Health Communication through Social Media
Evaluation of Communication Opportunities Offered by Social Networks to Health Care Institutions

Funda Erzurum, Anadolu University, Turkey

Abstract

Social networks gives it's users an oppportunity to share his / her activities, events and field of interests with their networks online. This happens through, instant messages, e-mails and shares. Technology is rapidly progressing and it does not seem possible to ignore that the Internet is integrated to our lives. In last few years social networks has entered to our business and private lives and reshape the communication, collaboration and even learning process. This new communication environment is rapidly taking its place about the health issues. Individuals use social media and social networks to get information about a disease, get feedback when they are making a decision about a treatment, to learn about side effects of a drug etc. Institutions and organizations in all areas of life have begun to use social media and social networks for the benefit of society, one by one. Access to information is now much faster, so health communication, health institutions and organizations, and health campaign and events take place in social networks, the importance of issues are increasing day by day. This studya descriptive compile This study aims to show the opportunities of social media and social networks for health care institutions and organizations by descriptive compilation.

Key words: Health communication, Social media, Opportunities of social networks

Introduction

Social media can be defined as an online service, platform or area where social communication and/or social relationships can be established and people share user generated content. Social networks offer their users an opportunity to share their ideas, activities, events, and interests online within their networks. They realize this through instant messages, e-mails, and posts. People in social networks usually prepare a profile page containing their personal information for colleagues, school friends, classmates, acquaintances and new friends and then publish it. Communication is becoming more and more digital and a part of the digital world (Erzurum and Tiryakioğlu, 2012: 495-500). One cannot ignore the ever accelerating progress of technology and its integration into the whole of our lives. Social networks, which have entered into our professional and personal lives at a great pace, have been rapidly, albeit erratically, entering the health care sector, too.

We live in an age of information in which the amount of information stored all over the world is doubled almost every 18 months. Now, by means of emerging technologies, this information can be exchanged within seconds. In new communication channels such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Friendfeed, Wikipedia, Google+, and Pinterest, content is created by users. They transform all spheres of our lives and introduce a new dimension. The diversity of the content offered has increased and the channels have multiplied. In anticipation of these days, Alvin Toffler made the following definition in 1970 in his book "The Third Wave";

> "Before the advent of mass media, a First Wave child growing up in a slowly changing village built his or her model of reality out of images received from a tiny handful of sources—the teacher, the priest, the chief or official and, above all, the family. As psychologist-futurist Herbert Gerrjuoy has noted: "There was no television or radio in the home to give the child a chance to meet many different kinds of strangers from many different walks of life and even from different countries." . . . The Second Wave multiplied the number of channels from which the individual drew his or her picture of reality. The child no longer received imagery from nature or people alone but from newspapers, mass magazines, radio and, later on, from television… Throughout the Second Wave era the mass media grew more and more powerful. Today a startling

change is taking place. As the Third Wave thunders in, the mass media, far from expanding their influence, are suddenly being forced to share it. They are being beaten back on many fronts at once by what I call the 'de-massified media' (Toffler, 2008, 199-201)."

While socializing is regarded as a process of learning and participation in human communities, the places for socialization where this process takes place have changed and diversified over time. After the 20th Century, when the importance of mass communication increased, socializing has now become a process in which learning and participation no longer require coming together in a physical environment.The power of the media growing until the last decades of the last century indicates the effectiveness of the mass media. From this perspective,the mass media seems to have an undeniable power in terms of creating public opinion. According to Laswell, who addressed the functions of the mass media for the first time, the mass media have functions such as surveillance, manipulation and socialization. Charles Wright added entertainment to these functions of the mass media (Dilmen and Öğüt, 2010: 238 in Aziz, 1982). Entertainment function has gained a new meaning in social networks. A new environment has emerged for users to socialize through social networks. Users who interact with each other on social networks do not only by share personal information and visual materials about themselves but they also get into a different sense of communication and togetherness by means of games peculiar to those social networks (e.g. Farmville, etc.). People who do not live in the same city in real life can be next door neighbors, live in farms next to each other and even trade their virtual products in these environments. As one of the enjoyable activities of the modern times, social networks contribute to socialization and participation by offering their users the component of entertainment (Dilmen and Öğüt, 2010: 238 in Cattanach, 1993).

