Public Relations and Technology: Practitioner Perspectives

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The purpose of this research was to gather detailed information about public relations practitioners’ new technology use. Seventeen semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted. This study describes how use of communication technologies can affect public relations roles. It discusses practitioner challenges associated with diffusing new technologies; practitioner perceptions of technology, organizational status, and power; and how public relations professionals are employing new technologies to improve research, increase productivity, and advance two-way symmetric communication in their organizations.

Technological innovations in the last 25 years have changed many aspects of public relations practice. Public relations practitioners began using computers for word processing, budgeting, and media database management, but soon were using them for public relations program evaluation and communication with colleagues. Telecommunications innovations brought not only telephone hotlines, but teleconferencing and satellite video feeds. Now public relations has entered the “fourth wave” of technological change in the field, and there are many questions about the impact of information highway technologies.

In the past few years, professional trade communication journals have devoted considerable space to describing how to change public relations practice by employing new communication technologies. Advice on changing tactics often centers on technology’s capabilities rather than on the needs of the audiences with whom an organization is communicating—or normative roles practitioners should

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fill. Dominant messages include quantity (of data, tasks completed, contacts made, etc.) and speed.

In analyzing the diffusion of technologies in public relations it is interesting to investigate what is driving the change. Is it externally driven—changing because "technology is there?" Is it strategic—related to reaching new publics, achieving specific objectives? Is this adding to the professionalism of the public relations field or simply adding more gadgets to the communication tactics toolbox? Given these possibilities, this article has two purposes: to investigate technology and practitioner roles and to investigate technology and practitioners' ability to carry out two-way communication. Included in the first purpose was exploring public relations professionals' perceptions of technologies' impact on their roles, practitioner reasons for adopting new technologies, and the personal challenges practitioners faced in employing or making decisions about new technologies. Related to the second purpose was exploring how the ability of some new technologies to be interactive, or allow two-way communication, was in a PR person's decision to adopt the technology and what has constrained two-way communication from taking place.

To accomplish these goals, the first and second sections of this article review previous literature about public relations and new technologies, concept definitions, and theoretical foundations of two of the concepts explored in the article. The third part discusses how some public relations practitioners perceive new technologies in the communications field. The last section discusses the implications of these observations on public relations practitioners, the function in organizations, and their target publics.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY

Rigorous public relations research about use of new technologies has been limited. Professional trade journals have done a better job of covering the range of technologies used in public relations, but they have done it in an anecdotal, unsystematic way. In addition, the terms new technologies, emerging technologies, computer-mediated technologies, and so forth have been used in organizational communication studies, public relations research, and mass media—new technologies research, sometimes without clear definition. One challenge for researchers in the area is that the definition of new technologies continues to shift. (For instance, 1980s mass media new technologies studies researched use of videotape recorders and remote controls.) This article limits its discussion to technologies used by public relations professionals that are interactive and computer- or satellite-mediated. These include electronic mail, electronic bulletin boards, interactive floppy diskettes, interactive video discs, CD-ROM, World Wide Web pages, online databases, online media monitoring systems, satellite teleconferencing, and virtual reality.
Interactive is defined as technologies that allow the user to control the flow of information (such as skipping the CD-ROM annual report's discussion section and hyperlinking to the financial data), allow two-way communication between the communications practitioner and the receiver, or both.

Along with an ever-changing concept definition, new communication technologies do not fit neatly into once separate constructs of interpersonal, mass media (uncontrolled), and controlled media used in public relations. "New media create a continuum between formerly discrete categories of interpersonal and mass-mediated communication" (Rice & Williams, 1984, p. 57). This adds complexity to choosing a public relations tactic. For instance, an executive addressing employees via teleconference is an in-person form of communication, mediated by satellite technology. It is not a preproduced video, nor do audiences perceive the communication in the same way they view an in-person speech by the top executive. New technologies have made former ways of organizing what practitioners do outdated. One gap in the public relations research and professional literature is that there is no organizing framework that merges new technologies with existing communication tools used in public relations. A possible structure that emerges from the literature is that of public relations roles.

PUBLIC RELATIONS CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Four role concepts developed by Broom and Smith (1979) have been widely used in public relations research to look at differences in gender roles (Broom, 1982; Broom & Dozier, 1986), differences in salaries (Dozier & Broom, 1995), environmental scanning and external environmental changeability (Dozier, 1990; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992), and strategic planning and research (Broom & Dozier, 1986; Dozier, 1985; Judd, 1987). Although practitioners play many roles within their practice, they enact one role more frequently than others. This dominant role could be one of four conceptual roles derived by Broom in his original work on public relations roles (Broom, 1982).

One is a communication technician. While functioning as a technician, the public relations person is mainly concerned with producing communication materials—such as brochures, videotapes, newsletters, news releases, and so forth. He implements communication programs but does not participate in the decision-making process that planned the programs.

Another role is the expert prescriber. Unlike the technician, the expert prescriber is the authority on public relations challenges and solutions. However, she is pigeon-holed as "the expert," without integrating the public relations function into the management of the organization. Because there is no executive management vested interest, according to Broom and Dozier (1986), this is a high-risk role for public relations professionals.
The third role that public relations managers enact is the communications facilitator. This person spans the organization's boundaries to act as a mediator between the organization and its publics.

