffusion of innovation (or diffusion of innovations) theory, by means of which an innovation can be seen to be influenced by its diffusion through the social system, and through time, which diffusion has consequences for the adopter, and for the innovation itself. The innovation of social media has spread quickly; it is relatively self-sustaining and has been widely adopted by society. According to Rogers (2003), people fall into one of five adoption categories: innovators adopting a product or technology first, followed by early adopters, early majority, late majority, and, finally, laggards. Additionally, every person goes through a five-step adoption process: Awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption are integral to this theory. At any point in this process, a person can choose to reject the innovation, idea, or technology. Critics of diffusion of innovation theory have argued that the adoption of new technology does not necessarily happen in such a systematic pattern, as all populations are not equal, nor do they view technology the same way (Rogers, 2003). Critics have also pointed out the adoption process relies on one-way communication, something that does not exist in social media. However, because social media is such a prevalent new technology, it is no surprise that this theory is used so frequently. As scholars have pursued diffusion of innovation in relation to social media certain tenets hold firm—adoption of the innovation is dependent upon the innovativeness of the person (Chang, Lee, and Kim, 2006); the ease, complexity, and relative advantage of the innovation (Peslak, Ceccucci, and Sendall, 2010); and the adoption of the product by peers (Gulati & C. Williams, 2011).

**Theories to Explore and Consider for Social Media Research**

Although these five theories were the most frequently cited theories in the most well-respected communication journals, scholars attempting to explain social media have used other frameworks. Theories such as knowledge gap (see Effing, van Hillegersberg, & Huibers, 2011), cultivation (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2010), social identity (Barker, 2009), polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2013), social feedback loop (Evans, 2008), socialgraphics theory (Owyang, 2010), McLuhan’s media theory (e.g., Pan & Crotts, 2012), and communities of practice (Yukawa, 2010; Lewis & Nichols, 2012a, 2012b) have all been used to explain social media phenomena.

**Social Media and Strategic Communication**

As indicated in the literature, the rapid success of social media has had implications on society in various areas including communication, government, business, education, and religion. As stated in the Nielsen
2012 “State of the media” report, social media and social networking are no longer in their infancy, they are coming of age (Nielsen, 2012). Social media is considered to be transformative for democratic societies, invigorating the public sphere conceptualized by Habermas (1989) as a place where citizens come together and confer freely about matters of general interest (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 287). Social media is also very important to the field of strategic communication. Strategic communication is a multidisciplinary endeavor with roots in diverse threads of social sciences (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, & Vercic, 2007). Strategic communication is dependent on institutions and implies intentional communication of an organization (Sandhu, 2009, p. 75). It is important to understand the distinction of strategic communication from integrated communication, which involves the emphasis on the strategic application of communication and how an organization functions as a social actor (Hallahan et al., 2007). “Strategic communication focuses on how the organization itself presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, employees, and communication practitioners” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 7). It is also important to note that the definition of strategic communication assumes that its function is part of the management structure that makes key organizational decisions (Coombs and Holladay, 2009). Understanding strategic communication as a management function rather than a technical function is a critical distinction in understanding how to effectively employ social media as a strategic communications tool.

Social media offers communication channels for organizational members to share information and talk to various stakeholders (Meredith, 2012). In the era of globalized media, social media provides an ideal forum to enable organizations to reach transnational audiences and offer them dialogic communication (Avery, Lariscy & Sweetser, 2010). Social media is being employed by virtually all fields to communicate with their various stakeholders. For example, the medical community and the business practices therein are also tapping into the resource of social media to engage the online community in order to better fulfill their missions (Samuel, 2012). Social media is being used to extend the authenticity provided by museums by enabling a museum to maintain a cultural dialogue with its audiences in real time (Russo, Watkins, Kelly, & Chan, 2008). In a multi-method study of the current uses of social media for communication by enterprises, political organizations and non-profit organizations, Linke and Zerfass (2012) offer insights into future trends in social media. The Delphi study indicates that organizations are evolving from experimentation to social media governance, and that guidelines will be more widely adopted and implemented.

