Hearing out Your Audiences: Models, Means, and Practices for Social Media Listening in PR

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Abstract
The current article looks to explore the current practices and means of social media listening in public relations by understanding how brands may observe, pay attention to, and listen to their stakeholders. We rely on the growing interest that tool developers have shown in the Marcom domain and in the need of gathering, processing, and analyzing the huge amount of data generated by the online environment. With a focus on social media listening, the article aims to draw a comprehensive picture of the means and practices on one hand and the ongoing conceptual framework on the other hand. In doing so, we looked into the guidance and know-how made available by business providers of social media listening services.

Keywords
Social media listening; social media conversations; online PR; Marcom; stakeholders' conversations.

Introduction

During the last decade, public relations faced a significant shift towards how messages and images are being communicated and spread due to online and social media. The widespread among all society's levels of online communication platforms also changed the way audiences consume and seek information both locally and globally (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2008; Wang, Cheng, & Sun, 2021; Davies & Hobbs, 2020). Furthermore, the changes that challenged the field of public relations may vary from one region to another as a consequence of the different means and

practices, traditions, and information technology infrastructure (for example between US and Europe, US and the region Asia-Pacific, Western Europe and Eastern Europe and so on) (Raaz & Wehmeier, 2011; Sheehan, 2020; Halff & Gregory, 2014; Dolea, 2012; Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2012; Nessmann, 1995; Ruler & Verčič, 2008).

Both scholars (Ferguson, 2018) and practitioners stressed the importance of gaining recognition of public relations as a field in the context of the online communication environment. Practitioners in public relations struggle to consolidate their positions, legitimize their work in competing for digital marketing and digital advertising (Rose & Miller, 1994; Thurlow, 2009; Hackley, 2018; L'Etang et al., 2015). Changes that shaped public relations' transition to the digital era are constructed around but are not limited to, content creation, integrating new communication channels, and measuring the effectiveness of campaigns. However, as in the case of every emerging field having to face a major framework change like the one driven by the digital transition, public relations had to redefine and reshape its core activities, techniques, and tools. The process is far from reaching its endpoint due to scarce regulation and unsettled conceptualization and methodological grounds.

When struggling to come into prominence as an established field within the digital environment, public relations must provide solid arguments, models, and ways to measure, explore and understand relationships, networks, and interactions (Macnamara, 2018). Significant progress has been made in this direction, but more actions are needed if the domain is to step beyond agreeing to a common set of principles (such as those assumed by AMEC - International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication) and to offer an understanding of how stakeholders react to brands actions and messages in various circumstances.

This paper is centered around social media listening and its role in measurement in public relations, aiming to draw a comprehensive picture of the main concepts, features, and means of understanding, observing, and paying attention to what stakeholders have to say about events and brands. Our discussion about social media listening starts with a brief description of the practical aspects following conversations and paying attention to messages, products, services, and ideas by users of social media platforms. It continues then by going through main challenges related to how both the business sector and the academia are constructing meanings around the concepts of social media listening and media monitoring.

How do brands listen to audiences' conversations?

The empirical research on how businesses monitor conversations that they might be interested in documents a variety of practices, ranging from ''classic'' such as keyword search, thematic and sentiment analysis, analysis of spread patterns to cross-media data classification, tags detection, label priority ranking, tweeting activity signatures, and geospatial data processing (Zhang & Vos, 20; Tafesse & Wien, 2018, Rathore, Kar, & Ilavarasan, 2017). Put next to the variety of metrics monitored (Macnamara, 2020; Kotras, 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020) using the internal tools built-in the respective channels and the increasing consolidation of different practices in the field – the above-mentioned mix of methods – contribute to the idea that social media listening is

characterized first and foremost by an excessive fragmentation. As far as we know, there are not any studies exploring terminological and conceptual unity or with a recent focus on how consensus is built between practitioners and researchers; however, the preference of both academia and businesses to use a vocabulary based on English might contribute to reducing mussiness.

In general terms, social media listening derives from organizational listening (Macnamara, 2020) and is defined as the practice of monitoring pre-established metrics of activity on social media channels that refer to relevant keywords for the brand, aiming to understand audiences and to gather insights to know the best way to respond and act in various communication situations.

At this point, brands have several solutions to obtain relevant information from monitoring mentions and conversations on social media. Not all of them are dedicated exclusively to social media listening, but they all provide insights about the volume of conversations and about how people feel about a specific situation. Besides using built-in tools, provided by the social media platforms, have also the possibility of organizing their own social media management dashboard (with monitoring solutions) or they may choose amongst the many social media monitoring tools as well as tools based on conversion tracking and analysis (usually defined as social media listening instruments) (Zhang, & Vos, 2014). Last, but not least, automatic data extraction tools (social media scraping tools) are yet another way to gather insights into consumer conversations (Batrinca & Treleaven, 2015).

