



An overview of new media research in public relations journals from 1981 to 2014



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ABSTRACT

A 34-year review of communication technology research published in six public relations journals reveals applications and perceptions studies far outnumber investigations focused on usability, concerns, or theoretical contributions related to scholarly and practitioner understanding of new media. Six trends observed in the 321-article dataset are noted, along with suggestions for theory building and other areas for future research.

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Public relations scholars and practitioners have grappled with and adjusted to new media since the dawn of the practice, yet “new media” as a term is generally associated with the advancing presence of communication technology in everyday life. Technology has undoubtedly impacted the practice, and thereby the study, of how organizations reach, persuade, inform, and respond to their publics’ ongoing demands and expectations. The purpose of this article is twofold: to examine the prevailing themes in new media research published in public relations journals over the last 34 years and, in light of that broader view, suggest areas for study and practical attention as the field approaches its fourth decade of continuing developments on the communication technology front. Given the breadth of time covered in this analysis, new media as a term in this article refers to whatever medium was “new” at the time an article was published. These new media range from the first Internet-enabled PCs in the workplace to tweets and status updates across a 34-year timeframe.

A thematic analysis approach (Aronson, 1994) was taken in the qualitative review of article titles from six journals primarily dedicated to the study of public relations: *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Journal*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *PRism*, and *Public Relations Inquiry*. These journals were selected because of their particular focus on public relations as well as their ability to represent scholarly and practitioner perspectives from both within and outside of the U.S. Each journal’s article titles were searched from the publication’s inception. An article was selected if its title indicated a primary focus on some aspect of communication technology in the practice or study of public relations, including key words such as Internet, Web, digital, computer, technology, Facebook, Twitter, and the like. Through a repetitive and reductive process, each article was reviewed and assigned to one of six mutually exclusive categories: (1) Early Predictions, (2) Usability, (3) Theoretical Contributions, (4) Applications, (5) Perceptions, and (6) Concerns. Categories with higher volumes were further subdivided for analysis, as will be explained. In all, 321 peer-reviewed articles across six public relations journals comprise the dataset discussed herein, ranging in publication dates from 1981 to mid-July 2014.

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This work follows previous investigations with similar intent (Duhé, 2012a, 2012b; McAllister-Spooner, 2009; Ye & Ki, 2012) but is comparatively broader in scope.

Public Relations Review has published the majority (56%) of new media articles, including the first in the dataset: management consultant Chester Burger's (1981) early discussion of how communication technology (in the form of digital message transmission, electronic data storage, etc.) would impact the practice of corporate public relations. Applications (45%) and perceptions (32%) studies comprise the largest portions of new media journal articles published since 1981. Studies with a primary aim of making theoretical contributions to the new media literature are a distant third (14%), followed by those expressing concerns (5%) and making recommendations for improved usability (2%). Authors making early predictions about technological impacts on the practice of public relations round out the dataset (2%). The following findings are organized according to observed trends in the dataset.

1. Observation 1: Early predictions were bold, prescient, and enduring

Just five articles published between 1981 and 1998 were classified as early predictions, comprising only 2% of the dataset. Heath (1998) and Coombs (1998) predicted the democratizing power of the Internet in their respective issues management and activist contexts, and Boutié (1997) recognized the coming shift from “push” to “pull” media and the growing inability for corporations to control new media. Following Burger's (1981) early assertions of cost saving, interpersonal, messaging, and other effects of communication technology on corporate America, Betsy Plank (1983) aimed to inspire and challenge public relations practitioners in the digital age. She outlined the pros and cons of faster, more interactive communication with publics, expressed concerns about responding too quickly without thinking, and argued that public relations practitioners should take a leadership role in ensuring technology improves quality of life.

2. Observation 2: Usability studies are few and far between

Articles focused on improving the user's experience with mostly websites numbered only five, or 2% of the dataset. These publications between 1999 and 2010 guided readers through best practices in website design (White & Raman, 1999), applications for usability research in testing the effectiveness of sites (Hallahan, 2001) and gathering data online (Moayeri, 2010), the intricacies of customizing XML for public relations use (Gregory, 2004), and protocol design for an experience-centered approach to websites (Vorvoreanu, 2006).

3. Observation 3: Relatively few, but notable, concerns have been voiced about new media

Seventeen articles, or 5% of the dataset, specifically address concerns associated with new media. The primary focus of these articles is split between risk, legal, and ethical concerns. Discussion of various concerns related to communication technology had a slow start in 1995, picked up in 2004, reached a peak in 2010, and are recently rising again.

3.1. Ethical concerns

Judd (1995) was the first to draw on Rawls' theory of justice to raise ethical concerns about new technology. After an extended hiatus of new media ethics focus in the literature, Sweetser (2010) warned that relational damage could result from a lack of disclosure in social media; Bowen (2010) urged corporate consideration of website audiences beyond investors alone; and Gallicano, Brett, and Hopp (2013) explored the ethical parallels between ghost blogging and speechwriting.

3.2. Legal concerns

On the legal front, Hallahan (2004) was the first in the dataset to raise concerns about protecting an organization's digital assets. Thereafter, Reber, Gower, and Robinson (2006) studied the role of the Internet in high profile litigation; Terilli, Driscoll, and Stacks (2008) raised concerns about free speech protections for blogging; Terilli and Arnorsdottir (2008) highlighted commercial speech concerns for CEO bloggers; and Terilli, Stacks, and Driscoll (2010) examined the legal parameters of anonymous speech online. Most recently, Myers (2014) discussed the legalities of disgruntled employees posting negative comments about their employers on social media sites.

3.3. Risk concerns

General concerns regarding risks associated with online communication date back to Mickey's (1998) critique of corporate share of voice on the Internet, Strobbe and Jacobs' (2005) analysis of the potential commoditization of news in an online environment, and Hiebert's (2005) assertion that the same technology with the ability to restore democracy could also be used for tyranny. Additional studies of new media risks include Robards' (2010) look at privacy issues affecting young social media users, Taylor and Kent's (2010) observation of a lack of risk discussion in PRSA's *Public Relations Tactics* articles about

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