The Social Media Battleground: How Public Perception, Science Communication, Media Coverage, and Politics Are Shaped by Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Energy industries, particularly companies that rely on coal power, find themselves at the crosshairs of public opposition fueled by social media. Social media has evolved from an online way to connect with friends to becoming the international morning newspaper. Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube, reddit, and other online forums influence what is reported by mainstream media, enable activist groups to quickly mobilize support and funding, and often renders traditional business communication modes ineffective. How a company or industry sector responds to these social media challenges can have repercussions that extend to the political arena, regulatory policy, and the bottom line. One-sided representations and portrayals in social media don’t allow room for conveying technical facts. As a result, the way science is communicated to the public has dramatically changed. Not only do companies need a modern strategy to refute inaccurate claims on social media, they also need to engage a broader audience, inform stakeholders, foster a dialogue, and prevent a groundswell of pressure tactics. This paper analyzes the coal ash “footprint” on social media, which reveals risks and opportunities for advancing the utilization of coal combustion products (CCP). Case studies of social media communication fails and success stories in other energy and business-to-consumer sectors are discussed in the context of lessons learned. The paper presents workable strategies, developed in collaboration with digital media experts, which can be used by companies in the CCP industry for public outreach and marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media platforms have fundamentally changed business communications by engaging millions of users globally. While it is tempting to dismiss social media as suited only for celebrities, teens and frivolous topics, the reality is that social media is being utilized to damage corporate reputations, rapidly foster public disapproval and develop political pressure against particular industries. Coal power and industries that rely on coal have been targets for social media opposition tactics designed to sway public opinion and shape regulatory
policy. For the coal combustion products (CCP) industry, opposition to coal power and negative labeling of coal ash in social media has contributed to declining recycling rates. Although coal ash recycling diverts material from disposal, reduces the amount of virgin materials mined, and lowers greenhouse gas emissions, concerns over the safety of coal ash have saddled the entire CCP industry. Unfortunately, sound science has also been pushed aside in social media conversations, resulting in one-sided characterizations. The speed at which misinformation is spread through social media has resulted in an image problem, not just for coal or coal ash disposal, but also for recycled coal ash products.

COMMUNICATIONS IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has altered the science and business communications landscape in several ways, making it more difficult and complex:

1. Communications have evolved from mass distribution of a one-way message (one-to-many) into a constant flow of conversation and messages, from many to many.
2. The evolution to participatory journalism, where news and analysis that is shared via social media influences what is reported in mainstream (both print and online) media.
3. Social media represents an uncensored outlet for those who feel aggrieved, want to spread rumors, or strengthen biases. There is often no practical legal recourse against such smear campaigns.
4. Online interactions provide the ability to reach beyond community borders to influence opinion and quickly mobilize support, which has been used to gain political influence and shape public policy.
5. The structure of social media communications lends itself to sound bites and hyperbole, presenting challenges for communicating science and technology to the public.

The nature of social media news sharing has influenced how mainstream media sources report information. This extends beyond eyewitness reporting and image sharing during dynamic news events. A Pew Research Center study on how consumers get their news confirmed that Facebook and Twitter have become sources for daily news. Although most consumers use social media as a supplement for accessing news, nine (9) percent rely primarily on social media. Other studies found that 50 percent of people have learned about breaking news via social media rather than official news sources, and 49 percent of people have heard breaking news through social media that turned out to be false. Further, social media reporting is not without bias, so people’s views can be influenced just from the source of the information.

Because of the instantaneous nature of social media interaction and the goal of news agencies to be the first to break a story, information shared on social media can get
picked up by mainstream media without significant vetting. This blurring of distinctions between social media reporting versus mainstream media reflects an evolution to real-time information sharing. Today, social media perception equals media perception.

Social media is perfectly suited for organizing and voicing dissent, whether it concerns an industry, corporation, or public policy. Case studies of using social networks to mobilize masses have been well documented. Social media has allowed non-governmental organizations that are opposed to coal to quickly rally support – both in terms of numbers of people as well as funding. Sierra Club’s Beyond Coal Campaign has spurned hundreds of Facebook pages and Twitter accounts and attracted millions in funding from anti-coal interests such as Chesapeake Energy and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. While the CCP recycling industry has not typically been a direct target of social media campaigns, the labeling of coal ash as “toxic” and “hazardous” presents marketing, public perception, and regulatory challenges.

