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corporate practices in three countries

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## **Social Media Newsrooms in Public Relations**

### **A conceptual framework and corporate practices in three countries**

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#### **Abstract**

The rise of social media in organizational settings has opened up new horizons for strategic communication. However, there are also drawbacks. Arguably the most important one is increased complexity. Many communication departments use a multitude of platforms ranging from corporate websites, campaign microsites and blogs to services like Facebook, Twitter, and the like to communicate with stakeholders. Social Media Newsrooms (SMNRs) have been introduced as instruments to reduce this complexity. The basic idea is straightforward: SMNRs aggregate social media content provided by the organization and/or thematic content about the organization and its key issues from several platforms in one place. Although SMNRs have been used in public relations practice around the world since the concept was first introduced in 2007, empirical evidence is still missing. This paper closes the research gap by a) introducing SMNRs from a conceptual perspective based on a literature review, b) exploring opportunities and challenges for strategic communication, c) researching empirical manifestations and modes of usage by corporations in three major international markets (United States, United Kingdom, Germany) based on a comprehensive content analysis of the 600 largest companies and 2,045

affiliated brands and subsidiaries, and d) explaining implications for the practice of public relations.

## **1. Introduction**

The potentials and limitations of online and social media platforms in public relations as well as the actual use in the profession have been a focus of research during the last few decades (Duhé, 2012; Ye & Ki, 2012). At the same time, consultants, agencies and authors of business books have not rested to propagate the implementation of nearly every channel and technology that has emerged. One of those instruments, which is mentioned in nearly every applied publication on social media relations, is the *Social Media Newsroom (SMNR)*. The concept was introduced in the United States by a consultancy (SHIFT Communications, 2007) and has since been heavily discussed in blogs, online communities and books advising on social media communications. The discussion is mostly attuned to the benefits of such platforms, which aggregate social media content provided by an organization and/or thematic content about an organization and its key issues from several platforms in one virtual place on the corporate website or on a specific website (Brown, 2009; Hay, 2009; Seiple, 2011).

Despite this intense discussion for more than five years, a comprehensive examination of SMNRs has not taken place so far. While a number of case studies have been published, nothing is known about the actual implementation of such platforms in corporate practice. Also, it is not known whether real-life applications make use of the manifold advantages described in the literature, i.e. whether SMNRs serve as a starting point for dialogical communication and relationship building with a broad variety of stakeholders and whether they are used to present and discuss the full range of topics shaping the identity of the organization.

Why does it make sense to research this specific type of social media application in public relations? In today's global online environment, companies and other organizations utilize a large number of owned and public channels for their communications. Organizations and those speaking on their behalf leave marks everywhere. At the same time, more content about companies, products and relevant issues is produced by online media and by social media conversations among stakeholders. The basic problem that arises from this development is a growing flood of information and sources as well as a rising complexity of the communicative representation of any organization within the public sphere. Stakeholders searching for general corporate information on the social web might end up watching a product video on YouTube, which may even be a fake uploaded by someone else. Many journalists, bloggers, employees, business partners, top management and public relations professionals themselves are interested in ways to reduce the complexity and to assess all communications from, and probably also about, a focal organization on the social web.

Social Media Newsrooms are designated to address this challenge by providing a single access point to social web information and conversation for a specific organization (Holzinger & Sturmer, 2012, pp. 173-202). Online communications are not manageable in the same sense as corporate media and even media relations might be. Communication professionals in the United States and in Europe report that corporations have more touch points with their publics and less control over their messages than five years ago (Swerling, Thorson, & Zerfass, 2012). SMNRs are an approach to getting hold of this in a very subtle and strategic way. While communication is not limited to the official standpoint of the corporation, and feedback as well as ongoing debates in external communities are displayed, the platform itself, as well as the choice of integrated channels, topics and degree of dialogue, is controlled by the organization. Obviously,

this will not prevent investigative journalists or critical stakeholders using other sources and making up their own mind. But the vast majority of stakeholders rely on search engines (Google, Bing) for information retrieval (Purcell, Brenner, & Rainie, 2012). SMNRs are easily spotted and ranked high by search engines because they bundle a lot of traffic as well as inbound and outbound links, which is a relevant criterion for most algorithms used by these services.

This article explores the field from a theoretical point of view. It starts by reviewing the literature, introducing a comprehensive definition of Social Media Newsrooms, and describing opportunities and challenges ascribed to the instrument. Building upon these insights, research questions and hypotheses for the empirical study are presented. The data will be presented and discussed. Results show that the basic added value of any SMNR to provide a simple, fast and clear access to important corporate information is not realized comprehensively. Moreover, “corporate speech” is predominant and specific opportunities connected to SMNRs are rarely used. The article closes with recommendations for the implementation of SMNRs and shows perspectives and consequences for the practice of public relations.

## **2. Literature review**

A review of descriptions of Social Media Newsrooms in both the Anglo-American and German-language debate since 2007 has identified a number of overlapping approaches, but no common definition. The concept was originally introduced in February 2007 by Todd Defren, founder of SHIFT Communications, a former public relations agency in San Francisco, which has now developed into a major integrated digital communications consultancy. SHIFT introduced a sample template for constructing SMNRs (see Figure 1) and described the aim of those platforms as opening and broadening corporate communications. An SMNR “is intended to get companies

thinking about how to present themselves to broader audiences; to motivate greater participation and openness; and potentially boost organic website SEO [Search Engine Optimization]. ... Neither a Social Media News Release nor a Social Media Newsroom are intended for any one specific audience. They are intended to meet the needs of people-journalists, bloggers & laypeople” (SHIFT Communications, 2007).

