What digital skills are required by future public relations practitioners and can the academy deliver them?

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Abstract

A recent study tour of Sydney public relations agencies and a major corporate for final year public relations students highlighted the significant trend toward digital as a core element of contemporary communication strategies. Compared with a similar tour in 2015, nearly all the case studies presented were based around digital communication, with only a very small number using traditional media. This study tour demonstrated that today's graduates require a high level of knowledge of all the basics of digital communication to be employable in the future. Recent research in the United Kingdom and Australia has demonstrated that employers are expecting future public relations graduates to understand what digital concepts will improve productivity, increase innovation, deliver cost efficiencies and improve relationships with key stakeholders, customers, suppliers, employees, governments and communities. This paper outlines the digital technologies that the academy needs to introduce if public relations is to continue offering creative, innovative and effective relationship-building solutions to its many stakeholders.

Introduction

Public relations graduates from 2016 onwards are going to have to demonstrate a high level of knowledge of all the basics of digital communication to be employable in the future. A recent study tour of seven Australian public relations agencies and one major banking corporation's communication group by final year public relations students from an Australian university highlighted the substantial changes in practice that have developed in the industry over the past two years. Recent research in the United Kingdom (Miller, 2016) and Australia (KPMG, 2015) has demonstrated that employers are expecting future public relations graduates to understand what digital communication concepts will improve productivity, increase innovation, deliver cost efficiencies and improve relationships with key stakeholders, customers, suppliers, employees, governments and communities. International consultants Accenture research shows 78% of business leaders expect their organisation to be a digital business in the next three years. However, 44% reported that a lack of digital skills was a barrier to achieving this outcome (Laurenceau & Sloman, 2015). There have been a number of recent studies into public relations and the use of new technology, with The Holmes Report (2015) presenting on an international research study into contemporary public relations practice that found the industry was seeking the following skill sets:

- 40% social media community management;
- 39% multimedia content creation;
- 39% insight and planning;
- 39% creativity;
- 31% measurement and analytics; and
- 23% digital build and production.

The report's website (http://www.holmesreport.com/research/article/what-does-the-pr-professional-of-the-future-look-like), titled, "What Does The PR Professional Of The Future Look Like", has a graph that rated the top three skills (social media community management, multimedia content creation and insight and planning) as areas where the profession has "struggled to build critical mass in terms of capability", and that multimedia content creators were highly prized. Another analysis of the industry skill needs was reported on by Pilkington (2015), where the Public Relations Academy in its third

annual Qualifications for Communicator Trends survey identified similar skills gaps. These were:

- • 68% identified digital communication; and
- • 56% measurement.

The survey also reported on discussions with Public Relations Academy students that digital communication was the most sought after skill and that they needed to continue to learn to keep pace with new developments, and there was a need to have a theoretical understanding for evaluating the different methods for effective implementation of strategies. The list of technologies required from this Qualifications for Communicator Trends survey was the need for:

- • Strategic thinking, innovation, creativity, and
- • Excellence in content creation, knowing about earned, paid and owned media; building communities, influencer strategies.

These outcomes support many of the points being made by Kent (2013); Schoenmaker (2014); Macnamara and Zerfass (2015); Verčič Verčič and Sriramesh (2015); and Moreno, Navarro, Tench and Zerfass (2015) regarding the core social media skills that are required for online contemporary and relatable practice.

This paper outlines the changes that digital technologies are creating for the academy and the challenges this poses, as a divide is developing between the purpose of public relations education and the needs of practitioners who have a client mandate to continue offering creative, innovative and effective sales support and marketing solutions to their many stakeholders.

Macnamara and Zerfass (2015, p.304), quote Zerfass, Tench, Verhoeven, Verčič and Moreno (2010), "Coping with the digital evolution and the social web is rated as one of the most important issues for communication management over the coming years".

The changing terrain

Maintaining linkages with industry is a commitment that many Australian universities engage in. This can take the form of advisory committees, guest lectures, or mentoring. These processes are designed to ensure that what is being taught goes some way to meeting industry needs. A regular final year subject at Charles Sturt University in New South Wales, Australia has an industry study tour that incorporates an assessable industry research paper on a range of contemporary public relations issue topics (i.e. the role of ethics in current public relations practice, or is traditional media relations still a core public relations competency?). Students have to collect data for their chosen topic from the study tour by asking questions or setting up interviews with the practitioners they meet. This task not only gives the students the opportunity to research on a relevant topic but they also learn about roles in the industry, working conditions, employment opportunities and case studies. It was from the presentation of the latest case studies in early 2016 that the author came to the conclusion that although the case studies were dynamic, and had a high digital content, they were not based around the core academic philosophy on which public relations was founded and which underpins much of the current curriculum. This gap between academic teaching and industry skills became the foundation for the research and the presentation of this paper.