Castells (2005:499 - 500) argues that the main feature of the new communication system based on the digitized and networked integrity of means of mass communication is that it covers and transmits all cultural expressions. Due to the presence of this system, all kinds of messageswork in a dual mode in the new community: existence/non-existence in the multimedia–communication system. The new communication system has profoundly changed space and time and the basic dimensions of human life. Localities nowbreak away from their cultural, historical, and geographical meanings, and they are recombined as

functional networks or image collages. Thus, the space of places is replaced by a space of flows. In the light of this, considering the new communication system of the new community, the use of social networks can be seen as an opportunity for health care institutions and organizations.

As the most popular social network online, Facebook has about one billion active users as of October 2012. A total of 584 million users log in daily and 604 million users are connected to Facebook with mobile devices (http://newsroom.fb.com/Key-Facts). What is considered to be the most important reason for the extraordinary growth of social networks is the concept of "the network effect". This shows that a social network grows slowly at the beginning but bursts after a certain point. In other words, the number of users rises slowly at first when a social network website goes public, but this number is rapidly folded after a certain point. LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner announced that it took the company 16 months to reach their first one million members but another one million new members signed up in only 11 days and today they have more than 200 million members (Kayabalı,http://www.ptms.com.tr/ptms/article/81/, 23.01.2013, 16:39). Today, social networks are considered to be only the beginning of the global connection that can diffuse ideas and innovations around the world faster than ever before. The greatest achievement of these networks is the fact that they have succeeded to transform themselves into the perfect means of mass communication. Getting widespread and relatively cheaper, the Internet allows people to spend some part of their time in the virtual space. This is best reflected by the presence of thousands of fast-growing social networks over the last years. Today, millions of users sign in to social networks and take part in interactions (Topraket al.; 2009:57).

A report conducted by the Turkish Statistical Institute in April 2012, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Usage Survey on Households and Individuals, revealed that 47.2% of households in Turkey have access to the Internet at home (http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=10880). According to a survey by EIAA Mediascope Europe, the social networking usage percentage of the Turkish internet users who spend approximately 10 hours a week is 38%. That is, Turkish internet users spend almost four hours a week on social networks. According to ComScore April 2010 data, there are currently 21.3 million internet users in Turkey and Turkish users spend more than a total of 80 million hours each week on social media(http://x.p-

tms.com/cms/front_content.php?idcat=285). On the other hand, this is not the case only with Turkey. These figures, high usage durations and amounts are similar in other countries around the world. For example, the United States spent 230.060 years on social media sites in July 2012 alone according to a social media report. (Popkins, 2012: http://www.cnbc.com/id/100275798/We_Spent_230060_Years_on_Social_Media_in_One_Month). Users of these networks are seen as active members of a participatory culture. A participatory culture is defined as a type of culture with a kind of informal counseling where a more unobstructed artistic expression, voluntary participation, creativity, and a strong support for sharing exist and experienced members transmit their knowledge and experience to newcomers (Jenkins, 2009 inAcun, 2009: http://www.kaynakca.info/eser_dosya/4_katilimkulturu.pdf).

Social media differs from traditional media. While traditional media usually needs particular sources to disseminate information, it is relatively inexpensive for social media to access or publish information and its access tools are available to everyone. The user is now defined as the prosumer, who both produces and consumes content in an interactive process. A feature both social media and traditional media have in common is their ability to reach small or large audiences; any content may not reach anyone orit can reach millions of people. The qualities to be used to identify the differences between social media and traditional media may vary depending on the methods used. Some of these features can be listed as follows (Akar, 2011:18):

1. **Participation:** Both traditional media and social media technologies allow everyone to gain access to a general audience. The distance between traditional media and the viewer / reader / audience has been eliminated in social media. Once produced, content cannot be changed in traditional media after its publication. In social media, however, it can be changed instantly by means of comments or editing. Social media encourages everyone involved to provide feedback.

