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A Delphi study of the future of new technology research in public relations

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ABSTRACT

New technology has dramatically expanded over the past decade. New features on websites, powerful mobile devices, and the subsequent restructuring of news services have dramatically changed the profession. This study sought to learn about the broader issues of technology, and forecast trends in online communication technologies. In an effort to learn what technology professionals outside of public relations know about new technology and social media, this study used a Delphi methodology and solicited the participation of technology professionals from computer science, professional writing, communication studies, art, business, music and other areas. The first two rounds of the Delphi findings are reported and suggest that public relations professionals need to broaden their understanding of new technology to consider social and relational issues, rather than the current focus on practice.

A quarter century ago, in an article titled, "Forecasting Tomorrow's Public Relations", Judy VanSlyke Turk (1986) wrote, "The future is not something today's institution or organization can afford to ignore, or something that can be left to chance. From a need and desire to intervene in the future come the necessity of futures research" (p. 12). Turk's basic argument was that public relations professionals needed to become skilled strategists and innovators rather than mere technicians who act as "the chairman's boys or girls" (p. 13). Ironically, however, the future that Turk envisioned where professionals would become forward thinking organizational counselors and leaders, has been eroding in the face of social media technology and the push to make public relations professionals into blog masters and "Tweeters in Chief." New technology has not brought us closer to Turk's vision but farther away.

Subtle changes in the professional practice of public relations occur on an almost daily basis. As public relations agencies and professional associations struggle to remain relevant (cf., Elliot, 2013), the field has seen a gradual shift in the profession from the organizational counselors and relationship managers Turk wrote of, to social media specialists and a return to technical "communication managers" and marketers, rather than strategic thinkers (Taylor & Kent, 2010). The relevance of public relations is threatened, as communication professionals become minions of new technology, rather than the masters.

Turk (1986) suggested a number of techniques for "revealing the future" and making public relations professionals more relevant that included "analogy, trend extrapolation, scanning, Delphi, cross-impact analysis, scenario-building, mapping, simulation and modeling" (p. 16). This study employs the Delphi method, with an eye toward discovering what scholars and researchers *should* be examining in order to advance the field. Technology experts from six countries participated in our

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study to identify trends in new technology that are important for public relations professionals to be aware of as they enact Turk's vision of becoming organizational counselors rather than "tweeters in residence." We believe that public relations professionals have a broader role to play in technology use and policy development. The paper has three sections: (1) A brief discussion of new technology and a review of the Delphi method. (2) A report of the results of our Delphi study of technology experts. And (3), a discussion section exploring what scholars and professionals can learn from the experts studied here.

1. New technology in public relations and the Delphi method

In just over a decade, communication professionals have seen the emergence of an assortment of social media and new technologies. How should public relations professionals use such technology? One answer might be, keep up with it all, do some research, and use what is best. At the core of all effective public relations is research. But how can a professional be sure of what the next trend in social media will be, what technology to invest in, or where to allocate scarce organizational resources?

Much of the current social media scholarship has focused on determining whether particular organizations or industries have used social media effectively in marketing and advertising settings, or whether organizational websites are meeting the status needs of organizational communicators (e.g., Hill & White, 2000; Kim, Park, & Wertz, 2010; Park & Reber, 2008). Most previous studies of new technology look at the consequences of technology after-the-fact. Few have explored the issues management charge of identifying, forecasting, and spotting trends *before* they arrive (cf., Crable & Vibbert, 1985; Heath & Cousino, 1990; Jones & Chase, 1979; Kent, Taylor, & Veil 2011; Veil & Kent, 2008). This article seeks to identify some trends *before* they become apparent.

1.1. The Delphi method

The Delphi method is a unique research approach because of the ability to learn about ideas and issues that are not widely recognized among a group. In contrast to survey methodology and content analysis, which both start inductively, from the assumption that the researcher already knows what questions need to be asked, or hypotheses tested, a Delphi panel begins deductively, gathering a variety of information obtained from experts and stakeholders, and trying to discern what to ask. Moreover, unlike surveys, which ask participants to give their opinion on a variety of predetermined topics, the Delphi method asks experts to participate in the research process. The elaboration process that is part of many Delphi studies brings participants together to explore ideas and issues to a greater extent than other methods, often generating consensus among participants, as well as obtaining new information to guide future activities.

The Delphi method can be used both qualitatively and quantitatively, and works well for combining both types of data gathering in successive waves of research. Central features of the Delphi method are repeated iterations, anonymity, controlled feedback, statistical aggregation of group responses, participation by geographically dispersed individuals, and participation of experts. A Delphi panel conducts successive waves of surveys until the researcher is confident that an answer has been found or that no further waves of questions will yield insight.

1.2. The Delphi method in public relations

The Delphi method is not a new method. Tens of thousands of Delphi studies have been conducted by scholars in a number of fields going back more than fifty years (cf., Brown, 1968; Dalkey, 1969). Although a number of public relations scholars and professionals have spoken of using the Delphi method (cf., Jones & Chase, 1979; Kalupa & Allen, 1982), only a few have actually used it.

Most recently, Verčič, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2012) reported the results of a two-round Delphi study of "internal communication" with eight participants. Watson (2008a,b) reported on the results of a Delphi replication, trying to identify the most important topics for research in public relations. Boynton (2006) examined key values of PRSA members. And Verčič, van Ruler, Butschi, and Flodin (2001) conducted a definitional study of public relations among academics and professionals in Europe. The earliest discussion of the Delphi method in public relations is probably Turk's (1986) overview on the Delphi method from 28 years ago. Turk used the Delphi method to study technology experts, as we do in the current study.

2. A Delphi study of technology experts

We conducted a Delphi study of new technology issues relevant to public relations professionals. The purpose of the study was both to answer questions about new technology, as well as to identify relevant trends in new technology that public relations professionals are not aware of.

2.1. Methodology

The study began with open-ended questions and progressed to more structured questions. Questions in the first round were delivered via e-mail. Participants were given two weeks to respond, reminded after one week, and then asked to have all final responses in by the end of week three. Late participants were sent personal messages, asked to confirm their