It is important to understand that the debate about Social Media Newsrooms was rooted in the discourse on media relations. At that time, bloggers had criticized traditional, text-based and non-interactive press releases as less suitable for their daily work. PR agencies like SHIFT Communications started publishing Social Media Press Releases with shorter bits of text, multimedia content, links to social media platforms, feedback options etc. (Ward-Johnson & Guiniven, 2007). A next logical step was to rethink the design of traditional corporate newsrooms on company websites. The basic idea, mentioned in the quote above, was an evolution that would enable public relations to keep pace with the communication needs of journalists, new opinion makers like bloggers and broader audiences alike. Brown takes a rather restricted view by defining SMNRs as “an evolution of the digital press office or pressroom” on a website by means of the social web (2009).

[Insert figure 1 here]

### **Figure 1**

Social Media Newsroom Template proposed by SHIFT Communications (2007)

Source: [www.shiftcomm.com/downloads/smnewsroom\\_template.pdf](http://www.shiftcomm.com/downloads/smnewsroom_template.pdf)

Mathauer, on the other hand, supports a broader approach: “The social media newsroom is a dynamic information and communication platform on which the company combines classic public relations content while contents of various Web 2.0 services are aggregated to build a comprehensive and sustained dialogue with its target groups” (2010, p. 6, translated). Hay (2009, p. 262) defines SMNRs mainly by their technical characteristics. Usually, any SMNR is constructed like a blog based on a platform like WordPress or another content management system. Each headline or content displayed links to an internal or external site with a permanent Internet address (URL). Information is thus linked directly and permanently. Based on this, the concept might be linked to the definitions and characteristics of blogs and corporate blogs.

## **2.1** *Definition and elements*

The following definition shall be used for this study. It combines the different strands of thoughts discussed above and takes a comprehensive, but also non-normative approach: *Social Media Newsrooms (SMNRs) are modular online platforms which aggregate and present content published by the organization or content dealing with the organization from different social web applications. They are published by organizations as part of a corporate website or as a stand-alone website. Content is usually displayed in reverse chronological order; it is frequently added using content management software (for press releases, PDF downloads, etc.) or automatically via widgets which display data from other platforms (photos from Flickr, videos from YouTube, etc.). SMNRs are open to a broad variety of external and internal stakeholders. Depending on the platform technologies, content and communication style, they can be used for information presentation and retrieval as well as for dialogic communication and relationship building.*

Typical *elements* of Social Media Newsrooms described in the literature (Brown, 2009; Hay, 2009; Ruisinger, 2012; SHIFT Communications, 2007) are:

- press releases and/or social media releases as well as other news published by the organization, including an archive;
- graphics, images, audio and video elements;
- headlines and links to external reports about the organization, based on a media monitoring or social media monitoring;
- content from social media channels used by the company (tweets from a Twitter channel, post from Facebook profiles and corporate blog);
- basic information about the organization, i.e. image brochures, annual reports;
- calendar of events (e.g. schedule of media events, trade fairs, industry dates);
- links to company-owned or company-related websites;
- contact details for communication representatives (name, position, phone, e-mail; to some extent also LinkedIn profile and Skype address);
- options to subscribe content, for example via RSS feeds;
- tag cloud;
- search function;
- social bookmarking services.

An SMNR is usually characterized by its *modularity*, which allows adding, rearranging or deleting content and “building blocks” by public relations professionals who take care of the platform, and sometimes even by the users who can select or deselect content. Obviously, any SMNR requires up-to-date and changing social media content. The instrument is especially suitable for organizations that frequently publish news releases and news items, run several



social media channels and continuously communicate with their stakeholders (Ruisinger, 2012). This also means that setting up an SMNR might look like a quick-win project at first glance because a lot of existing information can be integrated. But running the platform needs a lot of attention because the organization's communication on the social web will be more transparent than before.

Due to the flexible approach, SMNRs can be used for quite different *strategic objectives*. The existing literature is merely descriptive by outlining basic elements, features and benefits as well as normative objectives like dialogic communication and multi-stakeholder dialogues. Empirical insights into the objectives would have to be based on interviews with organizations or analyses of strategy papers for SMNRs; such research is not known until now. Nevertheless, it is possible to name opportunities and challenges for public relations which come along with this instrument.

## **2.2** *Benefits and opportunities of Social Media Newsrooms*

From the point of view of an organization and its public relations function, the added value and opportunities provided by SMNRs are (see e.g., Brown, 2009; Hay, 2009; Ruisinger, 2012; Wuebben, 2011):

- improved communication service for external and internal stakeholders (including journalists and bloggers) by establishing a multimedia hub in the social web;
- establishing feedback loops and dialogic communication with broad audiences;
- expanding and bundling relationship building on the social web;
- promoting credibility, openness and digital reputation among social web audiences;
- opportunity for framing the discussion about the organization through the selection and presentation of sources, keywords and topics;

- agenda setting and positioning the organization in a broad way;
- search engine optimization;
- more chances of being talked and reported about due to increased chance of reporting by the benefits described above for journalists and other multipliers;
- cost savings through declining information requests by phone or by e-mail;
- opportunities to monitor, evaluate and link discourses across different platforms;
- flexible options to add, change or delete sources and selection criteria for the information displayed in SMNRs without the necessity to use IT services (important in crisis situations, mergers which cannot be announced beforehand etc.).

This overview shows that SMNRs can be a very effective tool for public relations. Moreover, these platforms are well known and heavily promoted in corporate practice, at least in countries with a highly professional communication profession like the United States and Western Europe. It can be expected that a majority of large companies in those regions use SMNRs by now.