The ownership or responsibility of social media within an organization remains a topic of debate. Some argue that only communication professionals should handle corporate or organizational social media, whereas others maintain that social media communication should be holistic, with all members of the organization participating. And there are arguments along the entire spectrum in between the two opposing points of view. Most of the social media literature emerged out of the areas of public relations and strategic communication (Falls 2008; Odden, 2006; Rose, 2008; Lewis, 2010; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Toledano & Wolland, 2011; Wright & Hinson, 2009, 2010). Social media also falls within the areas of information technology, marketing, advertising, and customer service (Avery, Lariscy & Sweetser, 2010). Scott Elser, co-founder of a New York ad agency, argued in a recent article of Inc. magazine that social media is a natural fit within the discipline of public relations for several reasons, but because of the maturation and evolution of social media into a place for people to stay connected to products, promotions and developments, social media is starting to require the expertise of advertising professionals (Elser, 2013). The discipline of marketing has been aggressively addressing the need for content relating to social media and many MBA programs are offering courses in social media (Meredith, 2012). Moreover, the use of social media can be applied to all six relevant disciplines of strategic communications as defined by Hallahan et al. (2007): management, marketing, public relations, technical communication, political communication and social marketing. However, social media for organizations goes beyond communications departments, as social media applications are used in nearly every part of an organization.
Through a survey of 140 corporate social strategists, the Altimeter Group identifies five common frameworks for organizing social business (Owyang, 2013). The first model is titled “organic,” or “decentralized.” Approximately 10% of corporations use this model, which involves social media efforts bubbling up from the edges of the company, and no one department manages or coordinates the efforts. A little more than 29% of companies utilize the second model of social media structure, called “centralized.” In this model, one department, such as corporate communications, manages all of the social media activities. The majority of corporations, 36%, use the “hub and spoke” model, which involves a cross-functional team sitting in a centralized position helping various business units. Corporations using this model recognize that social media has an impact on every customer touch point, both internally and externally. The centralized cross-functional team (hub) makes most of the strategic decisions, with input from the various business units (spokes). About 24% of corporations use the fourth model, known as the “dandelion,” or multiple hub and spoke. This model, as the nickname suggests, is similar to the hub and spoke model with application to multinational companies where several companies act nearly autonomously from one another while being under one brand umbrella. The Altimeter Group maintains that this model will continue to grow year after year as it involves coordination at the center of the organization while multiple business units have the freedom to make decisions and manage within guidelines, (Owyang, 2013). Finally, only 2.4% of corporations are using the “holistic” model, which includes everyone in the company using social media “safely and consistently across all organizations” (Owyang, 2013). Companies such as Dell and Zappos are taking a holistic approach to their social media management structure. Very few corporations will ever work up to the holistic framework, as it stems from an internal culture that cannot be forced, as reported by Owyang (2013).

As the data from the Altimeter Group suggests, with more than 70% of corporations using a social media structure that utilizes a centralized unit (Owyang, 2013), social media has emerged as a prominent communication tool in strategic communication. It is no longer a matter of whether a company should utilize social media to communicate with audiences, but rather how and with what platforms (Walaski, 2013). Fortune Magazine annually compiles a list of America’s largest corporations, aptly named the “Fortune 500” (F500) given their size and wealth. The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research have been conducting an annual study of the social media adoption of these hugely influential companies, in order to gain insights into the future of commerce. Barnes, Lescault and Andonian (2012) report 73% of Fortune 500 companies were active on Twitter in 2012, and more than 80% of executives believed social media engagement led to increased sales.

The ultimate goal of social media is positive communication about the organization from individuals outside the organization. In other words, people are more likely to trust their friends, family and acquaintances than they are an organization, business or brand. When used effectively, social media is best used by “fans” of an organization to champion the goods, products, services and efforts of the organization to their social media friends and followers. However, the biggest asset of social media is also a matter of great concern. Using social media effectively requires not only relinquishing control of the message, but also a clear strategy on how to get fans talking about an organization without directly engaging them. The two concepts upon first glance appear to be mutually exclusive. How can you create a strategy while giving up control? In many instances, organizations only do one or the other. Many organizations have merely relinquished control, such as turning it over to interns with little direction or supervision, based on the notion that being “digital natives” makes millennials effective social media managers. However, Lewis and Nichols (2012a, 2012b) report that education has a more positive impact on college students’ perception of using social media strategically than has personal social media use alone. Even if you have an intern who understands how to use social media strategically, he or she still needs to be trained in the communication strategy for the company (Huhman, 2013). Relinquishing control of the message is about getting fans to talk about
the product, brand or organization organically and in their own words. It is not about relinquishing control to one employee or department.