2. **Openness:** Social media supports all kinds of sharing such as communication, making comments, information-sharing, and expression of thoughts. It tries to remove any barriers to accessing and using content. Content is usually produced for traditional media by private companies and governments whereas tools of social media can be used by anyone with little or no cost in general.

3. **Conversation:** The essence of social media is to socialize, to communicate. Traditional media, on the other hand, is interested in broadcasting, publishing. Traditional media production requires specialization and training. This is not the case with social media or the required skills are completely changed and new in some cases and everyone can contribute to content production.

4. **Community:** Social media encourages individuals involved to organize, form communities and effectively communicate about a topic quickly.

5. **Connectedness:** Social media is connected and it provides links for other sites, sources, and people.

The following are the platforms that are considered as examples of the current social media, but it should be kept in mind that these platforms can multiply and diversify depending on future developments:

Social Network Sites: By means of these networks people prepare their personal profile pages, contact their friends and share ideas and contents. The social networks with highest number of users are MySpace, Facebook and Bebo.

Blogs: Blogs are probably the most well-known form of social media. They can be described as online diaries.

Wikis: These websites are used as a means for sharing the information, documents and data users have about a subject with others. In this form of social media, every user acts as both a source and a receiver. The most well-known example of wikis is Wikipedia.

Podcasts: They are a type of social media that distributes particularly audio or video files to users based on a subscribing feature. The most well-known example is Apple iTunes.

Forums: They are online discussion platforms and are characterized by members' discussion on a particular topic and/or interest. Forums can be seen as a preparation period for social media.

Content Communities: They are communities where a certain type of content is shared. The most popular content communities are YouTube (video), Vimeo (video), Instagram (photograph) andFlickr (photograph).

Microblogging Sites: They can define as a platform combining the characteristics of both social network sites and blogs at a small scale. They allow users to write brief and limited messages and encourage updating. Updating and sharing is done online and with mobile

devices. The most popular microblogging service is Twitter (http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2009/04/27/future-of-the-social-web/ 24.12.2010 in Erzurum, 2011: 32).

According Jeremiah Owyang, former analyst for Forrester and the author of the blog Web Strategy (http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2009/04/27/future-of-the-social-web/, 24.12.2010), the future of social media will go through five distinct eras:

1. Social Relationships: The era when people connect to others and share

2. Social Functionality: The era whensocial networks become like operating system

3. Social Colonization: The era when every experience can now be social

4. Social Context: The era of personalized and accurate content

5. Social Commerce: The era when communities define future products and services

Owyang argues that these waves do not come after another, but they overlap each other. People have entered the era of social relationships and have started to witness its development. At the same time, people have also entered the era of social functionality, but they haven't started to use it actively yet. It is possible to suggest that, in a sense, people also have taken the first steps in the era of social colonization with the development of applications like Facebook connect. The era of social context does not seem far away, too.

As mentioned above, according to Alvin Toffler's (2008:16-17) three-wave theory, the first wave included the agrarian society 10.000 years ago and took a very long period. The second wave included the industrial society 300 years ago. The third wave included the information society which began in the digital era. Speed was not very important in the first wave. In the second wave, pace mattered, but the third wave isreally fast, even beyond speed. These three waves are the major breakthroughs with their own stages. Because the third wave is beyond speed, its own developmental stages take place at a fast pace. These breakthroughs are determined by factors such as macro-economic and sociological balances that determine inventions and diffusion of innovations in society. For example, one of these factors is the millennium. 1994, which is the year considered as the start of the Millennium Generation overlaps with the period when the Internet started to be used, which is a major breakthrough. A population in the same generation consists of all the individuals who areborn and liveapproximately at the same time and share the conditions, history, social events, problems,

fate and responsibilities of the same era. The most significant development that has affected the generation born over the last three decades is technology. Introduction of the Internet and of mobile communication tools such as smart phones and tablets leaves common traces in individuals' behavior and lifestyles. In order to reach the target audience, any structure needs to be built on their characteristics and orientations.

