

**Agricultural Communication in a Changing Media Environment:**

**A Case Study of the Dairy Farmers of Canada**

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**Abstract**

The digital media landscape fundamentally mediates consumers' understanding of agriculture, farming, and food. Web 2.0 has created many opportunities and challenges for both audiences and organizations of all types (private, public and non-profit). Through a case study, this project provides insights regarding digital public relations, specific to the agriculture industry in Canada. In particular, this research investigates how the Dairy Farmers of Canada implement digital public relations tactics in a Web 2.0 media environment. It shows how an organization representing dairy producers and farmers in Canada have adapted communication efforts to consumers in a digital media environment in an attempt to close to farm-to-plate knowledge gap. It supports prior research regarding the need to redefine public relations' control paradigm and strategic focus in the context of an interactive, participatory media landscape.

Keywords: public relations, participatory media, digital media, case study, agricultural communication, agriculture

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. The Issue – Overview and Background**

As Canadians seem to be increasingly geographically and generationally removed from rural, farming communities, many urban consumers' understanding of agriculture and farming is mediated. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a growing presence of media in our everyday lives and we live in "in a heavily mediated world" (Livingstone, 2009, p. 2). At the same time, media power is shifting and media environments are constantly changing (Jenkins, 2006). In turn, agricultural organizations are adapting the way they strategically communicate to many different stakeholders, including consumers, in an aim to reduce the 'farm-to-plate' knowledge gap.

In order to heighten consumer understanding about the source of their food and to market agriculture products, organizations representing food producers use marketing and public relations (PR) strategies and tactics to build trust and brand awareness amongst target markets. Additionally, such organizational communication is becoming increasingly hybrid, where 'integrated marketing communications' (IMC) is more widely practiced (Kitchen & de Pelsmacker, 2004) and the boundaries between public relations and marketing are becoming eroded. As a rhetorical construct, IMC can be described as the "coordinated use of a variety of different promotional communications tools towards a single objective" (Hallahan, 2007, p. 299). Integrated communications ensure an organization develops one single persona or voice to communicate consistently and purposively with key stakeholders, across all media channels or 'touch points' (Hallahan, 2007).

However, at the same time, many social, technological, and cultural influences, especially Web 2.0 media environments, are influencing strategic integrated organizational communication (Macnamara, 2010a). The growing sophistication of the Internet and interactive nature of 'new'

media are providing new opportunities and challenges to many organizations' integrated communication objectives (Kitchen & de Pelsmacker, 2004).

When integrating 'e-communication' into IMC strategies, "it is important to understand that the Internet does not replace the traditional marketing and marketing communication tools, but supplements them" (Kitchen & de Pelsmacker, 2004, p. 114). At the same time, with the widespread adoption of new media technologies, it is important to acknowledge how users of new media are afforded the possibility to become interactive, participatory, and influential towards the content and flow of messaging (Deuze, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins & Deuze, 2008). Audiences are no longer as passive to frames and agendas communicated through traditional mass media (i.e. television, the traditional press, radio) as they once were; Web 2.0 has the potential to facilitate a two-way flow of communication (Macnamara, 2010a).

Despite the presence of a digital divide, 'digital public relations' can be effectively used to supplement an organization's comprehensive IMC strategy (Kitchen & de Pelsmacker, 2004). Although earned media, such as paid traditional media, continues to be a priority for marketing initiatives (Kitchen & de Pelsmacker, 2004), organizations seem to be implementing more conversational communication strategies adapted to the saturated and evolving media environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, rooted in virtual two-way dialogue (Duhé, 2007; Macnamara, 2009, 2010a, 2010b). Dialogic, two-way consumer-oriented communication typically falls within the business practice of PR. As Grunig (1992) states, PR can be defined as "the management of the organization's communication functions," specifically "media relations, publicity, promotion or marketing support" (p. 4). Organizations exist within unpredictable environments and engage with many diverse, internal and external groups – the practice of public relations is needed to "steer diverse groups into some form of harmonious existence" (Murphy, 2007, p. 120). Overall,

organizations have the potential to supplement traditional media in an IMC strategy through engaging in dialogic ‘conversations’ with their audiences through digital public relations or e-communication (Grunig, 2009; Kelleher, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002).

## **1. 2. Misunderstandings of Agriculture**

The realization of public conversation in the current uncontrolled mediascape is important to one particular sector in Canada – agriculture. Agriculture is essential to the survival of families, and thus, societies around the world. Yet, despite our dependence on food and with less than two per cent of Canadians directly involved in farming (Beaulieu, 2014), there seems to be a misunderstanding among the Canadian public of farming and how food is produced. According to a recent poll of non-farming Canadians, 47% of those polled knew very little or nothing about farming in Canada (Ipsos Marketing, 2012).

Agriculture and society in Canada are undergoing complex changes simultaneously. Agriculture is becoming more scientific, progressive and change-oriented in order to evolve; today’s average farmer is extremely hard to describe to the urban consumer. For instance, precision farming, high-technology farming, and biotechnology are all new applications of technologies improving crop and food production (Boone, Meisenbach, & Tucker, 2000). These scientific and technological applications are helping to feed growing populations, yet as these populations are increasingly becoming culturally removed from rural life and the advancing agriculture industry, urban consumers appear to misunderstand and fear Canada’s complex food system (Blaine & Powell, 2001; Devries, 2014). Unlike previous generations, most urban consumers seem to have no direct connection with farming, and thus, seem to have less to no understanding of how food is produced, resulting in a ‘farm-to-plate knowledge gap’ and a lack of confidence in the safety and quality of the food supply (Anderson, 2000; Blaine & Powell,

2001; Verbeke, 2005). Evolving rural-urban demographics and societal relations, combined with the constant mediation of meaning and explosion of new communication technologies, have “contributed to a significant perceptual shift and public opinion toward agriculture” (Irani & Doerfert, 2013, p. 8).

As research (Reisner & Walter, 1994; Tucker, Whaley, & Sharp, 2006) shows, consumers are primarily informed about agriculture through the news media. Consequently, due to the growing gap between rural and urban societies, and news media’s declining and misrepresentative coverage of agriculture (Anderson, 2000; Devries, 2014; Pawlick, 2001; Reisner & Walter, 1994; Ruth, Eubanks, & Telg, 2005; Ten Eyck, 2000; Whitaker & Dyer, 2000), urban publics appear to have little understanding of, and are alienated from, agricultural issues (Devries, 2014). Addressing Canadians’ misconceptions is important, as a public blind spot of a vital industry directly related one’s own health, longevity, and wellbeing can be potentially damaging. Further, enhancing Canadians’ agricultural literacy is essential, as consumers and policy makers have a vested interest in agriculture, and need to be agriculturally literate in order to respond appropriately as issues arise (Frick, Birkenholz, & Machtmes, 1995). Overall, agricultural communicators are currently facing an educational challenge in a rapidly changing media environment.

### **1. 3. Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this research is to investigate how the Dairy Farmers of Canada (DFC), a national policy, lobbying, and promotional organization representing Canadian dairy farmers (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-a), implement an IMC strategy through digital PR tactics adapted to today’s saturated and participatory media environment. This study serves multiple purposes: (1) advances an understanding of how an agricultural organization representing Canadian food

producers adapts their IMC strategy to a saturated and highly digital media environment, (2) addresses how an organization representing Canadian dairy farmers aims to narrow the farm-to-plate knowledge gap through digital PR tactics, and (3) contributes to the lack of literature advancing an understanding of Canadian agricultural communication.

This is an important area of investigation, as members of the public with a direct connection to agriculture continue to decline in numbers, and as Irani and Doerfert (2013) explain, the future of agriculture depends on communicators' ability to more effectively convey the importance and value of agriculture to non-agriculture audiences. Irani and Doerfert also note how agricultural communicators seem to still use the one-way dissemination model, and need to reinvigorate communication, because as a society, "we are dependent on the food and fiber system, yet many in society have an uneasy relationship with it" (p. 10). Therefore, as Irani and Doerfert stress, and as the gap between rural and urban societies continues to grow, in order to improve misperceptions about agriculture and farming in Canada, agricultural organizations need to engage in authentic, two-way communication with urban consumer audiences.

The dairy industry in Canada in particular is in need of communicating how it has evolved. For instance, better animal nutrition, genetics, and robotic milking continue to increase the productivity of each cow, allowing farmers to decrease the dairy herd while milk production stays level (Statistics Canada, 2014). The media and vocal animal activists seem to often turn these advancements into misunderstood myths; farmers are not speaking up and dispelling these myths, and thus, "Canadian consumers may view the Canadian dairy industry in a portrayal that is different than Canadian dairy farmers would like" (Crowley, 2013, p. 131). As Crowley (2013) points out, "Canadian consumers are asking questions that they have never asked before –

especially in the agricultural arena where consumers have taken a distinct interest in where their food comes from – especially with milk production” (p. 131).

#### **1. 4. Central Research Question and Theoretical Underpinnings**

Using a case study approach, this study attempts to illustrate how the DFC integrate digital PR tactics into their comprehensive IMC strategy in order to not only promote the consumption of dairy products, but also to close the farm-to-plate knowledge gap. In other words, the research investigates how the DFC implements digital PR tactics, supplementing an overall IMC strategy, in order to improve consumers’ mediated understandings of dairy farming and agriculture. For this purpose, Symmetry/Excellence PR theory established by Grunig (1992), and dialogic communication theory as conceptualized by Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002), are utilized in this research to frame how the DFC may be harnessing digital media to foster two-way communication with consumers, in turn, attempting to narrow the widening gap between urban consumers and dairy farmers.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1. Agricultural Communication

Telg and Irani (2012) define agricultural communication as “the exchange of information about the agricultural and natural resources industries through effective and efficient media, such as newspapers, magazines television, radio and the Web, to reach appropriate audiences” (p. 4). Agricultural communication as an industry has evolved from agriculture magazines, journals, and rural weekly newspapers that feature farming news, to a complex, yet very important integration of several media channels to provide agriculture-related messages to targeted audiences (Telg & Irani, 2012).

Academic literature addressing agricultural communication is diverse in content, purpose, and methodology, reflecting the fact that agricultural communication is a complex social phenomenon seeking to address individual and group perceptions and behaviours toward farming, agriculture, and food production (Boone et al., 2000). The following is a review of academic literature specific to the agricultural communication field, mainly referencing research completed in the United States and Europe, as very little literature specifically addresses Canadian agricultural communication, let alone communication within the Canadian dairy industry.

**2.1.1. Farm-to-Plate Knowledge Gap.** There seems to be an increasing cultural and social divide between urban and rural populations in Canada, leading to a gap in knowledge about farming and food production. More and more Canadians appear to be generationally and geographically removed from farming as families are growing in and populating urban areas; for instance, in 2011, 81 percent of the Canadian population resided in urban locations, and only 19 percent of Canadians populated rural areas (Statistics Canada, 2011). Also, statistics support the

fact that Canadian agriculture has transformed throughout the last century, where technological advancements have enabled fewer, rural-based agricultural producers (Beaulieu, 2014) to support Canada's growing population, especially in urban settings. The decline in agricultural literacy of urban consumers can be characterized by a "green divide" (Irani & Doerfert, 2013), "farm-to-plate knowledge gap" (Rumble & Buck, 2013), and low "agricultural literacy" where individuals are generations removed from the family farm and have limited knowledge about agriculture and food production (Frick, Birkenholz, & Machtmes, 1995). Agricultural literacy amongst consumers is low (Duffy, Fearne, & Healing, 2005); in fact, 47 percent of Canadians, who are unfamiliar with farming in the first place, know very little or nothing about farming practices (Ipsos Marketing, 2012). As a result, Canadian food sectors seem to face a crisis in confidence as awareness of food related risk has been elevated (Blaine & Powell, 2001; Tucker, Whaley, & Sharp, 2006), and as Ryan (2014a) argues, this leaves consumers susceptible to misinformation spread through 'myths' communicated by activist groups. To illustrate 'modern myth-making' with one example, in North America, the anti-genetic modification (GM) movement mobilizes resources, including the Internet, to spread misinformed and fabricated messaging to consumers about biotechnology used in agriculture (Ryan, 2014a). Having said that, in summary, the farm-to-plate knowledge gap and shift in public perception toward agriculture is sustained through the following complex, yet integrated factors:

- Evolving demographics and lifestyle changes over the past 50 years expanding the urban-rural divide and leading to a decline in publics with a direct connection to agriculture.
- The problematic mass media coverage of agriculture (Devries, 2014) – this is important to acknowledge as traditional media such as television and newspapers are important

sources of information about farming and agriculture for Canadians (Ipsos Marketing, 2012).

- The growing, amplified voice of animal treatment and environmental advocacy movements (Anderson, 2000; Irani & Doerfert, 2013; Ryan, 2014a), which in turn influence consumer mistrust in Canadian food systems.

**2. 1. 2. News Media Coverage of Agriculture.** Mass media play an important role in mediating individuals' understandings and perceptions of agriculture and farming; the way in which media portrays issues surrounding agriculture and food can have an effect on consumer perception (Blaine & Powell, 2001). Due to the public's reliance on mass media sources for information regarding agricultural and scientific issues, research indicates that news media are ineffective in communicating about agriculture (Blaine, Kamaldeen, & Powell, 2002; Devries, 2014; Reisner & Walter, 1994; Stringer, 1999; Swinnen, McClusky, & Francken, 2005). Although agriculture significantly impacts the life of every Canadian, it continues to be a neglected topic in the mass media (Devries, 2014; Pawlick, 2001). As urban populations grew and rural populations shrank, mainstream newspapers gradually quit writing for a declining agriculture audience, and further, since 1975, media resources devoted to the coverage of agriculture and rural affairs dwindled (Pawlick, 2001). In addition, Canadian media have long since turned their attention far away from agriculture because of its complex, scientific nature (Devries, 2014; Lewis, 1997); agriculture journalists or editors in Canada are declining steadily and general reporters may fear the farm-beat (Devries, 2014; Lewis, 1997). The decline of agriculture media coverage also has strong ties to systemic pressures within the media industry, such as a demand for profit, the need to please advertisers, and dwindling resources (Anderson, 2000; Swinnen et al., 2005).

Further, literature maintains that when mainstream news outlets do cover agriculture, a slanted and distorted reality about agriculture and the food industry is presented to audiences (Anderson, 2000; Devries, 2014; Pawlick, 2001; Reisner and Walter, 1994; Ruth, Eubanks, & Telg, 2005; Ten Eyck, 2000). As mentioned, agriculture is a complex industry and most journalists are urban-based, fear the complexity of the farm-beat, and lack direct personal experience with agriculture (Devries, 2014; Pawlick, 2001), and therefore, use specific pre-existing frames which tend to negatively frame agriculture and food safety (Goodwin, 2000; Chiarelli, & Irani, 2011; Reisner & Walter, 1994; Ruth et al., 2005; Specht & Rutherford, 2013; Ten Eyck, 2000; Whitaker & Dyer). As such, it seems that most news reported on agriculture is often “misleading, inaccurate and incomplete” (Ruibal-Mendieta & Lints, 1998, pp. 383-384), and lacks the information required to communicate the context of the topic being reported, either being too brief, failing to contextualize the issue at hand, or skewing reality for a specific news angle (Anderson, 2000; Devries, 2014; Freeman, 2009; Laestadius, Lagasse, Smith, & Neff, 2012; Ten Eyck, 2000).