The fourth conceptual role is problem-solving process facilitator. When a practitioner plays this dominant role, he or she participates on the management team to define organizational problems and collaborate on the strategic planning and programming to meet the challenges. Collapsing the manager roles into one role and separating the technician role as a second dimension has been useful in a number of studies (Dozier & Broom, 1995; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992; Toth & L. A. Grunig, 1993). In his reanalysis of roles data from three studies, Dozier (1992) concluded that the manager and technician roles were stable and robust and a useful way of reducing the four roles into a simplified typology.

Broom's research on roles has focused on public relations practitioners, whereas Grunig's concept of roles (J. E. Grunig, 1975, 1984, 1989; Pavlik, 1987) looks at the way the function is practiced in organizations, what J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1989) described as "the public relations behavior" of organizations (pp. 30–31).

J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) used the terms asymmetrical and symmetrical to describe public relations that aims for balanced rather than unbalanced communication effects. Like the two-way asymmetrical model of public relations (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984), the two-way symmetric model relies on use of research by the public relations practitioner. However, the research's intent is to develop relationships between an organization and its publics, not merely to further an organization's goals. Two-way symmetric public relations relies on negotiating and conflict resolution strategies to further relationships. In short, the "models describe the mind-set and overall purpose of communication programs, roles describe daily behavior patterns of individual communication practitioners" (J. E. Grunig, 1992, p. 19).

Fundamental to the public relations manager role is two-way symmetric communication (Dozier & Broom, 1995; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1989; Judd, 1987) especially because of the environmental scanning and research that is necessary to fulfill a manager role or practice two-way communications. Both of these models flow from a foundation in systems theory. Two-way symmetric communication contributes to organizations functioning as open systems, and the public relations manager role ensures that the environmental surveillance necessary for adaptation and change can take place. Dozier and Broom "accept Grunig's two-way models of public relations as integral to the function" (Dozier & Broom, 1995, p. 5). This study positions the concepts as compatible ones, especially for the exploratory objectives of this research. In conclusion, then, it is useful when investigating how public relations practitioners are using, or not using, new technologies, to consider not only the concepts of public relations technician or manager, but the concept of two-way symmetric communication, as well.
Before many of the new technologies that this article discusses were even invented, J. E. Grunig (1976) argued in the 1970s that “when organizations become constrained by their technology and knowledge, they also fail to recognize problems and become closed” (p. 34). With the exponential explosion of new technologies available to organizations and to public relations practitioners’ external publics, Grunig’s statement is more prescient today. The risk of today’s organizations not using 1990s communications technologies is still the same as it was two decades ago. The public relations practitioner’s ability to be a change agent is critical not only to the success of the public relations effort, but to the success of the organization.

TECHNOLOGY, ROLES, AND TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

The following summarizes the literature about public relations practice and technology, organized for the purposes of this article by public relations role and incorporating two-way communication.

Public Relations Roles

Studies have shown that technology can enhance technician and manager roles (Anderson & Reagan, 1992; Thomsen, 1995). In addition, research has explicated technology’s enhancement of elements of public relations management roles (i.e., research and environmental scanning). The following discusses technology research related to key aspects of the public relations manager role.

Public Relations Manager Role and Technology

Computer databases and online services allow professionals to spot trends, monitor issues, and note sensitive changes among targeted publics while still in latent stages of public opinion. Managers can hear about research affecting their organizations before other publics. A key advantage to the diversity of information available online, and the speed of access and delivery, is that it allows for early identification of emerging issues (Ramsey, 1993; Thomsen, 1995). Through issues management, a public relations professional can help prevent crises. But, an organization in crisis in the 1990s no longer needs to rely on media to get out the first message because it is possible to alert employees, large stockholders, government officials, and other key publics immediately via a World Wide Web page announcement, E-mail, or teleconference.
A crisis has the potential to adversely affect the bottom line of a company (i.e., lost product sales, reduction in stock price, or lawsuits). In an Exxon case study, Calloway (1991) reviewed the critical role technology can play in crisis communication. “What surfaces from the Exxon Valdez press coverage is that media had just-in-time technology and used it, and that the management of Exxon did not” (Calloway, 1991, p. 86).

Technology’s aid in research and decision making—other dimensions of the management role—is described in research and professional journals (Druck, Fiur, & Bates, 1986; Glen, Gruber, & Rabin, 1982; Hauss, 1995b; Lubetkin, 1995; Masterton, 1992; Plank, 1983). Research and evaluation can be quicker and more productive with the use of computer-mediated technologies. E-mail surveys to target publics can be distributed, and focus groups can be conducted online.

Its role in enhancing strategic counsel to management and clients is another reason cited for the importance of technology (Gayeski, 1992; Temple, 1989–1990; Wolcott, 1990). Thomsen (1995) pointed to the autonomy of practitioners in establishing their own search agendas as an important distinction is use of databases as a management function rather than technician function. The other way that new technologies affect the role of public relations in the organization is in management decision making. Thomsen found that public relations professionals using technology had “a greater sense of inclusion in their organization’s decision-making coalitions” (Thomsen, 1995, pp. 119–120).