### **2.3** *Requirements and challenges*

Despite the long list of opportunities, not all organizations will be able to run SMNRs effectively. This is due to the fact that a number of specific requirements have to be met before starting such a comprehensive communication platform on the social web. Ideally, any instruments including SMNRs should contribute to overall organizational goals. This means that types and priorities of stakeholder relations, topics and communication activities to be supported by a newsroom have to be defined beforehand, based on transparent planning processes (i.e. using value links and scorecards) and key performance indicators which are necessary to evaluate the platform performance. This is especially important because SMNRs are dynamic

and flexible by nature. Success, failure and need to develop can only be identified if clear objectives have been defined.

Like any social media platforms, SMNRs can only be established and sustained if governance structures and resources – ranging from financial budgets to competencies of internal and external staff involved – are at hand (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Linke & Zerfass, 2012). Being able to produce relevant and current content which meets stakeholder expectations is as essential as the competence to adapt this content for different social media services. Otherwise, the transparency provided by SMNRs will have negative effects on the image and reputation of the organization (Ruisinger, 2012). Based on this line of thought, it can be expected that SMNRs will be more often implemented by larger organizations which operate in markets with many stakeholders and a large variety of communication topics (business-to-consumer) and in tech-savvy industries with talented social media staff (media, telecommunications and software).

When comparing legal requirements, a major challenge in European countries like Germany and the United Kingdom is data protection, especially with regard to the integration of social plug-ins on company websites. Social plug-ins are a key technological element of any SMNR. They are under criticism because they collect data, e.g. date and time of the page request and the IP addresses of all users of the site. The owner of the site on which the social plug-in has been implemented is responsible for protection against data privacy violations. The legislation of the European Commission (2012) makes it more difficult and costly for European organizations to implement SMNRs. Moreover, comparative studies show that social media platforms for public relations are used to a lesser extent in Europe than in the United States. As a consequence, SMNRs will probably be more prevalent in the US than in Europe.

### 3. Towards a theoretical framework

Obviously, the discussion of opportunities and challenges for Social Media Newsrooms could be expanded and detailed in many aspects. In order to structure the characteristics and to derive more hypotheses for empirical research, it is necessary to integrate the dimensions in a theoretical framework. As SMNRs are initiated as a part of strategic communication and public relations activities, it makes sense to expand an empirically proven typology by Schmidt (2007) which describes three different functions of social web applications. While this author argues mainly on the individual level, the same functions are relevant for corporate actors. SMNRs are relevant for *information management*. They serve as platforms for presenting, arranging, aggregating and linking content from different social media and online channels. This basic function is the core aspect and widely described in the literature, comprising a variety of practical goals from information services to agenda setting. As the concept has evolved from traditional media newsrooms on corporate websites, press releases and news play an important role. However, SMNRs are also important means for *identity management*, meaning that they enable organizations to present a selective view of their own personality. This has been mentioned above when discussing framing opportunities for example via tags. Specific choices of channels, topics, communication styles etc. position the organization in its stakeholder environment. The flexible newsroom technology allows for quite diverse presentations, i.e. a company might use an SMNR purely for distributing business-related information with few feedback opportunities, or it might present itself as an opinion leader stimulating and linking online debates about public issues in a very interactive way. Last but not least, SMNRs are important for *relationship management*. Organizations may use newsrooms to establish and nourish communicative interactions with a multitude of stakeholders. In contrast to other ways of

communicating, those relationships on the social web will mostly not be hidden, but visible to others.

A number of prerequisites for relationship building and information management on the social web have been identified in the literature. Kent and Taylor (1998) name five principles for building relationships through online public relations, which can be adapted to social media communications (Droller, 2012). Several of those principles are implemented in the basic features of any SMNR, especially the ease of the interface and the generation of return visits by updating content. However, the usefulness of information (second principle by Kent & Taylor) is a key challenge for every Social Media Newsroom. By definition, those platforms should address a broad variety of stakeholders. This, on the contrary, makes it difficult to present content that is attractive to specific users. According to previous research (Schmidt, 2007), means for *structuring and categorizing social media information* (i.e. tags, keywords, flexible selection criteria) are most important to cope with this challenge. Thinking of relationship management, Kent and Taylor (1998) point out that *feedback options* are a prerequisite for a dialogue between an organization and its stakeholders (first principle; dialogic loop). While social media technologies at the backbone of any SMNR usually provide such options, it is not self-evident that these options are activated or used in each case. The flexibility of the approach makes it possible to construct SMNRs with hardly any feedback elements.

If dialogues are facilitated, another distinction has to be made. It would be naïve to argue that any dialogical, two-way communication is symmetrical or oriented towards an exchange of ideas and joint problem solutions. Speech philosophy and its applications in public relations theory tell us that we have to distinguish between different *communication styles* (Zerfass, 1996). Basically, it is possible to use a persuasive, argumentative or informative communication style. The

persuasive communication style is characterized by the fact that the communicator tries to exploit emotional bonds and existing preferences of the recipient in order to push solely his own interests. Dialogue, in this case, results in an exchange of ideas and words, but not in building up joint visions and mutual relationships. Argumentative communication, on the other hand, relies on the insights of everybody involved. The communicator will not impose a fixed world view or solution, but stimulate a joint process of clarifying interests and searching common ground with the recipient. An informative communication style is characterized by the prevalence of presenting knowledge without a specific end. So it is very much up to the recipient and his situation and interpretation of how the dialogue will materialize on the relationship level. While the distinction of the communication styles is analytical, empirical research has proved a significant influence of the style used by organizations when posting Facebook messages on the frequency of user comments. Content analysis of 100 non-profit organizations in the United States and Germany showed that an argumentative communication style stimulated a mean of 16.49 comments, while a persuasive style provoked 4.38 comments and an informative style only 1.51 comments (Droller, 2012, pp. 108-109).

