The WIL student as social media practitioner: ethical challenges

Refereed paper (research paper) by:

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Abstract
As social media practitioners, Work Integrated Learning (WIL) students in public relations are faced with several ethical challenges in an industry which has only recently adopted the use of social media as a stakeholder engagement platform. This article is based on a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with WIL students and their mentors. Results identified five categories, namely social media conduct and Web 2.0 skills, online reputation management, WIL partnership requirements, the WIL student’s moral standards and organisational culture as ethical challenges. Shortcomings such as new media skills development, social media mentoring, social media structures and policies as well as online conduct sensitisation exist in the partnership between higher education and the workplace to adequately prepare WIL students for the challenges encountered as corporate social media practitioners. Social media blunders caused by poor ethical decision-making seem to be a significant threat to an organisation’s online reputation management. The always-on and viral nature of the social web amplifies the need to communicate truthfully, to uphold transparency and to respond promptly to online actions which are often malicious. As such, the findings suggest that social media fatigue is an imminent threat to ethical decision-making and that netiquette is an important consideration for responsible social media community engagement.

Keywords: social media, media ethics, cyber ethics, netiquette, citizen journalism

Introduction
Public relations is only beginning to understand and apply social media community engagement with varying degrees of success (Lewis, 2010:2). For the social media practitioner, an important aspect of online reputation management and indicator of social media influence is a large number of fans, friends and followers as well as frequent and positive ‘brand mentions’. This is typically attained when brand messages ‘go ii)viral’ as they are being ‘shared’, ‘Digged’, ‘liked’, ‘pinned’, ‘reblogged’ and ‘retweeted’ across networks and become iii)trending topics’ on the social web. A quest for influence implies that ethical practises may be compromised. As confirmed by West and Turner (2010:16) ethical issues arise whenever messages potentially influence others considering that the internet, as a mass medium, is the main source of information for many (Vaagan, 2011:21). In the information age, information is regarded as an asset with economical value (Day, 2006:43). The decentralised peer-to-peer Web 2.0 social media environment places its own unique demands on ethically acceptable behaviour. Internet governance (ITU, 2005b:75), for example, aims to safeguard freedom of expression on the internet while preventing the abuse of Information Communication Technologies (ICT). Similarly, cyber ethics (Tavani, 2011:3) is concerned about the moral and social issues involving cyber technologies. Another example is
netiquette (Pręgowski, 2009:364) which is a form of self-regulation whereby ethical online guidelines are created for users by users. Several authors (Burns, 2008:42, Kuhn, 2007, Stevenson and Peck, 2011:56, Vaagen, 2011:18) suggest that ethics is still insufficiently explored in social media studies.

Of interest for this study is the identification of the unique ethical challenges facing the WIL student as a social media practitioner. The context of this study is WIL as a prerequisite for a National Diploma in Public Relations and Communication at a major city based university in Gauteng, South Africa. WIL is an important element to prepare final year students for the world of work. Students are placed within organisations for a six month period and finally hand in a portfolio of their WIL activities for final assessment by both the university and the workplace mentor. Whilst being placed in industry, students are also expected to attend classes once a week during semester. An extensive overview of WIL in South Africa’s higher education landscape is already described in a study conducted by Vlok (2010). Furthermore, a study by Benecke and Bezuidenhout (2011) elaborates on experiential learning in public relations in South Africa.

The WIL student as social media practitioner

The social media practitioner is the individual responsible for engaging with the social media community on behalf of the organisation. Whilst this study uses the term social media practitioner, terms used in industry include social media manager, social media strategist, community manager, online community manager, social media assistant, social media intern or social media marketer to denote the various levels and roles of the social media practitioner. Social media community engagement is typically a public relations, advertising or marketing function with unrestricted access to senior management (Bottles, & Sherlock, 2011:71).

Literature warns about several ethical risks involved when employing a student as a social media practitioner. Being valued as digital natives who belong to the so-called social media generation, organisations eagerly entrust their social media community engagement to social media interns who presumably have an innate ‘feel’ for social media (Lewis, 2010:4, Temin, 2011). As Fathi (2009:22) points out, a student is inexperienced in corporate communication and lacks insight into organisational messages, business goals and the ability to provide strategic counsel or act as an organisational spokesperson on social media platforms. Although students are regular social media users, they lack strategic social media communication skills and the ability to critically analyse the social media environment according to a study by Lewis (2010:5,18). A further concern is the short-term nature of WIL contract. Students do not have the necessary long-term commitment to the organisation for social media campaigns to succeed and jeopardise online reputation management (Stamoulis, 2011). Given their short-term contracts, on-the-job social media training is inadequate. A more cautious approach is
involving students in the campaign planning stage for suggestions, but reserving the actual implementation and accountability to a senior, experienced practitioner (Cube, 2011). Another option is to supervise the student as a member of a social media team where skills can be transferred (Temin, 2011).

**Ethics defined**

Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, and Toth (2012:82) define ethics as social conduct that is regarded as being morally right or wrong according to standards of individuals, organisations and professions. Rossouw and Van Vuuren (2011:4) point out that the concepts of ethics and morality are almost indistinguishable. Similarly, Baran (2012:407) defines ethics as “rules of behaviour or moral principles that guide our actions in given situations”.