Therefore, due to people’s reliance on mass media to define their understanding of agriculture and food production, the steady decline of news focusing on farming has contributed to the urban public’s lack of understanding about agricultural issues. If media continue to sparsely cover only agricultural news using problematic, predisposed frames, or those associated with risk, then it can be expected that the public will continue to hold an inaccurate schema about agriculture and food production (Ruth et al., 2005). In addition to news, entertainment media seem to have an impact on the public’s perception of agriculture; entertainment and popular culture portrayals of agriculture reinforce existing negative perceptions and inaccurate stereotypes towards the industry (Lundy, Ruth & Park, 2007; Ruth, Lundy & Park, 2005).

**2. 1. 3. Consumer Perception and Information Habits.** Alongside recent food safety and ethical concerns, consumers now fear the role of technology and biotechnology in their food system and the lack of control they have over the food they consume (Boone, Meisenbach, & Tucker, 2000; Laros & Steenkamp, 2004; Tucker, Whaley and Sharp, 2006). Consumers' trust in the food system seems to have declined (Anderson, 2000; Blaine & Powell, 2001), resulting in a lack of confidence in the quality and safety of the food system (Boone et al., 2000). Some scholars (Blaine & Powell, 2001; Ryan, 2014) stress the role of biotechnology in fueling misconceptions and fear, as "the use of chemicals in agriculture, along with other food-related technologies, management techniques, and ethical concerns are being intensely scrutinized and continue to raise questions" among consumers (Blaine & Powell, 2001, p. 179).

It may be assumed that increasing the amount of information available about biotechnology, farming, and agriculture will decrease misperceptions of the industry, in turn fostering informed consumers who make better food purchasing decisions. However, research indicates that increased consumption of information does not necessarily translate into a more informed consumer (Verbeke, 2005); consumers tend to resonate more with media, and organizations or individuals who communicate through dialogue, increasing the potential for a relationship of trust (Anderson, 2000; Blaine & Powell, 2001; Blaine et al., 2002; Frewer, Kole, Van de Kroon, & De Lauwere, 2005).

In terms of who consumers trust for information, they tend to be skeptical of corporate organizations (Goodwin et al., 2011) and are more likely to trust communication from friends and family, not-for-profits, farmer or producer groups, and consumer groups (Ipsos-Reid, 2001, as cited in Blaine & Powell, 2001; Ipsos Marketing, 2012). Television, newspapers, and websites are the most widely used media for information about food and farming in Canada, and retailers,

grocery stores, farmers and magazines are also important sources of information for Canadians (Ipsos Marketing, 2012). Key messages that resonate with consumers involve connotative imagery of farmers and images consumers can visualize; messages supported with evidence or examples are also seen as favourable by consumers (Goodwin et al., 2011).

Overall, consumer interest in agriculture and food-safety seems to be on the rise, in fact, 59 percent of Canadians want to know more about farming (Ipsos Marketing, 2012). Yet understanding of crucial agriculture or food safety issues tends to be low; this becomes an issue, as urban consumers and policy makers will make important decisions regarding the future of the agricultural industry. As mentioned, 47 percent of Canadians know very little or nothing about farming practices in Canada (Ipsos Marketing, 2012); thus, many are uneducated and it can be assumed, many are unmindful of the impact the industry has on the Canadian economy and the livelihood of Canadians. Hence, improving consumer understanding and narrowing the farm-to-plate knowledge gap is crucial to the sustainability and success of the agriculture and food industry. As mentioned, it seems creating trusting relationships and dialogue with consumers is vital in order to increase urban consumers' understanding of the agriculture and food industry.

**2.1.4. Championing the Agriculture Story.** In order to narrow the farm-to-plate knowledge gap, improving trust between consumers and food producers, it appears crucial to communicate effective messages to consumers through dialogue; there is a need to reconnect farming with its market (Duffy et al., 2005). Through the work of industry communication practitioners, those within the agriculture industry have been inspired to develop greater awareness and understanding between producers and consumers (Goodwin et al., 2011). Goodwin et al. (2011) maintain that it is important for agricultural organizations to become advocates for the industry and tell their side of the story.

Recently, both the academic community (Graybill-Leonard, Meyers, Doerfert & Irlbeck, 2011; Irlbeck, Graybill-Leonard & Doerfert, 2011; Meyers, Irlbeck, Graybill-Leonard & Doerfert, 2011; Pritchett, Naile & Murphrey, 2012; Rhoades & Hall, 2007) and the agriculture industry (Crowley, 2013; Davison, 2011; Payn-Knoper, 2009, n.d.; Real Agriculture, 2013; Roberts, 2013; Ryan, n.d.; Vanik Smith, 2013) are celebrating the ability of social media to be used as communication tools to disseminate accurate agricultural messages to fragmented online audiences and engage in conversations with consumers. Rhoades and Hall (2007) suggest that with more and more readers turning to blogs for their news and information, and the effect blogs have on current news agendas, it is important for blogs to provide discussions on a variety of issues related to agriculture. Further, for the dairy industry in particular, social media tools such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter can be effective in connecting farmers with consumers, bridging the divide, and addressing farming issues consumers are eager to hear about (Crowley, 2013). In theory, computer-mediated environments and social media platforms afford the possibility for interactive agriculture-related conversations.

However, creating ‘mediated dialogue’ with consumers is easier said than done. It is also important to acknowledge the complex environment when communicating agricultural messages and information to consumers. Ruth-McSwain (2009) notes that saturated and participatory media environments are challenging traditional agricultural communication practices; changing, consolidated, and profit-driven media environments challenge and fragment agricultural communicators’ dissemination of messaging. Ruth- McSwain and Telg (2009) found that media relations strategies across the agricultural industry differ and traditional tactics are being problematized in contemporary media environments.

Clearly there are many communication tools to disseminate agriculture messages, and many fragmented audiences to address with different informational needs and wants. Duffy et al. (2005) emphasize how agri-food industry communication efforts are being challenged; “the communication activities of organizations in the agri-food industry confirms an extremely fragmented delivery, particularly to consumers, and a distinct lack of resources to effectively communicate the information that exists and evaluate its impact on the attitudes, perceptions and behavior of different target groups” (p. 32). Rumble and Buck (2013) summarize the complex environment when communicating about agriculture:

Due to the lack of comprehension of agriculture information, inaccurate media coverage, the lack of motivation of some to process agriculture information, and the struggles of those in the industry to communicate to the public and media about agriculture, a knowledge gap exists between those who produce and consume agriculture products. (p. 60)

Thus, improved and integrated agricultural communication is crucial to the creation of agriculturally literate public (Lundy, Ruth, Telg & Irani, 2006).

## **2. 2. Integrated Communication**

The Internet is rapidly changing the infrastructure of information, creating new communication channels and at times, forcing communication environments to hybrid. IMC includes the interacting business functions of PR and marketing (Hallahan, 2007). Traditionally, the tools of the marketing communications mix – advertising, public relations, sales promotion, direct marketing, and personal selling – were all distinct separate business functions (Kitchen & de Pelsmacker, 2004, p. 20). However, in today’s complex media environment, organizational marketing communication tools are coordinated and integrated to encourage synergy and

consistency across all external-facing organizational communication activities (Hallahan, 2007). As Hutton (2010) writes, over time, the differences between marketing and public relations diminished. These two distinct practices are combined in IMC in an effort to provide “clarity, consistency and maximum communications impact” (Schultz et al., 1993, as cited in Kitchen & de Pelsmacker, 2004). While some criticize the integration of organizational communication (Grunig & Grunig, 1998), in today’s media environment, there would very rarely be a circumstance where marketing communications and public relations should not be integrated to some extent (Hutton, 2010), as a lack of integration between practices would result in poor consumer-oriented communication and little consistency and clarity. Together, the Internet, globalization, and uptake of digital technology have driven the widespread use of IMC; the integration and unison of marketing communication tools has been accepted as the norm (Kitchen & de Pelsmacker, 2004).

Kotler and Mindak (1978) were the first to address the increasingly important issue of the PR and marketing interface. Five possible relationships exist between the integrated business functions: (1) marketing and public relations as independent functions, (2) marketing and public relations as overlapping functions, (3) marketing as a subset of public relations, (4) public relations as a subset of marketing, and (5) marketing and public relations as the same function (Kotler & Mindak, 1978).

### **2. 3. Theoretical Models of Public Relations**

As mentioned above, the practice of PR is increasingly converging with marketing; however, the digital implementation of PR tactics to supplement a larger IMC strategy is the focus of this research, and thus, public relations theory will frame this research. As such, a discussion of PR models is necessary in order to understand various approaches organizations

can take when disseminating messaging to audiences. Grunig and Hunt (1984) outlined four models of PR: (1) press agency, where PR professionals seek publicity and press coverage for their clients, often at the expense of accuracy and trust, (2) public information, where PR professionals act as amateur journalists, disseminating information about their employers to target publics, (3) two-way asymmetrical, a practice where organizations seek feedback from their publics, but only for the purpose of better persuading those stakeholders to see the organization's point of view (Grunig, 1992), and (4) two-way symmetrical communication, a more effective and more ethical than one-way information transmission or asymmetrical communication (Grunig, 1992). The two-way Symmetry model, also known as the Excellence study, encourages organizations to engage in two-way communication with their publics both to change the publics' perception, as well as to possibly change the organization itself (Grunig, 1992). This model reflects Grunig's concept of PR as a practice of developing relationships with publics in order to meet an organization's mission; this can be viewed as instrumental in shifting the emphasis in PR theory from persuading and managing publics to a new theoretical model of building, nurturing, and maintaining relationships (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

In addition to Grunig's four models, Kent and Taylor (2002) emphasize Pearson's dialogic theory of PR, where PR is conceptualized as the "management of interpersonal dialectic" (Pearson, 1989, as cited in Kent & Taylor, 2002). Dialogue changes the nature of the organization-public relationships by placing emphasis on the relationship (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Dialogue as a PR perspective includes five features:

*Mutuality*, or the recognition of organization–public relationships; *propinquity*, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; *empathy*, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; *risk*, or the willingness to interact with

individuals and publics on their own terms; and finally, *commitment*, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics. (Kent & Taylor, 2002, pp. 24-25).

It is important to emphasize the difference between two-way communication and dialogue. Kent and Taylor (1998) write:

the relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and dialogic communication can be seen as one of process and product. That is, two-way symmetrical communication's theoretical imperative is to provide a procedural means whereby an organization and its publics can communicate interactively...In contrast, dialogic communication refers to a particular type of relational interaction – one in which a relationship exists. Dialogue is a product rather than a process. (p. 323)

Further, for Botan (1997), “traditional approaches to public relations relegate publics to a secondary role, making them instruments for meeting organizational policy or marketing needs; whereas, dialogue elevates publics to the status of communication equal with the organization” (p. 196).

#### **2. 4. Public Communication and Digital Media**

It appears the practice of public communication is being reshaped in interactive media environments. As Macnamara (2010a) suggests, interactive two-way communication is now possible between organizations and publics – conversation, collaboration and co-creativity through collective intelligence can be realized through digital technologies. Once one-way, controlled models of communication are no longer as influential on audiences, as credibility is becoming a requirement for communication to publics where authenticity is being valued, instead of heavily produced and pre-packaged content (Macnamara, 2010b). Grunig's

Symmetry/Excellence theory, emphasizing two-way dialogue, can be realized within this media landscape where users, platforms, and institutions interact.

**2. 4. 1. Web 2.0 – Interactive, Participatory Media.** A shifting perception of consumer roles – as no longer just passive and anonymous, but as active actors in the communication process – has been reinforced with the advent of Web 2.0. Rhetoric of user empowerment within the ‘digital revolution’ is rooted in embracing the openness and participatory nature of new media. It is important to define Web 2.0, and Macnamara (2010b) is worth citing as he collectively defines Web 2.0 and the emergent Web 3.0 as:

increasingly widespread connectivity through always-on networks that allow people formerly confined to ‘audiences’ become producers as well as consumers (what some call prosumers or produsers) resulting in creativity, diversity, and plurality in content, and facilitating interactivity including two-way human-to-human interaction, collaboration with others to pool and share ideas and intellectual property (what Pierre Lévy calls collective intelligence) and engage in co-creativity, community building, and communication through conversation and dialogue between people interacting with authenticity. (pp. 38-39)

Those who favour Web 2.0 participatory culture reject the traditional one-way, top-down model of communication and cultural production. Media culture is undergoing a revolution as scholars (Bruns, 2008; Bucy, 2004; Deuze, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Macnamara, 2010a, 2010b) stress how in contemporary media environments, interactive media and the Internet afford users the ability to play an active role in the mediation of meaning, shaping the flow of messages across many media formats.

Poster (1995) originally defined rapid, digital changes in technology as the ‘Second Media Age.’ Due to technological innovations, an entirely new configuration of communication relations were created where boundaries between producer and consumer collapsed, and media are democratising through their “two-way decentralized communication” (Poster, 1995, 63). Similarly, Boler (2008) addresses the transformation of media, asserting that digital devices and the rise of the Internet have extended our abilities to communicate. Emphasizing how the Internet connects one another, Boler notes “the web has always been about voice and conversation” (p. 39). Bucy (2004) argues alongside the digitization of media, noting how people have the power to participate in an interactive way, which is a strong challenge to traditional sources of power. However, a paradox exists: interactivity can encourage two-way communication in a fragmented and individualized media environment, but only if users have the skill and education necessary to do so (Bucy).

Further, Jenkins (2006) maintains that media industries are undergoing a paradigm shift, where the hybridized media environment can be viewed as a “convergence culture” (p. 2). He explains, “convergence culture is a complex, non-linear process where old and new media collide, where grassroots and mainstream media intersect, and where the power of media and power of the consumer interact” (p. 2). Jenkins does address possible pitfalls of this emergent convergence culture, arguing that a participation gap exists by means of access, knowledge, and literacy; however, overall he celebrates the ability of convergence culture to allow users to pursue new forms of participation, collaboration and collective intelligence.

Illustrating this shift in media use and audience behaviour further, Deuze (2006) suggests that ‘digital culture’ is the increased proliferation and saturation of screen-based, networked and digital media in our lives. He argues that participatory behaviour seems to be the only way

individuals are making sense of the mediated world and participatory culture is being shaped by activities in 'new' and 'old' media.

Overall, public communication is being rediscovered and interactive media are transforming traditional modes of communication. (Macnamara, 2010b) deems the interactive media environment 'emergent,' stating "out of a stew of convergent media ecosystems and colliding commercial, social and cultural practices, new forms of media and communication practice are emerging with characteristics and potential unlike their predecessors" (p.7).

In summary, the proliferation of digital media is reshaping how media industries operate, altering relationships users have, and encouraging new forms of participation through 'produsage' and collaboration. Interactivity is at the core of the Web 2.0 phenomenon, as greater interactions between the producer of the message and its receivers become apparent. The interactivity afforded by Web 2.0 opens a huge opportunity for PR professionals to introduce more effective and balanced communication with different audiences.

**2. 4. 2. PR 2.0 – Two-way Communication and Dialogue.** Interactive media is changing the ways in which PR professional are communicating to publics. Sha (2007) suggests that partly due to the explosion of media channels and changes in technology, relationships between organizations and their stakeholders have grown increasingly complex and malleable. Duhé (2007) writes the Internet has played a pivotal role in breaking down information exchange barriers, increasing the transparency of a company's operations, regardless of a company's desire or willingness to interact with its stakeholders. Further, Duhé suggests "this lifting of the corporate veil brings both complexity and uncertainly to the practice of public relations" (p. 58). She argues the Internet provides "not only enhanced transparency of information, but also the potential for two-way communication" (p. 65).

