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## 31 Critical reflections on the field

**Abstract:** In this chapter, we argue that the effect of public relations on society merits further attention from scholars and practitioners. In particular, the advent of digitisation, algorithmic technologies and AI more generally, have been under-examined. In these areas, greater reflexivity and scrutiny of how such tools are used in the industry, and the ways it might perpetuate or challenge their in-built biases, is sorely needed. In a communications landscape characterised by the co-existence of digital utopias, post-truth politics and fake news, we suggest that the challenges raised by these new technologies relate to two key issues: voice and diversity, both of which are deeply affected by digital technologies. The industry's capacity to adequately reflect on its role in enhancing or limiting these inequalities depends on adopting a renewed ethics in pedagogy and practice that adequately equips practitioners with the reflective and analytical skills to not only use digital technologies, but also to account for their effects as part of the arsenal of communications tactics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** digital; Artificial Intelligence; algorithms; ethics; voice; diversity

### 1 Introduction

The “industrialisation” of public relations (PR) has been marked by the growth and spread of this industry across the globe, so that today PR firms count among some of the most wealthy and influential global conglomerates in existence. According to industry research, the global PR industry grew by 5% in 2018, with the top 250 public relations firms reporting fee income of around US\$12.3bn in 2018, up from US\$11.7bn the previous year (Sudhaman 2019). While industry growth is positive from a commercial perspective, it is also significant because of the impact that PR has on society. This is a dimension of the profession's work that attracts somewhat less attention in scholarship than commercial effects, but in this chapter, we argue that the contemporary communications environment, and the rise in particular of digital technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), mean that recognising and accounting for the societal impact of strategic communications work is increasingly important.

Existing scholarship does recognise the social role played by PR in a range of arenas. For example, PR campaigns by international development agencies have encouraged the acceptance of global programmes for immunisation against diseases such as polio and measles, although each of these campaigns has suffered PR setbacks (Curtin and Gaither 2007; Jacobson 2012). Not-for-profit organisations depend heavily on PR to raise awareness of issues such as food security, climate change and various forms of social inequality. In financial markets, PR has encouraged new forms

of borrowing and banking that change the way consumers understand and engage with financial systems and institutions (Brodsky and Oakes 2017; Marous 2019). PR has helped to package the BRIC nations as an investment idea, thus changing the shape of investment markets as well as international political relations (Bourne 2015). Likewise, governments and supranationals, such as the World Bank, have used PR techniques to globalise the tenets of neoliberalism, a political ideology associated with free trade and minimal government intervention in business (Miller and Dinan 2007).

The quality of democracy has been directly affected by public relations through its use in historical civil rights struggles in the US and elsewhere, including the NAACP, and contemporary movements such as Everyday Sexism, #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and Stand with Standing Rock. Across the global south, PR has been fundamental to the visibility of causes such as the Landless movement in Brazil, Cuba Solidarity Campaign, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, and the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa. On a global scale, PR has supported activists' response to the global financial crisis and ensuing recession, through movements and projects such as Occupy, Jubilee Debt and the Robin Hood Tax, and to ongoing environmental movements (Bourne 2017; Demetrious 2019; Moscato 2019; Straughan 2004).

Less positively, communications professionals have contributed to serious infringements of rights and freedoms. For example, Southern Publicity Association, one of the first formal public relations companies in the US, played a significant role in the revival of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s (Cutlip 1994), while almost 100 years later, in the digital era, public relations and marketing tactics using big data have been key to successfully disseminating disinformation that has distorted the political, social and electoral landscape in a range of countries since 2010 (Briant 2018; Ong and Cabanes 2018; Wasserman 2017). Public relations companies have provided support for industries such as tobacco, oil and pharmaceuticals, where the main objective has been to protect profit rather than the public interest and tactics have included rhetorical manipulation of facts, "astroturfing" (creating artificial grassroots organisations), and avoiding regulatory controls by using social media for promotion (Greenberg, Knight, and Westersund 2011; Kozinets 2019; Shir-Raz & Avraham 2017). At the organisational level, public relations has also been implicated in organisational activities designed to silence opposition in order to protect their legitimacy (Dimitrov 2018).

