



**Mindframe**  
*National Media Initiative*

**Consultation Report**  
**Journalism and Public Relations Educators' Views on Social Media**  
**February 2013**

Report developed by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health

## Background to the consultation

Social media has become the most popular activity for Australians online. In addition, many organisations and professions have entered the social media space to engage with and influence consumers. This includes journalists and public relations practitioners. The trend towards the prevalent use of social media has been received with mixed views from consumers, professionals and the media, in particular with regard to the perceived role that social media can play in suicide.

The Hunter Institute of Mental Health (who manages the *Mindframe* National Media Initiative) and the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre have collaborated to facilitate cross-sector discussion about the risks and potential benefits of engaging young people online who may be distressed. A roundtable has been planned for February 2013 that will bring together identified clinicians, academics, media and technology partners that will bring an informed view of suicide prevention, suicide postvention, technology capabilities, media engagement online and engagement of young people.

To inform discussions at the roundtable, the *Mindframe* National Media Initiative (*Mindframe*) sought the views of 16 members of the *Mindframe* for Journalism and Public Relations Education Advisory Group. This group has representatives from universities across Australia offering relevant programs, as well as members from the media and public relations professional practice.

*Mindframe* allocated 90 minutes at a national advisory group meeting to run two consecutive focus group-like discussions. To guide discussion, senior managers at the Hunter Institute of Mental Health asked each group a series of questions surrounding three primary topic areas to gain their views about:

- The current interaction between journalists, public relations practitioners and audiences through social media;
- The risks of engaging with potentially vulnerable community members through social media;
- The role that journalism and public relations educators can play in informing students about the communication through social media and engagement of vulnerable audiences.

This current report is a brief thematic analysis describing some of the key issues raised by journalism and public relations educators.

## Summary of Key Themes

### **1. Views on the current interaction between journalists, public relations practitioners and audiences through social media**

Facebook and Twitter were cited as the two most commonly utilised social media platforms for journalists and public relations practitioners.

*I have Facebook, Twitter, all the main ones, Tumblr, Flickr, I have all of these already*

*I think though the journalists, correct me if I'm wrong, journalists are expected these days to engage with... to use Twitter to source stories*



Participants highlighted a number of different ways in which social media was used in journalists and public relations practitioners. Some preferred to use social media as a scoping tool, as they were cautious about the credibility of using it as a primary source.

*I think that journalists take Facebook seriously, in that they wouldn't actually go there for the story, but they would go there to get a sense of where the story is at. See what people think. But it wouldn't be the only source that they would rely on*

*I've had to tell my student's effectively that Facebook is not your first port of call when you are going to source for something*

However, some believed that social media is increasingly being utilised as an acceptable source of information for stories. In some instances, journalists were posting direct requests on social media to attract suitable spokespeople.

*You see stories where they are just quoting people from Facebook posts*

*[Social media] can be the crux of the story if you can't get an interview*

*On Facebook I see some unscrupulous organisations that are basically looking for stories about, say eating disorders, and they basically put up there 'does anyone have an eating disorder and want to talk to our journalists?'*

A number of members suggested that there has been a paradigm shift in the nature of journalism. Whereas traditional media platforms only provided a one-way method of communication, social media ( and the online environment more broadly) now allows users to be actively engaged and comment on stories. Many felt that journalists may be ill prepared to handle this type of communication.

*The journalists are also dealing with this new paradigm, while their traditional organisational structures have fallen apart*

*You can see how unprepared they are now that the audience can actually speak back ...to the organisation and they don't know what to do*

*[A media personality] made a comment that people were offended by and then ended up in hospital herself because she was bombarded with death threats and stuff like that. Whereas once she would just speak to an audience and if people didn't like it they would talk amongst themselves. She made a statement that offended people and then was personally bombarded 24/7 in the privacy of her own home*

Others felt that journalists were already well equipped to deal with two-way communication.