PR as a practice is having to “broaden its focus to include engagement through blogs, social networks, online chat, and microblogging websites such as Twitter” (Macnamara, 2010c, p. 12). As Macnamara (2010c) states, “reputations and brands can be made or broken in these environments,” and “the ‘push’ model of information is being challenged” (p. 12). Traditional public relations tactics such as press releases, events, and media interviews are no longer the sole way to influence audiences’ perceptions of companies or brands (Cakim, 2007). Further, Macnamara (2010c) argues interactive media allow for the collapse of the traditional media “control paradigm” (p. 8). Citizens are no longer denied a voice and content is no longer exclusively controlled by PR or marketing practitioners, media companies or news gatekeepers (Macnamara, 2010c). Web 2.0 communication environments are “open-ended ongoing conversations” (Macnamara, 2010c, p. 12).

Blogs and social media open up channels of communication allowing for the facilitation of more two-way communication, but also make it difficult to manage and control information dissemination (Wright & Hinson, 2008). Digital media have opened up a new group of stakeholders to engage with, and new vehicles for reaching them (Wright & Hinson, 2008). Overall, by opening up direct channels of communications between organizations and their public, blogs and social media have had a huge impact moving public relations into the direction of facilitating more two-way communication (Wright & Hinson, 2008). While at the same time, “these new media create additional information channels thus making it more difficult for those who practice public relations to help organizations manage and control information dissemination” (Wright & Hinson, 2008, p. 19). This climate illustrates the fundamental shift in communication management, where organizations must actively engage stakeholders at various media touchpoints, functioning within the complex process of communicating with multiple

publics. Overall, as Cakim (2007) suggests, a new branch of communications has been developed alongside Web 2.0 – ‘digital publics relations.’

It is important to recognize that technology itself is not the driver of successful e-communication, but rather how organizations use the technology to influence organization-public relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998). As Duhé (2007) writes, with digital PR:

public relations professionals must help guide organizations toward more transparent relationships with stakeholders while maintaining the core beliefs, values and purpose that define those organizations. This balancing act becomes more challenging in a mediated environment but nevertheless remains a vital, enduring, and fulfilling part of the practice. (p. 70)

Similar to Duhé (2007), Kent and Taylor (1998) suggest “dialogic communication created by the strategic use of the internet is one way for organizations to build relationships with publics” (p. 331). However, there are often misunderstandings when it comes to public relations activities on the web. Proactive monitoring activities, equated to terms such as “monitoring” and “responding” do not “equate to genuine ‘dialogue’ or negotiation of relationships” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325). Without feedback from publics or consideration of publics’ needs, Internet-mediated PR becomes “nothing more than a new monologic communication medium, or a new marketing technology” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325).

Grunig (2009) addresses the role of Symmetry/Excellence theory in digitized environments, stating, “I believe that an organization and its publics are now embedded in Internet-mediated social networks” and “public relations is still about an organization’s relationships with its publics” (p. 6). Grunig maintains, “new digital media have dialogical, interactive, relational and global properties that make them perfectly suited for a strategic

management paradigm of public relations” (p. 6). However, despite this potential, Grunig notes how some PR professionals are using new media as an ‘information dump,’ reverting back to one-way models of communication. He argues, some PR professionals are not fully harnessing the potential of interactive and dialogic characteristics of new media.

The underutilization of digital media to enhance two-way and dialogic communication can be seen throughout recent research investigating the potential of social media tools to foster authentic dialogue. Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) and Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton (2012) confirm that Twitter has the potential to be a mediated online space for dialogic communication, but PR practitioners are underutilizing this medium and not engaging in dialogic communication with online audiences.

## **2. 5. Summary and Synthesis**

Digital PR is becoming an increasingly vital organizational function in a self-reflective and modern, global world where public understandings of social and cultural environments are mediated. Also, digital PR is one of many synergized integrated communication practices that organizations implement in order to successfully communicate to stakeholders. Interactive and participatory media are challenging organizations’ traditional control of messaging. The role of digital PR within the saturated media environment is more important than ever, where two-way dialogue and conversation is possible between organizations and publics. Canadian agriculture is a specific industry where the challenges of communicating within participatory media environments can be understood.

As existing literature maintains, urban audiences are increasingly physically, socially and culturally alienated from agriculture and farming. Evolving urban-rural relations, paired with skewed media portrayals of agriculture, seem to be having a negative impact on urban

consumers' perception of an industry that is vital to not only the success and sustainability of the Canadian economy, but also their own health and well being. Urban consumers' perceptions of agriculture tend to be misrepresentative, prompting fear and mistrust in the food system.

Within the rapidly changing and participatory media environment where users expect transparency and credibility, the agriculture industry faces a challenge to advance consumer misunderstanding and fear into an understanding of and appreciation for the food industry. According to literature, building trust and engaging in two-way communication resulting in dialogue with alienated consumers is the first step in doing so. This type of communication seems possible through implementing PR tactics in an interactive media environment.

Therefore, it is important to examine how organizations representing Canadian food producers are utilizing digital PR tactics, alongside an overall integrated communication strategy, to engage in dialogue and in turn, build trust with urban consumers, ultimately closing the gap between the agenda of farmers and consumers. Research is needed in Canada addressing this issue as currently very little academic work addresses this area of inquiry.

## **2. 6. Research Questions**

Based on the literature review and in order to structure this case study, a series of operational questions were developed to explore how organizations representing food producers engage in public communication within the interactive media climate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in an attempt to narrow the food-to-plate knowledge gap.

**Q 1:** What strategy does the DFC, an organization representing Canadian dairy farmers, implement in an attempt to narrow the farm-to-plate knowledge gap in an interactive media environment?

**Q 2:** Within an interactive media environment, what digital PR tactics are implemented by the DFC to supplement the organization's overall integrated communication strategy?

**Q 3:** Does the DFC's digital, consumer-facing communication demonstrate two-way, dialogic communication as illustrated by Grunig's Symmetry/Excellence PR model and Kent and Taylor's dialogic communication model? If so, how?

### **3. Method**

#### **3. 1. Case Study Research Design**

An instrumental case study (Daymon & Holloway, 2011; Stake, 1995) was completed to examine how, in a digital media environment, the DFC uses digital PR to supplement an overall integrated communication strategy in an attempt to create dialogue with consumers. This research is concerned with DFC's use of digital PR in order to possibly engage in two-way communication with consumers, resulting in dialogue. In theory, this type of authentic and conversational communication could contribute to enhancing consumers' trust in the agriculture industry and be a factor in narrowing the farm-to-plate knowledge gap.

Case study as a research design was chosen as this method allows for increased knowledge to be created about real, contemporary communication events in their context (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Due to the fact that agricultural communication is a very niche and underdeveloped area of research in Canada, case study research design allowed to understand the integrated communication strategy and supplementary digital PR tactics of one particular organization, investigating agricultural communication within a unique sector of the industry (dairy), while also attempting to offer insights that have wider relevance to other agriculture advocacy organizations.

It is worth noting that this research is not without its own limitations. Specific time and place boundaries were put on the case itself. Due to time and monetary limitations of the research, the phenomenon explored in this case study is bound to a particular idea, context and organization – digital, consumer-facing communications from the DFC; transferring ideas developed from this research into a broader realm may not be possible. As such, the findings of

this research may not be generalizable to similar cases, yet some conclusions may resonate with readers in such a way that they can apply them to other situations to which they are familiar.

### **3. 2. Document Analysis**

Further, textual document analysis supports this case study. Textual document analysis, involves offering interpretation of material presented by organizations in the course of their operations (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Texts – or documents – are “artifacts of social communication” created by individuals or organizations for public consumption (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 277), and are the main source of data this research makes use of. This method was chosen as it is unobtrusive, allows for more comprehensive data spanning time, and illustrates ongoing processes (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Texts offer an understanding of how organizations publicize themselves and communicate – they “offer insights into the role of managed communication” as a mediator of contemporary life (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 277).

In brief, an exploration of digital PR tactics supporting the DFC’s overall integrated communication strategy, to be unveiled and evidenced in documents and texts collected, was undertaken in accordance with Grunig’s Symmetrical/Excellence theory, and Kent and Taylor’s dialogic communication theory. The theoretical framework mentioned in the Review of Literature chapter guided the data analysis; the Symmetry/Excellence model of PR and the dialogic model of communication were used as a foundation for building analysis of the data. Data was analyzed according to both models and synthesized appropriately. Critical and postmodern scholars (Laskin, 2009; Laskin, 2012) criticize these models of PR and organizational-public interaction; however, without a reconceptualized or notable alternative, these models continue to be widely known and used in research today.

### 3.3. Sample

The DFC is the national policy, lobbying, and promotional organization representing Canadian farmers living on 12 529 dairy farms (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-a). Dairy farmers fund its operations and thus, DFC acts as a voice of the entire community of Canadian dairy producers (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-a). The vision of the DFC is “to foster and promote the strong and united support of producers at the grassroots level for a national system of supply management” and “position itself as the most comprehensive and credible source of information on political, marketing and nutrition issues affecting the Canadian dairy industry and its stakeholders” (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-a). With regards to DFC’s integrated communication activities, the primary communication goal of the DFC is to promote the quality and the great nutritional value of Canadian dairy products (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-b). The DFC’s PR activities are extensive and varied, all working to support the marketing department. All possible means – advertising, in-store promotions, sponsorship agreements, education programs and proactive media relations – are employed to promote dairy products as part of a healthy diet (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-b).

Boundaries of place and time were accounted for. The case study explored the DFC’s integrated communication strategy as implemented digitally on their organizational website(s), social media accounts, and more specifically, through the *100% Canadian Milk* and *100 Good Reasons* campaigns. The *100% Canadian Milk* campaign has been promoted since 2009 (The AgriPost, 2009), and *100 Good Reasons* started in 2013 (Dairy Farmers of Ontario, 2013); however, due to limitations of this research, documents collected were restricted to being published between January 2013 and June 2014.

**3.3.1. Sampling Rationale.** This case study explores the DFC as an agricultural organization representing Canadian food producers as the dairy industry in Canada provides a staple food produce in many households – milk – and as such, ranks third in the Canadian agriculture sector following grains and oil seeds and red meats (Canadian Dairy Information Centre, 2014). Also, the DFC has long-standing brand recognition with consumers; the ‘little blue cow’ logo used on Canadian dairy products is a highly recognized symbol promoting the quality of milk produced and has trusted brand status (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2010; Mann, 2013). The DFC communicates in both of Canada’s official languages, French and English, and manages multiple consumer-facing campaigns with large promotional budgets, including *All You Need Is Cheese*, *Get Enough?*, *Recharge with Milk*, and *100% Canadian Milk* to name a few. Therefore, with such brand recognition, and as a reputable, knowledgeable source of information about Canadian dairy farms and farmers, the DFC has substantial potential to engage with consumers both offline and online, narrowing what seems to be the ever-increasing farm-to-plate knowledge gap. Further, the DFC as an organization is funded and structured similarly to many other commodity groups in Canada representing farmers – results from this study could then possibly offer insights into other national organizations representing food producers, such as the Egg Farmers of Canada or Turkey Farmers of Canada for instance. For these reasons, this case study is associated with the DFC, and offers a close examination of the organization within its social context, as complemented by document analysis.

Further, consumers are asking questions that they never asked before when it comes to dairy farming and milk production (Crowley, 2013); in particular, it seems those who consume a vegan diet are voicing their concerns online. Uncertain and uneducated consumers seem to be multiplying, despite strict quality milk standards, animal welfare, and on-farm safety programs

applied throughout Canada's production and processing chain to contribute to the excellent production of Canadian dairy products (Crowley, 2013). Thus, the DFC was chosen as the organization to explore in this case study as, in order to improve consumers' misunderstandings about milk production, animal welfare, and supply management, the DFC has the potential to engage in two-way, dialogic communication with fearful consumers through integrated communication.

The *100% Canadian Milk* campaign, and complementary *100 Good Reasons* campaign, were chosen to study as the goal of these two integrated campaigns is "to get consumers to feel good about choosing dairy products made from 100% Canadian milk by showing them that it is produced according to the highest quality standards by farmers who care about their work" (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014a). Overall, through various communication activities, these integrated campaigns attempt to bridge consumers and farmers' agendas based on both group's mutual interest: quality dairy products. These campaigns work together under one integrated communication strategy, and were chosen as, through extensive integrated mixed-media campaigns, the DFC attempts to connect consumers to dairy farmers, or producers of Canadian milk products. These campaigns were chosen to investigate in detail as ultimately, they not only encourage the consumption of dairy products among consumers, but also attempt to influence an understanding of supply management, animal welfare and the quality of dairy products – bridging a connection between consumers and farmers.

### **3. 4. Data Collection**

Documents and texts were publically available and collected from the Internet. Purposeful samples of data were collected and various types of documents were collected, including written, visual, multi-media, and Internet-based.

The following documents and texts were collected:

- Spring 2013, and Fall and Spring 2014 *Action+* reports (i.e. semi-annual reviews)
- DFC media releases from January 2013 until June 2014 directly referencing the *100% Canadian Milk* or *100 Good Reasons* campaigns
- December 2013 and January 2014 *Action Facts* reports (i. e. DFC Marketing and Nutrition News)
- DFC website ([www.dairyfarmers.ca](http://www.dairyfarmers.ca)), including the *Farmer's Voice* blog (accessible at [www.dairyfarmers.ca](http://www.dairyfarmers.ca))
- *Canadian Milk* website ([www.canadianmilk.ca](http://www.canadianmilk.ca))
- *100 Good Reasons* website ([www.100goodreasons.ca](http://www.100goodreasons.ca))
- DFC Twitter account (@dfc\_plc)
- *100% Canadian Milk* Twitter account (@100CanadianMilk)
- *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook account

With regards to DFC's *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page, in order to collect purposeful and relevant document and text samples, Facebook status updates/posts posted from January 1, 2013 until June 23, 2014 directly referencing the *100% Canadian Milk* or *100 Good Reasons* campaigns were collected. Facebook status updates referencing recipes, events related to Canadian cheese promotions, or other DFC campaigns were not collected. As the two DFC Twitter accounts (@dfc\_plc and @100CanadianMilk) have countless tweets, in order to collect a manageable sample, tweets from January 1, 2014 until June 30, 2014 were randomly selected and collected. 'Screenshot' images of Facebook status updates and Twitter tweets, and website and blog pages, were saved to a computer using the 'Grab' application for Apple computer operating systems.

In addition to documents and texts from official DFC communication channels, evidence to reinforce the implementation of DFC integrated communication activities were obtained from

publically available sources, including the Internet, social media networks, Canadian agriculture and marketing trade blogs, and Canadian newspapers.

### **3. 5. Data Analysis**

Codes, categories, and broad themes were sought out of the data collected in order to explain the findings. Patterns of association within the materials were sought, collected, and then explored for meaning. Documents were analyzed only if they were seemed authentic and credible, free from error. As Daymon and Holloway (2011) suggest, documents collected in this research were interpreted as socially situated products, produced and intended to be read, seen or heard within a particular social context. As such, documents were interpreted according to their setting, context and situation in which they were disseminated, interpreted or ultimately consumed/viewed/read. Further, as mentioned above, data will be analyzed according to Grunig's Symmetrical/Excellence theoretical framework, and Kent and Taylor's dialogic communication theory. These two well-known and widely used PR/communication theories were used as a foundation for building analysis of the data.

### **3. 6. Limitations**

Supplementing a case study with document analysis is not without limitations. While document analysis does reveal how organizations publicize themselves and unveils laden content such as rhetorical or stylistic devices, it does not allow for the understanding of key individual perspectives crucial to digital PR and consumer relations processes. For instance, the opinion or perspective of various stakeholders and publics, and those involved in managed formal communication, would unveil a much deeper understanding, feelings, ideas and intentions associated with digital PR tactics. However, this type of perspective was unable to be explored in this research project

#### 4. Analysis

Through the use of textual document analysis, this case study revealed various patterns and themes regarding digital PR tactics implemented by the DFC. The data collected and analyzed will be presented throughout this section in order to describe and document the various patterns and observations. In short, and in relation to research question 1, the fundamental communication objective of the DFC was implemented through the strategic dissemination of key campaign messaging across multiple media platforms, and at times direct conversation with consumers was upheld via social media. Digital PR tools used by the DFC included websites, a blog, and social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube. As will be illustrated, the difference between DFC PR and marketing initiatives was unclear, and the DFC used social media to both converse with consumers and amplify the voice and image of Canadian dairy farmers<sup>1</sup>.