Concluding these theoretical considerations, it can be estimated that organizations will use SMNRs to present a broad range of content with a specific focus on press releases and news. In order to utilize the advantages of social web communications for multiple audiences, SMNR content will most probably be categorized and structured and deal with a broad range of social, economic and ecological issues, which helps to position the organization in its stakeholder network. In order to exploit the full potential of SMNRs, organizations will initiate dialogues by offering feedback opportunities and by using an argumentative communication style.

#### 4. Research questions and hypotheses

In order to shed light on the practice of Social Media Newsrooms in corporate practice, an empirical study across three major international markets was conducted. The research is limited to corporations which are arguably spearheading social media use in public relations both in the United States and Europe (Swerling, Thorson, & Zerfass, 2012). The overall research question was:

*RQ: To what extent do the 200 largest companies each in Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States use Social Media Newsrooms (SMNRs) in terms of quantity, content and functions, and which variables influence the use of these platforms?*

This relatively broad question was specified by several research questions and hypotheses which are derived from presuppositions discussed in the theoretical section of this paper:

*RQ1: To what extent are SMNRs used by the 200 largest companies in Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States?*

H1: The majority of companies analyzed (more than 50 per cent) operate at least one SMNR (Quantity).

H2: The number of SMNRs differs among the three countries (United States, United Kingdom, Germany), and they are more prevalent in the US (Spread).

*RQ2: Which contents and functions are implemented in SMNRs used by the companies in the international sample?*

H3: More than 50 per cent of SMNRs integrate and display press releases and/or news, which is also the core content of traditional online newsrooms (Content).

H4: More than 50 per cent of SMNRs give users the opportunity to categorize and structure content (Information management).

H5: The most important topics dealt with in SMNRs are social, economic and ecological issues which allow the company to position itself in a broad stakeholder environment (Identity management).

H6: More than 50 per cent of SMNRs offer feedback opportunities for users which provide opportunities for a dialogic loop (Relationship management).

H7: More than 50 per cent of SMNRs are characterized by an argumentative communication style, while persuasive and informative approaches are less prevalent (Communication style).

*RQ3: Which independent variables influence the use of SMNRs?*

H8: Companies with higher annual revenues are more likely to use SMNRs than smaller organizations (Size).

H9: Companies serving business-to-consumer markets use SMNRs more often than those operating in a business-to-business environment (Market segments).

## **5. Methodology**

A quantitative content analysis was conducted to answer the research questions posed above. The population is 600 companies in three major markets, the 200 largest companies each in Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States, according to their revenue in the 2011 fiscal year. The selection was based on rankings published by major newspapers and business magazines. In Germany, the ranking “Deutschlands größte Unternehmen in Zahlen” (Germany’s largest companies in numbers) issued by the country’s leading quality newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in July 2012 has been used (F.A.Z., 2012). In the United States, the “Fortune 500 2012” list by *Fortune Magazine* from May 2012 proved to be a valid source (Fortune Magazine, 2012). In the United Kingdom, the sample was composed by combining the “FT UK



500 2012” ranking by the *Financial Times* from July 2012, which includes only listed companies, with the “Top Track 100 2012” ranking of non-listed companies in the UK published in June 2012 by the *Sunday Times* in cooperation with market research company Fast Track (Financial Times, 2012; Sunday Times, 2012).

The study was conducted in a two-week period in August 2012 by a single researcher that speaks English and German, based on a codebook that had been derived from the theoretical framework and a pretest. Three levels of analysis were used. The coded variables refer to the respective SMNR as a whole or to single units of the newsroom. The first level of analysis included all SMNRs of the analyzed companies. The second level of analysis refers to social media applications (i. E. Twitter channels, blogs) aggregated within the newsroom. The units of analysis at the third level are contributions (tweets, blog posts) within those applications, as well as additional content published in the newsroom (press releases, news, and other textual content). An intracoder reliability test was performed using Holsti and Pearson coefficients. The overall reliability was .96 for nominal scales and .80 for metric variables.

In a first step, it was necessary to identify any Social Media Newsrooms used by the companies in the population. This was done by analyzing the corporate website of every company in any country in which the organization is part of the top 200 ranking. Search functions on the website were fed with the keywords “social media”, “newsroom”, “Facebook”, “blog”, “Twitter” and “YouTube”. It was assumed that this should help to identify any SMNRs integrated on the corporate website, SMNRs which are linked but offered on specific websites, as well as external social media channels which were tracked to check whether they are integrated into a newsroom. Additionally, the press or media relations section of each website was examined to verify whether SMNRs are offered under this label. If both search strategies proved to be unsuccessful,

the search engine Google was used to trace any existing SMNRs of the companies. This was done by combining the keywords “social media newsroom”, “social media”, “press” and “newsroom” with the related company name. In a second step, every SMNR which had been identified was analyzed in more detail regarding its structure, content, prevalent communication style etc.

Obviously, SMNRs can be used as a public relations tool on the corporate level, but also by subsidiaries, divisions and brands of the companies researched. It can even be expected that some companies in the sample will utilize social media primarily in those realms, depending on the overall communication strategy. For instance, automotive company Daimler AG operates a specific SMNR in Germany for its passenger car division Mercedes-Benz Classic. External stakeholders, journalists and bloggers will often search for popular brand names instead of the corporation itself on the social web.