*I think it's easier for journalists to engage because we've been trained in what we can say, particularly for radio journalists, it's very easy to move into that space*

Many participants said that they believed that the boundaries between personal and professional profiles were increasingly blurred. In some cases, this has led to instances where the social media profiles of individual personalities have become bigger or more influential than the organisations they represent.

*I think getting people used to a public identity and a private identity is something that is really key*

*I can see why big organisations have a problem with an individual PR practitioner having a personal profile being... someone that people followed for their opinion because they are not supposed to be individuals; they are supposed to be the mouth of an organisation*

*So their personal brand as a journalist is actually much more important to them, then their publication or their media outlet's brand*

*I think for journalists... are suddenly finding themselves in the social media space, not as journalists, but as celebrities or personalities in their own right*

A number of participants also suggested that social media has also caused a blending of the roles of journalists and public relations practitioners.

*Journalists become sort of, PR people, when they engage with social media*

*We have just started to introduce public relations into our journalist program, as a unit*

Many participants felt that having a comprehensive social media policy was not only vital, but could also be an advantage for organisations, empowering staff to use social media appropriately.

*The [media organisation], we've had a social media policy for three years and it's pretty basic but it says: 'you can't misrepresent the [media organisation], you must be impartial, you must be factual, you must be accurate and you must be objective*

*From a PR and a media perspective, I know [organisation]... put together some guidelines for all staff... They are quite rigid... but they empower them with 'you are the caretakers of this space'*

However, others felt that the most important aspect was that practitioners exercise common sense when using social media.

*[One company], they had a social media policy. It was two words 'be smart'*

## **2. View about risks for journalists and public relations practitioners when engaging with potentially vulnerable community members through social media**

One of the primary risks identified by the groups was the issue of immediacy. Whereas in traditional media, each story needed to go through a rigorous publication process, in social media, stories negate this process and can be available instantly.

*I think the most dangerous component of all this is the speed factor*

*I think if you combine the capacity for speed with the capacity for depersonalisation that social media brings, then putting those two things together, things can get out of hand in terms of what is being communicated incredibly quickly. There really isn't even a moment to stop and think about it*

There was a general consensus within the groups that one of the greatest risks for journalists and public relations practitioners using social media is the lack of control they have once the information is out.



*After it leaves your hands, understand that you're handing it over to an environment that you have no control over*

*Go back to the original suicide prevention case studies of someone who has taken their life [in a public place] and the school kids see it. Kid gets phone, boom, click and it's gone. You've lost complete control over it. And we are talking about mainly Twitter here, and Facebook, we haven't even gone anywhere near Tumblr yet and that is a world of hurt*

This lack of control could also be applied to the way the 'story talent' are managed by a public relations practitioner. With the inclusion of social media, it is more difficult to control how a person with a personal story will be represented or commented about.

*The people that are the case studies [for a media story] have an expectation about the way that they are going to be portrayed. In a traditional media scenario, there was an ability to manage the relationship with the journalist, and there was a level of trust. When you add social media into that scenario, you've got to look the person in the face and say 'I will really have no control over this and what they say about you'*

Many group members agreed that with social media, the comments that follow a story are often given as much importance as the story itself.

*But the journalist's story is no longer constrained to the article, you know, it's in the comments that go up with it. So people view all of those comments*

*It takes two minutes to read the story, and another 20 to read the comments*

One of the potential dangers with the ability to post comments, is that they are susceptible to trolling or other inappropriate or potentially dangerous content.

*What then can happen is what's happening at the [media organisation] at the moment, where there is a troll out there who is tweeting death threats to our female presenters and it's really serious. Now this person has started targeting women guests that the female presenters are talking to on air.*

Group members indicated that it was common for news stories and public relations posts to be measured and evaluated based upon the number of comments, and the engagement of the audience, however this often didn't consider the potential 'impact' that the engagement may have on audiences or publics. It can be more difficult to assess 'reach' as 'success' when complex issues are involved.