##### 4. 1. The DFC's Integrated Communication Objective

It was found that from January 2013 until June 2014, the execution of all DFC consumer-oriented communication was rooted in the DFC's integrated communication objective to promote Canadian milk and encourage of healthy eating habits (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014a). It became apparent that the DFC executed this objective via a mixed, cross-media strategy as implemented through various tactics: advertising, media relations, marketing, educational programs, partnerships and contests. As revealed, digital media tactics were only one component of a strategic media mix that supported the communication objective. In regards to

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<sup>1</sup> The DFC represents Canadian dairy producers and every Canadian dairy farmer contributes to funding the organization (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2013a). A Board of Directors oversees the organization, representing the interests of dairy farmers across all provinces (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2013a). For this reason, throughout the Analysis chapter, it will be assumed and generalized that the DFC communicates on behalf of all Canadian dairy producers.

PR activities in particular, paid, traditional, and digital media were all used in an attempt to gain media coverage and influence the perceptions of consumers. Closing the farm-to-plate knowledge gap was not a direct strategy for the DFC. However, as will be shown, due to increased consumer concerns and questions about the traceability of milk, digital communication efforts, whether PR, publicity or marketing, were implemented online in an attempt to educate consumers about the production process of dairy products.

As this research focuses on digital PR, and in relation to research question 2, it was found that DFC's digital PR activities were implemented through various online media, including corporate and campaign websites, a DFC-hosted blog and social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube. It was found that websites maintained by the DFC or DFC-hired marketing and advertising agencies, included [www.dairyfarmers.ca](http://www.dairyfarmers.ca) and 13 campaign-specific websites such as [www.100goodreasons.ca](http://www.100goodreasons.ca), [www.rechargewithmilk.ca](http://www.rechargewithmilk.ca), [www.allyouneedischedese.ca](http://www.allyouneedischedese.ca) and [www.canadianmilk.ca](http://www.canadianmilk.ca). The DFC had one Facebook page titled '100% Canadian Milk,' with just over 40 000 'followers' as of June 30, 2014 (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-c). The DFC was present on Twitter as well with two accounts: @100CanadianMilk and @dfc\_plc. The @100Canadian Milk account was started in March 2011 and as of June 30, 2014, had 3839 followers (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-d); the @dfc\_plc account was started in April 2011 and as of June 30, 2014, had 2514 followers (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-e).

**4. 1. 1. The Convergence of Marketing and PR.** Data unveiled that the distinction between the DFC's online PR and marketing activity appeared to be blurred. For instance, many online communication activities seemed to exhibit traditional functions of PR, such as promotion and publicity, while at the same time displaying traditional functions of marketing, such as mass-mediated, one-way, persuasive communication. For instance, content marketing on DFC 'owned'

campaign websites was consistently recycled and posted on the DFC's social media platforms, where in addition to pushing content marketing, the DFC also used these social media platforms for traditional PR or 'earned' media activities, such as cultivating relationships, sharing media coverage, and sharing media releases with followers. All e-communication tactics tended to support the overall communication objective to promote Canadian milk and encourage healthy eating habits; however, many digital platforms were used to raise brand awareness, and promote and market the Canadian dairy industry. As such, it was noticed that communication via websites and social media platforms seemed to favour a traditional, strategic marketing approach – promotional pushed content and one-way messaging. Meanwhile, and as will be illustrated in this research paper, PR activities such as reactive crisis communication and publicity were also implemented digitally through similar use of websites and social media platforms. Thus, in relation to research question 1, the DFC seemed to support their communication objective through the implementation of an integrated, mixed-media strategy in an online digital environment, where digital platforms were used to implement both PR and marketing activities, which at times were undistinguishable.

#### **4. 2. Integrated Marketing Campaigns**

This research focuses on digital PR tactics supporting the *100% Canadian Milk* and *100 Good Reasons* marketing campaigns. The *100% Canadian Milk* campaign was, and currently still is, implemented by the DFC in an attempt to assure consumers of product quality, connecting them with Canadian dairy farmers and the sustainable, accountable farm practices employed on Canadian dairy farms. The *100 Good Reasons* campaign aims to increase consumer appreciation for dairy products through reinforcing the values of passionate dairy farmers towards diversified, quality dairy products. Thus, it was assumed that through consistent

consumption of campaign material, urban consumers may develop a better understanding about their food supply –dairy products in particular – and the farm-to-plate knowledge gap would in turn be slightly narrowed. While each campaign has an individual goal, it was concluded that the two campaigns were originally implemented to support the above-mentioned integrated communication objective. A brief overview of each campaign will be offered before outlining the digital PR tactics implemented to support both campaigns.

**4. 2. 1. 100% Canadian Milk.** In order to understand the features of the *100% Canadian Milk* marketing campaign, a brief history of the well-known campaign will be given. Data unveiled that in 2009, the DFC reinvigorated the well-known ‘little blue cow’ ‘Quality Milk’ brand and slogan into a newer version – ‘100% Canadian Milk’ (Lloyd, 2009; TheAgriPost, 2009; Wilson, 2009). Based on consumer research indicating the origin of food products is important to Canadian consumers, this newer brand was created as it indicates dairy products made with wholesome 100 percent Canadian milk, while other products without the brand displayed on packaging could be made with imported modified milk ingredients (TheAgriPost, 2009; Wilson 2009). The revamped ‘little blue cow’ branded logo, also known as the 100 percent Canadian Milk symbol, can be seen here:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-f)

Further, as the ‘little blue cow’ logo illustrates, the explicit and clarified new brand helps to indicate to consumers that dairy products boasting the brand are produced by fellow Canadians living on nearby farms, and in a manner that reflects deeply held Canadian values such as a

commitment to the environment, animal welfare, and food quality (TheAgriPost, 2009). Since the rebrand, attempts have been made to raise industry and consumer awareness of the new brand through advertising, retail promotion, PR, a prominent web presence, and a wide range of promotional material over the past five years (Kohane, 2009; TheAgriPost, 2009). The DFC also encourages the Canadian dairy farmers they represent to help increase the visibility of the 100 percent Canadian Milk symbol by proudly displaying it on their farms and in their communities (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014a). The goal of this brand, and subsequent campaign titled *100% Canadian Milk*, is to contribute to increased sales and consumption of Canadian dairy products by providing a clear assurance to consumers that the products they are buying are made from 100 percent Canadian milk (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014a). Therefore, indirectly, this campaign aims to educate Canadian consumers about the source and production of the dairy products they purchase.

**4. 2. 2. 100 Good Reasons.** In 2012, the DFC implemented a multi-faceted campaign to reinforce the 100 percent Canadian Milk symbol for consumers. Quick, consumer-friendly content pieces were created across multiple media platforms promoting the ‘100 reasons’ to look for the branded symbol on dairy products; all communication directed audiences to the *100 Good Reasons* website (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g; Twist Image, n.d.). All 100 reasons to support the purchase of 100 percent Canadian milk products were published over the last two years, and have continued to be referenced in various communication activities in 2014 (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014a).

**4. 2. 3. 100% Canadian Milk Reinvigorated.** Documents analyzed revealed that in early 2014, the DFC implemented a refreshed *100% Canadian Milk* campaign in accordance with the recent introduction of a dairy supply management on-farm program called *proAction*, and as a response

to an increase in consumer uncertainty of Canadian milk supply management practices (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014a, n.d.-f). The proAction program aims to assure quality milk production on Canadian dairy farms, and in 2013 the DFC adopted a 10-year plan to develop and implement *proAction*, bringing together “existing and new programs related to on-farm practices in areas such as food safety, milk quality, animal care, environment, traceability and biosecurity” (Mann, 2013, para. 5). Based on the recent development of *proAction*, a new integrated communication initiative was created and recently launched in early 2014. This reinvigorated *100% Canadian Milk* campaign was possible because of the verifiable data that is the result of all dairy farms complying with strict quality regulations, tests, and validations (Progressive Dairyman Canada, 2014, para. 6-7). Reinforcing the 100 percent Canadian Milk symbol, the integrated campaign focuses on “getting consumers to feel good about choosing dairy products made from 100 percent Canadian milk by showing them that it is produced according to the highest quality standards by farmers who care about their work” (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014b, para. 2). The campaign aims to have farmers showcase their commitment to consumers and in turn, strengthen the Canadian dairy brand.

The dairy industry believes through the revitalized integrated campaign, “trust will be earned by demonstration of sustainability” and “in a world where misinformation is rampant, featuring good practices will help maintain and enhance the positive image of dairy farmers” (Progressive Dairyman Canada, 2014, para. 10-11). As consumer research suggests, farmers tend to be a trusted source of information about food and farming (Ipsos Marketing, 2014), and this new integrated *100% Canadian Milk* campaign aims to strengthen their already solid reputation with consumers by using Canadian dairy farmers themselves as key influencers and spokespeople throughout the campaign (Progressive Dairyman Canada, 2014).

### 4. 3. Digital PR – Tactics in Practice

Digital PR and e-communication tactics include, but are not limited to the following: websites, blogs, social media platforms, videos, podcasts, electronic media releases, and computer-mediated relationship-building activities (Macnamara, 2010b). Both the recent *100% Canadian Milk* and *100 Good Reasons* campaigns were analyzed in order to discover how these campaigns are digitally implemented. This section of the Analysis chapter outlines how the DFC used particular digital media PR tools to disseminate key messaging in an attempt to build mediated relationships with consumers.

**4. 3. 1. 100% Canadian Milk.** The slogan “A Lifetime Dedicated To Quality” is the first message viewers see when visiting the Canadian Milk website – [www.canadianmilk.ca](http://www.canadianmilk.ca) (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-h). This website is the primary digital PR and marketing tool for this campaign; it features six videos starring particular Canadian dairy farmers, their families, and how they “ensure quality on their farm via the following proof points: healthy cows; safety standards; accountability; strict regulations; consistent quality; and innovation” (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014b, para. 2). Figure 1 in the Appendix illustrates the main page of this website – the background of the main page is a moving image of a female dairy farmer brushing one of her dairy cows. Through captivating videos, the Canadian Milk website communicates the campaign’s key message: many Canadian dairy farmers commit their lives to ensuring their cows are healthy and produce quality and safe milk under strict regulations for fellow Canadians to consume (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-h). Further, other digital components of this campaign include the use of Facebook, Twitter, Internet ads, Youtube ads, and “online search and a rich media” banners on food and lifestyle websites (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-f, para. 4).

Hosted on Youtube, six informative videos are featured on the Canadian Milk website that visually tell the stories of three Canadian dairy farm families conducting tours of their farms (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-f, n.d.-h, 2014b; AdNews, 2014). The videos feature the select Canadian dairy farmers passionate and dedicated to producing high quality Canadian milk, telling their story about one of six concerns consumers typically have – healthy cows, safety standards, accountability, strict regulations, consistent quality, and innovation – all of which are of the utmost importance to Canadian dairy farmers (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-h). It seems as though these testimonial-style videos are used as a conscious PR tool in an attempt to reiterate to Canadians that they should feel confident about looking for the 100 percent Canadian Milk symbol. These videos aim to reinforce the quality of milk production in Canada, but also connect consumers to dairy farmers on a visual and emotional level. They do so by bringing the viewer into the homes and barns of Canadian dairy families, connecting them on a topic both farmers and consumers care about: quality milk. In relation to research question 2, video is one of many digital PR tools being used in an attempt to close the farm-to-plate knowledge gap in an interactive digital media environment.

Further, social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook, are used to supplement the Canadian Milk website and videos (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-c, n.d.-d, n.d.-e). All six videos were posted onto the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page, where page followers were able watch the videos, as well as like, share and comment on posts linking to each video (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-c). Please see Figures 2 and 3 in the Appendix for an example of a Facebook status update and Twitter tweet promoting this campaign.

It is important to note that digital tools are not the only tactics being used to implement this campaign. Other integrated communication tools for this campaign include television ads

airing in the spring and fall of 2014 on conventional networks and their websites, and on specialty television channels (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-f). Also, a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) partnership with the Steven and Chris television program featured a segment with a dairy farmer of April 29<sup>th</sup> (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-f). According to the DFC, in the spring of 2014, trade publications such as the Canadian Grocer, Food in Canada, Western Grocer and Grocery Business ran print ads and disseminated “ebblast” messages to audiences (n.d.-f, para. 5). Further, a promotional media campaign in select grocery stores ran in the spring of 2014, and will continue in the fall (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-f). All of the above-mentioned communication channels are integrated and appear to disseminate the same, unified key message mentioned above, and slogan, “A Lifetime Dedicated to Quality.” All communication materials appear to direct audiences to the *Canadian Milk* website featuring the above-mentioned six cinematic videos featuring farmers’ stories.

**4.3.2. 100 Good Reasons.** The primary digital component of the *100 Good Reasons* integrated communication campaign is the website – [www.100goodreasons.ca](http://www.100goodreasons.ca). This website features 100 individual pages referencing the corresponding ‘reason’ for choosing the 100 percent Canadian Milk symbol (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g). Figure 4 in the Appendix illustrates the main page of this website. While visiting the website, users can click on each ‘box,’ linking them to the correlating page that showcases imagery and text describing the reason further. As analysis of the website unveiled, reasons for looking for and choosing the 100 percent Canadian Milk symbol include ‘memories,’ ‘young farmers,’ ‘nature,’ ‘loving milk’ and ‘heritage’ for instance (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g). Social media platforms Facebook and Youtube are embedded into the 100 individual pages (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g). Through logging into their Facebook account, users are able to like, share, and comment on any of the 100 pages. In order to

understand how Facebook is embedded into the *100 Good Reasons* campaign website, please see Figure 5 in the Appendix.

The *100 Good Reasons* campaign website prominently features ‘Reason 1: the 100% Canadian Milk Film Fest’ – four videos highlighting Canadian dairy farms and dairy production facilities (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g). The films are hosted on Youtube, embedded into the website itself, and titled ‘Scoop Dreams,’ ‘Stewards of the Land,’ ‘It Takes a Village,’ and ‘Dairy By The Sea’ (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g). Similar to the *100% Canadian Milk* films, these videos feature farmers, their families, and owners of an Ontario ice creamery telling cinematic and eye-catching stories about safety standards, innovation, and animal welfare on farms (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g). The videos also showcase the variety of dairy products available to Canadians, including ice cream made from 100 percent Canadian milk (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g).

The *100 Good Reasons* campaign was also promoted through Twitter and Facebook (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-c, n.d.-d, n.d.-e). Figures 6 and 7 in the Appendix illustrate how key messaging was shared via Twitter and Facebook. From the Facebook status updates collected and analyzed, traceable links to 23 of the 100 reasons’ pages were posted; every Facebook status update included a photo or an ‘infographic’ illustrating the reason (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-c).

**4.3.3. Additional Digital PR Tactics.** In relation to research question 2, to achieve the objective of promoting Canadian milk and encouraging healthy eating habits, documents and texts revealed the DFC utilizes many digital PR tactics unrelated to the two campaigns discussed above. In addition to campaign-specific digital communication, the DFC implemented messaging

on their corporate website, a DFC-hosted blog, and above-mentioned social media websites Facebook, Twitter and Youtube.