Public Relations Technician Roles and Technology

Media relations. Probably more has been written about use of computer-mediated technologies improving traditional mass media relations activities than any other area, because so many practitioners are engaged in it and most journalists are accustomed to computers. Recent studies show that reaching reporters and editors via computer is appropriate for some media practitioners, but not all of them. Two surveys found 33% to 37% of journalists preferred to receive information via E-mail (Bovet, 1995b, 1995c). Descriptive information in the literature suggests that computer- or telecommunications-mediated technologies are improving media communication and evaluation of media coverage (Bovet, 1995a, 1995b; Dorf, 1995; Hauss, 1995a; Katzman, 1995; Paine, 1995; Plummer, 1995; Roche, 1995; Ross, 1995; Shell, 1995a). Activities include identifying media contacts more readily via criteria, customizing messages to media contacts, learning about reporters and other stories they have written before returning their calls, pitching stories electronically, keeping electronic records regarding media contacts, tracking online to determine immediately whether releases issued were used, and tracking news for information about competitors.
**Employee communication.** Organizational communication studies have analyzed various aspects of employee communication, although the studies have not been limited to public relations tactics (Fulk, 1993; Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Barrios-Choplin, 1992; Trevino & Webster, 1992). Professional public relations journals also have documented use of new technologies in employee relations. Some uses of computer- and telecommunications-mediated technologies include electronic publishing of employee newsletters (allowing for user control of items read and feedback from employees), employee teleconferences, employee E-mail, World Wide Web pages, and employee electronic bulletin boards (Berk & Clampitt, 1991; McGoon, 1992; Specter, 1995). Floppy diskettes, CD-ROM, and other multimedia delivery systems are being used to inform employees, communicate employee benefits programs, recruit new employees, and train existing employees.

**Customer and consumer relations.** A number of interactive media have been employed to expand brand awareness, build knowledge of products and services, and sell products. Although the ability to expand relationships between consumers and organizations through new technologies is enormous, articles in practitioner journals have tended to focus on the sales message potential. Key technologies include interactive kiosks devoted to informational or sales messages, CD-ROM, floppy diskettes, World Wide Web pages, and extensive use of consumer database information used for asymmetric communication with audiences (Davids, 1994; Gayeski, 1993; Sheth & Sisodia, 1993; Solberg, 1995). For instance, faced with decreased sales of distilled spirits, Cutty Sark devised a virtual reality game and sent it on tour (Davids, 1994). This adventure-oriented game, featuring Cutty Sark logos, was aimed at increasing brand awareness and involvement. The ethical implication of such a tactic is an area ripe for review.

**Lobbying and government relations.** Constituents are E-mailing the U.S. President, their senators, and even community representatives. Politicians have World Wide Web pages. Organizations can delineate the potential impact of a bond issue or ballot proposition on their World Wide Web pages, and issues are discussed in electronic newsgroups (Shell, 1995b).

**Investor relations.** Practitioners have a few techniques for using new technologies in communication with shareholders, security analysts, and registered representatives. Companies are including current press releases, executive biographies, executive speech "reprints," product info, company fact sheets, and so forth on World Wide Web pages, substituting for the traditional investor mailings. When investor relations practitioners call on security analysts or portfolio managers, they can tote a laptop computer featuring multimedia presentations. Investor relations
managers also can monitor the financial markets, analyze target publics, or gather investor information using computer-mediated technologies.

Productivity

In addition to technician and manager role enhancement, technology has affected practitioner productivity. The downsizing trend has paralleled the explosion of global knowledge, which requires public relations practitioners to investigate ways of being more productive and do more with less time and less staff. Productivity enhancements include electronic calendars; improved list management; automated media relations with databases like MediaMap; broadcast faxes for news releases; and E-mailing clients, media, employees, and other target publics (Petrison & Wang, 1993).

Public relations office computer networks offer more effective file management, shared project files, improved accounting and automated time sheets for public relations firms or cost-accounting-based public relations departments. The ability to store and retrieve massive amounts of data, photos, audio clips, video clips, and so forth on CD-ROM has also improved productivity. Audio and video conferences have reduced travel time and costs. When traveling, public relations professionals are using cellular phones and laptops to decrease waiting times for information and increase productivity. Capital investment in technology should continue to reduce ongoing general and administrative expenses like travel, postage, and secretarial assistance.

This latter section was a brief review of the use of new technologies in public relations management and in specialized public relations functions such as employee communications or investor relations. Although the previously mentioned technology-dependent tasks improve the practitioner’s ability to perform specific communication tasks aimed at members of a target public, the technology-based tools tend to avoid holistic management of relationships with the publics mentioned. The use of these communications tools falls within the realm of public relations technician, or craft, tasks. They expand the choices related to communicating with certain publics and make practitioners more productive. On the other hand, the literature shows that new technologies have the potential for the most impact on the public relations profession when they improve the practitioner’s manager role and ease the cost and time of garnering consistent feedback from publics. Using qualitative research, this study explores practitioners’ ability to maximize new technologies in these ways.