This had been taken into account in the content analysis. Brands and subsidiaries of the companies in the sample were identified by consulting the corporate websites, the annual report of the corporations and three major brand rankings (Interbrand, 2011; Millward Brown, 2011; Brand Finance, 2012). Afterwards, the same multi-step approach as described above was used to identify SMNRs operated by brands and subsidiaries.

Overall, 600 companies plus 2,045 subsidiaries and brands in three countries were examined. Statistical analysis software (SPSS version 18) was used to perform the data collection and analysis.

## **6. Results**

The empirical study showed that there is a sharp contrast between the praise for Social Media Newsrooms in the literature and the implementation of these platforms in corporate practice. Moreover, the content analysis suggested that a majority of those companies who have already implemented SMNRs are not utilizing them to a full extent.

### 6.1 *Implementation and types of Social Media Newsrooms (RQ1; H1, H2)*

The first research question asked about the use of SMNRs by the 200 largest companies each in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. The analysis unveils a low *rate of implementation*. In spite of the differentiated research method described above, only 100 SMNRs could be identified: 47 in the US, 34 in Germany, and 19 in the UK.

Some companies operate several SMNRs due to their consolidated subsidiaries and brands. In Germany, 25 out of the 200 largest companies have at least one SMNR (12.5 percent) and nine companies run two SMNRs. In the US, 23 companies operate at least one SMNR (11.5 percent), two companies have two SMNRs, one company has four platforms (Coca-Cola company) and one company (Procter & Gamble company) runs 20 different SMNRs. In the UK, 15 companies operate at least one SMNR (7.5 percent), two companies run two and one company (HSBC Group) has implemented three SMNRs. To sum this up, 63 companies use one or more SMNRs.

When comparing SMNRs on the corporate level, neglecting subsidiaries and brands, 21 out of the 200 largest US companies use an SMNR (10.5 percent), which is about the same ratio as Germany with 18 companies (9.0 per cent), but significantly more than the nine companies identified in the UK (4.5 percent).

Irrespective of the organizational background, SMNRs may differ according to their overall *focus and type*. The total of 100 SMNRs identified was categorized to catch possible differences

in this respect. A majority (55 of 100) of SMNRs mainly contain information directly related to the particular company and its activities. Twelve focus on brands or products, two present the company as an employer, and 25 clearly aim at customers and keep them informed. Six SMNRs are related to specific topics or issues beyond the own company or product world: electro mobility (Siemens), software and business (IBM), current research results (Pfizer), Shell Eco-Marathon (Shell), current music (Virgin Group), or sports and sport sponsorship (G4S Ltd., a company in the security industry). No campaign newsroom could be identified. A country-to-country comparison shows that more than half of the SMNRs identified in the US either provide information about brands and products or are used for customer service and information (55.3 percent). SMNRs in Germany and the United Kingdom are mainly designated to represent the company and its activities. Statistical analysis revealed a significant, moderate correlation between the type of SMNR and the country in which the SMNR is used (Cramer's  $V = .308$ ;  $p = .015$ ).

Hypothesis 1 has to be rejected. Only 10.5 percent (63 out of 600) of the 200 largest companies each in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany operate at least one SMNR. This is far less than the majority, which was expected.

Hypothesis 2 was partly supported by the analysis. SMNRs are more prevalent in the United States. However, the number of companies using at least one SMNR and the number of companies using SMNRs on the corporate level is about the same in Germany. The larger number of newsrooms in the US is mainly driven by the fact that two major consumer companies have implemented several platforms for their brands. Apart from this, SMNRs have clearly been less popular as public relations tools in the United Kingdom until now.

## 6.2 *Elements and contents of Social Media Newsrooms (RQ2; H3)*

The second research question asked about the contents and functions implemented in the SMNRs operated by the companies in the sample.

In this context, it is important to provide a general *overview of the social web applications utilized* by the newsroom platforms. Several software characteristics enable and limit types of contents and functionalities. Table 1 shows how often popular social web technologies and platforms are either integrated into the SMNRs, which means that content is directly fed and displayed to any user visiting the SMNR, or linked to the SMNR, meaning that there is a link but no content is shown within the newsroom itself.

Twitter (integrated by 92 percent of all newsrooms), YouTube (integrated by 86 percent) and Facebook (integrated by 56 percent) are the most popular applications in Social Media Newsrooms. RSS feeds (linked by 62 percent) and Social Bookmarking Services (linked by 50 percent) are also quite relevant. However, due to the nature of those services, they are not used to feed content into the newsroom but to enable users to mark and forward online content. Services mentioned in the category “other applications” include discussion forums, microblogging platform Stock Twits, location-based service Foursquare and photo-sharing service Instagram. A special feature in the SMNR of Telefónica Germany is audio support: text content, i.e. press releases, can be read out loud, and even the entire SMNR can be downloaded as an MP3 file.

Cross-country comparisons show that Facebook is poorly integrated in the UK. Only 21.1 percent of British SMNRs feed Facebook directly, which is significantly less than in the US (57.4 percent) and in Germany (73.5 percent). Germany is also leading when it comes to the implementation of blogs (50.0 percent). Flickr, a social sharing service for photos and similar content, is fed into 42.1 percent of SMNRs in the UK, compared to 35.3 percent in Germany and

only 6.4 percent in the US. With regard to the type of SMNRs, it should be noted that YouTube is almost always integrated in SMNRs focusing on brands, products or customer services (94.6 percent). Blogs are integrated more frequently (47.7 percent) in SMNRs that provide overall information about the company and its activities.