Derived from the Greek word *ethos*, which means character, ethics involve the philosophical foundations of choosing right from wrong options (Nel, 2001:335) while considering the traditions, customs or character that guide a culture or group (Baran,2012:407). Central to the definition of ethics, is an interplay of the concepts ‘good’, ‘self’ and ‘other’ (Rossouw & Van Vuuren, 2011:4). Ideally, ethical decision-making culminates in a balance of these three concerns. In other words, these three concerns firstly determine that which is good for the individual or the organisation. The second concern determines what is good. The third and final concern determines that which is good for stakeholders or anyone else affected by interactions. Based on the abovementioned discussion, a working definition of ethics for the purpose of this study is a moral concern when deciding what is right or wrong for the self, the organisation and the social good.

**Media ethics**

As applied ethics, media ethics is concerned with that which is “morally permissible for media workers to do, and what is not” (Oosthuizen, 2002:12). In other words, media ethics is not only a concern for journalists, but also for communicators such as public relations practitioners who rely on the mass media such as the internet to convey their messages. Relying on entertainment, persuasion and information dissemination, the mass media is one of the most influential institutions in modern democracies and set the agenda for standards of moral behaviour (Day, 2006:26).

When media ethics applies to journalists, the term journalism ethics or journalistic ethics is used. Journalism ethics is concerned with the fact that messages conveyed or ignored by journalists have the potential to influence audiences (Retief, 2002:4). Journalism ethics, as defined by Nel (2001: 335) is a field of study that provokes discussion about difficult judgements to evoke reflective thoughts about ethical issues in a systematic manner. Some of these difficult judgements involve issues such as
accuracy, objectivity or impartiality, editorial independence that is free from obligation to any interest group and being socially responsible to matters pertaining to obscenity, indecency, blasphemy and religion (Retief, 2002:37).

**Media ethics in the Web 2.0 network society**

The term Web 2.0 is associated with post 2004 technologies and we-media that makes it possible for any ordinary citizen to self-publish as a citizen journalist. Easy-to-use we-media include blogs, wikis and other social media. Whereas the mass media were previously in the hands of a selected few and messages were controlled by those in power, social media democratises the mass media as social media is collaboratively produced and owned by citizen journalists. The decentralised, peer-to-peer nature of the social web therefore holds distinctive ethical challenges for the social media practitioner compared to the top-down traditional mass media environment where gatekeepers regulate ethics.

Dominick (2011:25) defines social media as “...online communications that use special techniques that involve participation, conversation, sharing, collaboration, and linkage”. Kligienė and Rapečka (2011:34) define social media as open, web-based and user friendly applications that facilitate social networking, the co-creation of content and the sharing of taste and relevance. Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011:241) describe social media as mobile and web-based technologies used to create interactive platforms where communities and individuals co-create, modify, discuss and share user-generated content. Social media and Web 2.0 are relatively new phenomena given the history of the internet. Web 2.0 was conceptualised by O’Reilly (2007:17,19, 34) in 2004. Web 2.0 facilitates easy-to-use, peer-to-peer social media and web publishing platforms such as blogs, wikis, social bookmarking and social networking such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, Google+, Storify, MXit, YouTube and LinkedIn. By 2008, the volume of blogs has already become a collective rival to traditional media (Universal McCann, 2008:5). By 2011, social networks and blogs have reached more than three-quarters of Internet users across ten major global markets (Nielsen, 2011:1). In South Africa, there were 4.2-million Facebook users by the end of 2011 of which ten per cent are business owners (World Wide Worx: 2011). Given its popular global reach, social media offer new opportunities to communicate with markets and have become a significant strategic communication platform for public relations (Lewis, 2010:3).

Social media in the network society comprise interactive, horizontal networks of communication which converge with the mass media in a new communication space called mass self-communication (Castells, 2007). In the digital age, institutionalised power relations are challenged which question the legitimacy and political power of the media to shape public opinion. New communication technologies, and social
media in particular, challenge the conventional requirements for being a journalist and what journalism is (Chung, 2006:1). News has become a global conversation (Gillmor, 2006:xv) and the ‘reporter’ is just whoever happens to be on the scene, and online, when news happens (Reynolds, 2005:A16). An ordinary citizen using social media to comment on events is called a citizen journalist. As defined by Rosen (2008), citizen journalism occurs “…when the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another.” As such, journalism is no longer practised exclusively by professionals, but has become accessible to the masses (Lasica, 2003:70).

Cyber ethics
As a field of applied ethics, Tavani (2011:3) defines cyber ethics as “the study of moral, legal, and social issues involving cyber technology”. Other terms that are commonly used to refer to cyber ethics include information ethics, computer ethics, internet ethics (Tavani, 2011:4). Each phase in the history of computers and the internet in particular, has introduced a particular set of ethical challenges.

Due to the democratic properties of the internet, media ethics has become a concern for every citizen going online to voice his or her opinion in this unregulated environment (Day, 2006:43). Since its inception in the 1960s, the need to preserve the internet as a decentralised system with a free flow of information has remained a concern (Levy, 2001:143, Raymond, 1997). Cohen (2002:1,8), Potter and Potter (2001) and Hamelink (2000:32), however, caution against cyberspace as a source for moral panic and urban legends typically arising from middle class homes in reaction to inappropriate internet content. Moral panics about the so-called dangers of the internet are typically influenced by fear of new technology and technological change (Potter & Potter (2001).