Already much has been written about the changing world of public relations and the impact of new technologies on how public relations professionals manage their roles and tasks in the world of digital communication (Duhe, 2015; Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2015; Schoenmaker, 2014; Valentini, 2015; Verčič et al., 2015). There have been predictions from many of the academics cited above that digital communication will enhance relationship building, inform and engage stakeholders in a crisis, and explicate dialogue; for example, Macnamara and Zerfass (2015). For academics responsible for managing and teaching public relations, these changes are creating new challenges. Grunig (2009, p. 1) argued that social media, which is one form of digital communication, is "a new form of public relations", and social media will "inexorably make public relations practice more global,

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strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical, and socially responsible". These words suggest that academics and future practitioners have a new set of approaches and skills to learn, pass on, practice and to participate in.

These changes in public relations practice created by digital technologies have raised a number of questions, both for those who construct public relations curriculum, and those who employ university public relations graduates. There is the view of practitioners that social media was the principal channel for every public and demographic (Jones, 2015). McLennan and Howell (2010, p. 13) refer to social network public relations offering organisations the opportunity to "build brand awareness, research consumer opinions, identify opinion leaders and spread specific messages virally". The authors provide examples of where an influencer campaign generated a large increase in sales. There is no mention of the core theory of relationship management that is the foundation of public relations texts. The case studies presented in the 2015–16 study tours in Sydney featured many examples that emphasised numbers of 'likes', blogger postings and sales. There was little or no emphasis on creating and maintaining relationships and entering a two-way dialogue with key stakeholders. Some of the technologies that were mentioned in the case studies were new applications such as Periscope, Instagram, Flickr, Friendster, hi5, Ning, Plaxo, Buffer, Delicious, Digg, Hootsuite, as well as the usual Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, as well as various blogging platforms such as Tumblr, Vox, and Xangar. The digital platforms of Google, Hummingbird and Bing were also utilised to drive visits to websites, and the use of Picasa, Vimeo, MySpace, YouTube, Pinterest, Path, Quora, Reddit and Tweetdeck were applications used to enhance content on a wide range of social platforms. It became apparent that many of these key technologies and the basis for their use needed to be introduced into the curriculum.

What was of concern to the academic staff on the study tour was the strong emphasis on consumer engagement. The presentations were heavily based on one-way communication, that is, getting messages out to very clearly identify potential customers or current customers. Metrics were based on retweets and 'authentic' storytelling that was designed to get to the right people at the right time. There was very little reference to building short, medium or long-term relationships with key stakeholders. The impression was very clear that the clients wanted immediate numbers, not relationships.

These conflicting views between what is being taught and what the workplace is demanding opens up a debate between the academy and practitioners on whether the philosophy of public relations needs to change to meet the demands of the marketplace, or should it have to? How much should digital be emphasised across all public relations subjects and what are the philosophical foundations that students need to be introduced to so they can be made aware of the new world they are entering. Many academics, such as Valentini (2015) argue that the main reason for using social media is to seek human connectedness, rather than product or company relations, and social media should serve the interests of society, publics and organisations. Most public relations curricula of which the author is aware teach a wide range of theories centred around a symmetrical approach to communication, or rhetorical or relationship management. The core elements of all of these theories are that dialogue, listening, understanding, contesting ideas and understanding all the dimensions of how to manage a relationship are essential. It is argued that effective public relations practitioners need to be able to differentiate between persuasion, relationship building, and a marketing approach, and that public relations is not merely a channel for one-way marketing/advertising campaigns.

Many academics have argued for a critical, democratic approach to public relations (Kent, 2010; McKie & Heath, 2015; Valentini, 2015) and there are those whose research has found that digital promotes organisational business interests and is not really a two-way flow of information that shares content and benefits society as a whole (Hanna, et al., 2011; Harkaway, 2012; Schoenmaker, 2014). Should public relations students be taught to be critical of the core basics of public relations as an

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instrument of managerialism, or be provided with the opportunity for reflective thinking and understanding the democratic aspects of communication management, as described by Macnamara (2011, p. 246), as ensuring "all the members of the organisation become sensitive to social demands and expectations and communicatively competent to respond appropriately to those social demands"? Quinn-Allen (2010, p. 45) referred to social media as a "disruptive technology" as it supported active participation and not the static mass media channels used in past public relations practice and it should be "regarded as a way to establish new forms of relationships with newly conceived stakeholders" (p. 46).

