

# 11 The Dialogic Potential of Social Media

## Assessing the Ethical Reasoning of Companies' Public Relations on Facebook and Twitter

*Angela M. Lee, Homero Gil de Zuñiga, Renita Coleman, and Thomas J. Johnson*

### INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of interactive communication that more easily allows consumers to contact public relations offices, researchers are increasingly investigating the dialogic potential of online communication for maintaining relations with the general public (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Kent and Taylor (1998) defined dialogic communication as “any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (p. 325) with the purpose of engaging in honest, open, and ethical give-and-take with the public. The authors urged public relations organizations to facilitate dialogue by establishing channels and procedures for fostering dialogue, including social network sites (i.e., Facebook and Twitter). Specifically, public relations professionals argue social network sites and Twitter facilitate two-way communication by opening up new direct avenues of communication between organizations and their public, providing more transparency by creating additional information channels and making it difficult for those who practice public relations to help companies manage, regulate, and influence information. That is, the extent to which companies may systematically control the mode of company-to-public (and public-to-company) communicative interaction and information flow. This study puts these assertions to an empirical test by analyzing comments on the Facebook and Twitter accounts of 25 randomly selected *Fortune 500* companies according to which of the four Excellence Theory models they best describe, and how well they achieve each of the five objectives—truthfulness, authenticity, respectfulness, equitability, and social responsibility—of the TARES test. By analyzing the ethicality of public relations practitioner’s comments on Facebook and Tweets, this study adds the dimension of behavior to the broader studies of the ethical reasoning of public relations practitioners; what they *actually do* is addressed in this research, and can be considered in context of other studies that show what they are capable of.

Public relations practitioners believe that social media have made public relations firms more transparent and have improved the ethical perceptions of PR because the public perceives that social media create a truthful, transparent, and ethical culture (Wright & Hinson, 2012). Similarly, open conversations with the public through social network sites and Twitter can make a public relations organization appear more transparent and ethical (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Nordstrom, 2012).

This study analyzed the ethicality of public relations practitioner's edited comments on Facebook and Tweets to add the dimension of behavior to the broader studies of the ethical reasoning of public relations practitioners; what they *actually do* will be determined in this research, and can be considered in context of other studies that show what they are capable of.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To better understand whether and how *Fortune 500* companies are (or are not) using social media sites like Facebook and Twitter in an *ethical* fashion, the following research questions are proposed:

### Excellence Theory

RQ1a: How often do the *Fortune 500* companies use social media to achieve symmetrical communication?

RQ1b: Do such practices differ between Facebook and Twitter?

### TARES test

RQ2a: How truthful, authentic, respectful, equitable, and socially responsible are the *Fortune 500* companies' social media content?

RQ2b: Do such practices differ between Facebook and Twitter?

### Baker's Trustworthiness

RQ3a: How trustworthy are the *Fortune 500* companies on their social media sites?

RQ3b: Do such practices differ between Facebook and Twitter?

## METHOD

This study used one constructed week from a six-month period to content analyze Facebook and Twitter accounts of 25 randomly selected *Fortune 500* companies.

## Sampling

Constructed sampling is a stratified sampling method that effectively yields a representative sample for media content by minimizing possible skew due to cyclic variations (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005; Lacy, Riffe, Stoddard, Martin, & Chang, 2001). Constructed sampling has been found to produce sufficient, if not better, generalizable media content than simple random sampling or consecutive day sampling both offline (Stempel, 1952; Riffe, Aust & Lacy, 1993) and online (Hester & Dougall, 2007). Because large corporations' communication habits with the general public are unlikely to vary dramatically on a daily basis for practical purposes (e.g., to maintain a coherent online presence and follow centralized customer service protocol) as proposed by (Culnan, McHugh, & Zubillaga, 2010; Scott, 2011), this study adopted this recommendation and created one constructed week.

The constructed week was drawn between September 2011 and February 2012 (N = 182 days).