In this paper, we explored a corpus of texts related only to social media listening tools, based on the methodology described below. The main aim of this research was to explore how social media listening is conceptualized in papers, documents, and materials dedicated to being used by a large variety of practitioners - namely by all those needing a system to do social media monitoring/listening in their day-to-day work. Our research focused on the social media listening means currently made available by tool developers to explore the grounds, techniques, methods, and ways for listening to what stakeholders believe, think, and feel about specific events and brands. Having in mind that today social media listening is developing at the boundary of different domains (communication, marketing, and computer science) and that is an emerging area of study, our research looks to unveil the tool developers' perspective on the system, process, and means and to explore potential angles for cooperation with academic investigations.

Method

Our analysis departed from an initial corpus gathered by searching for social media monitoring tools that are used on a global scale and that provide services based on more than one social media platform. The first step was to run a combined search for keywords such as ''social media listening tools'', ''best tools for social media listening'', ''social media measuring tools''. We retained relevant results on the first three pages on Google for each combination of keywords. Our search provided a total of 38 different links (web sites, blogs, white papers), most of them from companies that develop such tools, but also from media outlets with a focus on public relations &

digital advertising (N=3). Out of these, we retained only sources that included any type of conceptual framework when talking about social media listening or social media listening tools. These selection criteria were used to identify and explore the potential definitions, meanings, and attributes of social media listening. It resulted in a corpus of 16 different sources, with a total of 19 working definitions, posted between 2018 and 2021 as follows: 2018 (N=3), 2019 (N=1), 2020 (N=4), 2021 (N=8), and without mentioning the year of publication (N=7). Two main coding categories were applied in the coding process. First, we looked at the conceptual framework and analyzed the working definitions and concepts around social media listening. This coding is foreseen to enrich the research available on social media listening and to depict key elements, attributes, and concepts around the topic. The second category code used was how they define and refer to different types of data to be scrutinized. For both coding categories, we have used open coding and then used thematic analysis to group and explore the meanings of the codes identified in the corpus.

As shown in the table below, the 16 different sources totalizing 19 working definitions were identified in the final corpus.

Table 1. Analyzed sources

Source	Keywords used to define social media listening	Type of data to be scrutinized
https://www.hootsuite.com	process of monitoring	Mentions
https://blog.infegy.com	system	online conversations
https://blog.infegy.com	practice	online conversations
https://blog.hubspot.com	monitoring	customer feedback and direct mentions
https://synthesio.com	monitor and analyze	social media conversations
https://astutesolutions.com	practice	what is being said
https://tuffgrowth.com	a new breed of industry and brand monitoring	what users are saying on social media
https://buffer.com	reflect-and-analyze approach	people's feedback,
	an art (…) a delicate balance	patterns and insights
https://sproutsocial.com	analyzing	conversations and trends
	understanding	full spectrum of conversation
https://latana.com	a more sophisticated way of snooping.	what people are saying
https://martech.org	takes you (..) to actionable intel	consumer needs
https://chaoss.community	combination of social listening practices	community analysis
https://sentione.com	tracking	what people are saying
https://mediatoolkit.com/blog	get a glimpse	what, when, where, and why people and media are talking about.
https://buzzsumo.com	use	content insights
https://khoros.com/blog	pulling data	how customers are interacting
https://www.socialbakers.com	using the data	data from (these) individual interactions

Results

The vivid interest that the field is showing in developing a conceptual framework for measurement in online public relations with the help of social media listening is proved by the high number of platforms, solutions, tools, and techniques offered to public relations practitioners. Drawing on our data, we see that the current development of social media listening is referring to a set of practices/ process/ approach/ system - thus meaning that is seen to provide to public relations practitioners a dynamic tool, or better said a tool for understanding the dynamics of how different audiences engage, feel and act towards specific events and brands.

As shown in Table 1, from the 19 working definitions, 5 used similar concepts and attributes when referring to social media listening in its technical dimension („process", „approach" „practice", „combination of practices", „method"), while 2 presented it with a reference to the whole industry („the industry standard" „a new breed of industry and brand monitoring). Important to notice is the fact that metaphors and informal/idiomatic expressions were sometimes used (N=4) to define what social media listening stands for: „sophisticated way of snooping", „delicate balance", „an art", „slice and dice". It results that, the main elements used to define social media listening are organized around two main poles, with a focus on the (1) action taken to perform this operation (referred to as – process, approach, practice) as well as (2) on the system to collect, code, and analyze; the other pole around which social media definitions are gravitating towards is to be found in the area of a more informal language.

By describing social media listening as a practice that relies on constant activity (process, method) employed to listen to audiences' conversations, reactions, and interests it may be considered as an organized and systematic way of hearing out what audiences have to say and might get to feel in a particular situation. Thus, by its capacity to provide contextual information about brand mentions, social media listening has the potential to explore insights into what consumers feel about brands and situations. It also might go beyond what public relations measurement techniques are known to reveal and depict, and closer to become an essential part of assessing public relations effectiveness according to the latest industry standards (Schriner, Swenson, & Gilkerson, 2017). Described as a system of listening to what audiences have to say and feel about a specific topic and understanding how conversations are spread within communication platforms, social media listening is depicted as the „new breed of industry and brand monitoring" (Tuffgrowth, 2020) and as a mix of practices (Chaos Community, n.d).