The corporate website – [www.dairyfarmers.ca](http://www.dairyfarmers.ca) – provides information to users about the DFC as an organization and what business activities the organization undertakes (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-i). The homepage of this website is displayed in Figure 8 in the Appendix. As the corporate website welcomes users with the statement “Canada’s Farmers: Working for You,” and seems to target a consumer audience. The website also provides information on the DFC’s six corporate commitments: environmentally friendly practices, food safety, growing the market for dairy products, economic sustainability, research and development, and improvements to animal health and welfare (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-i). Further, the corporate website links to 13 campaign and educational micro-sites, DFC associated Twitter and Facebook pages, and [dairygoodness.ca](http://dairygoodness.ca) and [dairynutrition.ca](http://dairynutrition.ca), which together provide further information about the production and nutritional value of the milk (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-i). In addition, the ‘News Centre’ section of the corporate website includes an events calendar, published media releases, and other official and credible DFC documents, including marketing and nutrition updates, *Action+* reports (i.e. semi-annual reviews), policy presentations, and government relations newsletters (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-i). All of these documents are publically available for users to download; these documents give consumers a comprehensive look into the operations of the DFC, Canadian policy making, regulations, and other business activities of the Canadian dairy industry.

Another digital PR tactic used to address consumer and industry-related issues is a blog. Hosted on the corporate website and titled “The Farmers’ Voice,” this blog “gives Canadian dairy farmers a place to share their stories and talk about life on a dairy farm” (Dairy Farmers of

Canada, n.d.-j, para. 1). From January 2013 until June 2014, 29 blog posts were published by several authors from various facets of the dairy industry, including agriculture university students, dairy farmers, DFC board members, and others working within the agriculture industry (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-j). Topics discussed on this blog varied; blog posts often referenced animal welfare, dairy farming practices, trade, supply management, innovation within the industry, and discussion of the passion farmers have for their jobs (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-j). However, when critically examining the blog, it was seen that blog posts seemed to address various audiences, from consumers to journalists, or industry-partners and dairy farmers. Blog posts were written using inconsistent, varied discourse; thus, one digital communication channel was used to reach fragmented audiences.

Social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube were also used to disseminate key messaging and to extend the voice of Canadian dairy farmers. From January 2013 until June 2014, the content of Facebook status updates tended to reference marketing communication campaigns and food recipes featuring dairy products (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-c). Twitter was used more extensively to share more inclusive information and messaging with followers. For example, from the samples collected, it was seen that tweets far outnumbered Facebook status updates – most likely part due to the real-time nature of Twitter. DFC tweets referenced many topics of interest, including industry issues, recipes, nutrition, food bloggers, supply management, and engagement with specific Canadian dairy farmers; while, as mentioned above, Facebook status updates seemed to only reference marketing campaigns and recipes.

It is interesting to note that when a random selection of tweets was collected and analyzed from the two DFC accounts (@dfc\_plc and @100CanadianMilk), each account had a distinct ‘identity’. For instance, the @dfc\_plc account identity appeared rational and

straightforward, as this account tweeted information about policy, supply management and animal welfare, links to the Farmers' Voice blog and 'live-tweets' from dairy or agriculture conferences, and often retweeted dairy farmers' tweets (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-e). Whereas, the @100CanadianMilk account identity was more promotional, 'up beat' and 'fun,' as this account tweeted photos and text referencing recipes, nutrition, DFC marketing campaigns, and often retweeted 'foodie bloggers' and dairy farmers' tweets (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-d). Further, it seemed the DFC may be beginning to develop online brand opinion-leaders through creating relationships with bloggers, who in turn, act as influencers of DFC's key messaging for their blog audience. As mentioned, both Twitter accounts often retweeted Canadian dairy farmers' tweets. A select few number of farmers were retweeted; these farmers share pictures of their farm, families and cows, and tweet about other dairy farming facts.

Data also unveiled that Facebook status updates tended to generate more user-generated discussion than tweets. Partly due to the 140-character restriction of a tweet, it seemed that Facebook was used to generate more in-depth discussion as this platform allows for longer, more elaborate commenting by users. For example, Figure 9 in the Appendix illustrates how three users utilize the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page to comment in lengthy paragraphs – many Facebook status updates were responded to with lengthy user-generated comments similar to that illustrated in Figure 9. The type of discussion illustrated in Figure 9 would not be possible on Twitter as the length of tweets is restricted.

Another digital PR tool the DFC used was the video-sharing website Youtube. It was revealed that all campaign-related videos were hosted on Youtube, where the DFC channel had just over 1000 subscribers as of June 30, 2014 (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-k). From January 2013 until June 2014, various playlists and videos were uploaded, featuring DFC campaigns,

DFC television advertisements, videos about dairy product nutrition, and every month a video was uploaded featuring a ‘how-to’ cooking segment (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-k).

#### **4. 4. Reoccurring Themes and Patterns**

Through completing the qualitative analysis of documents and texts exploring the DFC’s digital PR efforts, multiple reoccurring themes were revealed. This section of the research paper discusses these themes.

**4. 4. 1. Cross-Media.** The DFC seemed to utilize integrated media platforms to communicate and mediate consumers’ online experience with the organization. The DFC disseminated content across many media platforms, including print, web, television, video, and social media. Data unveiled that throughout all consumer-facing communication, the DFC incorporated a call-to-action for consumers to continue their mediated experience across media devices. In particular, consumers were encouraged to continuously stay in touch with the narrative presented through digital media by moving from one digital media platform to another. The DFC and *100% Canadian Milk* brands were present across many media platforms consumers engage with – most of the time media were integrated within one another. For instance, the *100 Good Reasons* campaign website was embedded with media platforms Youtube and Facebook. More specifically, as a platform for users to comment, share their opinions, and ask questions, a Facebook commenting tool was embedded into the website itself. Thus, users were not only encouraged to engage with content on the *100 Good Reasons* website, but also prompted to share, like, and comment on digital content using their Facebook account. Further, the recently launched Canadian Milk website, features six videos/short films hosted on Youtube, and all are embedded right into the DFC-hosted website. Also, tweets from both DFC Twitter accounts (@dfc\_plc and @100CanadianMilk) and posts/status updates on the *100% Canadian Milk*

Facebook page often included a link to Youtube or one of the many DFC-owned websites. The consistent use of integrated multiple media formats can be described as ‘cross-media,’ ‘transmedia,’ or mixed media. In relation to research question 2, the DFC supplemented their overall integrated communication strategy using multiple cross-media, digital PR tools.

Another key point to note is how the constant use of cross-media illustrated a trend where the DFC often ended up repeating similar key messages and carefully crafted discourse across various channels. As was seen, mass-mediated digital publicity and promotional communication was synergized across media platforms and was implemented throughout both the *100% Canadian Milk* and *100 Good Reasons* campaigns and in other strategic communication activities. Instead of directly influencing consumers’ perceptions about farming and food, content of such communication seemed to promote the consumption of dairy products and to encourage Canadians to feel good about purchasing products with the 100 percent Canadian Milk symbol.

**4. 4. 2. Consumers, Activists and Social Media.** Analysis of the collected documents and texts unveiled that consumers are participating in the ‘farm-to-table conversation’ through voicing their comments, questions, and concerns via social media platforms. In relation to research question 2, the DFC harnesses social media as a tool to converse with consumers about the farm-to-plate process of the dairy industry. It seemed that the DFC used social media as a complementary PR tool for both the *100% Canadian Milk* and *100 Good Reasons* campaigns. In doing so, the DFC utilizes the transparent and ‘open’ nature of social media to converse with consumers, while at the same time providing a digital arena for consumers to publish their own voice. For instance, the *100 Good Reasons* website hosts 100 individual pages, where Facebook is embedded as an application and where viewers can comment using their Facebook account.

Consumers appear to take advantage of this cross-media integration and voice their support, concerns, or questions about the dairy industry in Canada.

Figure 10 in the Appendix illustrates how a user benefited from asking a question via Facebook about animal health on the *100 Good Reasons* website; the DFC responded to this particular user in an effort to further educate this particular individual. In this particular instance, using her Facebook account, user Shelley Lynn Craig asked the following question on the *100 Good Reasons* website: “I would like to know if they cows are artificially inseminated to produce more milk and how do you treat the animals what do you do with the calves” (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g). The DFC responded with the following response:

Hi Shelley Lynn, For your information, cows are artificially inseminated to ensure that not all offspring on a farm have the same sire and that each generation is better than the previous. Honestly, a bull is a dangerous animal to keep: in order to maintain a calm environment for cows, it's better and safer to use artificial insemination. Animal care is a priority for all Canadian dairy farmers. Their commitment to providing high quality milk begins with a high standard of animal care that includes providing their cows with nutritious diets, healthy living conditions and good veterinary care. Dairy farmers have a strict Code of Practice on the care and welfare of dairy cattle: <http://bit.ly/1h0leJP> Thank you. (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g)

The user, Shelley Lynn Craig then commented again, responding to the DFC's answer:

Thank you for your reply, I have seen some horrible videos and to tell you the truth I wanted to quit milk and dairy completely. I feel that if we need to produce mas amount of milk the least they can do it treat the animals fairly without them we have no more dairy

at all. thank you I will go and take a look at the code of practice. (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g)

As this illustration shows, the DFC was able to communicate one-on-one with this user via Facebook, in an attempt to further educate her about breeding and animal care processes on dairy farms. This specific user seemed to have questions and concerns that stemmed from a video she had previously seen; she held a distanced, mediated perception of dairy farming and the DFC was able to provide her with accurate information and a link to their website outlining the animal care Code of Practice Canadian dairy farmers adhere to.

Specifically, it seemed users were much more participatory on the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page. Many users asked questions through commenting on stories, links, and photos posted on the page, they also ‘shared’ and ‘liked’ status updates. Some status updates on the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page had over 2000 likes, and over 300 comments (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-c). It was identified that in some instances, the DFC PR team engaged in conversation with such users responding to their question, comment or concern (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-c). For instance, one user posted to the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page: “Just curious...why is there so much sugar in milk? 11 grams per 250 ml/cup” (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014c). The DFC responded with a lengthy response to this user’s question outlining how to distinguish the sugar element on a nutrition facts table. In particular, the DFC defined how natural sugars, or lactose, are found in milk. This example is outlined in Figure 11A in the Appendix, Figure 11B in the Appendix also shows how, mediated through Facebook, the DFC answered a user’s posted question about the average herd size of a dairy farm in Canada. Throughout the analysis, it was found that this type of mediated two-way, one-on-one communication was practiced on both the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page and the *100*

*Good Reasons* website. Despite this type of digitally-mediated conversation being short and to the point, and the need for a direct change in consumer perception to be questioned, never before has the DFC had the opportunity to engage in a one-on-one conversation with a consumer before the advent of digital media and the proliferation of social media.

It is also important to point out that the DFC PR team responded only once to inquiries voiced via Facebook or the *100 Good Reasons* websites. After an initial response, user-generated comments and questions seemed to be ignored by the DFC and left for other Facebook users to respond to; in fact, it was revealed that many users that were dairy farmers themselves picked up the conversation where the DFC left off. Overall, users/consumers seem to be eager to engage with the DFC online, asking questions and sharing their concerns about the dairy industry.

However, it is also important to note, many comments and questions seemed to be voiced by Facebook users who advocate consumption of a vegan diet, where dairy products are typically not consumed, and by users who are animal rights activists (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-c). These users, often times expressing activist discourse, came across as having misunderstandings about the industry and as per their comments, it was noticeable that they are passionate, proud, and vocal about boycotting the dairy industry for various reasons. It was observed that some controversial issues were raised in comments on postings/status updates on the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page – specifically referring to animal care and animal abuse. For instance, Figures 12A, 12B, and 12C in the Appendix illustrate Facebook comments published by such users. Figure 12A shows how one specific Facebook user, with the username Irina Gheorghiu, posted “Babies should be with their mothers and have the milk. Instead they live in tiny pens, they are slaughtered within months. No milk for me. Happy vegan for 16 years” (Dairy Farmers

of Canada, 2014e). Figure 12B illustrates another comment from misinformed individuals, as a user named Karin Nelson posted:

Shame on the dairy industry. People, look at the cruelty of veal crates and the misery of cows constantly impregnated and then their calves taken away. Human beings are the ONLY animal that drinks breast milk into adulthood and we drink it from a completely other species. How stupid is THAT? Evolve. (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014e)

As these comments exemplify, many strongly opinionated users used Facebook to vilify and slander the Canadian dairy industry, and publish personal views and misinformation. Comments such as those shown in Figures 12A, 12B, and 12C make visible how agriculture is mediated for many individuals with little direct experience on farms. If one were familiar with a Canadian dairy farm and understood dairy production operations, such consumer misunderstandings would be infrequent; these statements, according to documents published by the DFC, are far from a realistic portrayal of majority of Canadian dairy farms. Such comments posted to the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page, although may be valid or of personal opinion, appear to be unrepresentative ‘myths’ about the Canadian dairy industry and as a result, could have negative impact on others’ view of dairy farming and milk production.

As the above-mentioned comments from the public unveil, knowledge gaps in the farm-to-plate process seem evident amongst the public – more specifically as this case study illustrates, Facebook users that voice their misunderstandings and ‘myths’ on the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page. Thus, the DFC uses Facebook as a platform to publish key messaging, as well as to converse with select misinformed individuals about milk production processes and farming. It was revealed that at times, activist discourse is pungent on the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page and thus, ignored by the DFC; however, active farmers on

Facebook tend to address these individuals. Overall, despite many instances of select activists using Facebook commenting tool to ‘attack’ the dairy industry, Facebook was revealed as digital PR tactic used to address well-intended, publically displayed consumer inquiries appropriate in nature. In turn, it was seen that Facebook is a digital media tool contributing to DFC’s attempt to enhance consumers’ understanding of dairy farming.

**4. 4. 3. Amplifying Farmers’ Voices.** Storytelling is a basic PR tactic that connects individuals to an organization or cause in a unique way. Data revealed that, through various digital platforms, the DFC tends to amplify the voice and image of dairy farmers in order to extend farmers’ on-farm stories with audiences. Farmers are one of the most trusted sources of information about food and farming in Canada (Ipsos Marketing, 2012), and thus, the DFC effectively places emphasis on a select few number of dairy farmers’ stories in many online communication efforts. For instance, the *100 Good Reasons* campaign features four captivating videos of farmers and their families, and the recently launched *Canadian Milk* website features six videos of three farm families sharing stories about the safe, quality production of milk on their farms. Connecting consumers to the visual image and voice of farmers can further mediate their understanding of dairy farming, but also allows consumers to generate an awareness of the industry through someone so invested and knowledgeable about it.

In accordance with Rogers’ diffusion of innovation model (1995), urban consumers sometimes view farmers as ‘laggards’ when it comes to adopting new, social technologies (Boone, Meisenbach, & Tucker, 2000; Frewer et al., 2005). However, farmers are found to use computers and smart phones to not only stay connected and share best practices among themselves, but many also to use social media platforms to contribute to the farm-to-table conversation (Crowley, 2013; Graybill-Leonard et al., 2011; Meyers et al., 2011; Telg & Irani,

2012). Using digital and social media, the DFC provides accessible and user-friendly platforms for dairy farmers to share their stories. Further, it seems as though farmers are using messaging disseminated by the DFC as a starting point for mediated conversations with consumers.

