Does research on digital public relations indicate a paradigm shift? An analysis and critique of recent trends

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes 141 articles published between 2008 and 2014 in order to determine whether public relations (PR) research has undergone a paradigm shift resulted from the rise of social media. Compared with digital PR research before 2008, we find that 1) social media have become a major research topic while remaining a secondary concern of many PR practitioners; 2) digital PR studies are gradually shifting from description to theorization; 3) the examined studies witnessed a general trend of methodological diversification but this trend needs to continue in order for scholars to better describe, predict, and explain how digital PR should be organized and practiced; and 4) digital PR research frameworks are dominated by the organizational perspective, whereas increasing attention has been paid to organizations in the nonprofit sector. Compared to digital PR research before 2008, our findings suggest that the development of digital technology in recent years has brought about changes in PR research such that the research paradigm is presently shifting and acts as a competing paradigm but has not yet shifted completely.

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1. Introduction

The development of public relations (PR) practice has been closely associated with technological advancement. After rapid changes in Internet technology, the emergence of YouTube and Facebook between 2004 and 2006, Twitter in 2007 (Boyd, 2009), and the microblog platform in Mainland China in 2009 (Bobbitt and Sullivan, 2012) has drawn attention from PR practitioners and scholars. Academic and trade associations have recently held large conferences focused on the implications of social media for PR (e.g., the PRSA's Annual International Conferences and the International public relations research conferences in the recent years).

Recent evidence indicates that an increasing number of PR practitioners have adopted Internet applications (such as websites, social network services, etc.) as tools with which to communicate to stakeholders (Guillory and Sundar, 2014; Taylor and Kent, 2010). For example, in a survey of 283 PR practitioners, the average respondent reported using 5.98 different types of social media, such as blogs, social networks, etc. (Eyrich et al., 2008). Results of empirical studies also indicate that Internet applications, such as websites and social media, not only provide an additional way for PR practitioners to deliver information to stakeholders (e.g. Kent et al., 2003), but also facilitate direct interaction and the maintenance of favorable relationships with public constituencies (e.g., Guillory and Sundar, 2014; L'Etang et al., 2012; Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010).

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The emergence of new forms of digital media has also encouraged scholars to revisit the theorization of new media and its impact on the following aspects of PR practice: the specific features of media, the power relations that exist among stakeholders, and the forms of organizational-public interactions (Guillory and Sundar, 2014; Kent et al., 2003; L'Etang et al., 2012; Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010). Moreover, from a broad perspective of communication professionals' practice, the use of digital media, especially social media, has been demonstrated to influence professionals' leadership (Jiang et al., 2016) as well as organizational performance (Parveen et al., 2015).

Several key communicative characteristics of new media have been identified in this emergent field: synchronization, asynchrony, interactivity, individualization, demassification, globalization, dialogicity, and equality (e.g., Hiebert, 2005; Huang, 2012; McAllister-Spooner, 2009; Smith, 2010; Taylor and Perry, 2005). Due to these distinct communicative characteristics and the recent proliferation of the digital platforms that convey them, it is necessary to ask: Is the impact Internet applications substantial enough to make digital PR research a subfield of PR research as it has been traditionally conducted? Do we ask the same questions of digital PR that we ask of traditional PR? Or, more fundamentally, have Internet applications shifted the paradigm of PR research?

To address the above questions, this study depicts the landscape of digital PR research by analyzing relevant articles published from 2008 to 2014, including types of Internet applications, theories, methodologies, and research perspectives. Moreover, drawing upon the definition of paradigm and paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1969), we compare our results with those of previous studies that provide overviews of PR research in general (i.e., Sallot et al., 2003) and Internet PR research in particular (i.e., Khang et al., 2012; Ye and Ki, 2012), to explore whether digital PR has brought about a paradigm shift in PR research.

Public relations is essentially about the "management of communication between an organization and its publics" (Grunig, 1992, p. 4). Particularly, the type of organization varies from profitable corporations and political organizations to social agencies, indicating PR's interdisciplinary approach to studying organizational performance and effectiveness. Accordingly, an exploration into whether digital technologies have brought about a paradigm shift in PR research is expected to shed light upon how digital media have changed and shaped organizational practice across various social sectors. The findings of this study therefore profoundly contribute to academic understandings of the development of e-commerce and e-governance.

2. Literature review

2.1. Paradigms of PR research in the non-digital age

Kuhn (1969) defined the term "paradigm" to refer to a model or pattern of thinking about a problem within a scientific community. While "paradigm shift" remains the key concept we are analyzing within the field of PR research, we also want to acknowledge the Kuhnian concept of incommensurability (Kuhn et al., 2000) and "irreconcilable differences" between paradigms. In essence, "irreconcilable differences" inevitably bring about paradigm shifts. Such differences may not be "translatable," but with sufficient effort they can be learned and explained, thus making comparisons possible (Kuhn et al., 2000; Wang, 2014).

Kuhn's definition originally applied to the scientific disciplines but was later adopted by the social sciences and humanities (e.g., Gottdiener and Feagin, 1988; Van Cuilenburg and McQuail, 2003). Specifically, a paradigm consists of 1) a set of concepts linked together by a rationale; 2) a set of favored research questions taken to be the most significant; 3) a set of substantive explanations (sometimes called theories); and 4) a set of tacit assumptions deployed when evidence is absent or when interpretations are ambiguous (Gottdiener and Feagin, 1988).

Several studies have discussed paradigms in terms of public relations research (e.g., Botan and Taylor, 2004; Hallahan, 1993; Huang, 1999; Hutton, 1999; Pavlik, 1987; Toth and Heath, 1992; Vasquez and Taylor, 2000).

One line of research focused on the constitutive elements of a paradigm. For example, Toth and Heath (1992) categorized PR research into three major theoretical perspectives: rhetorical, critical, and systematic. Later, based on PR practice, Hallahan (1993) proposed seven basic assumptions regarding the role of the PR profession from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, including discussions of public relations as a process, a program, a mode of communication, a method for organizational management, a means of behavioral change, a response to social problems, and environmental scanning. Similarly, according to the research subject and/or research questions, Vasquez and Taylor (2000) identified seven subfields of PR research, including two-way symmetrical communication, public relations roles, issue management, negotiation, public studies, international PR, and interactions between technology and PR.

By contrast, another line of inquiry argued that PR research was dominated by a certain paradigm. For instance, Pavlik (1987) contended that system theory was the major paradigm that dominated applied PR research from 1975 to 1985. Pavlik's definition of the paradigm posits environmental scanning activities serving as inputs, while communication activities serve as outputs (p. 128). Later, Hutton (1999) proposed that relationship management was a possible paradigm for PR research. Particularly, "managing strategic relationship" was considered the core of this paradigm: "managing" implies planning, control, feedback, and performance measurement; "strategic" implies planning, prioritization, action orientation, and a focus on relationships most relevant to client-organization goals; "relationship" implies effective communication, mutual adaptation, mutual dependency, shared values, trust, and commitment (Hutton, 1999, pp. 208–209). Botan and Taylor