**Table 1**

Social software applications used in SMNRs (N=100, absolute frequencies)

Social web application	SMNRs integrating the application	SMNRs linking to the application	SMNRs using the application overall
YouTube	86	12	98
Twitter	92	5	97
Facebook	56	35	91
RSS Feed	0	62	62
Social Bookmarking	0	50	50
Blog	38	11	49
Social Plug-ins	0	46	46
Flickr	23	12	35
Vodcast	8	22	30
LinkedIn	3	15	18
Google+	4	8	12
Podcast	3	9	12
Xing	1	11	12
Other applications	4	7	11

Slideshare	6	3	9
Pinterest	0	5	5
Vimeo	2	1	3
Wiki	0	3	3

An analysis of different *types of content integrated in SMNRs* shows that 79 of the 100 SMNRs in the sample provide an access to press releases, either by integrating them directly into the newsroom (39 percent) or by linking to press releases on another platform (40 per cent) (see Table 2). News pieces which do not correspond to the formal structure of a press release are displayed in 25 SMNRs and linked by an additional 12 platforms. Fifty newsrooms in the sample integrate press releases and/or news. An external view on the company and related topics is provided by 28 percent of the SMNRs by integrating or linking media monitoring content. Almost the same number of SMNRs offer other textual content like brochures, press kits, forum posts, speeches, or interviews with and biographies of the managing board. Non-textual content is also relevant: 40 percent of the newsrooms have integrated a database with images, pictures or graphics, and 28 percent offer a calendar of events. When it comes to content retrieval, tag clouds which draw attention to key terms and topics are seldom used (13 percent). Surprisingly, 14 SMNRs do not offer any search function, e.g. the newsrooms run by Lufthansa and Dell.

A comparison by country shows a highly significant, moderate correlation between the use of press releases in an SMNR and the country to which the SMNR refers (Cramer's  $V = .444$ ;  $p = .000$ ). Press releases are more frequently integrated in Germany (58.8 percent) than in the UK (47.3 percent) and the US (21.2 percent). It has to be taken into account that many US companies use SMNRs for products, brands and customer communication, which seldom involve press

releases. There is a highly significant, strong correlation between the type of SMNR and the use of press releases (Cramer's  $V = .669$ ;  $p = .000$ ). Typically, SMNRs on the corporate level address journalists and include media-related content.

**Table 2**

Content elements used in SMNRs (N=100, absolute frequencies)

Content element	SMNRs integrating the content element	SMNRs linking to the content element
<i>Text content</i>		
Press releases	39	40
News	25	12
Media monitoring results	10	18
Other textual content	10	17
Press archive	4	28
<i>Other</i>		
Image database	40	–
Calendar	28	–
Tag cloud	13	–
Search function	86	–

Hypothesis 3 was not confirmed. Fifty percent of the SMNRs analyzed integrate and display either press releases or news pieces, i.e., although the target has only just been missed, not a majority. A larger number of newsrooms provide access to press releases and news by



linking to content on other websites. But here the basic idea of a one-stop information platform is not implemented.

### *6.3 Information management and structuring (RQ2; H4)*

In order to provide useful information for a variety of users, Social Media Newsrooms should allow a categorization of content, for example related to specific topics, types of information or social media applications.

The analysis unveiled that only 23 percent of the 100 SMNRs identified included such options. Some examples are the SMNRs run by the Centrica Group, General Electric Healthcare and Mercedes-Benz Social Publish. 36.8 percent of British SMNRs enable users to categorize content, compared to 26.5 percent in Germany and 14.9 percent in the US. Related to this, with the exception of some thematic newsrooms (i.e. sport sponsorship by G4S Ltd.), there is no cross-linking of the aggregated content; posts from different sources are usually not related to each other. This is another indicator that the information management dimension is less developed in most SMNRs.

Hypothesis 4 has to be rejected. Less than a quarter of the Social Media Newsrooms researched give users the opportunity to categorize and structure content (23 percent).

### *6.4 Identity management (RQ2; H5)*

Self-representation on the social web is usually one of the main goals when implementing a Social Media Newsroom. In order to attract broad audiences, a wide spectrum of topics seems to be appropriate. It was estimated that a presentation of views on social, economic and environmental issues would be a widely used technique to stimulate discussions with

stakeholders and to utilize SMNRs for agenda setting. Table 3 shows the results of the content analysis. A distinction was made between whether a topic is presented or discussed on the platform (i.e. in Twitter or blog posts integrated into the newsroom) or whether the platform links to external channels, where the topic can be investigated. Topics were coded based on a number of typical aspects that fall into each cluster. For example, “general facts” refers to information on business segments, revenues and employees, or corporate history, while “social, economic and ecological issues” includes text and audiovisual material which deals with aspects of corporate social responsibility, sustainability and citizenship.

Services and products clearly dominate the self-representation of US, UK and German companies in their Social Media Newsrooms. Only the thematic-style newsroom by G4S Ltd. on sports and sports sponsorship does not refer to market-related offers. There are no significant differences between the three countries in the sample. Fewer than one-third of the SMNRs integrate debates about broader issues, and even fewer (6 percent) explain corporate standpoints on current questions. While more information is accessible via links, the overall identity presented in Social Media Newsrooms is often limited to the business side of the company. Notable examples of companies who foster a more comprehensive approach to identity management by integrating content relevant for a variety of stakeholders are Unilever and Whitbread in the United Kingdom.