- The media to be used should be interactive. This is an era of uninterrupted communication and mobile phones and devices with internet access are becoming an indispensable part of our daily lives.

- Personalized information or products attract much more attention now. Social media seems to be a good source of information in this regard.

- Followers can be encouraged to participate in online projects requiring collaboration. Their own blogs or works can also be included in these projects.

- Visual communication is extremely important. Visual messages can help attract users' interest.

- Games can be used as a means of the messages given in order to ensure the participation of every age group in social media. It could prove to be more effective when learning and participation are considered as games.

- Individuals in social media are regarded to be more prone to critical thinking and problem solving instead of memorizing information, so that should be taken into consideration when communicating through the web pages of an organization.

- The messages in social media should be given in smaller chunks considering the shorter span of attention and concentration (Erzurum, 2011).

Facilitation of internet-mediated communication has shown itself in all areas such as education, economics, media sector and communications sector and the traditional models and processes related to these areas were replaced by new practices (Birsen, 2012:13). The Internet has literally become the first source used by most people intending to purchase a product or service. It has astructure different from that of the preceding sources of information and communication media. Not having a one-way flow of information, the Internet serves as an interactive environment where userscanaccess, receive information, and find the relevant experiences about their topics of interest at any time they need. The Internet

has its own culture and etiquette. Therefore, any person, institution or organization who wants to bein this environment more effectively shouldn't ignore these rules and procedures.

Health communication and health communication in social networks

The concept of health communication began to be used in the United States in the 1970s and it describes a multi-faceted communication. The attempt to set the boundaries of health communication is particularly challenging because the topic contains various disciplines within itself and this attempt tries to combine the field of social science with the field of medicine. Health communication is a form of communication between individuals or groups related to the subject of health care and relevant target groups (Okay, 2009:21). Health communication could take place between patients and doctors, among doctors, between medical staff and patient, among patients and between health organizations and others. While early health communication studies focused solely on statistical data, today they deal with health promotion, information about diseases, campaigns, marketing activities and public relations and contribute to public "health literacy". In recent years, with the increasing interest in health issues, the number of health-related to messages in the mass media has also increased.

Health communication might occur at various levels. According to Thomas, these levels include individual, social networking, organizational, community and societal communication. On the other hand, Kreps suggests that the primary levels of health communication are intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, organizational, and societal communication. According to Kreps, health communication involves a wide area of research and this type of communication is implementedin a number of different levels and channels. In addition, health communication research has two major interdependent branches: "health care delivery" and "health promotion". Scholars in the health care delivery branch study how communication affects the delivery of health care whereas health promotion scholars examine the persuasive use of communication messages and the media to promote public health (Thomas, 2006:3 and Kreps, 2003:355 in Okay, 2009: 25-31).

Especially in recent years in Turkey, health communication is misguidedly referred to as a public relations and promotion activitiesof private hospitals or as medical communication (a definition including promotion of medical devices)and marketing of health care services.

Health communication actually takes place as a part of transmission of health-related news and information,conducting health campaigns and health education activities across the country (Çınarlı, 2008: 48).

Social networks are virtual social lives led by people on the Internet. People define themselves in these networks and set up communication with other people with the same cultural background whom they could get on with by means of the opportunities offered by the Internet. The brand groups created by companies or individuals on social networks such as Facebook have become the new channels for brands to communicate in terms of relationship marketing.