Despite this clear role in constructing the democratic and social health of the societies we inhabit, commercial and professional priorities tend to focus on securing influence within organisations and on their behalf, rather than reflecting on and learning from the consequences of these broader ~~forms of influence~~. This was recently evident in PR's failure to acknowledge its role in the 2008 financial crisis, following years of promoting financial markets as never-ending "boom" – "and to hell with bust" (Pitcher 2008: 69). Similarly, industry associations have actively obscured the occupation's history and current role in the production and circulation of disinformation, neatly allocating responsibility to other groups such as digital platforms (Face-

book in particular) and media-illiterate audiences (Edwards 2018a). And in response to economic stagnation in many developed countries during the post-crisis decade, the digital world, and AI in particular, have been positioned by PR practitioners as the necessary “shot in the arm” for mature economies. While the race is now on for technological and commercial supremacy in these fields (Bourne, *In press*), the necessary optimism for reinvigorating growth through digital innovations is increasingly accompanied by recognition of the attendant problems such innovations have wrought across society and the public sphere – including digital disruption of communication channels and the rapid spread of emotive content and “fake news”.

These examples of PR practice show that social in/justice is often a focus, outcome or side effect of the work practitioners do. However, the chances of introspection by the profession are usually scarce, because PR is constantly called on to address more pressing issues. We suggest that this somewhat casual approach to the effects of practice must be addressed, so that social in/justice is given a more prominent place in both practical and academic analyses. The professional, ethical and social challenges of this complex era deserve urgent attention, considered not only in terms of the impact they have on organisations, but also taking into account the “work” they do in wider society.

## 2 Digital utopias and the post-truth era: Landscapes of practice

### 2.1 Digital utopias

Accounting for PR’s current influence in wider society begins with understanding new landscapes of PR practice based on platform capitalism. Data has become pivotal to modern capitalism as a means of maintaining economic growth in the face of sluggish production. Digital platforms have emerged as a new business model for extracting, circulating and controlling vast amounts of data (Beer 2019; Srnicek 2017). It is not the data itself that is powerful, but the analytical insights, which are presented as the means by which “hidden” value might be unearthed; helping people manage their health, relationships, creditworthiness, voting, and other behaviours (Beer 2019).

Central to this data-based capitalism is speed, which is partly enabled through the feeling of acceleration being cultivated by the data analytics industry, and in particular through the burgeoning world of artificial intelligence, or AI. AI includes a host of activities, including cognitive robotics and human-agent–robot interaction (Dignum 2018). However, much of what we currently call AI is “machine learning”, where machines are taught through complex algorithms, enabled by greater 21st-century computing power. The PR industry’s response to data and AI has been to “ready” prac-

tioners for associated demand for skills. Those intermediaries who are most able to work with digital platforms and AI tools, locate value in data, narrate and then attach meaning to data, are increasingly influential (Beer 2019: 28). Thus, digital capability promises greater professional influence and legitimacy for PR practitioners, advertisers and marketers who enthusiastically embrace digital technologies (Valentini 2015) for new approaches to stakeholder relations, audience targeting, content generation and programme evaluation. One UK industry survey estimates that at least 150 AI tools are now actively used in PR (Slee 2018).

Throughout the 2000s, the PR profession was particularly optimistic about social media's potential to improve direct relations with stakeholders, by bypassing the media's gatekeeping role. A more participatory culture had arisen, in which active, engaged consumers became media content producers themselves (Hutchins and Tindall 2016). As platform capitalism's "speed" imperative closed the temporal gap between production and consumption of messages and ideas, PR's utopian ideal was a more one-to-one exchange of knowledge and ideas between organisations and their publics (Valentini 2015). By the 2010s, PR practitioners had convinced many client-organisations to create their own digital media centres, enabling companies with "good stories to tell" to do their own storytelling (Lieb 2017: 1). Content production could be augmented and automated through computational algorithms and AI software, able to turn data into stories. In addition, digital techniques presented more quantifiable measures, offering a solution to the evaluation conundrum that has plagued the PR industry in particular (Royle and Laing 2014; Zerfass, Verčič, and Volk 2017).