## Sample

This study analyzed 25 *Fortune 500* companies. The companies were randomly selected by using a random number generator. Only companies with working Facebook (e.g., ones that enable wall activities) and Twitter accounts were used for analysis. The following 25 *Fortune 500* companies, with respective *Fortune 500* ranks in parentheses, were used in the study: General Electric (6), AT&T (12), Pfizer (31), Target (33), Lockheed Martin (52), Cisco Systems (62), Morgan Stanley (63), Amazon (78), Allstate (89), Macy's (107), Kimberly-Clark (130), Nike (135), Progressive (164), Qualcomm (222), Visa (297), Henry Schein (317), Charter (333), Mattel (392), Clorox (411), Pitney Bowes (421), Ryder System (437), Avaya (445), Con-way (454), Rockwell Collins (478), and Dick's Sporting Goods (464).

## Unit of Analysis

Each company's Facebook and Twitter pages were examined. The unit of analysis was the individual tweet or Facebook post. For Facebook, everything that had been posted during the constructed week was coded; on Twitter only original tweets were coded (e.g., no retweets).

## Data

All of the data were collected over a 24-hour period by one of the authors and two graduate students from a large research university in the Southwestern U.S. Training sessions were held for all personnel involved in data collection. All of the posts and original tweets on the 25 companies' Facebook and Twitter accounts were collected.

## Codebook

Grounded in the Excellence Theory and the TARES test, and adopting measures created in previous studies (Baker & Martinson, 2001; Lieber, 2005; Grunig, 2008; Grunig & Grunig, 2010; Martinson, 1995; McCoy & Black, 2002; Lee & Cheng, 2010; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Cobat, 2005), this study created 25 variables to measure symmetrical communication in the Excellence Theory (e.g., "Does the site ask what their consumers need or want?"), truthfulness (e.g., "Are the responses from the company to consumer's questions reasonably informative?"), authenticity (e.g., "Are more than half of the photos used candid photos?"), respect (e.g., "Are the company's responses to audiences respectful?"), equity (e.g., "Has information on the page been presented in an unnecessarily convoluted fashion?"), and social responsibility (e.g., "Is the information presented clearly and easily understandable?") in the TARES test, and trustworthiness (e.g., "Does the company answer questions on the page, if asked?") as a measure of moral authority and ethical practices in public relations (Baker, 2002).

## Inter-Coder Reliability

Two graduate students from a large research university in the Southwestern U.S. were trained as coders for this study. They were both fluent English speakers and experienced Internet users familiar with Facebook and Twitter. Additionally, authors met with both coders to discuss observed disparities. The group worked as needed taking both coders' accounts and suggestions into consideration to generate a final codebook as objectively reliable as possible.

For example, one of the variables for truthfulness of the message from the TARES test asks whether the company asks questions and also offers answer in the same spot (e.g., "Want to have better hair? Try our new shampoo"). Coders had a different interpretation on the issue so it was discussed a common understanding. Several similar issues as this one were addressed and discrepancies resolved.

Coders went through extensive training and expressed confidence in understanding the codebook. The authors generated content randomization of about 30% of the total collected data used to calculate inter-coder reliability at the beginning of the coding process. Scott's Pi for individual variables are: Does the site ask what their consumers need or want? 1.0; Does the company interact with consumers on the site? .72; Does the company engage in dialogue with consumers? .88; Are the responses from the company to consumer's questions reasonably informative? .79; PR language: Does the company ask questions and also offer answer in the same post? 1.0; Visual: Do more than half of the photos used look manipulated? .68; Is the information presented on the page

useful or beneficial to audiences? .74; Are the company's responses to audiences respectful? .89; Has information on the page been presented in an unnecessarily convoluted fashion? .50; Does the information take advantage of human weaknesses such as anxieties, fears, low self-esteem, etc.? .50; Is the information presented clearly and easily understandable? .96; Is the information presented by the company harmful to individuals or society? .94; Does the company offer reward if someone does something for society? .83; Does the company encourage audiences to give back to society in ways other than offering personal reward? 1.0; Does the company answer questions on the page, if asked? .81; Does the page enable troubleshooting? .74; Is gratitude (e.g., "thanks" or "thank you") from consumers found on the page? .69; Is the page professional (e.g., use formal or distant language, no "lol," "nm," or slang, etc.) .96; Does the page allow Q&A? .53; Does the page have emails listed for contact? .53; Phone numbers listed for contact? .63; Private messaging function? .95; Does the page provide private policy info? .63.