*Companies, government departments... in a public relations and journalism space, we are asked to measure and evaluate the reach, also including the commentary and the social media reach and measure it on a dashboard of both a positive and negative sentiment. It includes the comments and it includes what journalists have grabbed hold of. So we are actually valuing that as part of the scenario. Which is fine, but when it comes to this kind of subject matter it takes on a different scenario.*

*They want to see the reach of how many people you see or how many people you engage, not the outcomes of that engagement. Which, isn't that the purpose?*

*And I worry about a sort of quantitative measure that is on a positive and negative scale, when we are dealing with complex issues and, really, some of the complex messages coming across in some of those conversations are much more important*

Some group members also expressed concern regarding the legalities of information that was posted on social media. In particular, members discussed who had the legal responsibility to moderate content posted on their pages, and the obligation to remove offensive or inaccurate material posted.

*There was quite a well-known case where... the information that was posted on the company's Facebook page was the responsibility of the company, even though they did not put it there... So it is actually extended beyond the first person responsibility that if you own the space, then you are responsible for everything on it*

*My point about the 24-hour stuff, if you are going to engage with people on social media during the day, they are going to respond at night and there needs to be somewhere there who can actually respond at night. Most of the time, people aren't watching... I mean young people in particular are awake at 3 am*

One potential risk raised was that the content of information posted on social media may be jeopardised, as organisations were using young or inexperienced staff to assume the role of posting and moderating material, as it was more cost effective. These more junior staff, while grasping the technology well, may not have as much experience with the complex nature of the issue.

*It's a staffing and a resource issue... if I handed over to a junior account exec, which is going to be a lot cheaper, their subject expertise is only this [small amount], and their ability to filter is just not there. So they are there frozen, like, I'm terrified to say anything, because it's like doing anything on live TV or radio, you can't get it back. The danger there, in the hands of junior journalists as well, you've got that inexperience with the subject matter, and an instant scenario*

Another key theme raised was that journalists and public relations practitioners need to recognise that they are not clinicians, and therefore should exercise caution when engaging with vulnerable audiences.

*The risks are PR people and journalists are not therapists, are not health professionals and therefore when you are engaging with vulnerable people you are unsure how to approach, what is needed, what help to get, whether there are certain triggers*

### **3. Views on the role that journalism and public relations educators can play in introducing informing students about social media interaction with vulnerable audiences**

One of the most commonly discussed issues was the lack of social media literacy that some practitioners have. Although students are frequently able to use social media tools, there is very little guidance or education available for using the space appropriately and the nuances of communication using that medium.

*One of the challenges is the real dearth of social media literacy in the community. And I don't mean how we use the technology, but I mean how we use it in responsible ways, and that extends beyond the professions and the occupations that we're in, but I think as educators we can play a role*



*It's about increasing the general knowledge amongst the people who become the practitioners so they don't fall into the same stereotypes and assumptions*

*We have an exercise in one of the subjects I teach where we go through what's public and what's private*

The group members felt that having up-to-date teaching resources, with case studies that included the use of social media, was an important aspect of any journalism or public relations course. At present there are very few resources available for educators apart from the integrated social media questions in the Mindframe case studies.

*In all resource development of social media, in all the new and perhaps the past ones, we need to make sure we are updating. Bearing in mind...that future practitioners understand who they are and what this medium is, what the risks are on themselves, the organisations and the vulnerable community*

*There's an absolute dearth of social media resources that we can use in classrooms*

However, some members believed that it was important that peak organisations develop and disseminate their policies to university educators, so that the information relayed to students at university was not contradictory to the policies they are given later, when they begin employment. Although some peak organisations have social media policies in place, it was noted that some are still lagging behind.

*The [peak organisation], the code of ethics doesn't say anything about social media. The [peak organisation] should have caught up by now*

Finally, the educators felt that it was important to ensure that students were aware of the consequences of posting materials to social media.

*A corporate member of ours, a staff member... just went bananas on Twitter one night and we had to walk into the shop the next morning and fire the kid, 'cause it had gone global...*