AI will mean PR's impact on society is felt in new ways and we argue that it constitutes an urgent location for reflexive critique. PR's utopian views of digital technologies have already led to complacency over the impact of the industry's use of digital platforms and technologies on the public sphere. Digitalisation and participatory culture forced newsrooms to downsize, weakening the media's gatekeeper role, while forcing journalists to draw on (possibly biased and unchecked) PR content. Meanwhile, content production can only become more personalised by data-tracking consumers, employees and other stakeholders. Greater personalisation encouraged more investors to financially capitalise on algorithms in order to manipulate public sentiment (Bakir and McStay 2018). On social media platforms, this has resulted in clustering groups of people together to feed them select information via search engine bias, thus creating digital echo chambers or "filter bubbles" (Bakir and McStay 2018). Beyond social media, AI technologies now datafy people's emotions, tracking them while they browse computer devices, shop or simply walk through the streets, in order to develop supposedly appropriate responses to marketing campaigns (McStay 2016).

Grey areas include the ability of targeted audiences to choose whether or not their data is shared; their ability to understand who their data is being shared with, for how long and for what purpose; and more broadly, the desirability of having promotional content increasingly inserted into what used to be private space (Edwards 2018b). The ethics of using data services to scrape audience data are scarcely raised in the PR

industry, which suggests that questions such as these are largely neglected by practitioners. Moreover, other uses of digital technologies such as the deployment of bots and algorithms, which directly affect the quality of political and social life, remain under-examined. This includes the impact of AI technologies and filter bubbles on the spread of “fake news” and “post-truth” politics, as discussed in the next section.

## 2.2 Post-truth and fake news

The rise of fake news marked the profession’s first outward acknowledgement of a visible dent in PR’s digital utopia. One of the hallmarks of post-truth politics is the level of heated emotion and sheer noise it produces. This noise sucks audience time and attention, making fake news a highly effective form of misdirection in today’s public sphere. It helps to enforce our silence by redirecting public attention away from controversial issues.

Fake news does not just take the form of text-based storytelling. Equally troubling are developments such as “deep fake videos” which can now be developed with machine learning. Public scepticism about PR tools such as press releases is not as well-developed for content such as social media videos, which are often more emotive than written communication, evoking warmth, empathy, sadness, and/or anger. Today, anyone from state-backed propagandists to trolls can access AI technologies to create “deep fake videos” (Schwartz 2018). AI technologies can alter what a speaker says in an existing video, combine two disparate videos, or create artificial video material from scratch. Deep fake video can thus skew information and manipulate beliefs, creating wider chasms between communities and between the powerful and the marginalised (Schwartz 2018).

Research shows that audiences are at best sceptical about the credibility of news generally, and while fake news may be actively assessed for its veracity using a range of cues, any notion of a singular “truth” is increasingly questionable (Waisbord 2018). The integration of digital techniques into online publicity – for example, increasing affective content to maximise shareability; automating circulation via algorithms; and the use of bots to enhance circulation – also increase audience tendencies to use online popularity cues such as likes and shares as a justification for circulating news, ~~regardless of its veracity~~. The end result is that the quality of public debate about critical social and political issues is undermined.

While some journalists point to the connection between PR and fake news on digital platforms, the PR industry has been rushing to position itself as the antidote to fake news (Czarnecki 2017). Industry narratives suggest that PR practitioners can be a trusted source of information for both journalists and audiences, protecting organisations from the threat of fake news and providing support and toolkits for audiences and organisations who want to verify the news they consume (e.g. Chartered Institute of Public Relations 2017; Public Relations and Communications Association 2017;

Staunton 2017). However, such narratives are optimistic to say the least, given that they implicitly deny the long heritage of disinformation that has characterised the PR industry. ~~Such narratives~~ also ignore the fact that mainstream communications strategies and tactics are directly implicated in the current disinformation crisis. Cambridge Analytica deployed widely used marketing techniques to pursue its clients' objectives, and was heralded by the marketing industry as an exemplary model of practice only a year before its fall from grace (Nix 2016). Ong and Cabanes (2018) show that, in the Philippines, a subcultural promotional industry has been constructed around fake news, and the new "disinformation architects" that populate this industry are practitioners whose day jobs are in the mainstream industries. These facts provide incontrovertible evidence that the industry's public approach to the post-truth era and the disinformation debate is at best ignorant and at worst actively misleading (Valentini, 2020).