The way Scott's Pi is calculated makes it conducive to skewed values for variables that do not have a lot of variation. For example, even although two variables have a .50 Scott's Pi, both variables actually have 99% coder-agreement. To ensure that all the variables are reliable, the primary coder analyzed all the pretest data in detail to systematically document variation in variables, and the variables are deemed acceptable despite the apparently low Scott's Pi because they have extraordinarily high coder-agreement (above 97%), and are only suffering low Scott's Pi due to the nature of this particular reliability test. After accounting for these special cases, Scott's Pi for all variables analyzed in this study range between .72 and 1.0, which is deemed acceptable by conventional standards.

### **Operationalization**

All of the indices used in this study are not uni-dimensional repetition factors. For example, "Does the company use 2 or more adjectives in one sentence?" and "Are more than half of the photos used candid photos?" make up the "authenticity" index, there is no inherent reason to believe that verbal and visual authenticity need or should coexist on a company's social media site (e.g., a company may communicate in an authentic fashion verbally but not visually). For this reason, reliability tests are not computed for these multi-dimension indices.

Sum of the following three variables made up the "excellence theory: symmetrical communication" index: Does the site ask what their consumers need or want? Does the company interact with consumers on the site? Does the company engage in dialogue with consumers?

Sum of the following three variables made up the "truthfulness" index: Are the responses from the company to consumer's questions reasonably

informative? Does the company ask questions and also offer answer in the same post? Do more than half of the photos used look photoshopped?

Sum of the following two variables made up the “authenticity” index: Does the company use 2 or more adjectives in one sentence? Are more than half of the photos used candid photos?

Sum of the following two variables made up the “respect” index: Is the information presented on the page useful or beneficial to audiences? Are the company’s responses to audiences respectful?

Sum of the following two variables made up the “equity” index: Has information on the page been presented in an unnecessarily convoluted fashion? Does the information take advantage of human weaknesses such as anxieties, fears, low self-esteem, etc.?

Sum of the following four variables made up the “social responsibility” index: Is the information presented clearly and easily understandable? Is the information presented by the company harmful to individuals or society? Does the company offer reward if someone does something for society? Does the company encourage audiences to give back to society in ways other than offering personal reward?

Sum of the following nine variables made up the “trustworthiness” index: Does the company answer questions on the page, if asked? Does the page enable troubleshooting? Is gratitude from consumers found on the page? Is the page professional? Does the page allow Q&A? Does the page have emails listed for contact? Phone numbers listed for contact? Private message functions? Does the page provide privacy policy info?

## RESULTS

As Table 11.1 indicates, *Fortune 500* Companies differ in their management of ethical communication on Facebook and Twitter. Specifically, *Fortune 500* Companies did the most poorly in achieving equitable communication, with over 90% of all the posts examined in the data on both Facebook and Twitter *not* achieving equitable communication. On the other hand, *Fortune 500* Companies successfully achieved trustworthy communication on both Facebook and Twitter.

RQ1a asks how often *Fortune 500* companies use social media to achieve symmetrical communication (range = 0 to 3). The data suggest that these companies do, in an overall trend, use social media to achieve symmetrical communication to a certain degree ( $M = .75$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ).

RQ1b asks whether *Fortune 500* companies use Facebook and Twitter differently to achieve symmetrical communication. Tables 11.2 and 11.3 provide the comparison. The data suggest that overall Twitter ( $M = .94$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) was used more efficiently than Facebook ( $M = .57$ ,  $SD = .99$ ) to achieve symmetrical communication, and the difference is statistically significant;  $t(26) = 3.07$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Table 11.1 Summary of the Extent to Which Fortune 500 Companies Failed to Communicate Ethically on Facebook and Twitter

	% Scoring 0 in each index	
	Facebook	Twitter
Symmetrical Communication	70.3	53.7
Truthfulness	22.9	2.0
Authenticity	81.1	95.4
Respect	2.9	0
Equity	91.2	93.1
Social responsibility	17.4	18.2
Trustworthy	0	0