Netiquette
Dutton and Peltu (2007:77) recommend that the Internet’s style of fluid governance is maintained through bottom-up decision making that preserves the growth, innovative vitality and openness of the internet. An example thereof is netiquette, a form of self-regulation (Hamelink, 2000:x) in cyberspace. The term netiquette was conceptualised (Raymond, 1996) during the early days of the internet (Livinginternet.com:2011). A definition for netiquette (Raymond, 1996) is: “The conventions of politeness recognized on Usenet, such as avoidance of cross-posting to inappropriate groups and refraining from commercial pluggery outside the biz groups.” Stated differently, netiquette is e-politeness (Boicu, 2011:56). In a study done by Pręgowski (2009:354), netiquette is defined as “the ethical code of conduct on the Internet and a form of online savoir-vivre, created spontaneously by the users, for the users.” Netiquette is not a set of rules, but rather democratically composed guidelines with suggestions for good behaviour and the reasons for doing so (Pręgowski, 2009:364). This code of
conduct is particularly helpful for internet newbies and function to establish a social order and respect in an online community. Specifically, Pręgowski’s (2009:361) study found that netiquette requires the personal attributes of an online user to be thorough and precise, able and willing to cooperate with other users, committed to common good, co-responsible - to some extent - for the collective life conducted online; and generous, kind and tolerant towards other users. Yet, in another study by on blogging netiquette by Boicu (2011:61) it was found that users ignore the rules that prohibit insults and quarrels and remain tolerant of these deviations in order to focus more on enjoying their online interactions. Legitimate self-expression is valued more than adhering to a netiquette.

Frahm (2010:48) cautiously suggests that netiquette and the trust, transparency and openness enjoyed on the social web may have a spill-over effect in the workplace where these social norms are not often practised. Beresford (2008:35) recommends that social media practitioners adhere to social netiquette whereby friends and followers are being listened to and treated with respect and honesty. When describing the do’s and don’ts of social media community engagement, Ramsay (2010) suggests using the term social media etiquette. A related term preferred by Gerber (2010:14) is social networking etiquette to treat online users with the same respect as in real life. Similarly, Armstrong (2009:10) uses the term technology etiquette to describe how social media users need to consider the consequences of their actions and practice self-restraint on the social web.

**Public relations and ethics**

Public relations is defined in several ways. A definition by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA: 2011) states: “Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other.” A more extensive definition by the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA:2011b) states: “Public relations is the management, through communication, of perceptions and strategic relationships between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders.” Similarly, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) in the UK defines public relations as follow: “Public relations is about reputation - the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.”

These somewhat inconsistent definitions of public relations are indicative of the ethical challenges facing the industry. For one, public relations is easily confused (Skinner, Von Essen, Mersham & Motau, 2007:4) with other forms of communication such as propaganda, sales promotions, publicity, marketing and advertising. Moreover, the industry is plagued with a reputation for unethical behaviour, (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth, 2012:81, Baran, 2012:316) especially as persuasive communication is often
used for the benefit of the organisation, regardless of potential harm caused to society (Baker, 1999:71). A case in point is the derogatory reference to public relations as ‘spin’ and practitioners as ‘spin doctors’. According to Lashley (2009:365): “spin relies on creative presentation of the facts, while political spin uses disinformation, distortion, and deception – lies”. Similarly, Brissenden and Moloney (2005:1005) define spin as modern political public relations “…offering to voters, mostly via the media, glimpses of policies and politicians which are favourable.”

Recognising that ethics remain a contentious issue in the practise of public relations, industry associations (Global Alliance:2011; IPRA:2011; PRISA:2011a) require their members to voluntarily comply with codes of ethics. Yet, Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, and Toth (2012:81) point out that these codes are not effective. Often, practitioners use the so-called front-page test to determine if decisions are ethical (Bishop, 2009:19). If decisions result in positive front page coverage of a newspaper, chances are that organisational actions are ethical. Since the press is no longer the ultimate judge of ethical actions given the plethora of social media users who scrutinise organisational behaviour, front page tests are outdated (Bishop, 2009:19). In fact, social media users may discover and share information before it is officially released which increases the demand for transparency, mutuality, honesty and integrity.

Recognising this shift in power from traditional media to citizen media, traditional media relations have evolved to include relationship building with citizen journalists in exchange for favourable brand mentions on the social web (Astroturfing, 2007:48; Biyani, 2009; Darling, 2009; Sprague & Wells, 2010:423; Tilley & Cokley, 2008:98; Yin, 2008:9).

Research objective
To explore the ethical challenges encountered by public relations students responsible for social media community engagement while formally participating in a Work Integrated Learning (WIL) programme.

Research methodology
The research method for this study was qualitative which is aligned with an interpretive methodological belief. Interpretivism is defined as “a systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds” (Neuman, 2003:76). Correspondingly, data collection involved open-ended, in-depth interviews through the use of interview schedules. This ensured that participants were asked identical questions; however participants were also probed (Du Plooy, 2002:144) to elaborate on their answers. During the course of the interview, participants were read the working definition of ethics as identified in this study, namely:
Ethics is a moral concern when deciding what is right or wrong for the self, the organisation and the social good.