METHOD

Qualitative research has been useful for studying organizational phenomena on which little previous research is available, and the research questions call for
exploration and description (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Lindlof, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Mc Cracken, 1988). Public relations professionals’ use of new technologies fits these criteria. Mc Cracken (1988) noted: “The long interview lets us map out the organizing ideas ... and determine how ideas enter into the individual’s view of the world” (p. 10). This study has isolated several concepts from the literature—public relations technician and manager roles, two-way asymmetric and symmetric communication, and computer- and telecommunications-mediated technology. The qualitative approach to data collection enables us to delve into practitioners’ views and assumptions about these areas from their frames of reference, and reveal patterns among them.

Informants

The sampling framework was a local chapter membership list of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) in a Southeastern metropolitan area. A purposive sample of 17 public relations practitioners was chosen to roughly reflect nationwide organizational settings of public relations professionals. It was believed that they would offer “an opportunity to glimpse the complicated character, organization, and logic of culture” (Mc Cracken, 1988, p. 17). Forty-seven percent of the informants were in corporate settings, 18% in public relations firms, 12% in associations, and the remainder—24%—were from government, nonprofit, and educational sectors.

Six of the practitioners in the study had master’s degrees and 6 held PRSA accreditation. The remainder had bachelor’s degrees and were not currently accredited, although some were enrolled in master’s degree programs. Most of the respondents were 30 to 50 years old. Two were younger than 30 and two were 51 and older. Experience in public relations ranged from 2 to 26 years, and experience in fields related to public relations—such as journalism, broadcast communication, advertising, marketing, or business management—ranged from 0 to 27 years. In summary, the informants were educated, experienced practitioners who met Lindlof’s (1995) definition of a valuable informant: “more experience in certain settings ... may command more respect from their peers, superiors, and/or subordinates” (p. 171).

The principal investigator contacted respondents by telephone or E-mail to solicit agreement to participate in the study and schedule appointments. Solicited informants had functional titles (manager or director) that implied some decision-making authority over public relations programming, except for one professional who was identified as the most appropriate respondent because of her technology-related duties. One of two researchers met with each respondent to conduct in-depth interviews approximately 1 hour long. All of the interviews were conducted in the autumn of 1995. The researchers worked from a list of questions and tape-recorded
the interviews. The two researchers participated in a practice interview session in which they discussed each question and consulted frequently during the first few interviews to improve the consistency in data collection.

Open-Ended and Closed-End Questions

There were 12 open-ended questions about challenges in securing approvals, budgets, or implementing new technologies; constraints and successes when used; challenges in diffusing the technologies; one-way and two-way communication improvements; understanding publics and alienating publics; results gained from using new technologies; costs, productivity, and efficiency; impact of technologies; and perceptions of public relations practitioners. Interviewees were asked to share “success stories” and “not-so-successful stories” about technology use or applications. To add variety and pacing to the interview, the interviewer asked a few closed-end questions about technologies and online services used and public relations tasks performed. Demographics and information about computer and telecommunications hardware used were gathered through closed-end items in a brief self-administered survey that the respondents completed at the end of the interview. This knowledge helped to put each informant’s comments in the context of their experience with technology and public relations and education. These data portrayed a group of practitioners who were in all stages of technology use—from fear and suspicion to confidence and competence.

Validity and Context

All but three interviews were conducted in the public relations practitioner’s offices, thereby increasing understanding of the environment in which they worked, and enabling the interviewer to see computer and telecommunications hardware that was available.

Role theory, since its conception, has been tested quantitatively. Studies of the four organizational models have been varied. Most definitions of public relations describe a practice bounded by social, economic, political, competitive, and technological impacts on the organization. It is logical, then, that the exponential growth in technology impacts public relations roles and models used in practice. However, the impacts are so new that we need to investigate the questions further before designing quantitative studies.

Although the data collection method in this study was qualitative, the researchers attempted to incorporate some of the strengths of quantitative research in informant selection and in the gathering of some descriptive data (such as demographics, hardware use, and telecommunication use). This descriptive data adds context to the interviews by providing more details about the respondents. Although the
interviewees are anonymous, the intent is that their experiences will open personal perspectives on technology and public relations.

Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to cull categories of comments from the data and compare them. Then, categories were linked so that the theoretical narrative could develop. The result is a detailed description of public relations practitioners' use of technology in a variety of organizational settings.

DISCUSSION

A number of themes and patterns of responses were revealed in the interviews. Central technology-related themes were audience orientation, improving one-way and two-way communication, productivity, research and evaluation, professionalism, stress, and the strategic diffusion of new technologies into public relations.

Audience-Focused

One consistent theme was how audience-centered the practitioners were in their employment of new technologies. The most popular reason for choosing strategies involving new technologies or not was the ability to reach particular audiences, and many practitioners focused on the comfort level of the audience.

An association member noted that computer-mediated communication allowed her organization to "get to a portion of our audience we may not have reached before—the under 35 Generation X group." She voiced concerns about a survey that showed lower readership of their newsletter among this target group of association members and prospective members. However, she emphasized judicious media selection while employing new technologies—she had to retain some of the old tactics so that traditional audiences would not be alienated. This public relations practitioner was typical of others in that she was adjusting her strategies to employ new media. In this case, she was reducing a traditional 10-times-per-year publication to 6 times per year in order to distribute topic-specific broadcast fax bulletins intermittently.

Access to new audiences was a recurring theme. "It allows us to leverage existing communication tools to reach new audiences," said one. This practitioner was "cutting and pasting" copy and graphics from newsletters and news releases to include excerpts on the organization's World Wide Web page.