RQ2a explores the extent to which *Fortune 500* companies' social media content is truthful (0 to 3), authentic (0 to 2), respectful (0 to 2), equitable (0 to 2), and socially responsible (0 to 4). Because these five indices are based on different scales, the following comparisons were done after each mean was divided by its own range. The data suggest that their content is most respectful ( $M = .87, SD = .23$ ), followed by truthful ( $M = .36, SD = .19$ ), social responsible ( $M = .25, SD = .15$ ), authentic ( $M = .06, SD = .17$ ), and equitable ( $M = .04, SD = .14$ ). Of these differences, Paired-Sample T tests revealed that respectful is significantly different from truthful;  $t(73) = 17.35, p < .001$ ; social responsibility;  $t(98) = 22.03, p < .001$ , authenticity;  $t(103) = 27.34, p < .001$  and equity;  $t(100) = 27.33, p < .001$ . Truthful is significantly different from authenticity;  $t(97) = 7.04, p < .001$  or equity;  $t(97) = 9.49, p < .001$ . Social responsibility is significantly different from authenticity;  $t(251) = 12.21, p < .001$  or equity;  $t(252) = 18.19, p < .001$  (Also see Table 11.4).

The data suggest these companies' content on Twitter is more truthful ( $M=1.20, SD=.45$  compared to  $M=.96, SD=.65$ );  $t(17) = 1.65, n.s.$ , respectful ( $M=1.76, SD=.43$  compared to  $M=1.69, SD=.53$ );  $t(18) = .89, n.s.$ , and socially responsible ( $M=1.00, SD=.62$  compared to  $M=.96, SD=.58$ ) than on Facebook;  $t(23) = 2.25, p < .001$ ., whereas their content on Facebook is more authentic ( $M=.19, SD=.41$  compared to  $M=.05, SD=.21$ );  $t(26) = .42, n.s.$ , and equitable ( $M=.09, SD=.31$  compared to  $M=.07, SD=.25$ ) than on Twitter;  $t(26) = 1.88, p < .001$  (Also see Table 7.4).

RQ3a asks how trustworthy *Fortune 500* companies are on their social media sites. The data suggest that they on average score below the median on trustworthiness (range 0 to 9,  $M=3.96, SD=1.44$ ).

RQ3b explores difference in trustworthiness between *Fortune 500* companies' use of Facebook and Twitter. The data suggest that *Fortune 500* companies are more trustworthy on Twitter ( $M=4.70, SD=1.15$ ) than on Facebook ( $M=3.26, SD=1.33$ );  $t(15) = 1.46, n.s.$

Table 11.2 Ethical Practices of Fortune 500 Companies on Facebook: Mean (SD)

Company	Excellence Theory				TARES Test				Baker	
	Symmetrical Communication	Truthfulness	Authenticity	Respect	Equity	Social Responsibility	Trustworthiness			
GE	2.29 (1.11)	1.33 (.52)	.57 (.53)	1.67 (.52)	0 (0)	1.00 (0)	3.17 (.98)			
AT&T	1.00 (1.29)	1.00 (.71)	.43 (.53)	1.67 (.58)	.29 (.49)	1.29 (.76)	4.00 (1.00)			
Pfizer	0 (0)	0 (0)	.14 (.38)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.60 (.55)	2.0 (0)			
Target	.14 (.38)	.33 (.58)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.29 (.49)	1.33 (.52)	1.67 (1.15)			
Lockheed Martin	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.50 (.58)	1.00 (0)			
Cisco Systems	.57 (1.13)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	.83 (.41)	0 (0)			
Morgan Stanley	0 (0)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	0 (0)			
Amazon	.57 (.53)	.50 (.58)	.29 (.49)	0 (0)	.43 (.53)	1.50 (.55)	2.20 (.84)			
Allstate	1.57 (1.51)	1.25 (.50)	.14 (.38)	1.75 (.50)	0 (0)	.83 (.41)	4.33 (.58)			
Macy's	.71 (.76)	1.40 (.55)	.71 (.49)	0 (0)	.57 (.53)	1.86 (.69)	3.00 (.71)			
Kimberly-Clark	.14 (.38)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	.50 (.71)	4.40 (.55)			