Today, it would be wrong to expect that medical science alone should take part in the solution of health problems and health related issues. In the light of this, as an example of a multi-disciplinary interaction, 'health communication'can make significant contribution to health promotion by using the methods of social marketing, media advocacy and public relations. Especially public relations, which is defined as the, 'strategic communication management' nowadays, can use its power as a method of communication used in health communication for 'the public interest' (Çınarlı, 2008:39). Social media can fulfill these functions as it is capable of reaching a lot of people at a lower cost. The Internet has now become a part of everyday life as a means of communication through which consumers themselves can initiate the process of obtaining information and have access to information about any product and service 24 hours a day.

Everyone is connected to each other with social networking. Every individual acts as a node or the center in another person's a social network. A considerable part of the quality of our lives are affected by the quality of our social networks. Our standards of living depend on the standards of our social networks (Durmuş, Yurtkoru, Ulusu, and Kılıç, 2010:18). Similarly, in his work "The Rise of the Network Society", Manuel Castells suggests that network-based initiatives are a form of organization that areappropriate for a global and knowledge-based economy. The Internet gives individuals an opportunity for new businesses, self-expression, cooperation and socialization, and a worldwide promotion of their thoughts and feelings. Making a mimicry of McLuhan's famous slogan "The medium is the message", Castells asserts that "The network is the message"(Castells, 2005). Companies using social networks

have begun to use applications through which they can meet and socialize with consumers apart from advertisements. Social media offers businesses a low-cost and effective environment. In addition to being a means of socialization, it also provides businesses with significant opportunities. The increasing number of users in these environments allows businesses to reach their target audience, deliver their products and services to consumers and increase awareness and loyalty of their customers by offering them different experiences (Durmuş, Yurtkoru, Ulusu, and Kılıç, 2010: 13-33). As the borders are blurring more and more, individuals, companies, or those sharing a common idea or hobby can now create their own communities. These communities share their knowledge and experiences in an open or closed way.

The growing interest in health issues and the fact that the media (traditional and social media) covers more and more health issues does not necessarily mean that health information is "quality" and "practicable". Consumption-oriented and commercial health sectorhas taken precedence over public health. Increasing abundance and low-quality of information is transmitted to recipients by the media sometimes as misinformation and sometimes as disinformation, and this threatens public health. Too much health-related information is spread out, but this information is actually controversial and complicated.

Medical knowledge needs to be supported by other information produced in social, economic, cultural and political areas so that it serves its primary function (Çınarlı, 2008: 188). The power of the Internet and social media for institutions is increasing day by day. Social media tools supplement the organizational development of institutions because they are easily accessible sources of information that provide continuous access to target audience. However, as mentioned above, the content and source of information are extremely critical. Unfortunately, there is a legal hole about the legal responsibilities that should be followed regarding this issue. Therefore, what matters at this point is the ethical responsibility understanding of companies and individuals.

After the introduction of social media in our lives, pace of change increased and being innovative and leading innovations became much more important. It is only natural that health sector is well aware of these opportunities. However, there are strict arrangements regulating the existence of health care companies in the media and this type of interactive

environments. In Turkey, health-related information sharing and promotion and the information that can be shared with the public are controlled and restricted by the law. Therefore, what health care institutions and organizations share in these environments can be limited. The regulation about the general issues and promotion activities to be followed by private health care institutions wasupdated by circular no 2012/42 of November 16, 2012. According to the regulation, only authorized health care professionals can provide health-related information on the Internet. Health sector has many restrictive (legal and self-controlling) internal conditions and it acts cautiously about the communication activities to be carried out on social networks.

Healthcare organizations seem to act in a cautious way in social media. They are both willing to take part in this new and undeniably effective environment and, at the same time, they have cold feet in it. There are some points that health care organizations should consider when planning to take part in social media:

*Editorialcontrol:*Any information to be provided in the web pages of an organization should be given only by qualified and experienced persons. Also, what the organization shares need to be subject to editorial control as it provides double-check by the healthcare organization. In this way, messages that can cause misinformation, put the organization in a difficult situation, orinclude misleading content about individuals and organizations can be controlled.