Traditional approaches to teaching public relations need to take account of these changes and all the digital technologies that need to be part of contemporary curriculum design. Future practitioners need to have a deep awareness of core digital technologies and how they can be utilised, such as how to create and develop conversations and to ensure that two-way dialogic communication and relational management is a core element of their practice. This raised the question; should the future public relations curriculum be centred on ensuring there is an understanding of what comprises social media concepts of engaging, conversing, creating, sharing and relating (Schoenmaker, 2014)?

It is argued by many public relations scholars (Fawkes, 2007; L'Etang, 2009) that public relations' core remit is to help manage the behaviour of organisations, build relationships with stakeholders, and facilitate dialogue. Public relations should be for community building, facilitating public debate, and not be allied with propaganda and spin, argued radical public relations theorist L'Etang (2009). Grunig (2009) stated some of the benefits of the new technologies were that digital media contributed to more effective environmental scanning (a skill that needs to be included in the curriculum and which is essential to ensure practitioners can track all that is being posted on all content platforms). And also tracking cyberspace for problems, publics, and issues were further advantages of using digital searching, as was Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) for ensuring content was delivered to the most widely used search engines. Content analytics (another skill that needs to be included in the curriculum) can then help segment stakeholders and publics and also identify values, concepts and ideologies. Cyberspace can also be used as a database for measuring the type and quality of relationships using concepts of trust, mutuality of control, satisfaction and commitment.

The current text books used by the majority of Australian undergraduate public relations courses deal with the core theories on which they build their understanding of the purposes of their discipline. Due to the changes that practitioners are facing through the introduction of increasingly more social media applications, do future practitioners need to have an awareness of these philosophical and psychological foundations of communication on which to build their communication understanding and practice? The argument developed in this paper is built on an extensive review of scholarly research into social media and public relations by academic authors (Macnamara, 2010; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2015; McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014; Moreno et al., 2015; Schoenmaker, 2014; Valentini, 2015). It been supplemented by an analysis of a number of presentations by leading practitioners published in online newsletters and presentations at public relations and communication conferences.

The philosophy of contemporary public relations and its relationship with social media

As has been stated earlier, is 'social' the new panacea for all the past problems that public relations has faced (i.e. a lack of transparency, one-way orientation, or privileging the rich and powerful)? McKie and Munshi (2007) stated that the internet was requiring a radical change in how public relations was taught and there was a need to be open to new thinking. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2. Other writers have characterised digital media as a means of building and maintaining

relationships and of developing concepts of "openness, sharing, authenticity, dialogue, and engagement in online contexts" (Schoenmaker, 2014, p. 1). There is, however, strong evidence (Dozier & Sargent, 2015; Lee, Sha, & Duhe, 2015; Schoenmaker, 2014) that the current use of social media is directed to commercial interests such as marketing support (selling products and services), filling the digital world with chatter and providing less than credible information; neither contributing to the dialogue, nor adding value.

It had been public relations academics (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Ferguson, 1984; Ledingham, 2008) who turned the public relations world from message production and delivery, mainly through traditional media, to constructs of communication management/managing meaning and taking a strategic view of communication based on nurturing relationships with key external stakeholders and where "monologue has given way to dialogue" (Solis, 2008, p. 19). Macnamara (2010, p. 22) states that the interactive applications of digital are "helping to realise the two- way symmetrical model of communication" proposed by Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995); Grunig and Grunig (1992); Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002), and Kent and Taylor's (2002) dialogic model of public relations. This approach to teaching contemporary public relations is supported by Talbot and Onsman (2010, p. 52), who reported on research by Toth and Aldoory (2010) that educators in 20 different countries accepted that the "field of public relations can be generally defined as a strategic function for building and maintaining relationships". Bucy (2004) argued that interactivity (user-to-user) was the defining element of any social media strategy and the web was to be shared.