Nike	.29 (.76)	.50 (.71)	.43 (.53)	0 (0)	.14 (.38)	1.00 (.82)	1.00 (0)
Progressive	0 (0)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	1.50 (.71)	0 (0)	.67 (0)	0 (0)
Qualcomm	.43 (.53)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.80 (.45)	0 (0)
Visa	.43 (1.13)	0 (0)	.29 (.49)	1.00 (0)	0 (0)	.75 (.50)	0 (0)
Henry Schein	0 (0)	1.00 (0)	.14 (.38)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	.60 (.55)	2.00 (0)
Charter	1.43 (1.40)	1.00 (.71)	.14 (.38)	1.50 (.58)	.43 (.79)	1.17 (.41)	4.80 (.84)
Mattel	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Clorox	1.00 (1.15)	1.33 (.58)	.14 (.38)	1.50 (.71)	.14 (.38)	1.00 (0)	3.67 (1.15)
Pitney Bowes	.43 (1.13)	1.00 (0)	.29 (.49)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	1.00 (.71)	4.00 (0)
Ryder System	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.75 (.50)	0 (0)
Avaya	.43 (.79)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	.75 (.50)	0 (0)
Con-way	1.00 (1.00)	.67 (.58)	.43 (.79)	2.00 (.00)	0 (0)	1.00 (.63)	4.00 (1.00)
Rockwell Collins	.14 (.38)	0 (0)	.29 (.49)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1.00 (0)	0 (0)
Dick's Sporting Goods	1.57 (1.13)	.67 (.58)	.43 (.53)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	1.00 (0)	4.00 (1.00)

Table 11.3 Ethical Practices of Fortune 500 Companies on Twitter: Mean (SD)

Company	Excellence Theory				TARES Test				Baker	
	Symmetrical Communication	Truthfulness	Authenticity	Respect	Equity	Social Responsibility	Trustworthiness			
GE	2.71 (.49)	1.25 (.50)	0 (0)	1.86 (.38)	0 (0)	1.00 (0)	3.75 (.50)			
AT&T	1.43 (1.40)	.75 (.50)	0 (0)	1.50 (.58)	.14 (.38)	1.60 (.55)	4.00 (0)			
Pfizer	.29 (.76)	1.00 (0)	0 (0)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	.83 (.41)	5.00 (4.24)			
Target	2.00 (0)	1.29 (.49)	0 (0)	2.00 (0)	.14 (.38)	1.29 (.49)	5.00 (0)			
Lockheed Martin	1.43 (1.13)	1.00 (0)	.43 (.53)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	.83 (.41)	3.50 (.71)			
Cisco Systems	1.58 (1.51)	1.00 (0)	0 (0)	1.75 (.50)	0 (0)	.83 (.41)	4.75 (1.26)			
Morgan Stanley	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)			
Amazon	0(0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0(0)	.67 (1.15)	0 (0)			
Allstate	1.57 (1.51)	1.25 (.50)	.14 (.38)	1.75 (.50)	0 (0)	.83 (.41)	4.33 (.58)			
Macy's	1.86 (.90)	1.50 (.55)	.43 (.53)	1.83 (.41)	.43 (.53)	1.83 (.41)	4.40 (.55)			

Kimberly- Clark	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.50 (.71)	0 (0)
Nike	1.86 (.90)	1.00 (0)	0 (0)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1.57 (.53)	5.00 (.63)
Progressive	1.71 (.95)	1.40 (.55)	0 (0)	1.40 (.55)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.86 (.38)	6.75 (.50)
Qualcomm	1.00 (1.00)	1.00 (0)	.14 (.38)	1.00 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1.00 (.63)	4.00 (0)
Visa	.14 (.38)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.60 (.55)	0 (0)
Henry Schein	.86 (.90)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1.33 (.58)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1.00 (.63)	0 (0)
Charter	.57 (.79)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.29 (.49)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.80 (.45)	0 (0)
Mattel	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Clorox	1.00 (1.00)	1.50 (.71)	0 (0)	1.50 (.58)	0 (0)	.43 (.53)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1.33 (.52)	4.50 (.71)
Pitney Bowes	.86 (1.21)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.80 (.84)	4.00 (0)
Ryder System	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0(0)	0 (0)
Avaya	.29 (.49)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.14 (.38)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1.00 (.63)	0 (0)
Con-way	.57 (.98)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2.00 (.00)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	.83 (.41)	0 (0)
Rockwell Collins	.43 (1.13)	0 (0)	.17 (.41)	1.50 (.71)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1.00 (0)	0 (0)
Dick's Sporting Goods	1.57 (1.13)	1.00 (0)	0 (0)	2.00 (0)	0 (0)	.14 (.38)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1.29 (.95)	4.00 (0)