A statewide organization communication manager focused on geographic reach. "Rural areas stand to benefit most because technology can remove the constraints of time and distance." Another public relations professional felt differently. She chose not to attempt electronic communication because her target population lived in rural Southeast locations, and she believed rural publics would be late adopters of networked computers (in part because of access to servers). Discussing an
additional aspect of technology use, one practitioner in a health field was concerned with the ability of low-literacy or no-literacy publics to get information because their access to communication technology is more limited.

Some practitioners focused on age differentials in target publics. "I guess we'll have to deal with the haves and the have-nots for a long time. It's my kids versus my parents. There will always be a gap." Another technology company executive said simply: "All people haven't adapted to reading on a tube." He felt that the biggest factors in use or nonuse by his internal audience were type of job category and age of the worker. Similarly, a government relations manager noted that despite media discussions of politicians and government making use of the Internet, the norm with regulators and legislators was still face-to-face communication, and it would be a slow evolution: "Our target publics are so varied. For some the impact (of technology) has already been an adjustment, here it's second nature. And externally, the media, government, and other publics are pretty big entities—they're ready for the technology."

Respondents discussed the suitability of E-mail messages (and forums) for introverted audiences. Some felt they would hear from the nonvocal ones, as well as the more vocal ones who normally speak out in face-to-face settings. Others had evidence of stronger language and less polite comments than in interpersonal interactions. "Online communication is more candid than face-to-face. You're talking to people with the same general interests (news forums). They don't get embarrassed. Even if you know their names, you don't know where they are from. It's a mask you can put on and say what you want to." A government-funded organization practitioner said it: "might be easier to be nastier online. Some who might be reserved in person might voice their opinions electronically."

Relationship building will need reconceptualization, informants said. "One way public relations builds respect in the organization is through relationship building. If technology gets in the way (between) executives and public relations, then there's a risk the upper level managers wouldn't respect us," said a corporate manager.

Some reported to managers or related to other publics who preferred interpersonal or phone contacts. "I wouldn't choose a new technology without knowing my audience first—you can't assume." Or, along similar lines: "It's going to be more of a challenge to have a trusting relationship online. To me, there's no substitute for face-to-face meetings."

There was much concern expressed about how audiences were decoding the messages they were being sent. Although informants did not use the term "social presence," (Perse & Courtright, 1993; Rice, 1993; Rice & Love, 1987; Rice & Williams, 1984) they had reservations about computer-mediated technologies being interpreted as less personal.

We are using E-mail almost exclusively for communication in the company and E-mail can be misinterpreted. There's no vocal inflection or body language; it's fast
but not personal. And there’s no chance for immediate follow-up questions so you’ve
got to just convey information. You can’t just jot the message down because the reader
probably won’t interpret it the way you meant it if there’s anything else besides fact
in it. So the quality of internal communication has decreased though the quantity has
increased.

A lot of communication, E-mail and stuff like that, is shorthand. You communicate
in shorthand, so you develop this impatience and even an intolerance to talking about
things in a conversational way—which is the way lots of the publics … would like
to address things. That goes for one-way and two-way.

How effective is all this new technology, really? I know you can’t not do it, we
have to get E-mail and hire these computer people. But after this settles I think we’re
still going to have to meet people in person to do things of real importance.

The research technology helps us understand our publics much better, with all the
growing and research it helps—but that’s just one facet of the technology. The other
part of it is that you lose the one-on-one contact.

Differentiation and breaking through communication clutter was another dimen-
sion of reaching target publics. One practitioner believed that because comput-
mediated communication forms were newer, they could gain more attention. Another attributed the success of a CD-ROM he had recently produced to its
newness and distinctiveness. The audience paid attention to the message because it
was important, but also to the medium because it appeared important.

As these comments demonstrate, reach and relationship building were para-
mount concerns of public relations practitioners. How technology could help them
understand their publics, how it could help them reach their publics, and concerns
about audience decoding of organizations’ messages were major emphases. Com-
ments support the communication facilitator role in public relations, in which
bridging relations between the organization and its publics is paramount. In
addition, the respondents reinforced the importance of two-way communication,
along with noting the subtleties of face-to-face communication that technologies
could not replace.

Concern for Professionalism Adds Stress

Audience issues were key in new technology discussions, but practitioners also
were asked about impact on them personally and professionally. Public relations
managers saw themselves in the midst of a learning curve about new technologies.
This was driven primarily by perceptions or facts about the needs of target
audiences. But the second clear theme that developed was that adoption of the new
technologies was self-driven by their own definitions of professionalism. All the
respondents admitted to knowledge gaps about various technologies and their
self-identity as a professional was dependent on reducing the gap. “Everybody’s
going to have it (online capability) sooner or later. We need to get started.”
This attempt to live up to what one "ought" to do and "ought" to know caused considerable stress among practitioners. If they were not using certain technologies yet (particularly the Internet), they felt behind their contemporaries in other organizations. If they were trying to incorporate new technologies into their programming, they often suffered stress from system constraints such as multiplatform organizations or differences in client capabilities. Most realized that adoption of new technologies was an evolutionary process for themselves, their managements, their organizations, and their target publics. However, they pressured themselves to keep up with information in order to make good decisions, educate managements or clients, justify technology budgets, and learn to maximize each new medium. Many of these comments surfaced when discussing technology and the image of the public relations practitioner.