Following a pilot study of two interviews, an additional question was added to the interview schedule to allow more in-depth probing. Pilot studies enhance reliability (Neuman, 2003:181). Well before the interviews commenced, participants were informed about the nature of the study. Interviews were held in private and quiet offices at the participants’ place of work and lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. Informed consent forms were signed by the participants and their anonymity (Welman & Kruger, 2001:188) and confidentiality (Neuman, 2003:397) were assured. Recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional service provider.

Considering the research objective for the study, a purposive sampling strategy was used. Purposive sampling eliminates elements that fail to meet specific required criteria (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006:91). Criteria for inclusion were WIL students who were involved in social media community engagement in the workplace as well as their respective mentors. The total number of students enrolled for the WIL module at the time was 106 of which only six students met the criteria. Of these, four students and their four mentors agreed to be interviewed. Two researchers were involved in the data collection. One researcher interviewed the WIL students, while the other researcher interviewed their respective mentors. The researchers were familiar to the students as both were their lecturers in public relations, WIL and social media. This familiarity enhanced trust and rapport (Neuman, 2003:391) between the participants and the researchers through a process of mutual discovery and sharing of experiences during the interviews.

Data was analysed using content analysis. Qualitative data analysis involved the analysis of all data as recommended by Altheide (1996:41,43). Themes were compared to one another and ‘typical’ cases were established in terms of their presentational and thematic characteristics. A codebook (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000:353), also known as a protocol (Altheide, 1996:25) was used comprising written rules for coding to improve reliability. This protocol also functioned as a data collection sheet and a coder instruction sheets which provide descriptions of categories and related themes (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006:163). Content categories were mutually exclusive and exhaustive (Du Plooy, 2002:193).

The same two researchers who conducted the interviews, were also involved in the coding of themes. In so doing, triangulation of observers (Neuman, 2003:138) was achieved in order to increase the validity and reliability of observations, analysis and findings (Du Plooy, 2002:40). These two researchers were suitable coders as they were both familiar with the topic of the study. Before coding commenced, researchers familiarised themselves with the data by listening to the recorded interviews and repeatedly reading the transcripts to enhance reliability. Following a pilot study where the transcription of one
interview was coded, the two researchers convened to reach consensus on the themes and codes that emerged from the data. Thereafter, a suitable protocol was developed and both researchers familiarised themselves with the use thereof. After coding a second interview transcription, the coders once again convened and adjustments were made to the protocol. The remainder of the transcriptions were coded by one researcher. Once all the data was coded, three researchers reached consensus on the ordering and naming of themes and categories. In total, 1 831 cases were analysed from raw data contained in eight transcripts. Inductive and deductive reasoning was applied.

**Results**

After analysing the data, 28 themes and five categories emerged. Themes were grouped coherently according to common attributes in order to arrive at categories. Each of the categories and their related themes are discussed below in descending order of occurrence.

**Online reputation management**

The most frequently mentioned category, *online reputation management* describe the ethical challenges associated with effectively planning, communicating and monitoring that which is being said about the brand. Results are illustrated in Table 1 and subsequently discussed.

**Table 1: Online reputation management as a category and its related themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category: Online reputation management</th>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Verbatim quotes from interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsible use of gifts and promotions</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>“We just ask them nicely, like the PR way you know. It is not guaranteed that they will use it. Because remember we are not really forcing them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffusing malicious actions</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>“So it is not that we go and check the Facebook page when somebody is employed or that our HR goes and snoops around. It is just word of mouth and it is just that perhaps I am having a problem with the employee and then maybe we should go onto their Facebook page or let us go onto their Twitter page and see if there is anything - and what do you know!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to complaints</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>“A lot of the time people do nothing but complaining.” “Others are bored at work so they want to make someone’s life miserable, you know.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning the message</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>“The challenge with the students would be that sometimes they could be quick to react and impulsive instead of planning because you feel you have to answer quickly.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate tone</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>“It is important for social networks, you can’t write everything the way that you would write in a press release. It has to be in a certain kind of voice, in a type of personality.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysing brand sentiment</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>“When we are doing the monthly reports we send them the Facebook stats, how much the page has grown or if people have not liked it to show them how many people have unliked the page and when did that happen and why and what could be the reason of people unliking the page.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total frequency</td>
<td>645</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The *responsible use of gifts and promotions* requires that the social media practitioner cannot expect that gifts to social media users guarantee favourable product mentions. Common practises to increase social media followers and enhance online relationships include the giving of product vouchers, prizes for competitions, product hampers and special events where all expenses are paid. **Diffusing malicious actions** with the intent to harm a brand entails social media users who are maintaining fake social media
accounts, leaking business intelligence, distorting the brand logo, planting false rumours about competitors, badmouthing employers, aggressive attacks, trolling and creating hate groups on Facebook. Recognising that users are entitled to free speech, social media practitioners realise that legal action is not always a wise option to manage online reputation. Another concern is the malicious online actions by disgruntled employees which require internal disciplinary policies and procedures. Malicious actions tend to gain considerable attention through viral sharing and pose a threat to online reputation management.