It was unveiled that a select number of Canadian dairy farmers themselves are very participatory on the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page. Data revealed that farmers often responded to questions in an attempt to educate users about milk production, animal care, etc. on their farms. Dairy farmers are taking advantage of the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page, maintained by the DFC, to engage in discussion with consumers, activists and other concerned online users. For instance, on April 29, 2014, the DFC posted a link to the CBC Steven and Chris video segment from the popular television show hosts' dairy farm visit (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014d). With over 3000 likes, 2000 shares, and just under 400 comments (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014d), this post was very popular among *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page followers. Farmers began commenting on the post and other users (unfamiliar with farming) used the post as an avenue to then ask farmers questions about milk production and animal care practices on their farms (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014d); hence, back-and-forth commenting between farmers and users occurred. Figure 13 in the Appendix illustrates this example of mediated farmer-consumer conversation.

Further, a farmer under the username Egger Dairy on Facebook often contributed to mediated conversations through directly commenting on status updates published on the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page. This user actively addressed other Facebook users' questions and comments about animal welfare, policy, or supply management for instance. For example, on April 28, 2014, the DFC posted a status update on the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page that included a link to one of the six short films featured in the recently launched *Canadian Milk*

campaign; this video in particular outlined safety standards on Canadian Dairy farms (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014e). One user, with the username Ann Smith, asked a question through commenting on this particular status update. She posted the following: “Hey!! Where is my grandpaw’s smelly old cow barn??? What happened to it?? This is so high-tech!! Hope the cows go outdoors to soak up some rays!!!” (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014e). The DFC responded to Ann, answering her question by commenting on the status update with the following response: “Hi Ann! Yes, they do go outside often, but since Canada has the winter season to deal with, the cows need a comfy place inside the barns where the temperature is controlled!” (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014e). Following the DFC’s comment addressing Ann’s question, another Facebook user, Chris Nes, posted the following question: “Is there any growth hormones in these milk producing cows? Are they grain fed and by that I mean none GMO grain fed?” (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014e). The DFC did not respond to Chris’ comment on the status update, but user Egger Dairy responded the question with the following:

Hi Chris. I’ll answer the first part of your question. In Canada (unlike the States) it’s illegal for dairy farmers to use artificial growth hormones like rBST. Therefore, there are NO artificial growth hormones in Canadian milk. And just so you know, the quality and composition of milk are checked both when it is picked up at the farm and when it is delivered to the plant. At the processing plant, milk is tested for residues: its temperature and composition are verified as well. Farmers are paid for the components of their milk and face heavy penalties if the quality o the milk does not meet proper quality standards. Actually, FYI, milk is the most heavily safety-tested food in the Canadian food supply system. (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014e)

After Egger Dairy commented, another farmer active the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page further addressed Chris' question by posting the following:

Chris, if you want to be sure that the milk you purchase comes from cows fed non-GMO feed, you may want to buy Organic milk. It's still 100% Canadian Milk, but Organic dairies are not permitted to feed GMO crops to their animals and are required to turn their cows out to pasture during the growing season. Just so you know, besides soy and corn, there are no other GMO grains fed to cows on conventional (non-Organic) farms. (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014e)

As this example shows, farmers used a DFC-hosted, computer-mediated medium (Facebook) to answer consumers' questions about various aspects of milk production in Canada. The example outlined above can be seen in Figure 14 in the Appendix.

Overall, Facebook-savvy farmers were found to directly address issues and questions being raised on the Facebook page. Again, as mentioned, the degree to how much perceptions are changing must be questioned; however, social media platforms such as Facebook are providing digital arenas for conversations to be held between urban and rural-based Canadians.

In short, some Canadian dairy farmers are using the DFC-hosted Facebook page as a platform to address consumer comments and questions, even if such comments seem harsh or 'hard-hitting' in nature or voiced by vocal animal rights activists. Participatory dairy farmers on Facebook are beginning to discuss farming practices on their own farms and the passion they have for dairy farming in Canada. In turn and in theory, this type of conversation should prompt users towards a more comprehensive understanding of dairy farming. Conversation is uncontrollable however – some status updates on the Facebook page have hundreds of comments from concerned consumers, activists, and farmers, and as described above, some activist

discourse can be harsh, 'spam,' and slander in nature. Also, the level of consumer awareness and education that takes place must be questioned, and it seems as though extreme, divergent voices on the Facebook page are harnessing the accessible nature of social media to 'spam' such pages. However, these types of discussions are beginning to occur online, where digital media is bridging a connection between farming and urban-based consumers. It seems that some social media-savvy Canadian dairy farmers no longer have to rely on others to tell their story. As a whole, dairy farmers now have the ability to enter the conversation themselves and spread what seems to be factual, trustworthy information about agriculture and farming. Overall, and in relation to research question 2, the DFC-hosted *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page is one digital PR tool being used to disseminate information in an attempt to close the farm-to-plate knowledge gap. Further, the Facebook page is being harnessed by dairy farmers to engage in mediated conversations about milk production processes on their farms with what seem to be both activists, and users who appear misinformed about dairy farming and agriculture.

A blog, titled *The Farmers' Voice*, is another digital tool the DFC is using to engage farmer-consumer discussion of important agricultural issues. As mentioned, this blog is hosted on the DFC, consumer-facing corporate website and published blog posts ranging in topic. Innovation in the dairy industry, farmers' passion for and commitment to their work, and current research being done to improve dairy farming practices are all issues being discussed by farmers on this online platform. To illustrate, a blog post published on May 9, 2013 and written by Wally Smith, President of the DFC and dairy farmer himself, was a reaction to a newspaper opinion piece about dairy supply management that, according to Smith, published some inaccurate facts about dairy supply management (Smith, 2013). In the blog post, Smith seemed to provide factual, truthful information to counteract some arguments made in the previously published

newspaper opinion piece. Traditionally, this type of reactive PR would have been published in the newspaper that originally published the misrepresentative article. However, with the advent of digital media and the creation of The Farmers' Voice blog, the DFC seems to be able to publish this type of reactive-PR material, written by farmers, right on their corporate website.

However, despite frequent blog posts from farmers, agriculture post-secondary students, and industry representatives, the reach of The Farmers' Voice blog needs to be critically investigated. The stories published and information provided seem to be written using discourse unsuitable for consumers' limited understanding and knowledge of the dairy industry. Despite this blog being consumer-facing, easily accessible, and proactively promoted through the @dfc\_plc Twitter account, the blog seemed to be written for audiences already familiar with dairy farming.

Twitter is another digital platform where the DFC amplifies dairy farmers' voices and provides an avenue where farmers can connect digitally with consumers. The random sample of tweets from both the @100CanadianMilk and @dfc\_plc Twitter accounts unveiled a trend where these accounts often retweeted Canadian dairy farmers' tweets. Continuous retweets referenced dairy farmers' opinions towards milk quality and safety, answers to consumers' frequently asked questions, and retweets often included photos of farmers' farms and dairy cows (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-d, n.d.-e).

More specifically, on June 6, 2014, the @dfc\_plc account tweeted the following:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014f)

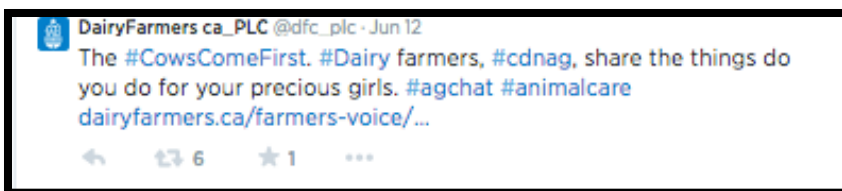
Farmers responded to this tweet by tweeting photos of their farms and cows; such tweets were then retweeted by both DFC Twitter accounts. Figure 15, 16, and 17 in the Appendix illustrate particular farmers' response to the tweet. This type of call-to-action can not only engage farmers in a digital manner, but can also give @dfc\_plc and @100CanadianMilk followers a glimpse into the day-to-day operations of a Canadian dairy farm and his or her family. Similar to Facebook, it was noticed that specific and select farmers were consistently retweeted by the DFC; these farmers seem to know how to amplify their voice online and thus, could be regarded as online advocates of the industry. In relation to research question 2 and as illustrated, Twitter is another digital PR tool used to mediate followers' understanding of dairy farming practices. Twitter is being used to provide quick, accessible bits of information in an attempt to bridge a connection between rural-based dairy farmers and urban consumers.

**4.4.4. Instant and Reactive PR.** Further, it was revealed that the DFC implemented reactive digital PR tactics during crisis situations; the instantaneous nature of digital media seemed to provide the DFC with a platform to immediately address arising issues. The documents and texts analyzed unveiled that at on June 9, 2014, Mercy for Animals Canada released a shocking video of workers kicking and beating dairy cows at Chilliwack Cattle Company, a large-scale dairy farm in British Columbia (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-c, n.d.-d, n.d.-e, n.d.-i). The DFC released an official statement/ media release addressing this animal care crisis (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014g). This statement was uploaded onto the corporate website and shared with Canadian mainstream media outlets, but the DFC also utilized social media to spread key messaging regarding the incident. In particular, the DFC posted a link to the media release/statement on the *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page (Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-c) and in both French and English, tweeted the following from the @dfc\_plc account:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014h)

This tweet reads, “Animal Abuse is Never, Never Okay,” and contains a link to the media release/statement on their corporate website. Further, indirectly encouraging farmers to help counteract negative media coverage of the industry, soon after the incident on June 12, 2014, the @dfc\_plc account tweeted another call-to-action to farmers:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014i)

Soon after this tweet was published by the @dfc\_plc account, dairy farmers and dairy industry supporters tweeted photos and statements about animal care using the hashtag #cowscomefirst. Farmers’ tweets were then retweeted by both the @dfc\_plc and the @100CanadianMilk account. Figure 18 in the Appendix illustrates one farmer’s response via Twitter. In this case, the DFC used Twitter to extend the audience of the official statement addressing the incident, and attempted to create an online environment where the DFC amplified farmers’ voices about their passion and commitment to animal welfare and quality milk.

Further, another reactive-PR piece to the Mercy for Animals Canada video was published on The Farmers’ Voice blog. A post titled “The Cows Come First” included a 42 second video of author David Wiens, Vice-President of the DFC and dairy farmer, addressing the continuous improvement of dairy animal welfare practices in Canada, including research, technology, and animal care codes of conduct (Wiens, 2014). The blog post addressed the incident in British

Columbia, referred to the official DFC statement released, and included some personal antidotes of how Wiens cares for his cows (Wiens, 2014). He also discussed how the DFC is committed to being a transparent organization, where farmers are eager to engage in conversations with consumers about what happens day-to-day on their farms (Wiens, 2014).

In short, social media platforms and a blog are enabling the DFC to implement reactive PR tactics when crisis situations arise. In relation to research question 2, digital PR tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and The Farmers' Voice blog were used by the DFC to harness the voice of farmers and spread 'good news' stories in an attempt to counteract negative media coverage of the animal abuse incident. These type of digital PR activities would supplement traditional crisis PR actions within a comprehensive crisis communication strategy the DFC would have planned for and implemented during the June 2014 animal abuse incident.

**4.4.5. Dairy Farming and Dairy Product Aesthetics.** The analysis of digital PR tactics, documents and texts unveiled the use of highly visual stylistic devices to connect consumers with dairy products and Canadian dairy farmers. The reoccurring use of visually and aesthetically pleasing images of food, farming, cows, farmers and their families was noticed throughout online websites, social media platforms and digital campaign materials. It seems as though the aesthetic value of food and farming is emphasized throughout the DFC's cross-media digital PR efforts, especially on *100% Canadian Milk* or *100 Good Reasons* websites and *100% Canadian Milk* Facebook page. In particular, from the 51 Facebook status updates collected and analyzed, all but seven posts included an image or a video. This trend points to the inherent visual nature of dairy products and dairy farming that consumers seem to resonate with. The scenic value and cultural aesthetic of farmland is a universal visual connection for many people, whether urban or rural-

based. Due to the technical and unfamiliar nature of dairy farming for urban consumers, the DFC communicated key messaging through highly visual content.

## **5. Discussion – Implications for Agricultural Communicators**

In short, the findings of this study show that the underlying philosophy of Web 2.0 – embracing openness, conversation and engaging in two-way/symmetrical communication resulting in dialogue – was revealed in some of DFC’s digital PR tactics. However, because of the unclear distinction between PR and marketing tactics supporting the DFC’s overall IMC strategy, much web-based and consumer-facing communication seemed rooted in a one-way, marketing-based approach. Carefully crafted content pushed across media channels was revealed as the most common tactic used to disseminate key messaging reinforcing the DFC’s communication objective. This section of the research report will now discuss the importance and relevance of findings.

### **5. 1. Digital Media: One Component of an Integrated Strategy**

As mentioned, a textual document analysis of documents unveiled that the DFC incorporates digital PR tools into a much larger multi and cross-media IMC strategy. Digital media, including websites and social media, are not innately the only strategic tools the DFC uses for PR activities. However, digital PR tools are playing a large role in supplementing traditional marketing and PR tactics. Interactive, digital media are providing yet another platform to share dairy farmers’ stories, disseminate factual information about dairy farming, and heighten the visibility of *100% Canadian Milk* brand. Consumers seem to discover and consume information across media formats and the DFC is adapting their IMC strategy to this recent socio-technological tendency.

Traditional, mass media are still crucial and prominent in a digital media environment; however, as Macnamara (2010b) suggest, mass media is:

monologue and is increasingly unable to reach into many emergent media environments, public relations has unparalleled opportunities to help organizations align with the public interest, build relationships, establish goodwill for brands, and ensure sustainability by facilitating conversations and dialogue between organizations and their publics. (p. 316)

Thus, it is important for agricultural organizations such as the DFC to diversify their consumer-facing communication activities. Overall, the all-encompassing integrated communication objective of the DFC is to promote Canadian milk and encourage of healthy eating habits (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014a). This approach is not only upheld through strategic use of digital media, but is also sustained through the integration of a wide range of marketing, PR, government and media relations, advertising, and promotional activities. To rely solely on digital media in an attempt to alter consumers' perceptions would be inadequate, as television and newspapers continue to be media sources for information about food and farming for non-farming Canadians (Ipsos Marketing, 2012). Nonetheless, an interactive communicative focus on digital media is imperative, especially as younger audiences tend to develop relationships with brands or organizations through the Internet. Thus, as data unveiled, and as research suggests is imperative, the DFC is beginning to diversify and integrate PR and marketing efforts with the consistent use of both traditional and digital media.

## **5. 2. Two-way Communication and Dialogue**

It is important to relate themes and patterns that emerged from the data to Grunig's Symmetry/Excellence PR model and Kent and Taylor's dialogic communication theory. As Macnamara (2010a) suggests, interactive media applications are helping to realize the two-way symmetrical model of communication recommended by Grunig, and similarly, social media in particular is seen as having the potential to enable a dialogic model of PR as proposed by Kent

and Taylor. Findings illustrate that at times, symmetrical/two-way communication was practiced when the DFC responded to consumers' inquiries on social media. As Grunig and Grunig (1992) write, the practitioner of the symmetrical/two-way model uses planned communication to manage conflict and to improve understanding with publics. At the core of two-way communication is the facilitation of understanding and communication with publics, rather than identifying messages most likely to motivate or persuade publics (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). As mentioned, the DFC illustrated this type of activity mainly using Facebook. Despite a one-to-one conversation being mediated and limited in scope, the DFC did respond to consumer questions and inquiries in an attempt to increase the user's understanding of dairy farming in Canada.

However, as Grunig and Grunig (1992) maintain, in the symmetrical model, *understanding*, rather than persuasion, is the principal objective of PR. It was revealed that in the case of the DFC, marketing, advertising, and PR activities seemed to be fused within a digital environment. It appeared as though the e-communication efforts of the DFC were largely one-way, with a traditional persuasive marketing approach being used – mass communication to mass audiences. Digital content appeared to be 'pushed out' to audiences through websites, a blog and social media websites. More often than not, consumers interacted with such content, commenting on and sharing content, yet few received response from the DFC. Across media platforms, carefully crafted consumer-oriented key messages were consistently relied on and repeated. Thus, in relation to research question 3, it seemed that DFC's PR activities lost their distinctiveness from advertising and marketing, and appeared to suggest a more one-way flow of communication rather than one rooted in symmetrical/two-way communication principles.