More than half had experienced downsizing and were faced with exponentially increasing workloads. One state government agency manager expressed a common sentiment:

Right now, we’re so bogged down just trying to get online and I don’t know any of this stuff. We’re just trying to catch up. And after this there will be something else. So I know I’m juggling my job and all the technology. I’m swamped already and now there’s this.

Comments included: “There is no time to evaluate services and systems because I am busy handling other organizational priorities”; “It’s lack of information. How much does it cost? The information gathering stage is time-consuming”; “Not enough time to think through how we could benefit”; and “I can’t hire the staff with the expertise.”

Some were focused on client perceptions of public relations. “There’s a current mystique among clients about online communication, and we’re enjoying the wave” (until the mystique is reduced by a new innovation). “We’re participating in change management. Society is changing, people are changing, we need to keep up.” Another consultant voiced a similar thought: “Clients want an aura of wow.”

“It’s value added,” said a public relations executive who has computer-related clients and deals with computer trade publications extensively. “Media editors perceive you as more sophisticated. Clients expect it. When a client is in the computer business, they expect you to have it.”

Understanding computer- and telecommunications-mediated communications added status to those who were using it. A public relations counselor said: “People in the agency who know how to use the technology are seen as moving ahead.” At a previous job where he did not have access to much technology, he said it was: “frustrating, an irritant, embarrassing.” Limited technological capabilities in the other firm were restricting his career growth, along with options for his clients.

Others experienced similar gains in organizational perceptions:
New technology gives a foot in the door to have more prestige and more power. When I'm working with IS (Information Systems) people on an Internet project, we agree they'll handle the technology and I'll handle the content. But they are so integrated, I'm as up on it as the IS people. This gives communicators potential beyond being seen as wordsmiths and writers and take the lead to bring companies into the next era.

Using a new technology to communicate an important company message, a public relations practitioner found: "It earned us respect in the organization. We had good comments from around the world." Showing success using new technologies helped one public relations practitioner to build power within the organization. His organizational culture was technology-oriented, and its workforce was highly educated and computer-literate. Another had a similar experience. "It builds employee morale. People who use it on a daily basis like it, understand it, and are on the cutting edge." This executive's corporate culture, he said, valued being on the cutting edge.

Someone else worked in a non-cutting-edge culture, where they hoped computer-mediated communication would help change the culture:

Our organization is viewed as behind the times. In some cases, the medium is the message. We want to be perceived as a progressive, modern, organization. This technology gives information, but the medium also conveys an image of keeping up with the Jones. Before I didn't believe that the medium was the message. Now I believe that the form of the message is just as important as the message.

An association manager said: "Our members like it. They see that we are trying to keep up with the latest trends, expand the way we do things, and look out for them."

Another public relations professional disagreed that technology use affected perception of public relations practitioners. She felt that among her internal audience, at least, it was taken for granted. "We swim with geologists and physicists, individuals who use home computers. The perception of PR has very little to do with it. Perceptions are based on how the message is communicated, what the message is, and the credibility of the source." To her, the medium didn't matter if there is no credibility with the source of the message and public relations' ability to "take technical information and package it coherently."

Distribution Issues Limit Success

One of the biggest stress producers was dealing with hardware and systems issues. Mergers and acquisitions in the past 15 years created a plethora of companies on different computer systems. Even practitioners in organizations that had not combined business units described the phenomena of "Mac" divisions, PC divisions,
different E-mail systems, and so forth. The multiplatform organization created a public relations challenge.

"Although most managers are online, the best we could do company-wide would be about two thirds." "Half of our workforce is in the field, they don't have access."

Others were attempting to operate on dual systems, rather than wait for standardization. "We will use Band-Aids and plug holes until we have one (computer) system," said a respondent who felt that he could not wait for the ideal system before using CD-ROM technology for particular projects. "We need to begin using new technologies now, so that we build the learning curve of PR and management."

To summarize, practitioners expressed tension between their self-identities as professionals and what that entailed and the gaps in understanding and using new technologies. Although they were cognizant of management's perception of their image and that of their department or firm, the desire to improve knowledge and use of technologies was guided by internal motivation, not management pressures. Stress caused by weaknesses in factors outside of their auspices (e.g., multisystem platforms) increased practitioners' stress about new technologies.

Productivity and Efficiencies

These externally and internally driven motivations to employ new technologies were balanced with two consistently positive gains that practitioners cited: productivity and efficiency and research capabilities. Despite concerns or disappointments with computer- or telecommunications-mediated technology, most practitioners had experienced increases in efficiencies.

Respondents were pleased with their productivity improvements, especially those who used E-mail. "To fax or mail something takes at least 10 to 15 minutes of the person's time," said one association public relations manager. "E-mail takes 30 seconds." Many others expressed similar efficiency.

"We're able to handle customer inquiries or problems much more efficiently because they send us questions electronically. We don't miss any and we can just reply." "Eighty percent of our press contact is online. I could be pitching a feature to a TV reporter, or with the (name of metropolitan daily newspaper), I talk to them sometimes four times a day—easy—over E-mail."