**Responding to complaints** poses an online reputational challenge for the WIL student considering that frustrated social media users’ complaints are often very rude and tend to rapidly gain viral momentum across networks. Social media users keep a watchful eye over everything that the brand does and have realised that their complaints are processed more effectively compared to traditional channels due to the public nature of online platforms. Therefore, dedicated organisational processes for social media complaints need to be in place. Strategic *message planning* and content calendars require proactive approval by management. In addition, the social media practitioner needs to educate management about the unique challenges of social media community engagement.

Controversial social media blunders have been caused by social media practitioners who have used an inappropriate tone of voice when interacting with the social media community. Using an *appropriate tone*, on the other hand, can even diffuse a potential hostile situation and gain more popularity and respect for a brand. Furthermore, the WIL student as social media practitioner needs to constantly monitor the social community’s reaction to the brand in order to *analyse brand sentiment* and trends. Monitoring conversations not only assist in gaining insight into social media behaviour, but is also a source of strategic public relations intelligence in the form of quantifiable monthly reports to management and clients. In this manner, social media efforts are also evaluated and follower numbers are tracked which all form part of effective online reputation management.

**Social media conduct and Web 2.0 skills**

The category, *social media conduct and Web 2.0 skills*, describe the ethical challenges associated with the conduct required by the WIL student when engaging with the social media community as well as the skills required to use Web 2.0 platforms. Results are illustrated in Table 2 and subsequently discussed.

**Table 2: Social media conduct and Web 2.0 skills as a category and its related themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category: Social media conduct and Web 2.0 skills</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Verbatim quotes from interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>“We have to be careful that we are not personally endorsing the brands that we work on.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology skills</td>
<td>Technology skills</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>“I am not the biggest Facebook person and I know nothing about Twitter. I just think about what is the purpose of that - but anyway.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“So on top of that social media and then we know as intern you have all the small admin work – ‘type this for me, print this, laminate this’ - and all of it altogether it is too much.”

“Because of labour laws it is very hard for us as a company to embrace and interact on social media platforms.”

“It is a home where most of them are HIV positive and some of them have been abused by their parents so they have been removed by court from them. So each time also there is an event I say to them guys, please, I know you have got your cameras and everything - do not take the faces of the children and it is because of this, this, this.”

“Generally, a 21-year-old’s attention to detail is appalling – I think it is just that generation.”

“And that is why I said we stay away from social media because we still have to develop policies.”

“But they were just tweeting these horrendous jokes, really sexist jokes, really offensive to women which is completely off brand, funnily enough.”

“They will blog about it and tweet about it and put pictures up and you get really good feedback back from your client, from your brand. But if you don’t build that trust with them they are just going to “oh well this is nice - thank you”.

“We must get trained by someone who is a social media guru that will come to the office and say this is what you do, this is what you do not do - like what is ethical, what is not ethical.”

“Well it would be an issue if we did not disclose they have been paid to do it. But most of the bloggers we deal with are very good about that. They are not going to pretend like they were not paid to do it.”

“Do not lie and do not spin it. It is the worst possible platform to do that in because there will always be one person who will know.”

“I cannot understand what young people are saying on the networks half the time.”

“Legislation pertaining to labour and consumer rights influence how the social media practitioner engages with the online community. In

**Transparency** relates to the open nature of the social web which makes the personal social media profile and online relationships of the social media practitioner equally visible to that of the brand on whose behalf the social media practitioner communicates. Some participants mentioned that it is unethical to use their personal profiles to post harmful or promotional comments either about the brands they manage or competitor brands. In fact, anybody’s relationship to a brand can easily be exposed on the social web by any user simply by tracking a user’s digital footprint and social graph. With regards to **technology skills**, students lack a thorough understanding and ability to effectively use Web 2.0 technology, especially given the novelty of social media and rapid changes in new media. Fear of using new technology had become a challenge for social media practitioners, their clients and management to embrace social media. Although some students are regular social media users, their technical skills are limited. As such, social media training is a necessity with regular refresher courses to keep up with trends and to overcome the fear for new technology.

Given the always-on nature of social media and the plethora of active platforms and profiles, students often need to engage with the social media community after hours, especially in times of crisis. Even during the day, switching between different profiles and different brands require multi-skilling and **time management** to avoid mishaps and cope with general office tasks. **Legislation** pertaining to labour and consumer rights influence how the social media practitioner engages with the online community. In
some instances, legislation can be a deterrent for the adoption of social media platforms due to legal sensitivity of certain issues. In other instances, social media practitioners were motivated to engage ethically with online stakeholders out of a moral concern to do the right thing and not purely to comply with legislation.

Students need to maintain a *sensitivity for confidentiality* when posting information online, particularly to protect the identities and whereabouts of vulnerable sections of society such as HIV Aids orphans as well as abused and abandoned children that were removed from their homes. Students’ *writing skills* need improvement considering that writing for social media differs from writing for traditional media.

*Social media policies* are required to guide the social media practitioner and employees. Policies may compensate for the fact that social media platforms’ constantly changing terms and conditions are not effective in regulating responsible online conduct. *Avoiding offence* entails that the social media practitioner needs to avoid posts that contain sexism, racism or anything else that is regarded as distasteful by the social media community. To *maintain trust* in the social media community, relationships are not limited to online engagement, but also face-to-face interaction in real life. Moreover, unethical online behaviour breaks stakeholder trust. The need for *social media ethics training* was required at the workplace as well as in higher education. In fact, such training needs to be introduced in school already to sensitize young people about the rights and responsibilities of being an online citizen.