Other organizations have developed clear strategies for engaging audiences, but fail to relinquish control. For example, in February 2007 Sara Rosso, an American blogger living in Italy, created World Nutella Day, celebrating Italy’s chocolate–hazelnut spread with a website and social media presence on Facebook and Twitter. After almost seven years, in May 2013, Nutella’s corporate parent, Ferrero SpA, set out to put an end to the fan-led product promotion sending out a cease and desist letter to Rosso. Because of Rosso’s championing of Nutella through social media, more than 50,000 people were celebrating Nutella through Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and blogs. In a final post on the World Nutella Day site, Rosso wrote:

The cease-and-desist letter was a bit of a surprise and a disappointment, as over the years I’ve had contact and positive experiences with several employees of Ferrero, SpA., and with their public relations and brand strategy consultants, and I’ve always tried to collaborate and work together in the spirit and goodwill of a fan-run celebration of a spread I (to this day) still eat.

After considerable backlash on social media against Ferrero’s actions, the corporation dropped the cease and desist. This is an excellent example of a corporation not understanding the benefits of fan-based social media for a brand (Crick, 2013). The importance of control completely overshadowed the situation that most brands would love to be in: an annual event that promotes the brand/product, organized by a fan, recognized internationally with no cost to the company (Crick, 2013).

Organizations must have strong relationships with their stakeholders and great trust in their attitude and communication about the organization. Zappos, an online shoe and clothing shop, is often discussed as a best practice case study in the marketing and organizational leadership circles (Perschel, 2010). Part of Zappos’s communication strategy is to be customer-centric and strive to make customers happy. As a result, Zappos’s customers want to share their positive experiences with their friends. This focus on customer service requires a high level of trust in the Zappos employees. Customers are encouraged to call Zappos and ask questions via social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (Fernandez, 2010). A key aspect to the Zappos customer service model is that nothing is scripted. Employees are given autonomy in their decision-making and discussions with customers. Employees are encouraged to spend as much time with customers, either on the phone or through social media, as needed to make their shopping experience pleasurable and memorable. Zappos is an example of a company developing a clear communication strategy that recognizes the importance and value of relinquishing control of the message.

Among the most prominent ways that organizations are employing social media to fulfill their mission include: management and internal communications, promotion of corporate social responsibility, crisis communications, public relations, and building brand communities and brand loyalty.

Management and Internal Communications

When looking at strategic communications from a postmodern perspective, internal communications also need to be included in the discussion of social media as a function of strategic communication. As Smith (2013) points out, “Postmodern perspectives illuminate the role of negotiation, persuasion, and change on internal activities that ultimately influence the external communication product” (p. 67). Social media can be utilized for internal communications, which can in turn translate into more effective external communication. In a 2009 study of 1,700 business executives worldwide, 64% of companies reported using social media for effective internal communications (Culnan, Patrick, McHugh, & Zubillaga, 2010). Huang, Baptista and Galliers (2013) conducted a study of the impact of social media on internal communications. Their findings reveal that social
media has played a role in reconceptualizing the rhetorical practices in organizations. They defined rhetoric in an organizational context and reported that it is used with specific intent, often to generate consensus in situations of uncertainty and emerging possibilities. The authors maintained that social media adds multivocality, increases organizations’ reach and richness in communication, and enables simultaneous consumption and co-production of rhetorical content. When facilitated by social media, multivocality is beneficial in “stimulating employees’ engagement and facilitating cross-functional innovation by providing a means by which different ideas, viewpoints and concerns are freely expressed, effectively exchanged, consulted, and consolidated” (Huang et al., 2013, p. 112). Their findings suggest that organizational use of social media allows for more voices and messages and less distinction between rhetor and audience. This is supported in Perschel’s analysis of Zappos (2010).

Huang et al. (2013) maintain that when organizations embrace the emancipating characteristics of social media they improve communication flows and allow for the co-creation of strategic initiatives. Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas (2013) recommend that organizations train employees on how to effectively use social media and encourage them to use it to promote the corporate brand. Many organizations prohibit or discourage employees from using social media because of an unfounded fear of abuse (Kesavan et al., 2013). Remidez and Jones (2012) maintain that project managers can enhance communication effectiveness by incorporating social media.