Hypothesis 5 was falsified. The most important topics dealt with in SMNRs are services and products, which were identified in 76 percent of the newsrooms, while social, economic and ecological issues and a broader approach to identity management are only prevalent in 31 percent of the SMNRs analyzed.

**Table 3**

Topics discussed in SMNRs (N=100, absolute frequencies)

Topic	SMNRs integrating elements which discuss the topic	SMNRs linking to elements which discuss the topic	SMNRs which do not discuss the topic
Services and products	76	23	1
Social, economic and ecological issues	31	45	24
Cooperation with other organizations	29	28	43
General facts and figures	10	70	20
Corporate standpoints	6	55	39
Mission statement	1	50	49
Strategic principles	0	14	86

### 6.5 Relationship management (RQ2; H6)

Among the most important reasons for implementing Social Media Newsrooms are opportunities establishing dialogic communication and building relationships with stakeholders. It was analyzed to what extent elements integrated in SMNRs offer feedback facilities. Eleven SMNRs allow users to interact directly on the platform, responding to content provided via Twitter, YouTube, blogs, news, press releases or other textual content. But the content analysis did not reveal one single sequence in which a company post was commented on by a user and the company replied again. Twenty-four SMNRs display user comments posted in social media

channels (i.e. Facebook, blogs) on the platform, and 49 SMNRs show comments made by the company in those channels. Here, participation is showcased, but these are not starting points for initiating dialogues. Some SMNRs do not even provide the most basic prerequisites for stakeholder communications: three newsrooms include neither contact details nor a contact form, and six provide an anonymous contact form without any specific details. Only 62 percent of the SMNRs name a contact person, which is especially relevant for journalists and bloggers searching for background information and interview partners.

While the vast majority of SMNRs represent only monologues, examples show that some companies have exploited the participatory potential of SMNRs:

- The Marathon Oil Corporation enables users to tweet directly from its SMNR.
- Stakeholders may comment on blog post when using the SMNRs provided by Berghaus Ltd., General Electric Healthcare, Pfizer Think Science Now, Costa Coffee, Centrica, and Virgin Group (“Redroom”). Virgin and Pfizer also offer comment options for YouTube videos on their platforms.
- General Electric Healthcare, Puma, Berghaus Ltd., Carat and the Manpower Group allow users to give feedback on news pieces on their SMNRs.
- Visitors of the Costa Coffee Press Office SMNR can even submit feedback to press releases; and it is possible to comment on music reviews in the Virgin Group SMNR.

Hypothesis 6 could not be verified. Only a minority (11 percent) of SMNRs offer feedback opportunities for users and provide opportunities to start a dialogue. In fact, not a single dialogue going beyond comments from either the company or a stakeholder were observed during two weeks of analyzing Social Media Newsrooms of the 200 largest companies each in the United

States, the United Kingdom and Germany. Relationship management seems to be a less developed aspect of SMNRs until now.

#### 6.6 *Communication style in Social Media Newsrooms (RQ2; H7)*

The code book for the content analysis used criteria defined and tested by Droller (2012, p. LIII) to identify the prevalent communication style in SMNRs. Up to 30 messages or information chunks displayed in each newsroom were coded. Argumentative communication is coded if a company motivates users to comment, if it replies to statements made by stakeholders or if different positions are discussed. A persuasive style has been coded if a company instructs users to act in a specific way or if it underlines its own position. In the case of mainly neutral information, an informative style is at hand. While the codebook worked quite well, it was still not possible to clearly assign a prevalent communication style for 12 newsrooms in the sample.

**Table 4**

Prevalent communication style in SMNRs (N=100)

Communication style	SMNRs
Informative	50
Persuasive	35
Argumentative	3
Not clearly attributable	12

Results reported in Table 4 show that 50 percent of the analyzed SMNRs predominantly rely on an informative communication style, followed by 35 percent with a persuasive approach and

only 3 percent with an argumentative style. Argumentative elements stimulate dialogues, as previous research has shown (Droller, 2012). This kind of communication was utilized most often in a Social Media Newsroom dealing with career issues by German retailer Otto Group and in corporate SMNRs run by Procter & Gamble and Simyo. There is a significant, moderate correlation between the type of SMNR and its communication style (Cramer's  $V = .335$ ;  $p = .001$ ). A persuasive information style dominates in SMNRs which focus on customer service (52.0 percent) and brands or products (58.3 percent). There is no significant correlation between the prevalent communication style and the country.

Hypothesis 7 was falsified. The majority of Social Media Newsrooms are not characterized by an argumentative communication style, but by informative approaches. The content analysis shows that SMNRs are not designed as platforms which stimulate or even realize dialogues and argumentative communication between companies and stakeholders.

#### *6.7 Independent variables influencing the use of SMNRs (RQ3; H8, H9)*

Implementing and running a Social Media Newsroom needs resources, both financially and in terms of qualified employees who are able to communicate on the social web. It was estimated that companies with a higher annual turnover, with operations in the technology industry, software, telecommunications and media industry and those in business-to-consumer markets use SMNRs more often than those with other characteristics.

Hypothesis 8 has been verified. In order to compare revenues of the 600 companies in the sample (200 each from the US, UK and Germany), the values reported by the rankings mentioned above (Fortune Magazine, 2012; Financial Times, 2012; Sunday Times, 2012; F.A.Z., 2012) were converted into the euro currency. We excluded companies in the financial sector because their

level of revenue is not comparable to other industries. The conversion was made in August 2012 based on an exchange rate of 1.25 USD and 0.79 BPD equaling 1.00 EUR. Spearman and Kendall's tau-b correlation measures were applied to test the relationship between the existence of at least one SMNR and the turnover for each company. The relationship proved to be slightly positive and significant (Spearman's rho = .131; Kendall's tau-b = .106; p = .002). It can be assumed that companies that have a higher revenue use more budgets for the implementation of social media activities including SMNRs.