Recognising that blogs have become paid media, social media practitioners and bloggers need to openly *disclose* instances when payments have been made in return for blogging about brands. When faced with *honesty* as an ethical challenge, social media is the worst possible platform for public relations spin, empty promises and lies given the risk that someone in the social media community will certainly point out the lies. Students are familiar with *social media jargon* and give valuable insight into the lingo and topics that young users discuss on social media networks.

**WIL partnership requirements**

As a category, *WIL partnership requirements* involve the mentor’s availability to guide the student as well as the WIL programme’s effectiveness in preparing students to function as social media practitioners. Results are illustrated in Table 3 and subsequently discussed.

**Table 3: WIL partnership requirements as a category and its related themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category: WIL partnership requirements</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Verbatim quotes from interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjusting the WIL module</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>“I did journalism, advertising and all that feels useless now because with the department that I am in it feels like a brand new thing. Social media is growing and it might even take over PR. PR might change to doing things the social media way.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When referring to **adjusting the WIL module** most of the participants agreed that the WIL module needed to better prepare students to formulate appropriate messages, how to generate creative ideas, to understand the norms of social media interaction and to learn about social media terminology. Social media is a new phenomenon and several supervisors have no experience in social media. Some public relations departments have ventured into social media for the first time only a few months prior to employing students. Several students suggested that WIL needed to feature practical social media sessions, social media planning, social media measurement and reporting, understanding the profile of social media users and how to approach them. Social media needs to be introduced prominently from a first year level.

The lack of a **social media job description** is attributed to the novelty of social media in the workplace. Some organisations had no formal social media job description or structure in place prior to appointing the student or launched a social media function for the first time after the students were appointed. One student raised her moral objections about only being informed that she was appointed in a social media capacity when she arrived for her first day at work and as a result she was ill-prepared. Organisations are still not sure exactly how to structure the social media function as it can be integrated with marketing, advertising or public relations. **Social media avoidance** occurs when mentors prefer to use traditional media and public relations instead of social media community engagement. A few participants maintained that stakeholders are sufficiently updated through existing communication channels like notice boards, meetings, media relations, events, e-mails and telephone calls. On the other hand, **hands-on mentor involvement** occurs where workplace mentors guide, approve and edit messages before students posts updates. A few participants mentioned that mentors are not always available to give guidance on and recognition for social media efforts.

**The WIL student’s moral standards**

As a category **the WIL student’s moral standards** describe the personal belief-system as a challenge in ethical decision making. Results are illustrated in Table 4 and subsequently discussed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social media job description</th>
<th>129</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>“The company started the Social Media thing only now when we kind of like got in and then we saw that we can and we started doing it. We just had to take it because it was given to us. I did not feel good about that, especially because I did not know of a department in PR of Social Media and I would not have chosen it. So that to me was not really fair or ethical.”</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media avoidance</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“So the Social Media - in fact like I saw her as the person that will update all the information for me on the website, somebody that will help me with the events, somebody that will also do some research for me as well as somebody that will capture and liaise on my behalf with my Media Department.”</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands-on mentor involvement</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“Because sometimes I find that she is really, really busy. So to get hold of her even for a minute sometimes is hard.”</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total frequency</strong></td>
<td><strong>380</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Good ethical judgement is a personal choice based on integrity. Keeping one's personal reputation intact is more effective to guide ethical judgement than adhering to codes of conduct which do not successfully deter unethical behaviour even when faced with dismissal. Furthermore, the social media practitioner’s ethical judgement is critical to avoid messages that cause harm to the social media community. In demonstrating their commitment, students initiate social media activities. They remain dedicated to engaging with the always-on social media community while constantly monitoring a plethora of social media platforms. The social media practitioner needs to use discretion in relationships with business partners who use public relations to deceive stakeholders. Discretion is also needed when becoming involved with organisations that have questionable reputations.

Organisational culture
The category, organisational culture, describes how the social media practitioner’s ethical judgement is influenced by workplace policies, rules, norms and leadership style. Results are illustrated in Table 5 and subsequently discussed.

Table 5: Organisational culture as a category and its related themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisational norms</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>“They are very strict and they tell you what you can and cannot do. Like basically you are censored you know. Like anything that you do you have to report. We report you know and we do not feel this is like general prison. We feel it is the right thing to do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership style</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>“Also our CEO - she has got quite a reputation behind her. She is all about doing it the right way. She will never exploit her people and she would never expect anybody in the company to go and do something that is bad. She sets the example.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WIL students find it challenging to adjust to organisational norms which include the formal and informal workplace expectations that influence decisions around social media community engagement. Organisational cultures that display strict organisational norms include constant reporting and checking of employees’ whereabouts, conforming to the strict implementation of rules, protocol and the chain of command. Although rules protect employees against misconduct, they may stifle creativity. Finally, leadership style and professional reputations influence the social media practitioner’s online conduct and ethical decision making. Leaders lead by example, however, their openness to new ideas hampers the adoption of innovations such as social media.
Discussion
The ethical challenges associated with *online reputation management* occurred most frequently which is indicative of the importance of effective strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation. The high frequency of cases pertaining to the responsible use of gifts and promotions concurs with Grunig (2009:7) who observes that online public relations are plagued with many of the same ethical problems that have featured in traditional public relations. Traditionally, public relations utilise incentives such as gifts, freebies and *junkets* (Skjerdal, 2010:380) to influence positive media coverage. Another challenge which threatens *online reputation management* involves the high frequency of malicious actions such as Facebook hate groups and disgruntled employees who vent their frustrations online. For the social media practitioner, this requires a fine balance between censorship and recognising internet users’ right to freedom of expression as outlined in the founding principles of internet (Levy, 2001:143, Raymond, 1997), internet governance (ITU, 2005a:4, 2005b:75; ITU, 2005b:75) and netiquette. Legal or other actions to silence voices of dissent may be viewed as censorship.