Hanna et al. (2011) reported that social media should be used to engage, leverage relationships, influence, and manage conversations. Macnamara (2015) also points to a need for an architecture of listening in organisations and the potential for digital to revolutionise communication. Hanna et al. (2011, p. 268) also state that social media was about experiences and they used the terms "reach, intimacy and engagement". They raised

the need for future practitioners to understand the social media ecosystem and to navigate through owned (controlled by the sender), paid (bought), and earned (i.e. word of mouth, viral) channels. This creates further challenges for the academic community teaching new technologies to develop subjects that have a strong dialogic and conversational orientation, a relational foundation, and sharing that is "connecting, co-creating and empowering", (Schoenmaker, 2014, p. 10). There is much discussion (Kent, 2013; Schoenmaker, 2014) among academics that practitioners need to think about online spaces dialogically and the need to meet and share with publics online and to learn how to connect, engage and relate. They argue that it not just the technology but a need to develop undergraduate understanding about all the basis of what form of content is going to be needed, what level of visual support is going to enhance the message, and what are the core constructs of managing meaning, and how it can be evaluated. Kent (2013) further states that practitioners also must adapt and respond strategically and embrace the benefits that digital offers and that it must be genuine (and authentic) and "where community members online help solve problems, share information and jointly construct narratives online" (p. 341).

What does this mean for the academy?
Prospective practitioners (and their academic teachers) need to immerse themselves in online discourses, share and nurture dialogue (and understand the tools required for interpersonal and group communication), as well as focus on a communication orientation that is driven by transparency and two-way communication. Macnamara (2010) asked, how does the academy prepare future practitioners for this new world, and a new way of thinking? He claimed that practitioners he had spoken with said social media was used primarily for research and "listening" (p. 32) and it was seen as just another channel. Talbot and Onsman (2010, p. 55) stated that "the interaction and open communication between industry and education is an essential aspect of maintaining and expanding disciplinary knowledge, as well as to maintain the profession's public credibility and relevance". This included

remaining alert to industry communication trends and issues, and to generate and validate new ideas, models and practices. Following the lead of Kent and Taylor (2002), Valentini (2015), and Macnamara and Zerfass (2015), the core philosophical concepts on which to build new academic digital communication programmes need to incorporate the elements of dialogic orientation and an awareness of what comprises mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk and commitment; authentic, transparent and co-creational constructs, and the creating and sharing of content; online relationship building; how to connect directly with stakeholders and what is required to influence consumer opinion (Men & Tsai, 2013).

A range of academics, such as Pieczka (2011), Valentini (2015), Macnamara (2010), and McKie and Heath (2015), for example, have all expressed caution that there is still a lack of scholarly research into this emerging field. The concepts of control and power are still being debated with the need for strong organisational governance and guidelines required, as opposed to the concepts of openness, participation and transparency that many social media analysts argue are the basis of Web 2.0. Schoenmaker (2014, p. 6) argues that relational interactions need to be for more than economic benefits and should bring "perceptions, intentions, and values as important relational components". All these elements of contemporary practice, understanding what comprises power and transparency, as well as relationship management, present a challenge for current and future public relations discipline leaders to ensure their students have the capacity to analyse and implement the new skills they need to have. The following section discusses what is needed to answer the question of how does the academy meet the digital skills required by the public relations industry?

What of curriculum development?
There is firstly a need to include digital public relations concepts across all elements of a contemporary curriculum. From an initial philosophical approach in introductory subjects (for example at one Australian university it is named 'What is PR?'), students would need to know the theories and ethical issues behind digital communication and to be introduced to all platforms, applications and devices. Many undergraduate courses now have basic website, digital filming and editing components and communication students need an introduction as to how these can be utilised in a client/corporate environment. Digital technologies need to be introduced across all subjects that are part of a public relations undergraduate curriculum, such as public affairs (the impact of digital on political communication); activist public relations (the use of online petitions and Instagram as means of generating support for an issue); employee communications (how Snapchat or Facebook can improve discussions between staff and management); financial/investor relations (creating stronger relationships between an organisation and its shareholders), and public relations strategy (utilising digital methods to develop specific objectives that are measureable, and understanding how to create digital influencer strategies). Reinforcing the earlier points made in this discussion, where it was apparent that many public relations professionals in medium- and large-sized Sydney consultancies used social media as marketing and advertising tools, it is argued that communication professionals need to stop seeing new technology as simply a sales tool and consider how it can be used in more robust activities such as relationship building, problem solving, crowd sourcing, or design improvement.