Speed of transmission and increased timeliness of messages were consistent pluses to new technologies. Practitioners dealing with international time differences because of multinational clients or organizations were able to minimize time zone challenges that previously had meant more cumbersome multinational relations. Increasing global or domestic turnaround times on projects was another advantage. An executive approved the switch to online publishing for employee communications in hopes of avoiding a formerly time-consuming printing processes, involving repeated interactions with printers and inevitable delays.
Although a public relations counselor felt it could depersonalize relations, he said E-mail made it more likely for people to respond to his inquiries. "People will not call you," he said. "They are busy, and afraid of being pulled into a conversation. The other choices—fax or letter—are too time-consuming. So they send stealth messages by E-mail. It's like dropping a message on someone's desk and walking away."

Other efficiencies included avoiding typographical errors because transfer of documents could be done electronically, eliminating the need to rekey information. This was particularly important for global corporations, along with one regional public relations firm that had clients in Asia.

One respondent, however, also felt that new technologies "pushed the window," increasing management's expectations about public relations productivity. "It's overwhelming at times, there's so much information, I'm on overload."

An agency with a number of technology-based clients is automatically billing clients and getting paid (through automated banking relationships) as soon as the client reviews the invoice. The implications for agency cash flow are interesting. However, technology could change the entire way a public relations firm bills, which traditionally has been based on hours serving the client. This billing structure was possible in a business that just 20 years ago required few capital expenditures beyond typewriters and copying machines.

One of the challenges to public relations firms now is the high capital investment. "I'm buying two or three new computers per year, which means I'll either have to raise hourly rates to include the cost of technology or bill differently," said an agency owner with a half-dozen employees. Other "expected" devices—even for small firms—included optical scanners, color printers, laptop computers, and cellular phones.

Research and Evaluation Possibilities

A constant frustration of these professional managers was the lack of time, staff, or budget to handle all stages of the public relations process. One of the most exciting aspects of online capabilities to respondents was the ability to do research faster and cheaper. Respondents were finding online surveys particularly effective with employee publics. A public relations firm executive was planning an online focus group, another corporate executive gathered information from quarterly E-mail surveys of a target public.

Comments included: "We didn't do research before because it was too slow"; "We have tremendous access to client and prospective client information that we didn't have before"; and "No more driving downtown to the newspaper morgue. No more thumbing through the card catalog at the library." Some respondents considered the ethical and management challenges of data availability. "We'll have
intimate data about our customers and more information coming in than we can manage. The challenge will be to organize data so that we can use it.”

In summary, getting more work done with less hassle was a definite advantage for practitioners using technologies, whether it was high-level research or querying a journalist. The dysfunctions of new technology use included greater management expectations and greater capital expenditures, especially for small organizations.

Proving Success in Small Steps

Informants knew that gaining organizational and client trust and building credibility required a multistage exposure to new technologies. A practitioner who demonstrated success with one CD-ROM had received approval to do another. Another professional’s multinational management had just approved another videoconference after they saw the increase in two-way communication and decrease in travel costs that the first one achieved. An international business executive noted that when top management uses the new technologies (such as a CEO using E-mail), it helps others adopt the technology and pay attention to the medium.

An association communicator said: “Our executive director likes this stuff. He’s for anything we can find to get more information to our members and information back from members as much as possible.”

Another agreed with the importance of management acceptance. “We have a dual challenge. Even when we get the expertise (in public relations), we have to educate our internal audiences.”

Challenges to Incorporating New Technologies

When discussing reasons for lack of innovations in their departments or firms, informants mentioned their own limitations along with cost factors. Management education was a challenge in a few corporate cultures. As noted previously, practitioners were strategic about diffusing new technologies.

The biggest hindrance is my self-education about what’s out there. I don’t encounter the resistance here (in the organization).

It’s no longer a question of what’s useful and worthwhile, it’s a question of what we can afford. We’re really getting past that fear of technology. I think we’ve really turned a corner here.

There’s nothing that prevents me from proposing anything. Implementing is restricted by resources.

In our business, to our management, cost is a priority. Justification is key.

We are changing the culture. You don’t leap into this. There’s not much opportunity to be on the cutting edge, it’s a fact of life here [at the government-funded agency.]
Another challenge in adopting new technologies was retooling one's writing style. "New technologies require a writing style that's short and sweet. Even when you are writing about science—which is complex—you must do it in four or five paragraphs."

Informants talked about technology-mediated applications that were not success stories. Some tactics were discontinued because of lack of use. These included a daily multisite television broadcast to employees of a multinational corporation, an electronic bulletin board, and satellite-fed video news releases. Another electronic bulletin board was unsuccessful because there were not enough resources to update information regularly. Practitioners tended to view these experiences as part of a natural learning curve about audience responses to various communication tactics and part of their own knowledge-building.

The latter discussion addressed the first set of research questions for this study, focusing on public relations professionals' perceptions of technologies' impact on their roles, their reasons for adopting new technologies, and the challenges they faced in decision making related to new technologies. The other major question of this research was how much emphasis the practitioner put on interactivity when considering use of a new technology and what constrained two-way communication from taking place.

**Improving One-Way and Two-Way Communication**

"We're adding the Internet as part of the media mix. It's interpreted by the client as a great bold step, but it's just another medium, appropriate for some uses and not others. If you want international distribution and access to a global public, it's useful."