In addition, according to Kent (2013), dialogic communication via social media involves building relationships with publics, solving problems and communicating on parallel level with

audiences. With limited two-way communication between the DFC and online users, consumers' voices, concerns, and questions tended to be addressed with mass-mediated and unindividualized communication rooted in the traditional principles of marketing. Despite a couple of instances where the DFC responded to consumer comments through Facebook, social media tools (Facebook, Twitter, and The Farmers' Voice blog) seemed to be used more to push content and as a social marketing tool, not inherently 'social' at all. Further, it seemed as though the traditional PR 'control paradigm' was favoured in a participatory digital environment. Despite digital media operating in a participatory, open and interlocking nature, it seemed as though DFC PR practitioners still assume they have influential control over key messages. Conversations about dairy and milk production processes occurred, however the extent that the DFC facilitated, nurtured, and appreciated such dialogue must be questioned. For these reasons, and in relation to research question 3, it seems as though DFC engaged in insufficient two-way communication that may have only resulted in dialogue in particular instances.

Without feedback from publics or consideration of publics' needs, Internet-mediated PR becomes "nothing more than a new monologic communication medium, or a new marketing technology" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325). As Aaragon and Domingo (2014) maintain, PR practitioners are not adopting the widespread interactivity of digital media as they fear the loss of control and power in doing so. Organizations are not harnessing the relationship-building benefits of Web 2.0 and are not seeing the advantages of interactivity beyond considering it a trend (Aaragon & Domingo, 2014). Overall, there is huge potential to build relationships with audiences via interactive social and digital media, but PR practitioners are 'fearing the unknown' and as a result are portraying an 'appearance of interactivity,' constraining the potential for open-

ended conversation and communication that builds relationships with publics (Aaragon & Domingo, 2014).

In the case of the DFC, Facebook in particular seemed to be used to engage in two-way communication with users, enabling dialogue through one-to-one relations – although, if one were to critically examine this type of dialogue, it may simply be an appearance of interactivity or monologic communication disguised as dialogue. At times, the DFC responded to users' questions and concerns with what seemed to be a carefully crafted message. This is where there seems to be a gap in understanding the new tools they could be using online; using social media to push out marketing messaging or content goes against the conversational structure of the web itself. According to Kent (2013), social media web sites are not intended as places where thousands or tens of thousands of people passively wait for messages. Agricultural organizations need to embrace digital media in the manner they were developed to be used – collaborative, conversational and participatory in nature – as in today's emergent and saturated media environment, crafting your message to suit each digital channel is essential.

### **5. 3. Need for New Practices**

Similar to findings from research done by Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) and Lovejoy et al., (2013), it was found that the DFC, an organization representing Canadian food producers, are not using digital media to its full potential in order to narrow the farm-to-plate knowledge gap. As social media platforms are public and completely transparent, the DFC seemed to disengage from hard-hitting issues and activist discourse. Despite the DFC's commitment to being a transparent organization, in reality, it can be seen they are having a difficult time incorporating this philosophy into their online digital relations with consumers. It seemed as though social media was more often than not used as an additional one-way channel to extend their IMC key

messaging, when in reality, it is not just another marketing channel, but rather an interactive platform with distinct two-way communicative features.

At times, it can be seen how engaging in a never-ending discussion with opinionated activists may not be a win-win situation for anyone involved; however, addressing activist discourse in a transparent, honest and open manner should be attempted. In order to thrive in a digital world, agricultural organizations such as the DFC need to abandon the traditional PR ‘control paradigm.’ PR practitioners must learn how to enter online conversations in an appropriate manner, both representing their organizations and correcting inaccurate information, while also defending against criticisms. Utilizing digital media as just another tool to disseminate marketing campaign material and carefully crafted messages does not translate into building trust or relationships with consumers. As Macnamara (2010b) writes:

emergent media enable public relations practitioners to expand and enhance communication and engage with stakeholders in new ways. However, to make full use of these opportunities public relations needs to address the challenge of unspinning spin and adopt new practices, not just new technologies. (p. 318)

Further, Macnamara (2010b) suggests a new PR paradigm is needed to communicate effectively and authentically in the Web 2.0 mediascape – “a new model of public relations in which centralized control paradigm of ‘gatekeeper’ units are dismantled and replaced by professional communicators acting as advisors, trainers and facilitators of communication” (p. 324).

Similarly, Kent (2013) addresses the need to rethink dialogue in digital, participatory media environments, maintaining “dialogue is an orientation toward communication with others, not a simply procedure or process” (p. 341). Dialogue is not simply tweeting to other people or posting a status update on Facebook (Kent). Kent suggests:

to use social media for relationship building means we think about social media differently. Rather than social media being a cheap and easy way to reach stakeholders and public with organizational messages, social media should be reenvisioned as interpersonal and group communication tools, and not a replacement for weakened mass media. (p. 341)

Thus, the future of PR mediated by digital media should favour collaboration and putting the community ahead of the organization. PR practitioners need to “put a stop to the practice of using stakeholders and publics to satisfy our organizational ends, and work to rebuild democratic ideals and public awareness” (Kent, 2013, p. 342).

Thoughtful discussions with an appreciation of consumers’ inquiries, although may be uncomfortable for the DFC, are needed and are not being realized with digital media. The majority of online participants seem to be a minority group of Canadians – food activists. However, as exemplified in Figures 12A, 12B, and 12C the Appendix, these individuals are harnessing Web 2.0 to loudly voice their concerns (Ryan, 2014), and they may be increasingly influencing the majority of the consumer-population. As Kent (2013) writes, divergent voices such as these should be nurtured, listen to, and conversed with. DFC’s digital PR efforts appear to ignore divergent opinions voiced by vegans and other activist groups online. PR practitioners should step outside of their comfort zones to welcome, appreciate, and converse with divergent voices. In the case of the DFC, this includes conversing in a more inherently honest, social way with vocal vegans and concerned, misguided consumers. In order to further the farm-to-plate conversation, agricultural communicators need to understand that controlling a brand image in a social media environment is impossible; conversations should triumph staying ‘on message’.

‘Transparency’ and ‘authenticity’ are two buzz words being used in PR and marketing departments of organizations attempting to work within a spreadable, participatory media environment (Jenkins et al., 2013). However, as was revealed, the DFC attempted to build trust with consumers through direct marketing tactics adapted for a digital environment, rather than foster online participants’ voices and concerns in order to build trust through dialogue.

#### **5. 4. Strategy Redefined**

As research presented in this paper unveiled, and as Stroh (2007) argues, the problem with many digital PR strategies is the lack of emphasis on participation and relationships; many PR strategies have processes of two-way communication and involvement, but whether they incorporate ‘true,’ authentic participation is to be questioned. The underlying philosophy and approach of Web 2.0, embracing participation and openness, is in direct conflict with the idea of ‘strategy’ – something planned, managed and under control (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). In a Web 2.0 environment, Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) write that PR needs to embrace a more inclusive definition of ‘strategic communication,’ one that appreciates strategy as open and participatory. PR practitioners should embrace participation from publics via digital, participatory media while at the same time, not lose sight of advocating their own organization mission and interests (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). As revealed in the research presented in this paper, this ‘sweet spot’ is difficult to maintain. Perhaps the ‘newness’ of digital media contributes to the lack of understanding in how to adapt communication efforts in this mediascape (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

In opposition to a ‘deliberate’ strategy, in order to embrace the participatory nature of Web 2.0 environments, PR strategy should be regarded as an ‘adaptive’ strategy, where a participatory, governance model is adopted that advocates and advancing interest of both the

organization and its publics (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Steyn, 2007). An adaptive PR strategy utilizes communication to “solve problems in unstructured situations or to capitalize on opportunities presented” where the final objective is unclear and elements are still developing as the strategy proceeds, continuously adapting to events and people (Steyn, 2007, p. 160). No deliberate strategy can be upheld with complete success in a constantly changing and participatory media landscape. Especially in regards to the mediated nature of agriculture today, the PR approach of agricultural organizations should be an emerging process of relationship-building – actively participating in conversations around important emerging issues, where strategic direction is not set in advance, but rather emerges (Stacey, 2003, as cited in Stroh, 2007). Building relationships with stakeholders through authentic, dialogic communication and participation should be valued over a one-way, marketing-based approach in an online environment, which goes against the underlying philosophy on the Internet in the first place. Given these points, a more inclusive and socially-sensitive notion of strategy is required, such as those proposed by Kirk Hallahan and colleagues (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, & Sriramesh, 2007) and Falkheimer and Heide (2014).

### **5. 5. Farmers as Agriculture Storytellers**

Throughout the analysis, it seemed as though the DFC is harnessing digital media as a means to amplify farmers’ voices. Overall, the DFC is using digital media – websites, Youtube, Facebook, Twitter and a blog – as a platform to voice not only the *100% Canadian Milk* brand story, but also to increase visibility of farmers and their personal stories. At times, a select few number of participatory Canadian dairy farmers are bypassing the traditional media gatekeeper; the open, transparent nature of digital media is enabling those on farms to connect directly with urban consumers. Food producers are utilizing digital platforms to share their side of the story,

celebrate the industry, and directly respond to consumers' questions or concerns. Despite the lack of two-way/symmetrical communication from the DFC, farmers themselves seem to communicate not in a top-down or hierarchal nature, but rather in a way that is mutually beneficial and informative.

Through joining the conversation and being transparent about concerning issues for consumers – such as the use of technology, antibiotics, or genetically-modified foods on their farms – it seems as though farmers are beginning to build relationships with information-hungry consumers. Given a voice through Twitter, Facebook, The Farmers' Voice blog, and as featured in marketing campaign videos, dairy farmers are beginning to share their story, before someone less informed and involved tells it for them. Not only can farmers' voices help agricultural organizations' key messages be heard, but also as mentioned, the inherent visual charisma of farmers and farming can be capitalized on in an attempt to connect consumers to agriculture.

At times, some farmers who are active online can be seen as 'preaching to their own choir' on social media – interacting and having conversations with the already knowledgeable online agricultural community. Further, some may argue that placing value on the visual image of dairy farmers puts an aesthetic veneer on the issue at hand, glazing over the real discussion that needs to take place. However, with many consumers unfamiliar with farming in the first place, and with consumers' visual relationship with farming and food, it seems necessary to place value in the aesthetics of farming and the voice of farmers themselves. Using highly visual, yet credible content helps place truth and factual information in a visual, and thus accessible and easily understood manner.

Farmers' voices, typically left out of mainstream media and not typically considered a source of information for urban consumers, are entering the conversation thanks to digital media.

Organizations can harness the voice and image of the food producers they represent to forward their relationship with consumers; farmers are a trusted source of information on food and farming for Canadian consumers (Ipsos Marketing, 2012) and many farmers seem eager to act as spokespeople and advocates of their own industry. Whether agricultural organizations train farmers on how to host a media tour on their farm, start a blog, or talk with mainstream media, amplifying the voice and image of food producers can be accomplished in today's mediascape. Canadian farmers seem to increasingly coming to terms with their ability and the need to connect directly with consumers.

## 6. Conclusion

The agriculture and food industry, informally known as ‘Ag,’ is one the world’s most essential industries, and provides a basic human necessity; yet most people in cities are unaware of how their food gets from farms to their plates (Devries, 2014). The industry is hard to comprehend and scientifically advanced, one of many reasons mainstream media tend to avoid covering it. Yet as consumer interest in food grows and as issues becoming public via social, participatory media, digital, agriculture-specific PR adapted to the underlying participatory philosophy of Web 2.0 is needed.

This research utilized a case study of the DFC, employing document analysis, to reveal that the DFC engages in mass-mediated digital communication with consumers. Campaign-specific websites, a blog, and social media platforms are all marketing and digital PR tactics used to support the overall communication objective of the DFC: to promote Canadian milk and encourage of healthy eating habits (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014a). It was revealed that in an attempt to increase awareness of dairy farming, promote the sale of 100 percent Canadian dairy products, and to counteract misinformed activist discourse that mediates and seems to affect public perceptions of the dairy industry in Canada, the DFC utilizes various digital media to implement their overall communication objective (mentioned above). As this research paper outlines, the DFC’s IMC strategy was implemented through various, multi-faceted outreach channels, including traditional marketing tactics, media relations, and digital PR strategies. Research presented in this paper revealed that the DFC implemented digital PR strategies through multiple, cross-media channels. It was illustrated that the DFC’s IMC marketing and PR activities are becoming increasingly hybrid, where content was communicated to consumers through the two investigated marketing campaigns (*100% Canadian Milk* and *100 Good*

*Reasons*) using both online and offline PR tactics. One digital PR tactic implemented was the use of social media – for instance, the DFC engaged in one-on-one conversations with concerned users who prompted questions via Facebook. Further, Twitter and a web-hosted blog were also used to disseminate key messaging supporting the IMC strategy and to amplify the voice of dairy farmers.

However, it was also revealed that through the strategic use of cross-media and integrated media platforms, key messaging was repeated and content was pushed out to various audiences. The DFC seems to push out content supporting a strategic and specific discourse, which in turn, limits consumers' ability to engage in symmetrical/two-way, and thus dialogic communication with the DFC. At times, consumers reach out using social media to ask questions and raise concerns about the dairy industry in Canada. In some of these instances, two-way communication resulting in dialogue was evident; however, DFC responses to such inquiries were limited. More often, social and seemingly open communication seemed to be maintained by a select number of dairy farmers who are utilizing the DFC's digital environments to participate in mediated discussion and converse with consumers about dairy farming.

Our modern, globalized world is full of massive amounts of information that is digital, instant and ubiquitous. Yet with all of this information circulating around us, urban consumers know very little about what is in their food or how it is produced. PR activities are adapting to the media systems that mediate how consumers develop certain perceptions about the sources of their food. Overall, as Macnamara (2010b) argues, "Interactive Web 2.0 media and communication tools are being used as another channel to push marketing content and at times interact with consumers". Dialogue and engagement, aided by interactive online communication, can enhance relationships and must be valued by agricultural organizations such as the DFC. The

facilitation of participation, instead of the strategic management of content, will be essential to reviving agriculture literacy and closing the farm-to-plate knowledge gap amongst urban consumers within the 21<sup>st</sup> century mediascape. Using the already credible and trusted voice and image of farmers may be one dimension of an agricultural organization's adaptive PR strategy within online environments. As Duhé (2007) writes, PR professionals need to:

guide organizations toward more transparent relationships with stakeholders while maintaining the core beliefs, values, and purpose that define those organizations. This balancing act becomes more challenging in a mediated environment but nevertheless remains a vital, enduring, and fulfilling part of the practice. (p. 70)

All in all, there is a 'sweet-spot' that must be found between educating and engaging consumers about farming in an online environment, while still maintaining a valued and trusted organizational image.

The research presented in this paper offers insights into the connection between agricultural sciences and communication, which is needed to better understand how organizations can appropriately and effectively impact the publics' misunderstandings in a participatory 'convergence culture' and interactive media environments. Due to the fact that agri-food is a big business in Canada, generating over \$80 billion in sales every year and helps to fill the stomach of every citizen, while employing one in eight Canadians (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2013), it is important to contribute knowledge to the workings of public communication that aim to attract and create relationships with consumers to support the industry. Urban consumers need to be better equipped with knowledge about farming and food safety in order to respond to future industry issues and policy needs. Closing the farm-to-plate knowledge gap is necessary as future generations will become even more far removed from the

family farm and farmers continue to advance food production through increasingly technical and scientific complex processes.