Social media and related technologies have tremendous untapped potential, said Kent (2010, p. 340), and a focus on relationship building via dialogue and communitarianism principles, as well as a long-term world view of the world that would eventually lead to a more robust profession. Social media should be re-envisioned as interpersonal and group communication tools, he wrote. This is where users have taken control of the web and the market has shifted from a click-based engagement model to a fan-based engagement model (Cavazza, 2012). This author makes the point the web has moved from publishing (blogs) to sharing (using Twitter as an example) and to curating, providing the platforms of

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Quora and Pinterest as examples, and how it was now necessary to seek to add value when developing social media strategies. One example provided was that Twitter was a copy platform and Instagram was a visual one. The correct selection would be based on the strategy being used. On his website Cavazza noted that practitioners needed to have knowledge of all digital platforms and also how to use them.

A decision needs to be made by the curriculum developers which of the usages developed by Cavazza (2012), defined as interactions, networking, buying, playing, sharing, publishing or localisation, needed to be utilised for the purposes of teaching the basics of any public relations campaign. Therefore a strong awareness of social media architecture should be a first inclusion in any digital public relations strategy subject, and also an understanding of how to add value to the interaction. From the literature (Leigh, 2010; Luo, Jiang & Kulemeka, 2015; Quinn-Allan, 2010; Shen & Sisco, 2015) it can be stated that students need to understand all aspects of brand and social engagement, how digital can support and complement bricks and mortar outlets, and know what is earned, owned and paid.

The second stage is to consider which aspects of social media will contribute to the conversation and to introduce the concepts of conversing, sharing and relating (Schoenmaker, 2014). Edwards (2015), when discussing industry expectations of social media in an online article on the Mumbrella site, said companies needed to build new partnerships to work successfully in the collaboration economy. "While new technology platforms facilitate collaboration, at its heart the collaborative economy relies on trust and the individual reputation of all parties." McCorkindale and DiStaso (2014, p. 2) state that engagement, transparency, authenticity and influence are the key drivers of any digital strategy. "With considerations of paid, earned, and owned media, organizations must understand how the integration of social media fits within their organization's strategy." Wigley and Lewis (2012) found that highly engaged interactions received fewer negative tweets, and that it was vital organisations engaged closely with their stakeholders in any conversations and be willing to solve problems as soon as they can.

Transparency (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014, p. 7, quoting DiStaso and Bortree, 2012), was "being open and honest; reporting the bad with the good; and providing information in a timely manner" and involved providing information that is useful for others to make informed decisions. Waters, Tindall and Morton (2010, p. 245), when investigating the public relations practitioner-journalist communication relationship, said "for media relations to be effective, open two-way communication must be present in the relationship" and that educators needed to learn how to develop an understanding of online media relations. A new concept of 'media catching' (platforms where the media can seek and source information), required practitioners to adapt to the technology and be willing to participate in responding to requests for advice. This form of openness facilitated by digital media was a key component in developing lasting media relationships, said Waters et al. (2010). Authenticity was another concept referred to by McCorkindale and DiStaso (2014) as something that was real, genuine, sincere, and linked to trust. In relation to digital, using a human voice as opposed to a faceless, institutional voice, provided more positive relationships with stakeholders, they wrote.

There was some degree of support for these concepts from Canning (2015), who stated that targeted nurturing, smart data and automated campaign optimisation were trends the industry needed to be aware of. Prospective practitioners needed to research and be aware of market demographics and have knowledge of the digital consumption habits of their key stakeholders and where they could add value. Storytelling was how companies wanted to connect, he told the Mumbrella site. Understanding tools such as Buffer, Radian6, Periscope, and Twitter were essential according to Freberg (2015, para. 5). She wrote that "practitioners were looking for talent that can properly communicate seamlessly across multiple platforms, research and apply analytical data, monitor and listen to audiences, express empathy and formulate sustainable

relationships, and engage in ethical and legal practices".

A third stage is to understand the new measurement tools that drive digital utilisation. From a review of recent presentations to the Public Relations Institute of Australia annual conferences (i.e. Leigh, 2010); social media practice websites (i.e. http://www.ogilvydo.com) and interviews on the Mumbrella site (http://mumbrella.com.au), the point is reinforced that graduates need to understand how digital improves relationships between consumers and the world. They also need to know how to use Google analytics (www.google.com.au/analytics), Hootsuite (hootsuite.com), Sprout Social (sproutsocial.com), Crimson Hexagon (http://www.crimsonhexagon.com), and Buffer (buffer.com). Yanco (2010) also provided the names of online aggregators such as Addictomatic and Samepoint to keep track of conversations in real time and understand how to use them in the real world.