Utilizing social media from a management and internal communications perspective is better served with guidelines that keep the strategic communication consistent with an organization’s image and culture. Linke and Zerfass (2012) argue that organizations should include employees and organization members in the process of developing the social media guidelines in order for the guidelines to be relevant and accepted by members of the organization.

It is also important for organizations to prepare employees to facilitate customer service via social media platforms, otherwise known as social care. The younger the customer, the more likely they are to contact a company by social care than they are by phone. Almost half of all global social media users engage in social care, taking part in such activities as asking questions by writing on a company’s Facebook page or complaining to a company’s Twitter username (Nielsen, 2012). If organizations do not have the people and guidelines in place to field these inquiries and comments, they are missing out on an opportunity not only to engage their audiences and change perceptions, but also to reach other audiences with whom they have yet to connect. In the Delphi study of communications professionals in Germany, notable increases were reported in the areas of availability of budget and support from top management with regard to social media (Linke & Zerfass, 2012). This suggests that consumers can expect increasingly more effective and strategic use of social media by corporations and brands.

**Corporate Social Responsibility**

Social marketing or communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities via social media has been advocated and established in the literature. For example, Kesavan et al. reported that Kraft Foods Group is utilizing Facebook to communicate their efforts to help feeding less fortunate families in the United States. Kraft donates 6 meals to hungry families whenever a consumer joins Kraft’s Facebook page. TOMS, an American footwear company in Santa Monica, California, is founded on the concept of donating a pair of shoes to a child in need for every pair of TOMS shoes sold. The company uses Twitter to communicate its “one for one” shoe donation program to needy kids in 60 developing countries (Kesavan et al., 2013). According to Ros-Diego and Castelló-Martínez (2012), social media assists organizations in improving interaction with customers and placing consumers in the center of the relationship with brands. This interaction and relationship-building climate allows organizations to highlight their responsible actions in their communication. Social media programs for
CSR communications need to be integrated with other efforts such as community events or executive outreach (Kesavan et al., 2013). Communicating an organization’s social mission can lead not only to improved sales and profit, but also to growing a loyal fan base that “evangelizes” for the brand.

Crisis Communications

Organizations are also utilizing social media as part of their crisis communications. Social media is gaining acceptance as a strategic means of communicating warnings, risks and emergencies. Utilizing social media in a crisis requires considerable strategic planning. According to Walaski (2013), organizational integration of social media into risk and crisis communications hinges on developing trust and credibility with an audience well in advance of a crisis event. In March 2012, the American Red Cross launched its Digital Operations Center, which constantly monitors the social media space, so that when an emergency arises the Red Cross can evaluate the needs on the ground. A study in 2012 by American Red Cross reported that social media sites are the fourth most popular sites for obtaining information during an emergency (American Red Cross, 2013). Following the severe tornados in Joplin, Missouri in 2011, Rebecca and Genevieve Williams and David Burton co-authored a field guide to setting up a disaster recovery site via Facebook. The guide reports that utilizing social media for disaster recovery takes knowledge, expertise and dedication. “Collectively, the five person core team for Joplin Tornado Info was experienced in professional social media management, marketing, PR, crisis intervention, IT, journalism, copywriting, construction, logistics, nursing, and meteorology” (R. Williams, G. Williams & Burton, 2012).

Public Relations

Public relations practitioners have been at the forefront of adopting social media technologies and using them to achieve organizational goals (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008; Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2009, Lewis & Nichols, 2012a, 2012b). Social media not only allow public relations practitioners to reach out and engage their publics in two-way symmetrical communication; they also provide an avenue to strengthen media relations. In a study of journalism and public relations coorientation, Avery, Lariscy, and Sweetser (2010) suggest that as journalists and public relations practitioners increase their use of social media, they may be sharing sources, information and insights which could lead to more agreement among the two groups, confirming accuracy of information. The authors maintain that this byproduct of social media signals not only that public relations practitioners can reach a key strategic public (journalists) through social media to the desired effect, but also that the use of the co-orientation model presents an intuitive approach to understanding the effect of strategic communication.

