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Lessons for the future: universities and social media

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August 01 2009

University PR programs around the country are still figuring out how to best incorporate social media into their curricula.

This fall, Auburn University's PR Messages in Style and Design course will launch and manage a university-wide social network. The site will include audio, video, blog posts, and other interactive items for all 13 of the university's schools, alumni groups, and other organizations. It will also be featured prominently on Auburn's homepage.

“This tells me that the university is fully embracing social media as a way to engage different publics,” says Robert French, professor at Auburn who will teach the course.

The university may only now be fully accepting of social media, but French says he has been incorporating it into his classes for a decade. Back in 1999, his students began writing articles that French graded and posted on a now defunct site, AuburnMedia.com.

Today, French's students maintain a social network for the PR department, WarEagle.me, that also reaches program alumni and faculty. They also maintain their own social network, TheLoveliestVillage.org, which has gathered more than 1,200 videos and 1,000 stories since its first post in April 2008. And students contribute to blogs, including PRBlogs.org, which launched in August 2005. There are more projects anticipated for the coming school year.

“You need to be able to do the traditional AP style for print, you need to be able to do a bit more conversational blog post, you need to do headline writing, which is now Twitter writing,” says French. “All of those skills are important, but further, multimedia has become a very important way to share.”

French isn't the only Auburn professor bringing social media into the classroom. He says his colleagues are also incorporating social media into their course work and classes, such as Online Survey Research, are now in the curriculum.

“Our goal is to have it be part of the program, not one class here, one class there,” French adds.

The nation's PR educational programs have reached the point whereby social media is, in some way, shape, or form, being incorporated into both undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Mirroring the in-house and agency imperative to integrate digital media into most campaigns and initiatives, universities are bringing it onto campus to make sure their PR students are equipped to face the post-graduation world.

However, while some educators have dived in, many are slowly deciding how it's most useful to introduce the topic. Students come to class with the basics of how to use social media; many freshmen enroll with Facebook profiles, MySpace pages, and Twitter accounts. What students are lacking is the ability to use social media strategically.

"In the past, it was a classroom exercise," French says. "Now [students are] interacting with clients. They recognize that they have an expected return on investment. They recognize that they have to explain why they've developed the strategy, why they chose certain tactics, and then they have to evaluate it and show results."

At Georgetown University, where its PR Master's and advanced certificate program is only six semesters old, social media has been part of the program since the start. Its students work with clients, and where that work incorporates social media, strategy and tactics are highlighted.

"On one level, I'm saying we're very focused on all the shiny new tools," says Denise Keyes, associate dean of the PR/corporate communications master of professional studies at Georgetown. "But through this experience of the explosion of social media, it has also made us stick to the very traditional because we know what's going to make our students successful is their ability to think strategically."

In addition to blogging, the Georgetown program incorporates social media in some innovative ways. It's "one of the advantages of being a new program," she adds.

For example, the school offers a course, Global Communications in the Age of Social Media, which is taught by Rohit Bhargava, blogger, author of *Personality Not Included*, and an SVP in Ogilvy PR's 360 Digital Influence group. The class collaborates on a wiki to help clients develop social media strategies. Clients are located in a different region of the world each week. In a class Keyes recently attended, students worked on a strategy for a microfinance nonprofit, Kiva, in its efforts in Russia. The following week, they worked with an environmental program in Sweden.

"The most important challenge we face is not to have people dazzled by the newness of this social media," says Keyes. "You should never do a social media campaign without looking at the full picture. [Students] are not going to impress me with a bunch of fancy tactics. They have to do this all in the context of an overarching strategy."

Combining the new with the traditional

For programs with a longer history, incorporating social media requires some transition. Bringing social media into the fold while holding on to the principles of strategic thinking is the conundrum these PR educators face.

Syracuse University's SI Newhouse School of Public Communications has been revamping the curriculum across the school for the past two years. Many professors have been experimenting along the way, changing different elements, such as adding Twitter and blogging to the curriculum, says Maria Russell, PR professor and director of executive education for the school. But ultimately, big changes have to go through university protocol before they're implemented.

Russell says the school ascribes to the framework that comes from regular recommendations from the Commission on Public Relations Education. The Syracuse curriculum includes a basic principles course that

gives a PR overview; a skills course that includes writing; one focusing on visual communications; a class on PR research; another on campaigns; and a PR management course. Social media can be included in those classes as well. It is also recommended that students complete an internship.

“Rather than having a course in Web design or social media, which we're not excluding, we're going to weave social media principles through everything,” says Russell. “From our viewpoint, that's a good way to go because talking about the history of PR, it helps them understand where it's been, but also where it's going.”

A big concern is deciding how best to weave social media into the program, without chasing trends that will fade into oblivion before students can apply them to their careers. Russell (and other educators weighing the social media issue) cites Second Life as an example of a recent craze that went bust.

“Now where's Second Life?” she asks. “If you don't pay attention, you'll get to be irrelevant. People aren't arguing that. They're trying to figure out the evolution. What are the best practices? That's the role of education – kind of a guiding thought leadership.”