### **6. 1. Limitations**

Understanding the bounded breadth of this case study, the findings are not without limitations. This research was restricted with certain time and geographical limitations. Further, as a researcher, I acknowledge that public perception of food and farming, and the consumption of media, is informed by audience members' cultural and social backgrounds, histories, prior knowledge and understanding, and many other factors, of which could not be explored in this research paper because of its scope. This research is concerned with the implementation of digital PR tactics, which were strategically implemented to support the DFC's communication objective. Thus, this research could not explore the effects of such tactics on consumer perception, knowledge or understanding of dairy farming or agriculture.

### **6. 2. Future Research**

This case study provides a foundation upon which to base continuing research about the public understanding of agriculture and farming. While this research would be naturally enhanced by a reception study to measure the perception of DFC's digital followers, it can be expanded upon to include other emerging trends in digital media and PR, specifically the increasing trend to disguise monologic communication as transparent, dialogic communication in an online environment. Further research on this subject would provide welcomed insight to the role of digital media in mediating urban consumers' understanding of agriculture and farming.

Future research needs to recognize and be cautious about the challenges of PR within digital culture, such as the digital divide, digital literacy issues or possible illusions of 'participation' within Web 2.0 environments. While at the same time, future research should be

open to the possibilities and opportunities of digital PR contributing to the enhancement of particular understandings and perceptions via digital media environments.

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@BCHolsteins @BCMilk Our girls are part of our family! #happycows #farmerscare

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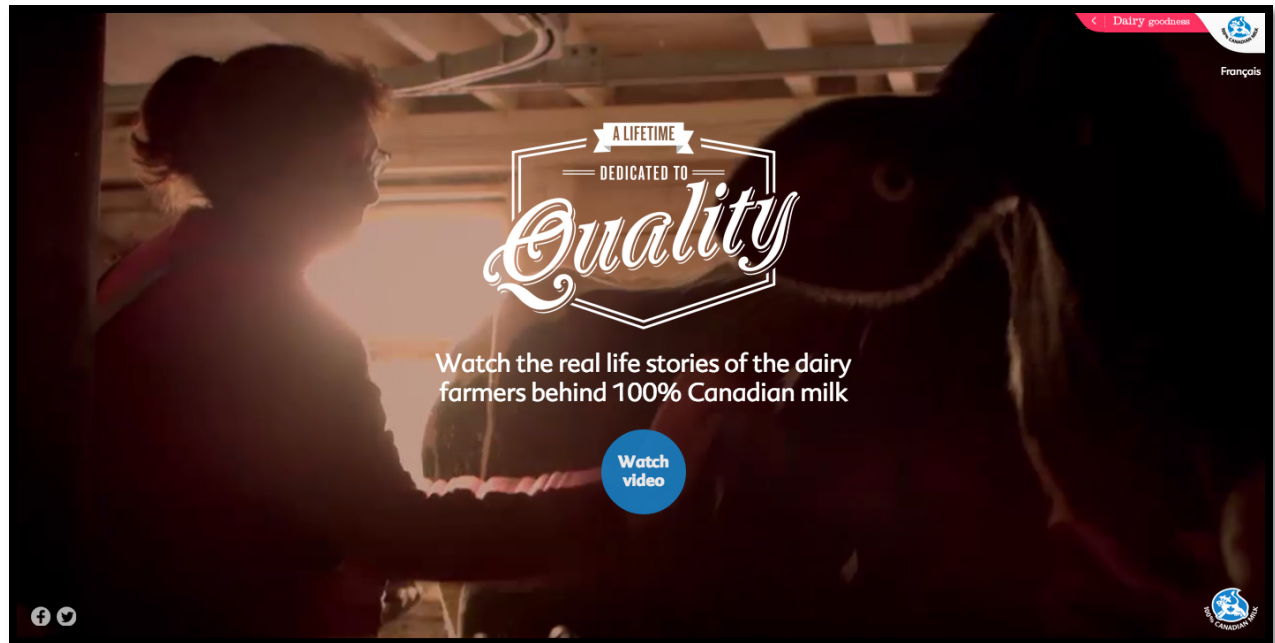
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Appendix

Figure 1:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-h)

Figure 2:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014j)

Figure 3:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014k)

Figure 4:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g)

Figure 5:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-1)

Figure 6:



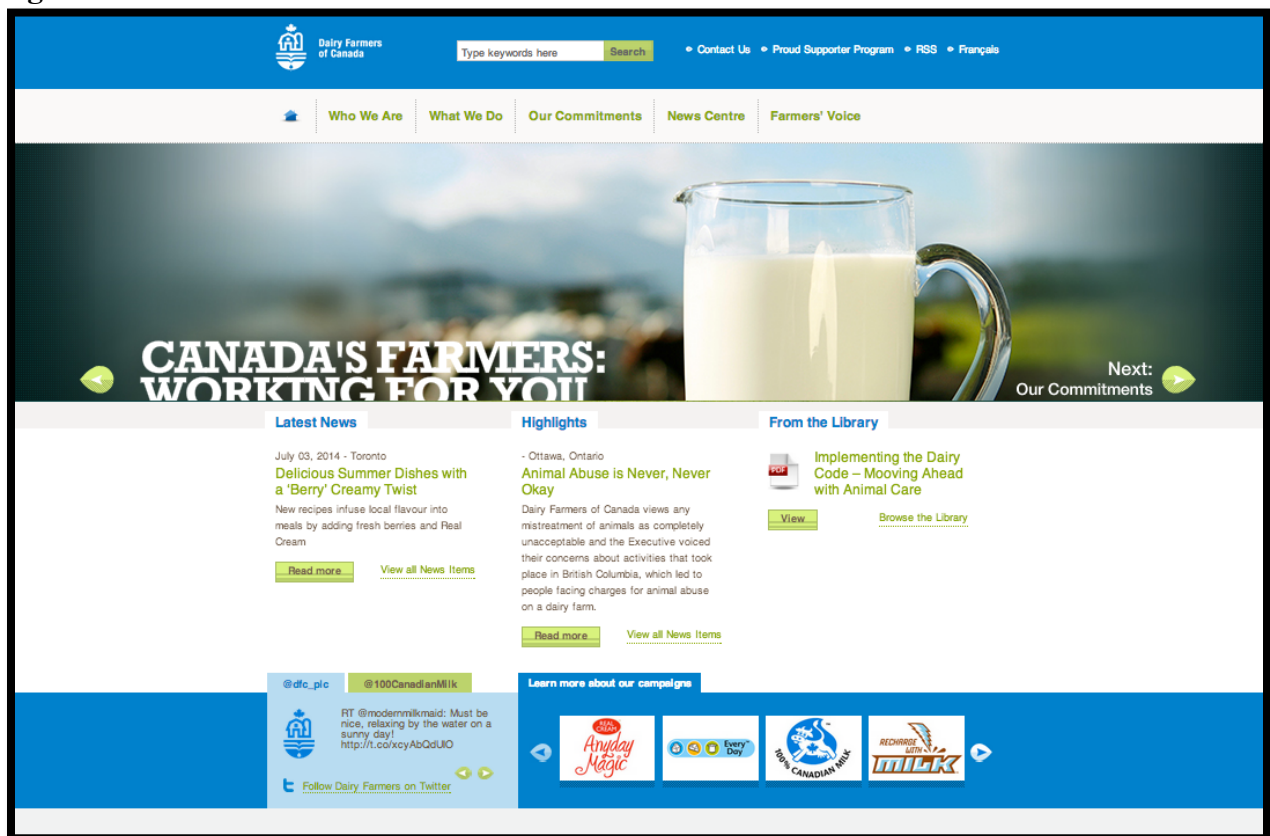
(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2013b)

Figure 7:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014)

Figure 8:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-i)

Figure 9:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014e, n.d.-c)

Figure 10:

**Reason 26 Young Farmers** Young dairy farmers are renewing the Canadian dairy industry

Today's dairy industry allows me to be part of a business focused on constant improvement.

Andrew Campbell  
Bellson Farms  
Strathroy, Ontario

Comments

18 comments

Sharing: Like 47, Pin, Tweet, Email

**Shelley Lynn Craig** · Verdun Protestant High School  
I would like to know if they cows are artificially inseminated to produce more milk and how do you treat the animals what do you do with the calves  
Reply · Like · February 17 at 6:14pm

**100% Canadian Milk**  
Hi Shelley Lynn,  
For your information, cows are artificially inseminated to ensure that not all offspring on a farm have the same sire and that each generation is better than the previous. Honestly, a bull is a dangerous animal to keep: in order to maintain a calm environment for cows, it's better and safer to use artificial insemination. Animal care is a priority for all Canadian dairy farmers. Their commitment to providing high quality milk begins with a high standard of animal care that includes providing their cows with nutritious diets, healthy living conditions and good veterinary care. Dairy farmers have a strict Code of Practice on the care and welfare of dairy cattle: <http://bit.ly/1h0ieJP>  
Thank you.  
Reply · Like · February 20 at 7:09am

**Shelley Lynn Craig** · Follow · Verdun Protestant High School  
Thank you for your reply I have seen some horrible videos and to tell you the truth I wanted to quit milk and dairy completely, I feel that if we need to produce mas amount of milk the least they can do it treat the animals fairly for without them we have no more dairy at all. thank you I will go take a look at the code of practice  
Reply · Like · February 20 at 10:13am

(Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-g)

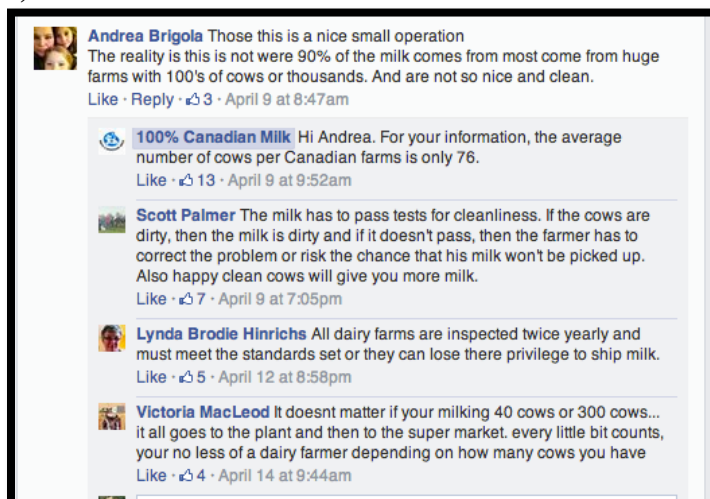
**Figure 11:**

**A)**



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014c)

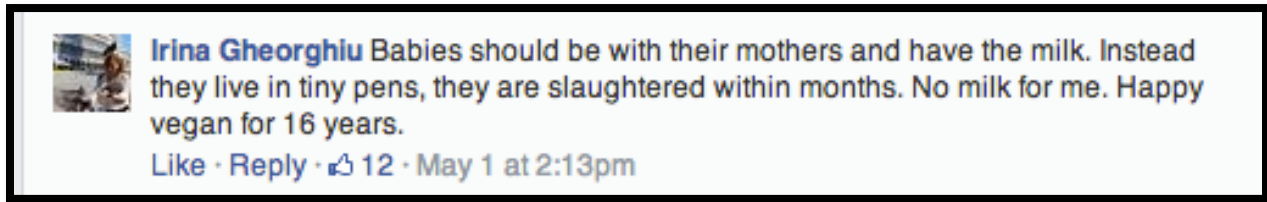
**B)**



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014m)

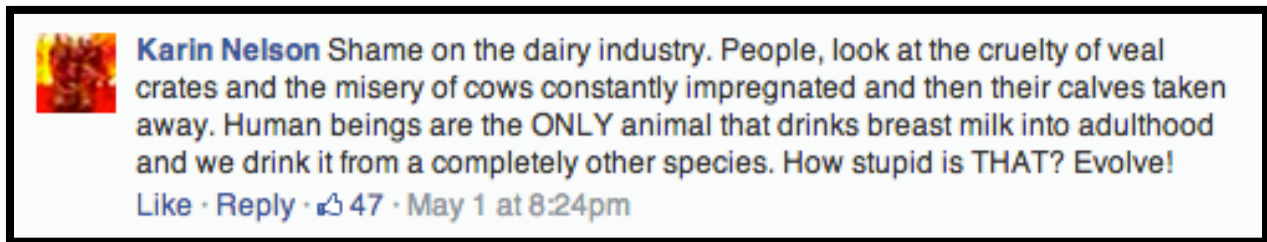
**Figure 12:**

A)



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014e)

B)



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014e)

C)

**Alisa Ashley** Poison  
Like · Reply · 7 · May 1 at 12:45pm

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**Karen Crooks Porter** Chemicals are poison not milk.  
Like · 4 · May 1 at 3:26pm

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**Alisa Ashley** Lol. Have you ever heard of casein? How about IGF-1? No? Do some research.  
Like · 1 · May 1 at 7:18pm

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**Alice Dairy** Human breast milk contains casein. Are you implying that mothers should NOT breast feed their babies? Seriously?  
Like · 8 · May 1 at 7:31pm

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**Alisa Ashley** No Egger, that's not what I am saying. I don't know about you but I weaned off my mothers breast at about two years.  
Like · 6 · May 1 at 8:30pm

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**Julaine Treur** Alisha, check out this quote from a UK cancer research site: "Recent research shows that a higher intake of calcium (which is found in dairy products) can protect against bowel cancer. But some research suggests there could be a link between dairy intake and the risk of developing prostate and ovarian cancers. For breast cancer the evidence is conflicting. A link between breast cancer and dairy products has been suggested, possibly because of the type of fats they contain, or contaminants that could be present in these foods. But there is no clear evidence to support this. Another theory is that dairy products might help to protect against breast cancer but this is not backed up by firm evidence. At the moment the research does not support a strong link between breast cancer risk and intake of milk and dairy products. ... At the moment, doctors and nutritionists recommend a healthy, well balanced diet. Calcium should be part of that diet, and milk is an important source of calcium. A healthy diet should also be high in fibre and include at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables each day. It is best to avoid smoking and to limit your alcohol intake."  
Like · 7 · May 2 at 12:31am

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**Julaine Treur** Karin, please see my response above to your original question.  
Like · May 2 at 12:32am

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**Alisa Ashley** Julaine, do you know what calcium is and where it comes from? In case you don't, calcium is a mineral and it is naturally occurring on our beautiful Earth. Cows, don't have the monopoly on producing calcium. Cows, like all other creatures who need calcium get it from eating grass. Unfortunately, today's dairy cows don't get to graze in beautiful pastures, they are fed corn and soy. So, where do you think cows are getting their calcium?? Supplements. So, if calcium is hard for you to get, why not take a supplement and forget the saturated fat, the risk of cancer and the cruelty associated with today's animal agriculture. For humans, the best source of calcium are green leafy veggies.  
Like · 5 · May 2 at 1:02am

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**Julaine Treur** Easy on the condescension, Alisa! I'm not a child or an idiot. For your information, I am a dairy farmer, and guess what??? Our cows DO get to graze in our beautiful pastures from April to the end of October! Many dairy farms in Canada still pasture their cows during the growing season. As for supplements, I'd much rather get all of my daily nutrition from the whole foods I prepare at home, including animal proteins and milk, than from popping pills!  
Like · 9 · May 2 at 1:07am · Edited

(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014e)

Figure 13:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014d)

Figure 14:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014e)

Figure 15:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-e)

Figure 16:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-e)

Figure 17:



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2014n)

**Figure 18:**



(Dairy Farmers of Canada, n.d.-e)