Building Brand Communities and Brand Loyalty

Utilizing social media in branding activities is also well established in the literature, despite debate over whether it is a welcomed practice by consumers (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). Social media provide an opportunity for organizations to build brand communities. A brand community is a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Brand communities involve a common understanding of shared identity and can be found both in face-to-face interactions and via online technology (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Brand communities based in social media provide an opportunity for gathering customers together, engaging them in conversation, encouraging conversation among themselves, and enabling them to obtain information about the brand from various sources (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). Social media based brand communities enhance customer relationships,
provide benefits to their members by facilitating information sharing and increasing customers’ bonds to each other (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). Kurikko and Tuominen (2012) maintain that online brand communities empower members by creating value and a sense of belonging. Brand communities provide a “place” for organizations and stakeholders to develop integrated ties that constitute loyalty (Lobschat, Zinnbauer, Pallas & Joachimsthaler, 2013; Laroche et al., 2012). Although the personal computer is still at the top, connecting to social media through mobile devices is one of the major and growing trends in social media; app usage accounts for more than a third of social networking time (Nielsen, 2012). Mobile is particularly strong in Asia-Pacific. Given the growth of mobile and increased adoption of apps for social media access, brand communities can establish that sense of place and belonging for their stakeholders while they are on the go.

Building community can also be accomplished with the fusion of television and mobile. As discussed in the introduction and often referred to as the “second-screen effect,” social media users are interacting with others via social media on their mobile devices while watching TV. These multimedia users particularly enjoy watching and commenting about live events, including but not limited to the following: sporting events, awards shows, and contest and reality programs. Twitter is leading the social TV conversation. Simultaneous smartphone and tablet usage while watching TV is also a growing trend, not only in the United States, but globally. In a survey of more than 28,000 global consumers with internet access, more 60% of consumers in the Middle East and Africa and more than 50% in Latin America reported that they are interacting with social media while watching TV (Nielsen, 2012).

Social Media, Strategic Communication and Communities of Practice

Social media have changed the way organizations communicate both internally and externally. Since the inception of social media, organizations have been in an “on-the-job training” environment, learning to navigate the changing landscape of technology and strategic communication. Traxler (2007) reported that “mobile, personal and wireless devices are now radically transforming societal notions of discourse and knowledge, and are responsible for new forms of art, employment, language, commerce, deprivation and crime, as well as learning” (p. 2). According to Castronovo and Huang (2012), organizations are leveraging social media to actively engage with audiences, but the strategic execution of using social media has yet to be robustly identified. Although professional development has always been a part of organizations, communication, and business, changes in technology and the explosion of social media over the last decade have brought learning to the forefront. In addition, strategic communication has always been about information sharing and value creation within a specific context, which is essentially social learning at its core. Thus, social learning theory or situated learning is a natural lens for an examination of social media with respect to strategic communication. Etienne Wenger (2000) has maintained that the success of organizations depends on their ability to design themselves as social learning systems.

In a study of situated learning, mobile technology and learning language, Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo and Valentine (2009) reported that mobile technologies provide an opportunity for a situated and informal learning experience that encourages interaction and a sense of community among learners. The situated learning experience gives the learners the freedom to engage with the activity in their own way. The teacher or school is no longer mediating the context for the learners, but is inviting them to experience it for themselves in the hope that this will result in a more personalized and meaningful learning experience. It requires a transfer of control of the activity to the learners, which also requires a diminished degree of control for instructors (Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo & Valentine, 2009). Although this study is about mobile education, it is a mirror image of what is happening with social media and strategic communication. Practitioners and organizations must be willing to give their audiences the freedom to engage with social media activity in their own way. Organizations have to welcome the shifting balance of power in order for their stakeholders to gain a personal and meaningful experience with them via social media.
Lave and Wenger (1991) designate learning as a function of the activity, context and culture in which it occurs: learning is “situated.” According to Wenger (1998), a social learning theory must integrate four components necessary to characterize social participation, namely: (a) Meaning: learning as experience, (b) practice: learning as doing, (c) community: learning as belonging, and (d) identity: learning as becoming (p. 5). Situated learning is framed by the concept that knowledge is best learned and retained in an authentic context (Moore, 2009). Likewise, effective strategic communication through social media involves experience, practice, community, and identity.

