



Erika Pearson

Editorial: Online social networks, communication practice, and public relations.

By: [Erika Pearson, University of Otago](#)

The rise of social networking and the growing ubiquity of computer-mediated communications for many people have led to new challenges and new potentials in the areas of communication, public relations, and social organisation. These challenges are forcing a re-evaluation of a number of practices across the board, from research and data collection, through marketing and public relations, and into what was once a very personal calculus of friendship and the building and maintenance of our individual social networks.

This special issue reflects the breadth of impact of new forms of online communication, participation and social networking. The four authors here represent a range of views and perspectives on the issue, and taken together indicate the growing penetration and, indeed, ?naturalisation of new communication technologies in a number of social spheres.

Firstly, Moayeris article on ?Collecting online data with usability testing software argues that this technological change and commensurate social change requires new forms of data collection to inform critical research. By using new forms of data collection, researchers can uncover information about the emerging social interactions that are facilitated by these new computer-mediated communication technologies. Moayeri asks the question ?how do you observe participants in virtual spaces? and puts forward the argument that virtual spaces, with different expectations of interactivity and collaboration between subjects, demand new research tools and approaches. Moayeri concludes by suggesting that researchers need to become ?bricoleurs of different paradigms and approaches in order to do justice to their internet research subjects.

This leads neatly into the second paper in this special issue. Robards sets out to explore notions of friendship and space within social networking sites such as Facebook. Robards study highlights how, for the cohort in his research, internet-based communication and sociability have become *de rigueur* ? a normal and ubiquitous part of their experience of everyday life. Working from this starting point, Robards considers conceptualisations of ?friendship and ?space (especially personal space), and in doing so raises questions of privacy, disclosure, and participation. His argument asks how people using these sites manage and control their access to and performance of self in these communal, virtual spaces, and how might their current experiences shape the frameworks of expected social engagement in the future.

The third paper in this edition takes a more speculative, future-focused approach to the question of public relations and the internet. Macnamara takes as his starting point the shift from the so-called ?Web 2.0 to ?Web 3.0 era, and asks what opportunities this opens up for the field of public relations. Firstly, his article explores current challenges to public relations posed by Web 2.0. He then moves on to critically interrogate public relations and Web 3.0, concluding that public relations in a Web 3.0 era will see a growth in true two-way flows of information and communication, an abandoning of top-down ?control models of public relations, and an increasing demand for new skills and proficiencies as befits new forms of media and social interaction.

Finally, to conclude this special edition, musician John Egenes talks briefly in his commentary about the shifting paradigms of cultural production and experience that Moayeri and, to a lesser extent, Robards and Macnamara, hint at in their articles. In his commentary, Egenes argues that the new technologies underpinning production, distribution, and social engagement re-engage with culture as a folk process that not only enables, but indeed demands, communal participation. In light of this, Egenes asks the important question of what this means for current and future forms of music and media creation.

Taken together, these four articles highlight the new challenges and questions being thrown up as societies adopt and incorporate new forms of communication technology and, more importantly, the new social and communicative practices they enable. As flatter, more participatory models of social communication and media become the norm, we will need to further re-evaluate how we exchange ideas and information, how we construct friendships and social bonds, and how we understand our place as individuals and social groups within the wider mediated cultural landscape.

Acknowledgements: The editor would like to thank *PRism* editorial management and particularly Dr Elspeth Tilley for the opportunity to produce this special edition, the authors who submitted papers, and all the reviewers who contributed their time and effort.

→ Copyright statement:

The author of this article has elected, in the interests of open dissemination of scholarly work, to provide this article to you in open access format. This means that, in accordance with the principles of the Budapest Open Access Initiative (<http://www.soros.org/openaccess>), you may freely copy and redistribute this article provided you correctly acknowledge its author and source, and do not alter its contents.

→ Author contact details:

Dr Erika Pearson

University of Otago

Tel 64 3 479 8680

Email erika.pearson@otago.ac.nz