Establishing and maintaining favourable reputations is the bedrock of corporate communication.

—J. Cornellisen

With this assertion as its cornerstone, Corporate Communication through Social Media by Asha Kaul and Vidhi Chaudhri paints the changing landscape of corporate communication after the advent of social media. Creating and maintaining a robust corporate reputation has always been daunting. More so in the digital age when social media has led to stakeholders being in an ‘always on’ mode. The very characteristics of speed, reach, and visibility that make social media the stuff of dreams for users turn it into a nightmare for organizations that are trying to communicate with stakeholders to enhance their reputation while still struggling with the unexpected loss of control and exposure of their minutiae in the public domain.

A search for books on social media reveals a staggering number. From the highly acclaimed The Cluetrain Manifesto (2007) by Rick Levine, Christopher Locke, Doc Searls, and David Weinberger to Erik Qualman’s Socialnomics: How Social Media Transforms the Way We Live and Do Business (2009), there are several books that address business in general, and marketing in particular, using social media. On the other hand, books on corporate reputation, from the early Managing Corporate Reputation (2003) by Susan Croft and John Dalton to the recent Corporate Reputation Decoded (2014, co-authored by Asha Kaul) focus mainly on creating, maintaining, and protecting corporate reputation. These books treat social media as one of the routes towards reaching this goal. Paul Argenti’s Strategic Corporate Communication (2008) is a comprehensive guide to corporate communication, but it is targeted towards public relations audiences without any reference to social media or corporate reputation. Where does one turn to for assistance on communicating with
stakeholders, who form the foundation of corporate reputation, in a contemporary manner using the latest social media, while at the same time keeping an eye on the reputation of the company?

In this scenario, Corporate Communication through Social Media provides a logical, relevant, and practical (and possibly the first of its kind) guide to managing an organization’s corporate communication keeping the objective of reputation management at its centre. Divided into six chapters and grouped by functions of corporate communication as branding, customer engagement, employee communication, crisis communication, and corporate social responsibility (CSR), the book also rounds off the discussion with a much needed chapter on measuring return on investment (ROI) of social media communication.

The first chapter, The New Anthem for Open Source Branding, discusses the all-important shift from brand-generated content to stakeholder-generated content for brand management. It emphasizes on building the emotional connect and the impact of crowd culture. The most hard-hitting takeaway is the fact that open source branding will invariably lead to loss of control over the brand, and the authors provide some very practical tips in terms of maintaining transparency, encouraging collectivism, and surviving criticism that will enable managers to gain resonance while ceding control. They also provide a framework for managing new-age branding which is heavily reliant on story-telling, brand entification, building brand communities, and advergaming.

Taking this theme further, the next chapter On-Demand Marketing establishes, through a number of interesting examples, that inclusivity and not exclusivity drives customer engagement. It emphasizes the ‘change in kingship’ which has transformed the role of passive purchasers and turned them into active advocates or prosumers. There are a couple of interesting models on the levels of participation of consumers in social dialogue and on aligning company and customer objectives. This helps readers understand the need for a consumer perspective and creation of synergy through positive marketing and aligning value propositions for the company, society, and consumers. Interestingly, the authors also cover the business-to-business (B2B) space and provide a set of strategies for using social media in this segment. Evangelism and crowdfunding are just two of the strategies discussed with engaging examples as IBM, GoPro, Lays, among others. No discussion on customer engagement can afford to ignore the changing composition of customers, more so for online customers. The authors point out how Millennials form the largest group on social media and discuss how their traits greatly influence their preferences, and in turn, social media marketing strategies of brands.

Addressing another crucial group of stakeholders, the chapter on Social Media@Work, first establishes the context for enterprise social media, listing its benefits using strong examples as IBM Connections and GE Colab. David Packard, of HP, once said, ‘marketing is too important to be left to the marketing people’. Extending this quote to social media, this chapter stresses on the role of employees as advocates of the company on social media. Apart from a number of pointers about the implementation and use of enterprise social media, the authors also discuss three crucial points of contention about social media at the workplace—whether to use employees as reputation agents, blurring of internal and external content when employees use social media, and managing the loss of control that inevitably arises from widespread use of social media by employees. Acknowledging the fact that ‘the role of employees in reputation building is perceived as a double-edged sword’, the authors explore various options for digital reputation management by employees, discovering that neither unbridled access nor complete censorship can alleviate reputation risk. Since employee expression on social media influences not only that individual but also individuals and groups in his/her circle of influence, it becomes all the more crucial for an organization to walk the tightrope between encouraging and restricting employees’ online participation. When ‘the water cooler moves to social media’, boundaries are blurred and an organization’s innermost workings are exposed. The authors believe that in an age of employer reviews, censoring negative feedback would prove futile, but setting up mechanisms for enhancing employee engagement and conflict resolution would help avoid unexpected fracas. To combat the loss of control rising from use of social media by employees, the authors make several suggestions for an effective social media governance policy. They go on to discuss emerging trends as cybervetting that pose ethical dilemmas and expect workers to curate their digital presence. Quoting the concept of ‘Open Leadership’ by Charlene Li (2012), the authors accentuate the role of the leadership in the digital workplace and reiterate that any strategy for enterprise
The advent of social media and its associated visibility, CSR in 2015, this largely constitutes information sharing. An extensive review of the changing perception of crises along with a discussion of some of the prominent theories of crises communication as Situational Crisis Communication Theory drives home the fact that all three stages of a crisis—pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis are important from a reputational capital angle. Social media can actually amplify a crisis because it gives stakeholder groups the ability to make themselves heard, acts as an equalizer, and leads to an ‘echo chamber’ effect, rendering crisis management and communication in the digital age more relevant than ever before. The authors mention the interesting concept of ‘paracrisis’ and the need to treat these as warning signals to avoid escalation. Coombs and Malshe’s models of types of social media crises are used to highlight the power of perception and the inherent lack of control in these situations. Understanding the sentiment of stakeholder groups is a practice advocated by the authors to move towards using crises as an opportunity. Ultimately, the staggering visibility of social media is a reality, and the authors reiterate that it is not sufficient for organizations to act and react during a crisis; they also need to interact with stakeholders and media in an ‘ongoing effort to improve reputation and perception’. Examples as KLM Royal Dutch Airlines and Lufthansa are effective in illustrating some of the best practices in digital crisis communication.