Table 11.4 Key Differences Between *Fortune* 500 Companies' Twitter and Facebook Uses

	<i>Twitter</i>		<i>Facebook</i>		<i>T-Test</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Symmetrical Communication	.94	1.10	.57	.99	t(26)= 3.07***
Truthfulness	1.20	.45	.96	.65	t(17)= 1.65
Authenticity	.05	.21	.19	.41	t(26)= .42
Respect	1.76	.43	1.69	.53	t(18)=.89
Equity	.07	.25	.09	.31	t(26)= 1.88***
Social responsibility	1.00	.62	.96	.58	t(23)= 2.25***
Trustworthy	4.70	1.15	3.26	1.33	t(15)= 1.46

Note: \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001.

## DISCUSSION

Scholars have long argued that a two-way symmetrical model is considered to be ethically superior to other models because it incorporates reciprocity and mutual understanding through communication exchange (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006; Grunig & Hunt, 2004). Therefore, organizations are increasingly using social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter to increase dialogue with important stakeholders because they facilitate two-way communication by opening up new direct avenues of communication between organizations and their publics.

This study analyzed Facebook and Twitter accounts of 25 randomly selected *Fortune* 500 companies to shed light over the degree to which these companies practice the two-way symmetry model and explores how ethically public relations practitioners engage in Facebook and Twitter by exploring how well they achieve symmetrical communication (Excellence Theory) and each of the five objectives of the TARES test.

### Ethical Implications for the Practice of Social Media

Social media are more interactive than most earlier Internet components (Gil de Zuñiga, 2002; 2006), and can create a more human face for a company by allowing social network site users to become “friends” with and “like” the organization (Men & Tsai, 2012), several scholars question the degree to which organizations are taking advantage of Facebook (McCorkindale, 2010; Nordstrom, 2012; Waters et al., 2009) and Twitter (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Recent studies suggest companies are doing a better job of employing social network sites and Twitter to build dialogue

with various stakeholders (Brightman, 2012), but that was not apparent in this study. Companies were gauged on three measures of symmetrical communication, whether they asked consumers what they want, whether they interact with consumers and whether they engaged in dialogue and the 25 companies totaled a .75, suggesting that most companies did not engage in symmetrical communication on any of the three measures. Companies did particularly poorly engaging in dialogue on Facebook, as only 29% engaged in dialogue by replying to comments and asking for feedback and only 27% attempted to engage in dialogue. Only one company, General Electric, scored above a 2 for both Twitter and Facebook. Five companies recorded a zero on this measure for Twitter and seven for Facebook. One might expect that Facebook might produce more symmetrical communication than Twitter because of the ease of responding to those posting to a Facebook page and because to engage in a dialogue with Twitter users, companies must first follow them then engage the Tweeter. However, companies actually engaged in more dialogic communication on Twitter than Facebook, perhaps because although the 140-character limit on Twitter might make it more difficult to post long messages to followers, it makes it easier for the companies to respond. Still, companies respond to customers less than half of the time, engaging in dialogue about 38% of the time and interacting in general 40%.