Hypothesis 9 was verified. Business-to-consumer companies use SMNRs more frequently (12.3 percent) than business-to-business companies (5.9 percent). Most SMNRs are implemented by companies which operate in both segments (14.2 percent). Notably, HSBC Bank offers one newsroom for business banking and another one for personal finances. There is a significant weak correlation between a company's business segment and the use of SMNRs (Cramer's V = .130; p = .028). This weak correlation is also confirmed by the PRE-level lambda test (significance value  $\leq$  .004).

## **7. Discussion and conclusion**

The empirical analysis shows that the *potential of Social Media Newsrooms for public relations and corporate communications* is not fully exploited in practice, at least not by large companies in key markets which are especially exposed to the rising complexity of information on the social web. Only 10.5 percent of the 600 largest companies in the United States, United Kingdom and Germany have implemented at least one SMNR. The rate differs only slightly, with Germany and the US leading the field, followed by the UK. Overall, 100 SMNRs have been identified and analyzed in detail. The number is highest in the US due to the fact that a number of companies

run several newsrooms, not only on the corporate level, but also focused on specific brands. While SMNRs were originally introduced in public relations as a means to enhance traditional media newsrooms on corporate websites and foster relationships with journalists and bloggers, many US companies use them as an instrument for marketing and consumer communications. Examples of this type of SMNR are the platforms provided by Florida Power & Light Company and Pampers (Procter & Gamble). This was observed less often in Germany and the UK, probably due to data protection laws in the European Union, which require more caution when interacting with private users.

A closer look at *elements and content* integrated in and linked by SMNRs indicates a focus on basic channels like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and blogs, as well as on content which is also accessible through traditional online newsrooms (press releases, news, images). Headlines and links to external views about the company, i.e. by integrating content from media or social media monitoring, are seldom implemented.

From the *users' point of view*, many benefits ascribed to Social Media Newsrooms are not put into practice. The literature review concluded that SMNRs can provide a one-stop platform on the social web for obtaining, researching and verifying information and multimedia content about a company and related issues, as well as for contacting representatives of the organization. While all of the newsrooms analyzed aggregate information from several sources, three out of four fail to offer features for categorizing and structuring content. Tag clouds are only implemented in 13 out of 100 SMNRs. Some platforms even lack search functions. With the exception of one thematic newsroom, there is no cross linking between the aggregated content displayed in SMNRs. Basic information like mission statements are often missing. Most newsrooms are still far away from offering a one-stop information base for journalists, bloggers



and other stakeholders. Along this line, feedback options, contact data and other opportunities to start a dialogue with the company are only offered by a minority of the SMNRs evaluated (11 percent). With the exception of six newsrooms that focus on specific topics and use an agenda-setting approach, most platforms resemble traditional “corporate speech”. While additional research involving user surveys and evaluating online statistics would be necessary, it is quite safe to claim that most SMNRs do not fulfill the principle of usefulness of information (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

From a *company and public relations perspective*, a similar conclusion has to be drawn. SMNRs can be classified as a lost opportunity for strategic communication. The basic idea of establishing an improved communication service for external and internal stakeholders, including journalists and bloggers, which might also reduce inquiries via phone and e-mail and thus reduce costs, is seldom put into practice. There are some improvements for information management, but it is questionable whether this justifies the investments for setting up and running a newsroom. The same is true for relationship management. Missing feedback options and contact data as well as the marginal use of an argumentative communication style reduce the chance for initiating dialogues and building relationships on the social web. Last but not least, only a few companies utilize the vast opportunities of SMNRs for identity management. Framing discussions and influencing the public agenda by aggregating content in a strategic manner and by positioning the company and its representatives in a broader stakeholder context are rare. Products and services are the most important topics in many newsrooms. This adds to the overall impression that most companies use Social Media Newsrooms in a quite old-fashioned manner for reaching out and for conducting monologues. However, a closer look at thematic newsrooms like those by Siemens on electro mobility and by Pfizer on current research results as well as stakeholder-

specific SMNRs like the career newsroom run by the Otto Group might show paths to a more comprehensive and strategic use of such platforms.

It has to be noted that the study – as any empirical research in the dynamic field of online public relations – has some limitations. The extensive data collection was limited to Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. So the results cannot be considered as being representative for other countries, especially for countries with different intensity of social media use in society and by organizations. Also, the sample consisted of listed corporations and it can be assumed that small and medium sized companies as well as non-profit and governmental organizations use Social Media Newsrooms in a different way. Qualitative studies are a necessary help to research strategic and tactical objectives which motivate public relations professionals to start SMNRs. Moreover, it should be investigated to what extent and how SMNRs are used by journalists, bloggers, consumers and other stakeholders. Such research should combine uses and gratification approaches with theories of productive and interactive audiences on the social web (Sullivan, 2013).

From the professional point of view, the study provides the first comprehensive insight into an important public relations instrument that has been propagated in the industry for more than five years. Both the theoretical considerations and the empirical results should enable public relations practitioners to analyze existing SMNRs for their organizations or clients. The study should also help them develop newsrooms that utilize the full power of such platforms in terms of information, identity and relationship management. Social Media Newsrooms offer a full range of opportunities for public relations. As in many other fields, it needs strategic thinking and creative power to unfold the potential and productivity in corporate practice.

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