The ever-evolving and vast plethora of active social media platforms coupled with the always-on and viral nature of the social web places increased pressure to respond to complaints, often rude in nature, and to use the appropriate tone when engaging in conversations. In fact, the social media community constantly keeps a watchful eye over the social media practitioner’s actions which imply that spin doctoring may be easily and rapidly exposed by a multitude of online users. This finding supports the view of Hayes, Singer and Ceppos (2007:274, 263) who point out that citizen journalists are collective, self-appointed watchdogs who constantly fact-check and highlight errors. These findings are congruent with Ribstein (2006:185) who identify the self-correcting peer-review system which ensures aggregated accuracy online. Furthermore, the WIL student finds it difficult to manage time spent on social media platforms with the result that monitoring and responding to an array of comments, often on behalf of several clients simultaneously, occurs both in the evenings and over weekends. Moreover, social media crises are not restricted to office hours and span across global time zones.

The novelty of the social web has brought unique ethical challenges for the WIL student who requires a new set of skills and knowledge to acquire effective *social media conduct and Web 2.0 skills*. Mentors and students agreed that students’ technological capabilities, social media writing skills and insight into social media norms are vastly inadequate despite being regular social media users and understanding social media jargon. This finding supports the views of Lewis (2010:4) and Temin (2011) that digital natives do not necessarily possess strategic social media communication skills in a workplace context. Furthermore, most participants agreed that higher education and the WIL module in particular, do not
adequately prepare students to meet the challenges of social media. In some instances, mentors not only complained about their own ignorance of social media, but that they also had never received any education or training on social media usage. In fact, a fear for new technology often prevents leadership, students, mentors as well as clients from embracing social media. This finding is coherent with Potter and Potter (2001) who argue that moral panics about the so-called dangers of the internet are typically influenced by fear of new technology and technological change which is related to cyberphobia (Sandywell, 2006:46,74). Moreover, this study suggests that moral panics and cyberphobia can be attributed to the preference for organisations to use traditional public relations instead of social media community engagement. As a result, most participants reported that social media job descriptions and structures had not been in place prior to appointing WIL students. As such, social media policies are non-existent in most organisations.

Social media conduct and Web 2.0 skills require the social media practitioner to be aware of netiquette. As a form of peer-to-peer regulation developed to maintain social order and respect in the online community (Pręgowski, 2009:354), netiquette also encourages openness and transparency (Frahm, 2010:48). Of concern are the personal and professional social media profiles for which the social media practitioner is responsible. As such, the study suggests that the blurring of these identities poses the ethical risk when the social media practitioner uses personal social networks to either criticise competitor brands or to enhance positive brand sentiment for professional profiles. Similarly, bloggers need to disclose the fact that they have been paid to write about a brand. Moreover, transparency requires the social media practitioner to honestly admit to their mistakes and not to delete negative comments or resort to public relations spin. Whereas netiquette transgressions by social community members are tolerated (Boicu, 2011:61), this study found that it is not the case when the social media practitioner is the entity responsible for posting offensive comments. Rather, the social media practitioner’s offensive comments become well-publicised and virally shared case studies of social media blunders. It may be proposed therefore, that the profit motive of brands enhance the intolerance for netiquette transgressions in the social media community. This sentiment is evident in Raymond’s (1996) early definition of netiquette which encourages users to refrain from “commercial plugging”.

With regards to the WIL partnership requirements, as mentioned earlier, respondents highlighted the need for an intense focus on social media in higher education, starting on a first year level already. In most organisations, mentors provide hands-on guidance such as planning and editing social media messages before the student post them online. This finding supports the recommendation by Temin (2011) for the transfer of skills through close supervision. However, a few participants mentioned that some mentors are not always available to give guidance on and recognition for social media efforts.
When describing the *WIL student’s moral standards*, this study found that discretion, integrity and commitment are more effective to guide ethical judgement than adhering to formal codes of conduct. This finding concurs with the view of Rossouw and Van Vuuren (2011:7) and Lattimore et al (2012:81) who argue that ethics originate from personal values instead of a fear for consequences when distinguishing right from wrong. Noteworthy is the fact that one student was employed as a volunteer for the duration of the WIL programme without receiving any remuneration. This finding contradicts the view of Stamoulis (2011) who argue that interns lack the required commitment for successful social media implementation given the short-term nature of an intern contract. Lastly, findings suggest that *organisational culture* plays an insignificant role when the social media practitioner is faced with social media engagement choices.