Complementarity: All kinds of health information presented on the site is not supposed to replace the relationship between doctors and site visitors, patients, and patients' relatives, but to support the fundamental doctor-patient relationship.

Privacy: Health care institutions are supposed to protect the security and privacy (based on their privacy settings) of visitors' or followers' information on social networking pages. Information about followers shouldn't be used or shared without their permission (http://www.slideshare.net/ehaliloglu/sosyal-medyada-salk-uygulamalar).

Social media is changing the nature of health communication. Social networks and other components of social media are changing both interpersonal and intercommunal relationships at anunpredictable pace. In health area, as with many products in other areas, consumers /

patients share their wishes, needs, preferences, and experiences through social networking. Health care institutions need to be careful especially about what is shared on their webpages.

Conclusion

We are faced with a rapidly growing network culture and the scope and variety of online applications are increasing rapidly. The common aspect of all of these developments is that all of them separate broad audience of television viewers into smaller groups and each group do not only provide a cultural diversity but also deprive major television broadcasters, who have determined the images in our minds until now, of their power to a certain extent. The number of kinds of new means of communication that do not appeal to a wide audience is increasing and, as Toffler pointed out, means of mass communication, which obtained a considerable impact during the second wave, are being replaced by these new means. According to Toffler (2008, 209-210), the third wave ushered a completely new era, an era of moving away from masses in the media and communication. The biggest impact of all this will take place in the most important area, our minds, because all these changes together will alter and re-shape our personal world views. Divergence of means of communication from masses will also take our minds away from masses.Today, as larger masses receiving the same messages is coming to an end, small masses have begun to exchange information among themselves. Communities are acknowledging the diversity brought by the third wave. The new means of communication bear traces of this process and create an acceleration effect. Through social networks, communication between individuals and small and large communities has becomeinstant and interactive. Consequently, every person and every organization who works in relation to society and who aims to reach new generation should think and act at a fast pace. Health care institutions and organizations also must keep the pace with this speed. In both health care and in other areas, strategies and practices should be prepared in line with the preferences of the new generation. By means of technological advances, social media has become an indispensable part of our daily lives as it allows to share knowledge for 24 hours a day and take part interactively in online life through devices including mobile communication technologies such as mobile phones, tablets, and computers. Interactions in social media also provide opportunities for health care institutions that are probably not intended for them or are considered as secondary benefits. This is a completely new process in which patients' profile information and what they share in social media can provide more detailed information about their lifestyles and habits and this information can

be used in their treatment process. As a result of the fact that the new generation is born into technology and grows up along with it, geographical boundaries are becoming less and less important and this new generation is predicted to demand globalized management policies in all areas. It is estimated that, in Turkey, this generation (the population born after 2004) will have a population of 18 million in 2015 and, because the time periods between generations are getting shorter, they can find it easy to get on with the preceding generations and hardly have generation gap problems. On the other hand, organizational structure can change because they don't really like hierarchy and they are open to communication. As they expect everything to be personalized for them, all institutions, organizations and administrators might need to develop an individual perspective. Investment on the individual will probably continue to grow. Since this is a generation that wantschange but, at the same time, change their minds quickly, retaining talented individuals might require more resources. Business processes are likely to be supported by technology and designed in a way far from bureaucracy. There will probably be a need to define flexible systems and set up the necessary environments in order to meet individualized demands of employees with increased "Me" focus. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that this information is likely to be beneficial not now but five years from now. Yet, marketers and communication experts are already developing a special strategy tailored for this generation. Social media and social networks provide individuals with the opportunity to learn about diseases, share their experiences or benefit from experiences and participate in support groups. It is crucial that health communication create strategies and implement practices for its target audience in advance when it is set up through social media and social networks. Social networks emerge as a platform of information and communication when individuals are to make a health-related decision. The content shared on social networks and the experiences shared by individuals online affect their decisions as to where and when to receive health care service. In the coming years, health care institutions that can use social media actively and properly are likely to have the opportunity to take on a more active and participatory role with respect to individual and community health.

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