Public relations practitioners overwhelmingly say that credibility is a problem in their industry and most say they do not receive ethics training on the job (Lee & Cheng, 2012). This study found that trustworthiness is indeed a problem with public relations organizations. Nearly all Facebook pages allowed questions and answers from customers, but only 60% of Facebook groups did. Fewer than 10% posted information on their profile such as email and phone numbers for contacts and allowed private message function, although 20% of companies did allow direct messaging to their companies. The 25 companies averaged fewer than four points on the nine-point scale. Only two companies, Charter and Allstate, scored above a 4 out of 9 on the Facebook trustworthiness measures. On the other hand, 8 companies scored above a 4 on the Twitter trustworthiness measures, including Progressive, which scored a 6.75. Past studies suggest that engaging in more dialogic communication can build trust in an organization (Men & Tsai, 2012). Although companies on Twitter were more likely to engender trust by engaging in troubleshooting, spell out a privacy policy, and be more professional in their posts, they also put more trust in their users by allowing anonymous comments, questions, and answers and having a private messaging function.

Lee and Chen (2012) discovered that 80% of PR practitioners perceived that the rise social media posed an ethical problem. Indeed, the increased use of social media and Twitter has not led to an increase in ethical behaviors as measured by the TARES test. The *Fortune 500* companies only scored highly on one of the ethical areas, respect, as the overwhelming percentage

of companies did present information that was beneficial and treated their users on the social media sites with respect during their responses. But this is a measure of tone and style of messages, rather than interactivity. Companies were almost always respectful to their consumers and almost never wrote in convoluted sentences. However, scores for usefulness were much lower (52.4% on Facebook, 63.7% on Twitter). Means scores for truthfulness, authenticity, equity, and social responsibility were all low. For instance, for social responsibility, companies averaged less than one on a five-point scale, and for equity scores were .08 on the three-point scale. Fewer than 5% of the posts on both Facebook and Twitter offered rewards for doing something for society and even fewer encouraged consumers to give back to society. Furthermore, 18 companies scored 0 on the three-point equity scores on Facebook and numbers of companies that scored 0 on truthfulness, authenticity, and respect were in double digits. Only five of 20 companies did not receive 0 for authenticity on Twitter. Although Twitter allows people to post pictures, fewer than 3% put up candid shots that might humanize the company. Part of the reason why scores were so low is that the companies did not regularly update their Twitter feed and Facebook page, leaving their social media sites like cyber ghost towns. Another reason scores were so low is that companies often failed to use their social media to inform or engage their users, using them instead to put up strictly public relations items of little interest to their readers (such as what their CEO was doing) or use them to promote sales.

Differences were found on the TARES ethics scores between Twitter and Facebook. Facebook scored higher on authenticity of the persuader and Twitter on being truthful and socially responsible. Differences may be because of the nature of the two social media. People are more likely to friend people they already know offline and perceive Facebook as an online community (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), whereas on Twitter people may follow public figures like politicians and celebrities whom they do not know (Bekafigo & McBride, 2012). Not surprising, then, people might see company speakers as more authentic on Facebook. On the other hand, because Facebook is seen as a more social outlet, companies may be more likely to employ Twitter to send more news and thus Twitter messages are more likely to be truthful and socially responsible.

### Limitations

There are some caveats to this study that should be taken into consideration to improve forthcoming studies, as such we propose this limitations as challenging suggestions for future research. First, this study examined a random sample of *Fortune 500* companies, but only 25 were studied, which represents 5% of the total companies encompassing the list. It is possible that a larger sample may have yielded somewhat different responses. The TARES test has been most commonly used to study advertising messages, particularly public service messages such as anti-smoking (Lee & Chen, 2010). In

this study, we have drawn our measures based on this test, which may not be the most appropriate for social media. Nevertheless, we are confident this test translates well when it comes to explaining social media messages albeit only scores of studies will prove this feasibility as empirical evidence continues to accumulate. These are all, of course, suggestions for future research to enhance our understanding on the dialogic potential of social media.

### Discussion Questions

1. How often do the *Fortune 500* companies use social media to achieve symmetrical communication? Do such practices differ between Facebook and Twitter?
2. How truthful, authentic, respectful, equitable, and socially responsible are the *Fortune 500* companies' social media content? Do such practices differ between Facebook and Twitter?
3. How trustworthy are the *Fortune 500* companies on their social media sites? Do such practices differ between Facebook and Twitter?

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