Of interest is the fact that none of the participants made reference to the public relations associations’ code of ethics. This finding underlines the arguments of Cant and Rensburg (2009:255) who state that industry bodies’ ethical codes lack a sound theoretical basis for ethical decision making. Furthermore, these findings support a study conducted by Niemann-Struweg and Meintjes (2008:228) that concluded that the South African public relations industry requires a credible and independent authoritative body that adequately prioritises the role of ethics in professionalism.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the public relations WIL student as a social media practitioner encounter a complex set of ethical challenges that are unique to engaging with the social media community. Given the novelty of social media use in public relations, the WIL partnership needs to revise new media skills development, social media mentoring, social media structures and policies as well as online conduct sensitisation to adequately prepare WIL students for the challenges encountered as corporate social media practitioners.

A few ethical challenges associated with traditional public relations ethics have resurfaced in the context of the multifaceted Web 2.0 environment. As such, this study suggests that citizen journalists’ editorial independence is challenged. Therefore, effective online reputation management involves an awareness of media ethics considering that information is regarded as an asset with economical value (Day, 2006:43) in the information age. Furthermore, an awareness of journalism ethics is required considering that ordinary social media users are now the citizen journalists (Lasica, 2003:70; Reynolds, 2005:A16) of the social web. As such, gifts and promotions involve journalism ethics to protect the editorial independence (Retief, 2002:37) of the social media community. Furthermore, the social media practitioner is expected to refrain from offensive or harmful comments as addressed in journalism ethics.
These findings are congruent with Vaagen (2011:18) who recommends that journalism ethics form the basis from which to enquire about the nature of social media ethics.

Whereas disgruntled employees previously leaked information to the traditional media, social media and websites such as Wikileaks have become the media of choice for whistleblowing, badmouthing and office gossip. Whilst these malicious acts may be symptoms of a dysfunctional organisational culture, the social media practitioner is in the ideal position to advise management of codes of online conduct for employees which needs to be supported with social media training and netiquette awareness. Such interventions will enhance online reputation management.

For the WIL student, public relations associations’ code of ethics seems to provide insignificant guidance for moral judgement. This may imply that ethical codes face the risk of industry redundancy unless they are updated to meet the needs of social media community engagement. In the spirit of netiquette and the open, peer-to-peer nature of the social web, it is recommended that codes of ethics and social media policies are collaboratively developed in dialogue with all stakeholders and the social media community, or citizen journalists, in particular. However, classical hierarchical organisational cultures and moral panics arising from a fear of new technology may not be conducive to this approach. It can therefore be concluded that the social media practitioner’s function may be frequently challenged by the conflicting demands arising from the openness of the social web on the one hand, and the closed culture of the organisation on the other. Moreover, as netiquette values authentic self-expression over the adherence to rules, care needs to be taken to preserve freedom of expression inherent in the founding principles of internet and internet governance.

For the social media practitioner, adherence to a social media code of ethics and social media policies may be problematic as the individual’s personal moral-belief system seems to be a predominant influencer of ethical judgement. Consequently, it is recommended that the individual’s moral-belief system is sensitised through social media ethics training. Of particular concern is the blurring of the social media practitioner’s professional and personal identities on the social web. Social media ethics training requires integration with Web 2.0 skills education and training as well as netiquette, cyber ethics, media ethics and internet governance. Such education and training is recommended to commence in higher education as early as the first year with a more focussed approach towards workplace challenges as the student enters WIL. Moreover, social media ethics awareness campaigns and training need to be incorporated in professional associations’ continuous professional development initiatives. Social media ethics is inseparable from best practise in public relations and social media community engagement.
References


**Endnotes**

1 Brand mentions refer to the number of times that brand name is mentioned by social media users.

2 A social media post goes viral when it is recommended and shared by many users and spreads rapidly across social media networks.

3 When many social media users comment about a subject or aggregate information about a subject, it becomes a trending topic. Trending topics are mostly associated with Twitter, although other platforms such as Google Trends, Google+ Trends and Yahoo’s Trending Now, also indicate the topics most often talked about on the web.

4 For the purpose of this study, the terms ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’ are considered synonymous and are used interchangeably.

5 When describing Web 2.0 user participation, the terms we-media, participatory media, citizen media, social media and democratic media are used interchangeably (Shi, 2008:266). Bowman and Willis (2003:7) describe ‘we media’ as easy-to-use web publishing tools, always-on connections and mobile devices.

6 A blog is the unedited voice of an ordinary citizen which is produced as online posts or text, sometimes accompanied by audio-visual media. A blog usually allows posts from other citizens which are displayed as comments in reverse chronological order.

7 A blog-like system that allows anyone to edit anything in an amalgam of many voices, instead of the unedited voice of a single person (Winer, 2003). An example is Wikipedia.

8 Web 2.0 facilitates participation on the internet through social networking, sharing, interactivity and user collaboration. Web 2.0 relies on easy to use we-media or web publishing tools.

9 The tagging of a website which can be shared with friends online.

10 Building online relationships, typically by means of a personal profile that interacts with a community.

11 Cyber technology ranges from personal computers and mobile phones to private networks and the internet.

12 A blog is the unedited voice of an ordinary citizen which is produced as online posts or text, sometimes accompanied by audio-visual media. A blog usually allows posts from other citizens which are displayed as comments in reverse chronological order.

13 Junkets are events where all expenses are paid.