"It's a two-way medium, that's what it is useful for. Companies have to be ready to discuss issues in the public eye, they can't be lurkers in news groups (for instance). We have to remind our high-tech clients to think interactively."

"We learn what the state legislature is doing, what affiliations they have, and where individuals stand on issues. We can then decide how to serve them, so ... the results are mutually beneficial for us and the agencies or people we serve."

Practitioners recognized the usefulness of interactive media, but categorized it as another option, best for certain uses, rather than a substitute for something they did before. They were careful to differentiate it from face-to-face communication, along with traditional one-way media.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Despite the self-induced pressures, these 17 public relations practitioners are moving forward in this new era of public relations. They are gathering knowledge
via trade journals and seminars, experimenting without fear of discontinuing projects that do not work, educating management and target publics—taking small steps. Savvy managers have learned to focus on what is in their control, because distribution issues in multiplatform environments make some visions more difficult to enact. Given the experiences of these practitioners, the most immediate benefits that the public relations professionals can garner from computer- and telecommunications-mediated technologies are online research and evaluation and maximizing some of their most easily identified productivity and efficiency gains. The results of this study suggest that practitioners who track these gains over time should benefit. Specific improvements will vary, depending on the organization, its objectives, and its publics—as they did for the participants of this study. These conclusions may be of interest to those preparing entry-level public relations practitioners, as well as to those offering seminars for practicing professionals who want to provide skills training with immediate applications.

A future area of research is found in public relations professionals' stress associated with the need to be professional, balanced with the challenges of self-education and use of new technologies. Managers appear to be responding to a perceived "third-person" expectation. Research exploring the role of trade publications, professional organizations, role models within organizations and the industry, academic leaders, and other sources of influence about professional expectations would add to our knowledge of factors that may affect how or why practitioners enact certain roles.

The insight offered by the study participants in dealing with just one issue—technology—is useful to scholars studying public relations roles. If research and evaluation is easier and less expensive to do, one could assume that as practitioners gain skills and experience successes, this part of the strategic public relations process will be strengthened. Studies have predicted this for some time, but the diffusion of Internet access means it can be more readily achieved. Given what we know about the correlations between employing research and attaining management roles, technology use has increased the probability of management role enactment in the future. Greater gains in productivity and efficiencies are also quantifiable achievements that aid in credibility with management—.

It is interesting to juxtapose traditional definitions of the public relations manager role with the clear orientation toward publics that these informants had. When one looks at the measures (Dozier & Broom, 1995) that have been used in most of the role studies described in the beginning of this article, one sees that the focus for a key manager role (problem-solving process facilitator) is on the organization and the organization's management. A manager in that role is organization-oriented and is, or attempting to be, a member of the dominant coalition. This, of course, is central to the success of the public relations mission within the organization, along with practitioner salary and job satisfaction. However, we know
from studies exploring organizational environments and roles, and environmental scanning research, that the audience orientation this study's informants revealed is also critical. Had this been a quantitative study rather than a qualitative one, our informants' traits would have been linked to items measuring the communication facilitator role. All of the communication facilitator measures (Dozier & Broom, 1995) discuss publics. The findings of this research support the usefulness of collapsing these items (along with the expert prescriber measures) into a manager role evaluation, rather than separate each role. Recent studies have done so. However, one might still risk coming up with a manager role profile that is more organization-directed than audience-directed. The ideal is one that spans boundaries between the two.

The role measures that have been used for well over a decade have shown consistent reliabilities. Their comparative accessibility (not many public relations measures have been published) and solid theoretical conceptualization have spurred a program of well-designed and well-executed public relations research, with findings that have broadened our theoretical base. Role research has been one of the crossbeams in the public relations theoretical house. However, as the public relations industry moves into a new phase, future studies may want to add items to the role measures that account for technology-driven tasks for public relations technicians and explore how the ability to be more interactive with publics may affect the technician and manager roles.

There is a possibility that tactic-oriented practitioners are more audience-oriented than those who more frequently enact the management roles. Technicians may be more immersed in media relations programs, community relations activities, and so forth. But more importantly, new technologies will allow feedback from audiences to be embedded in the tactic itself (such as World Wide Web page feedback). One could argue that before online communications, environmental scanning and evaluation tasks were segregated from technician-oriented "creative" tasks. In future quantitative studies, it will be important to ensure that measures of the technician role account for that. As currently measured, the technician role appears to be more audience-centered, and the management role appears to be more organization-centered or public relations profession-centered. Dozier and Broom (1995) framed it with the dominant coalition. "Enactment of specific manager role behaviors results in practitioner involvement in decision making of the organization's senior managers—the dominant coalition" (p. 7).

Role studies conceptualize these roles realizing that practitioners perform activities of both managers and technicians, but are categorized depending on how frequently they enact each. If used strategically, practitioner use of technology can further several dimensions of the management model, thereby furthering two-way symmetric communication models in organizations. Even empowering technicians with more interactive media improves two-way symmetric communication, coa-
ing them toward management role enactment. Although the greatest impact of technology is on management role enactment, new media have the capability of shifting more public relations practitioners from technician roles to manager roles.

REFERENCES