Boston University's (BU) PR program is also taking a careful look at how social media should be included in its program. Two years ago, the program added a New Media and Public Relations course that looks at PR through the lens of social media impact, challenges, and opportunities. Steve Quigley, associate professor and coordinator of the program, notes how guest speakers such as Shift Communications' Todd Defren and marketing strategist David Meerman Scott have been brought in to address students.

Ultimately, Quigley says, the program would like social media to be included throughout the curriculum. But BU faculty, like the one at Syracuse, is still grappling with what social media really means to the practice of PR.

“There's a spectrum of questions about whether this is a new set of tools or whether this is a paradigm shift,” he says. “Every now and then, we need to stop and wonder if we've consumed too much Kool-Aid. One of the questions we ask ourselves in our program is, ‘What's the right balance of adapting to a profession and innovating and influencing the actual nature of the profession in the future?’”

How best to prepare students for their careers goes to the heart of what PR's future will look like. Moreover, it raises the question of what role education plays in the industry.

“I think universities would be remiss if they didn't push back,” says Quigley. “You run the risk of letting the tail wag the dog if we don't ask questions. Part of the role of the university is to ask hard questions and bring rigor and analysis to the conversation.”

To that end, The University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication uses research that it does to inform its social media programs. The school works with Ketchum on the annual Media, Myths, & Realities media usage study and conducts an annual Generally Accepted Practices (GAP) Study.

“Anything we do in social media comes from research that we do about what's in the world,” says Jerry Swerling, PR professor and director of PR studies at USC Annenberg. He emphasizes critical thinking, the nature of new media (“social networking is a phenomenon, not a destination”), and the importance of managing the social media function as well as using it.

By Spring 2010, the program will launch a 28-week course based on observations from the school's graduate program that, according to Swerling, “is going to tell the story of integrated media in a two semester period.”

“We've had historically two courses, one called ‘controlled media,’ the other ‘uncontrolled media,’” says Swerling. “While we will continue to integrate this content into everything we do, this is going to be a unique course that will focus on the constantly changing world of media.”

Who makes the best teacher?

Once the courses are decided, the curriculum integrated, and social media has settled into its place in a university program, there's still one lingering issue that has to be dealt with: who will teach all of this?

Ask an educator this question and the response ranges from uneasy hesitation, to laughter, to immediate certainty; indeed it is definitely an obstacle.

Across universities, faculties are depending on the industry to help teach students – and professors – about social media and its PR uses.

“We're fortunate to have wonderful group of adjuncts in LA using social media every day, learning it on the job, and bringing it into the classroom,” says Swerling.

Many educators are using this technique or drawing on their own professional resources to get experts on the cutting edge of social media strategy and tactics into the classroom as instructors and speakers. According to Swerling and other PR educators, instructors, particularly full-time educators, must be sure to take steps to keep up.

“Many faculty members got their PhDs when there were no RSS feeds and YouTube,” says Alexander Laskin, assistant professor of PR at Quinnipiac University. “We have to educate ourselves so we can teach our students.”

“The most important thing for every faculty member to remember is you can never stop being a student yourself,” adds Tia Tyree PhD, assistant professor and coordinator for the PR and advertising sequence at Howard University. “We can't afford to sit back and say, ‘They're trying to figure it out, so we have time.’”

Sometimes, instruction comes not from faculty or the PR pros, but from the students themselves. And not only are they being asked to share their know-how at school, students are being called upon by the organizations where they're interns.

“It's very interesting: when we feel we're not doing enough, our students come back in the fall and say, ‘You won't believe how little is being done at XYZ organization where I just interned,’” says Russell.

Ultimately, with the ongoing industry challenge of keeping up with each new social media development and figuring out how PR can effectively add it to its toolbox, schools turn back to basics to serve their students.

“There's going to be a lot of the ‘next shiny thing,’” says Russell, referring to a term she heard used at this year's Edelman New Media Summit. (*PRWeek* was a sponsor of this event.) “That's the exciting part. Now the hard part is how to apply it. PR departments have always had dozens of tools. Excellence is using them strategically.”

PR PROS AS EDUCATORS:

Many colleges and universities turn to PR professionals to teach students about strategic and tactical use of social media.

Gary Grates, president & global MD of change and employee management, Edelman

Strategic Employee Communications. Taught at the SI Newhouse School of Public Communications, this course incorporates social media into its lessons about internal communications.

Matthew Knell, head of social media product development, MTV Networks

PR 2.0: Using social media channels to engage customers and their communities. An NYU course, it explores the use of social media for finding consumers online, listening to their feedback, and understanding the competitive landscape.

Matthew Le Veque, SVP and director of digital strategies, The Rogers Group

Creating Media Strategies: Real world media strategies for public relations. This USC Annenberg course teaches students how to incorporate all media channels, including blogs, microblogs, and online video, into outreach strategy and helps students understand the changing media world.

The title of this story appeared in print as "Lessons for the future"