Communicating technology and science in the social media age presents unique challenges, both structural and derived. Structural challenges are those that are inherent to the delivery of communications on social media networks. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook limit the number of characters that can be used in any message, which does not allow for thorough scientific explanation. Other forums, such as Pinterest and Instagram are visual in nature which precludes traditional and meaningful exposition. Derived challenges are those arising from the how information is shared on social media. Even well-constructed posts can be altered or commented on then forwarded by social media users, possibly changing the original intent of the information.

SOCIAL MEDIA RISK

With the changing communications landscape and challenges posed by social media, what incentive is there for participating? The answer is social media is taking place whether or not your company or industry is involved in the conversation. Social media allows you to shape your brand and how your industry is perceived – using your voice. By not participating you are allowing other voices, which may be unfavorable, to unduly influence the discussion. Even in business-to-business (B2B) marketing, negative public opinion can present difficulties. Downstream consumer interaction can affect your clients, or your client’s clients. It is therefore important to monitor social media outlets, just as news reports and marketing efforts are monitored.

A recent study conducted by Stanford University surveyed 180 senior executives of North American public and private companies on their social media understanding and actions. The study revealed a serious disconnect between companies’ realization of the serious business risks posed by social media and their responding actions. Although 90 percent of respondents recognized these threats, only 32 percent monitored social media to detect risks, and even less (14 percent) used metrics to evaluate corporate performance.
Risks of social media-fueled public relations (PR) disasters are very real, highlighted by viral campaigns such as Greenpeace’s mock Shell Oil slogan website, featuring user-created slogans such as “Turn the Power On. It’s Time to Melt Some Ice!” The fake site was cleverly constructed and duped many people into believing it was a real but ill-conceived Shell Oil marketing ploy. The situation was made even worse when news outlets picked up the story on social media, without recognizing the mock website was a hoax. Monitoring social networks is essential for identifying this type of brand hijacking.

There are also risks associated with employees misrepresenting corporate values, policies or culture on social media. A recent example is a StubHub employee who posted a tweet with profanity on the corporate account. Other social media fails include posts designed to take advantage of high-profile news events such as Gap posting about online shopping during superstorm Sandy or not realizing the meaning for a trending topic – in Celeb Boutique’s case, the Aurora, Colorado shootings. Another social media tactic that can backfire spectacularly is trying to censure the conversation or ignore negative comments. Nestle learned the hard way that social influence trumps censorship when they attempted to block a Greenpeace video parody and then the ensuing negative comments posted to their Facebook page. The additional backlash from attempted censorship resulted in an epic PR disaster. Quite simply, not being responsive or trying to shut down the conversation is interpreted as lying or disdain for public opinion, and only inflames negative perceptions.

Crisis management plans that include how to respond on social media can allow a company to quickly respond and diffuse brewing social media disasters. The common element for companies that have successfully averted a social media PR crisis is monitoring. That is, the companies knew what was happening before the situation went viral, and effectively responded in a quick, transparent, and honest manner.

SOCIAL MEDIA “FOOTPRINT”

An analysis of social media discussion associated with coal ash and coal combustion products was conducted to assess the social media “footprint” for the CCP industry. The social media sites analyzed were Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Google+. To provide some perspective on the potential influence of these sites, the top six social media sites (as of March 2013) by number of users are:

1. Facebook: 750,000,000 unique monthly visitors
2. Twitter: 250,000,000 unique monthly visitors
3. LinkedIn: 110,000,000 unique monthly visitors
4. Pinterest: 85,500,000 unique monthly visitors
5. MySpace: 70,500,000 unique monthly visitors
6. Google+: 65,000,000 unique monthly visitors

A recent report, U.S. Digital Future Focus 2013 analyzed the time spent on social media sites. Facebook dominated all social media channels (83% of time spent). Also notable was that Pinterest use increased 284% in 2012.
Although LinkedIn is the third most popular social networking site, discussion threads within groups are not conducive to development of metrics other than reach. However, participation with LinkedIn group discussions by individuals in the CCP industry is important for providing accurate and balanced information.