Besides the above-mentioned attributes, our data shows that the activities involved in social media listening are mainly referring to monitoring (N=6), analyzing (N=3), tracking (N=2), collecting (N=2), and actively listening (N=2). Derived from monitoring techniques, social media listening is considered to unveil the visibility of a brand or an event, to provide significant contextual information, and thus to be able to foresee potential threats and issues. As mentioned by the tool developers, social media listening is to be seen as active research and dynamic analysis both aiming to scour what audiences say, imagine and feel in specific contexts in social media. Social media

listening relies also on an approach that favors constant improvement and searches for a new type of data or new mentions to be introduced within the tracking system: ''actively'' (N=4) and ''proactively'' (N=1) are used when describing the main action(monitor/listening) as well as activities that imply to go beyond mere mention counting into how to better make use of available data: ''paying attention'', ''reflect'', ''use'' (N=2).

Among the type of data scrutinized by social media listening tools and techniques, the mentions (N=7) and the conversations (N=6) are the most frequent type of data that social media listening looks at. Besides these, some social media listening tools point out that they identify and explore audiences' feedback, as they look at how stakeholders respond to events and messages. Although most of the data scoured by the social media developers (N=17) is based on conversations, mentions, and feedback, some of them also are not very specific when naming what exactly represents data that they feed into the listening software. What people/users are saying/talking about (N=3) or simply ''what is being said'' (N=1) as a way of defining ''data'' or ''conversations'' points out a lack of clarity.

Getting to relevant outcomes and delivering results

Discussing the purpose of the social media listening process equals discussing what practitioners see as the most relevant outcomes of their effort into exploring social media conversations. The view advanced by social media listening tools developers is that informing strategy (N=5) and enabling decision making as well as providing information to support decision making (N=5) and specific actions (N=4) lies at the hard of the entire process of gathering data from social media conversations. In a broader vision, social media listening relates to the effort to ''understand'' audiences (N= 3) and to find root causes for their communicational behavior. Midway between understanding consumer reactions and identifying the best solutions to adjust communication strategy, the analysis (N= 5) of brand mentions is also to be found amongst the main benefits of engaging in social media listening. Last, but not least, ''people's perceptions'' ''consumer voice'' and ''customer sentiment'' are ways of conveying the idea that, exploring the public feelings and attitudes towards a brand or a situation is yet another way of considering social media listening benefits.

Making sense of conversations through mentions: an emerging conceptual framework

Drawing on our data and having in mind the existent literature on the field, there is evidence that in the case of social media listening we are dealing with an emerging conceptual framework. The attributes and features of social media listening, along with its strengths depict a system for paying attention to, hearing out, and understanding different types of audiences brands may have in social media. Still, the differences between conversations and mentions need to be further looked into as more clearance is a need in how social media listening is making sense of conversations through mentions. The automatic and manual coding of mentions is still poorly described by the current developers and thus leading to scarce knowledge of how social media listening methods, techniques, and practices may be grounded and regulated.

The data explored in the current paper reveal that most of the social media listening tool developers engage in providing systems for spotting mentions and mapping visibility on certain topics of interest, thus leading to a comprehensive picture of what audiences are talking about. In doing so, social media listening seems to claim itself from Marcom, as it uses mixed features and arrays of elements, in a certain way leaving behind the traditional sociological and psychological investigations of what audiences believe in specific contexts.

By looking at conversations and mentions, social media listening provides quick insight on what audiences talk and think and how they feel about a situation or event. However, this shortcut is still under development and needs to set up a solid conceptual framework to rely on when exploring relationships with stakeholders and communication networks. The poor reference to how social medial listening may fit in the communication and public relations field on its own and the scarce details regarding the methods and techniques reveal that the current development is still far from being reached a solid point.

Conclusions

Drawing on our data and having in mind the increasing role that social media listening aims to have in reshaping measurement in public relations, we consider that social media listening is, first of all, a set of actions and practices looking to depict conversation themes, trends, and emotions and to foresee the potential threats that brands may encounter in online communication environments. Unlike other public relations measurement tools and techniques, we should consider that social media listening might be expected to deliver predictive models for looking at how stakeholders may react and perceive specific communication products and events. By actively looking to understand how audiences talk, think, and engage in conversations about brands and by observing their emotions, social media listening should provide insights for both present and future actions of the brand.

As in the case of other fields related to digital and online environments, social media listening practice is ahead of theory. There is evidence that the tool developers provide a set of means for public relations practitioners that may be useful for keeping a close eye on what is going on in social media with the brand, but this is mainly based on building up a system of looking at mentions rather than exploring thoughts. The current development of social media listening is set to spot spikes and keywords and to capture the attitudes and emotions of different audiences, which is extremely efficient and useful. However, the overall design of the measurement process should be grounded in a solid conceptual framework to be able to deeply understand stakeholder relationships, communication networks, and patterns.

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