Other digital technologies identified from the literature as being important to the future practitioner were:

- How to assess the impact and value of Twitter through Twitter Analytics (https://analytics.twitter.com/about). This application evaluates impact score/percentile/influencer category (such as everyday users, reporters, social butterflies, trendsetters, thought leaders); also Twitter Grader (http://twittergrader.com.w3snoop.com) provides a rank, and is an attempt to measure the power reach and the authority of an account. Yanco (2010) also provides Brandtology, Dialogix and Radian6 as potential social media monitoring platforms.
- Kietzmann, Hermkens and McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011) refer to the use of blog search engines such as Technorati and also news and bookmarking sites. Reddit and Digg also needed to be understood, they wrote.
- Wong (2010) in a paper presented to the 2010 Australian PRIA National Conference, stated that social media platforms were to promote products, services, brands, policies or campaigns and that practitioners were missing out on the wealth of conversations that were occurring via social media, online media, community forums and blogs. To monitor conversations Wong suggested Tweetdeck, Buzznumbers, Cymfony, Omniture and Webtrends. This monitoring helps determine key influencers and if closer relationships are needed, she said.
- Influencer strategies were also important according to McCorkindale and DiStaso (2014, p. 8), where they wrote that influencers were important as they gave credibility to a message and the practitioner needed to understand what personality attributes make these individuals credible. Some 63% said storytelling was how companies needed to connect, rather than relying on clickbait.
- Kamal (2013) suggested that to drive passionate advocacy, an organisation must know and focus on its fans' true advocacy.

Ethics were also a further important issue as due to the constant changes in social media platforms and applications, many ethical dilemmas can occur and future practitioners needed to be aware of concepts of integrity risk, advertising and marketing practices, recruitment practices, and duty of care. How to manage ethical topics such as handling negative comments, communicating corporate social responsibility, handling openness and disclosure, being authentic and equitable, crisis management, stakeholder communication, and measurement, should be included in the curriculum. For example Schultz, Utz and Goritz (2011, p. 20) wrote, "corporations regard blogs and Twitter often as efficient communication tools for 'repairing' the reputation and preventing boycott in crisis situations". They wrote that the impact of different media types on the effects of different crisis responses strategies was still understudied.

- Measurement: Barcelona Principles (Institute for Public Relations, 2015) need to be clearly understood by prospective practitioners and the focus

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should be on outcomes, how to measure conversation and engagement, be tied to goals and objectives, integrate online and offline, and should be unique to each platform.

Conclusion

It is apparent there are substantial changes occurring in the teaching and practice of public relations caused by the rapid introduction of digital communication to practice. As researchers such as Wright and Hinson (2014), Macnamara and Zerfass (2015) and Freberg (2015) have pointed out, digital has created new and dynamic channels for selling products, creating audiences, increasing traffic to websites, and raising awareness of issues, with only passing reference to creating, managing and maintaining relationships and using the two-way capacity of social media to create and continue conversations and relate as a consequence of online conversations. Schoenmaker (2014, p. 11) expressed it succinctly by stating that future scholarship "exploring social media and public relations practice could explore the drivers of online interactions and what converts interacting to relating". Schoenmaker argued that those academics teaching public relations must continue to introduce concepts of sharing, connecting, engaging and relating into the curriculum. Further research is needed to find how online connections can be converted to something more akin to relationships.

A final point regarding the teaching of digital communication skills, is that academics also need to become highly skilled at all the social media elements that students are going to be expected to learn and then implement. A United Kingdom public relations research fellow (Reisz, 2015, para. 7) has written that academics need to engage with the wider public through using social media platforms such as Twitter and blogging. "Twitter has great potential for academics, both for promoting their work and as a research tool, particularly in areas moving so fast that academic publications have not yet caught up."

McKie and Munshi (2007) discuss that practice is going to be continually disturbed by radical social and political change, with power being more widely shared, and this creates challenges for the academy to remain relevant and ensure we can all participate in an equitable, creative, sustainable world. From the author's own perspective, the need to keep up with students' use of a wide range of digital platforms presents a challenge. Questions are asked by students about use of Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and Hootsuite.

Freberg (2015) concludes that from an academic perspective, to incorporate digital into the classroom was hard work. There was a need to be aware of trends, find methods of engaging students in the new technologies through their use in assessments so they can demonstrate their understanding of the various platforms and to encourage creative and innovative thinking. She wrote that social media in classes was not a replacement for the traditional foundational practices for public relations pedagogy. By exploring these new tools and providing hands-on applied experiences while discussing key conceptual issues, educators can provide a new experience for future practitioners that will provide them with the necessary skill set to manage the changed public relations environment.

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