Social media sites were analyzed for discussions/pages about ‘coal ash’ and ‘coal combustion products.’ Occurrences were categorized as favorable to the CCP industry, unfavorable, or neutral. Unfavorable occurrences were assessed from the language used to describe coal ash, such as characterizations of “toxic” or other negative qualifiers. Neutral occurrences were instances of news sharing that did not contain commentary either supportive or negative towards CCPs.

On Facebook, the prevalence of anti-coal pages dominates those that are supportive of coal power. For example, there are currently 42 “Beyond Coal” Facebook pages alone. For the CCP industry specifically, the number of “likes” for the top five pages critical or unfavorable toward coal ash dwarfs those supportive of coal ash recycling by a factor of 40 to 1. Those statistics do not include likes for other pages that may be unfavorable to coal, but are not specific to coal ash. However, the level of engagement on Facebook pales compared to Twitter.

The prevalence of coal ash or CCP discussion on Twitter was evaluated from general search terms as well as hashtags. A hashtag is a word or phrase with the prefix of # symbol, used to mark topics or keywords in a tweet. Hashtags are useful research tools for locating messages regardless of sender or date. ‘Coal combustion products’ was used infrequently, and mainly by entities working in the CCP industry, such as University of Kentucky Center for Applied Energy Research. However, the term ‘coal ash’ has been used extensively during the last two years. Since January 2011, 76 percent of the tweets using ‘coal ash’ have been unfavorable, 6 percent favorable and 18 percent neutral. The hashtag #coalash results in even more skewed results, with 92 percent unfavorable and 8 percent neutral. A hashtag #kickcoalash was specifically created for a twitter chat (an interactive conversation on certain date, often at a certain time). The only favorable tweet during the #kickcoalash chat was from Congressman David McKinley. The term ‘coal ash recycling’ had the highest percentage of favorable and neutral results, although there were only 15 occurrences since January 2011. There are also several Twitter accounts specific to coal ash, from which mostly unfavorable discussion originates.

A Pinterest search on ‘coal ash’ produced an interesting collection of results. Pinterest is a visual platform for sharing pictures and graphics. In addition to pictures of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) dike failure, aerial photos of coal ash impoundments, and video of the SS Badger; there are also pictures of products such as makeup, carpet, paint, and bowling bowls that are said to contain coal ash; and vintage ash buckets and scoops. There are several boards dedicated to negative portrayals of coal ash. The search term ‘coal ash recycling’ has many pins of green building designs with countertops and sinks. Common uses of recycled CCPs in concrete, blended cement
and wallboard are not represented. On Google+ dialogue has been overwhelmingly disparaging to coal ash, with the TVA accident and House coal ash bills dominating the discussions.

SOCIAL MEDIA OPPORTUNITIES

The social media footprint for coal ash and CCPs reveals there are many avenues available for public education and positive engagement. Social media is about conversation and interaction. Traditional marketing and public relations practices of promoting a well-scripted press piece fail to gain traction in the social media world. It comes across as stiff, out-of-touch, or indifferent. The most successful corporate social media campaigns are those where the company comes across as “human” and “authentic.”

To minimize risk, social media strategists recommend a company blog that is used to answer questions, refute false claims, and create dialogue. Social media interaction can then be used to direct readers to blog posts which have been planned (as opposed to responding on-the-fly via social networks). The blog should be based on questions and answers to acknowledge concerns, or provide content that is interesting without being marketing-related. Although this integrated approach for social media has been proven highly effective, only 1 in 10 energy companies have a blog.

Maersk (oil, shipping) has been very successful at integrating social media into business communications, including a blog for “Maersk stories”. Social media links appear on every page of the company website. The hub page for their social media accounts states “Social media is about communication, not marketing. It’s about engaging, not pushing.” The campaign has been hugely popular, with over one million likes on Facebook because of engaging multimedia content that does not read like a press release.