Born out of situated learning theory, Lave and Wenger coined the term *community of practice* while studying apprenticeship as a learning model, as reported by Wenger (1999). The term refers to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice. Through further investigation of the concept, Lave and Wenger realized the existence of the practice of a community went far beyond the formal apprenticeship system (Wenger, 1999).

### Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice (CoP) are informal, pervasive, and an integral part of our daily lives. Knowledge and skills are obtained by participation in activities that expert members of the community would perform. Learners become involved in a CoP, which embodies certain beliefs and behaviors to be acquired through legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 1998). According to Annabi and McGann (2013), CoP have long been considered powerful knowledge management mechanisms, but are often viewed independently from organizational goals and structures. In their article, “Social media as the missing link,” they argue that when supported by social media, CoP have great potential to contribute to organizational goals, such as business strategy. Among the findings of their study, they report that a change in culture is required at all levels of the organization. Employees from the top down must change their perception of CoP and social media in order to strike a balance between alignment with organization structure and strategy (Annabi & McGann, 2013).

Communities of Practice have been described as tools used to improve an organization’s capacity to develop and share knowledge. These communities provide the opportunity to develop strong relationships and trust, which are essential for effective communications (Wenger, 1996). In today’s connected world, organizational CoP can be both internal (management and employees) and external (organization and various stakeholders). Social media also can help facilitate an organization’s capacity to develop and share knowledge. Like CoP, social media and online social networks bring organizations together through social ties that lead to strong relationships, trust and exchange of knowledge. A 2012 report from McKinsey showed that a majority of the estimated $1.3 trillion in untapped value from social technologies lies in “improved communications and collaboration within and across enterprises” (Barnes, Lescault & Andonian, 2012).

Traditional media, by contrast, is most often one-way communication where the message is simply broadcast from the producer to the receiver. When using only traditional media, organizations produced and distributed their messages to specific audiences through various media. With social media, the balance of control for both production and distribution of content is now being shared by the organization and its stakeholders. This shared control concept was and still is somewhat frightening to most executives and organizational leaders from a marketing and business perspective in the early stages of social media. They want to maintain control of the message and the distribution. But practitioners with a strategic communication perspective better understand and appreciate the value of social media and its ability to include the audience in production and distribution of an organization’s message. In the article “Defining strategic communication,” Hallahan et al. (2007) explain that communication is a “two-way process that is interactive and participatory at all levels” (p. 23). Social media is also interactive and participatory, fitting seamlessly within strategic communication. Social media is a tool for organizations to become social learning systems both internally and externally, informing and becoming
informed about the organization via communication with various stakeholders. The organizations and its stakeholders are both empowered by the social learning systems created out of CoP and social media. Organizations and stakeholders are each creating value for themselves and for one another.

Conclusions

Social media plays a large role in the field of strategic communication today. Social media provides a meeting place for individuals, from all walks of life, who find each other to share information, emotion, beliefs and belonging. Organizations are also utilizing the social media space to become involved in that sharing of information, emotion, beliefs and belonging in order to connect with people on a sustaining level. Numerous theoretical perspectives are being used to examine the social media phenomenon, including the following theories examined in this chapter: social information processing theory, uses and gratifications theory, relationship management theory, agenda setting or framing theory, and diffusion of innovation theory.

The social media literature has implications for numerous fields of study as it is affecting so many areas of modern society, including but not limited to technology, political science, medicine, and, of course, communication. Within the field of strategic communication, many disciplines have made an attempt to take ownership of social media from an organizational perspective, such as public relations, marketing, advertising, and management. According to the literature, social media is a tool that can be employed effectively in each of these disciplines. However, we would argue that in order for that to be true, the social media plan needs to be positioned in the strategic communication of an organization, meaning it is a part of the management structure that makes all of the key organizational decisions. If social media is used as a mere tactic, independently from the various disciplines such as marketing or public relations and informed by no integrated strategy therefrom, its effectiveness is considerably diminished. By looking at social media and strategic communication through the lens of CoP, we can see the importance of learning through meaning, practice, community, and identity. In order to provide the right climate for CoP and effective knowledge management through social media, organizations need to give stakeholders the opportunity to experience Wenger’s (2000) three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment. To capture these different forms of participation, the strategic communication efforts have to be adopted by, if not born from, the organizational leadership and integrated from the top down.

References


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