The Reputation Institute’s ‘RepTrak’ framework estimates that CSR contributes roughly over 40 per cent towards a firm’s reputation. Corporate Responsibility in a Social-mediated Era examines how social media influences the strategy and communication of CSR and reflects on the challenges and opportunities for corporate communication of CSR. After a detailed discussion of CSR, sustainability, and creating shared value, the authors point out that communication of CSR needs to move from information to dialogue and participation in CSR. Although KPMG mentions 90 per cent of the world’s most profitable firms reporting on CSR in 2015, this largely constitutes information sharing. The advent of social media and its associated visibility, speed, and reach demand a drastic change in the way companies look at CSR communication. Citing examples as Hero MotoCorp Ltd., TOMS shoes, and Marico, the authors posit that the ‘new normal’ of CSR is not what organizations do to or for stakeholders, but what they do with stakeholders. This shift to a participative approach necessitates a move from one-way communication that only disseminates information to a more interactive style of dialogue. Presenting evidence from existing research, the authors make a compelling case for organizations to develop an interactive CSR communication strategy to reap reputational benefits and furnish a very useful list of constraints and facilitators to dialogue from the organizational and stakeholder perspectives. As unfettered access to social media converts stakeholders from ‘sitting ducks to roaring lions’, the authors maintain that organizations need to be willing to listen, engage, clarify, and even modify business practices if needed. The challenges posed by the ever-active Millennials and the scepticism towards greenwashing can only be countered by a transparent leadership.

No matter what the array of benefits from developing and implementing strategies for corporate communication and ultimately, corporate reputation, through social media, no organization would be truly committed to it in the long run unless it demonstrates real ROI. Amid the raging debate on ROI of social media and its measurement techniques, the authors emphasize that in order to measure relationships that are a precursor to building a good reputation, it is important to comprehend the ‘why’ of measuring returns. The authors use Kellogg’s, Dove, and Lenovo to exemplify the need to move beyond the traditional objectives of sales, cost reduction, or increase in market share and target customer loyalty through interactive engagement. Keith A Quesenbery, writing in Harvard Business Review (2018), questions the actual worth of likes, comments, and shares to a firm’s business and emphasizes that social media needs to be connected to business objectives right from the beginning; failing this, social media may become an end in itself. In line with this, the authors provide relevant and practical suggestions for implementing an effective social media campaign and various web metrics and analytics strongly anchored to reputation management. According to them, the focus of assessment needs to be on identification of objectives and on the journey of the consumer from awareness to purchase/investment. Advocating this process approach to implementing and measuring returns, the authors
also succinctly discuss selected models for measuring ROI of social media.

Apart from the research-backed content replete with numerous relevant examples, the book is a delight for anyone teaching a course on social media, corporate communication, or corporate reputation. In addition to pointed chapter highlights and thought-provoking discussion questions, the large list of activities at the end of each chapter is a boon for creating relevant and engaging in-class exercises for mature students. The chapter-end cases are referred to in the text as well, linking concepts to practice very effectively and can serve as starting points for class discussions. The very innovative ‘Voices from the Field’ section at the end of each chapter gives one the feeling of reading a specialized magazine targeted at corporate reputation.

However, the very features that make this an excellent textbook might somewhat hamper its style if picked up by a professional. The book is more of a textbook than a handbook both in terms of structure and tone. Also, as one turns the final page, one feels the need for more Indian cases. Though the book does not claim to deal exclusively with the Indian context, it would undoubtedly help in establishing more relevance.

As Kim Garst says, ‘Conversations are happening, whether you are there or not.’ Social media have pervaded every aspect of personal and professional life, blurring the boundaries between them. Organizations can ill afford to ignore these new age media, neither for routine operations, nor for strategic functions as reputation management. This book aims to bring a convergence between corporate reputation, corporate communication, and social media, and is successful in doing so. For organizations, ‘the time to adapt is now, because the times they are a-changin’.

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