Multimedia is extremely important for fostering engagement and generating interest. Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, and other graphically-oriented platforms can be used to tell the company story through photos. GE is a company taking advantage of visual interest to further its brand philosophy and mission with a #GEInspiredME photo contest and humorous Pinterest boards such as “Badass Machines” and “Mind = Blown.” YouTube is a useful platform for tailoring content to different target audiences. The goal of using multimedia and social media interaction is to direct engagement back to where the complete story can be told.

Communicating science or highly technical subjects can be accomplished using links on Facebook and Twitter that direct audiences to a blog or video which provides an introductory level of information. The blog or video can then give additional reading links to enable those interested to gain deeper understanding. This “layered” approach to social media communication minimizes many of the inherent risks, while overcoming perceptions of not being responsive or engaging. Technical communication through social media is vitally important, as most people are not reading journal publications or...
actively seeking out scientific information. Several respected scientific groups have been wildly popular on social media by providing interesting content that informs people. CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research), NASA, and Smithsonian have proven that social media can be a valuable tool for science education.

DEVELOPING A SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

Jumping into the social media world without a plan is asking for trouble, so social media integration specialists recommend a comprehensive strategy that addresses:

- **Corporate Goals**: The goals of engaging in social media should be well defined and work with other business objectives. Branding, prospecting, competitive business intelligence, stakeholder outreach, influencing sentiment, and corporate sustainability can all be reasons for social media interaction.

- **Shared Content**: What is the content that will be shared, and how will it be shared? There is no "right" strategy for content sharing, and it is highly dependent on who the audience is, and what the social media goals are. Content that is tailored to different audiences can accomplish multiple business goals.

- **Regulatory Compliance**: Some industries are highly regulated – such as the healthcare and financial industries – restricting the type of content that can be shared. Regulatory issues must be identified and addressed.

- **Staffing**: People that work with the online community across social media channels must be vetted against corporate goals and sensitivities. There are pitfalls associated with outsourcing social media or assigning it to someone inexperienced in an industry.

- **Training**: Marketing, PR, social media, and sales personnel should have proper training on corporate social media policies, and personal interactions. Training may differ by position and responsibility.

- **Personal versus Corporate Accounts**: A policy for how employees participate in social media on behalf of the company or on their own personal accounts is vital. The lines between corporate and personal should not be blurred.

- **Monitoring and Measuring**: The tools and metrics used to monitor social media and measure performance should be identified. How monitoring, participating, and responding responsibilities are assigned will be extremely important for crisis aversion.

- **Crisis Management**: The plan should delineate how the company will respond to negative comments, dissatisfied clients, poorly constructed communications, misrepresentations, and even outright lies by those hostile to the company or industry.
EVALUATING SUCCESS

Determining the impact and success of a social media strategy must involve the evaluation of metrics. There are five main monitoring metrics:

- Engagement – the amount of interaction and feedback a company or industry is getting. Measurement differs depending on the social media platform.
- Reach – the size of the audience seeing a company’s content. Not just followers, but friends of followers, number of followers that content is retweeted to, etc.
- Referral Traffic – the number of people visiting a website referred from a social media source. Google Analytics can be used to measure referral traffic.
- Share of Voice – a measure of how much a company is mentioned in relation to the entire industry/competitors or the percentage of content originating from a company relative to competitive content.
- Influence – a measure of how important your content/brand is on social media.
- Sentiment – Perhaps the most important metric for an industry with an image problem, sentiment tracks whether engagement is positive, negative, or neutral.

There are numerous pay subscription and free tools that can be used to evaluate metrics. Facebook, Twitter and Google have their own evaluation tools, while social influence sites such as Kred and Klout can give an overall picture of the relative success and improvement from social media outreach. There are several free services that evaluate across multiple social media sites. Before initiating a new social media strategy, it is a good idea to evaluate the baseline – where the company is today.

Using metrics to measure social media performance allows a company to calculate the return-on-investment (ROI) for the resources spent on monitoring and responding to social media. Further, by identifying vulnerabilities, it will also inform improvements to an evolving successful social media strategy.

REFERENCES