### 3 Social in/justice – voice, ethics, diversity

As noted in our introduction, the significance of these new landscapes for public relations relates not only to their impact on organisations, but also to their effects on various forms of social in/justice. In this section we discuss two main areas where such effects appear: issues of voice and diversity.

#### 3.1 Voice

For PR to support social justice, it has to be able to facilitate voice for marginalised groups. Voice that matters is more than simply speaking out; it is articulated in a context where it is understood as a valuable intervention in society, and as such it is inextricably linked to a politicised form of recognition and the redistribution of power (Couldry 2010; Edwards 2018b; Honneth 1996). Couldry and Powell (2014: 4) maintain, however, that "something similar to 'voice' is required in this new world" of algorithmic-driven automation, because the value of voice is "not immediately compatible with a world saturated with the automated aggregation of analytic mechanisms that are not, even in principle, open to any continuous human interpretation or review".

Issues to do with voice in the digital age are further exacerbated by the introduction of digital data banks, which have proved to exacerbate inequalities across all societies where these technologies operate. For example, AI programs designed to police criminal activity, recruit employees and issue loans have all been shown to incorporate bias against women and people of colour (Cossins 2018: 12; Eubanks 2017). Following Couldry and Powell (2014), these new systems, with their automatic sensing and calculative logic, eliminate the accountability of voice as a subjective form of expression.

### 3.2 Diversity

PR professionals cannot successfully intervene in the spaces where AI algorithms exhibit bias and erode human rights if the profession itself does not represent society. Digital platforms are not “neutral” technologies, their design is purposeful, exhibiting bias and eroding human rights (Noble 2018). This is painfully obvious to those living in liminal or marginalised space (digital or material) and vulnerable to exclusion, but for those who are not subjected to it, it is notoriously easy to ignore or mistake for a “natural” state of affairs. Indeed, the faith in numbers that neoliberalism fosters through its reification of quantifiable data leads to an even stronger belief that whatever is produced by data is a reflection of the “real” world (Kennedy 2016). It follows that, unless the public relations profession includes practitioners who are familiar with the lived experience of marginalisation, it will remain blissfully unaware of the implications of its work for some of the most vulnerable groups in society. The state of affairs is exacerbated if the majority of PR practitioners lack the capacity to design and/or work with digital architectures and user experience, because they will be unable to intervene in such spaces, even if they wanted to.

In other words, as long as diversity is limited in the PR profession, then the use – and continued promotion – of digital technologies in promotion is far more likely to perpetuate social *in*justice than support social justice. Currently, diversity is in a parlous state: data shows that the PR profession in many countries has failed to make progress on diversity in class, race or gender. One UK professional survey found that, in 2019, 92 % of respondents classified themselves as white, compared to 88 % the previous year. The gender pay gap between men and women had also increased over the two previous years. Meanwhile, 28 % of respondents had attended fee-paying schools – four times higher than the national UK average, and a significant rise on the 16 % figure reported in the same survey in 2015/16 (Chartered Institute of Public Relations 2019). At the same time, professional bodies have cited the profession’s lack of self-awareness of the disadvantages many face on entering the PR profession, or progressing in their careers (Sudhaman 2017).

Around the world, digital skills attainment has emerged as a new area of socio-economic exclusion. Young people raised in households with access to broadband, smart phones, tablets and other devices have significant advantages when they move through the education system and into the job market. Considering the PR profession reports a lack of digital skills as its biggest recruiting gap (Chartered Institute of Public Relations 2019), it is worth asking whether the ever-expanding range of digital skills required in the PR sector may even be exacerbating well-meant efforts to diversify the profession. PR’s professional bodies have also failed to acknowledge that algorithmic technologies adopted by HR departments and recruitment firms (designed to screen by postal district, education, and turn of phrase) inevitably create bias in PR’s own recruitment processes, potentially contributing to the backward slide in diversity in the PR profession in different parts of the world.

## 4 A renewed ethics in pedagogy and practice?

As practitioners and academics have already recognised, there is no doubt that future PR professionals must have the practical ability to navigate persuasion architecture in its contemporary form. Plentiful analysis exists on the lack of data skills, limited understanding of new technologies, and challenges associated with grasping complex and emergent communication and information ecologies (Chartered Institute of Public Relations 2019; European Communication Monitor 2016). This kind of research highlights the new skill sets required to live up to PR's professional promise to its clients of mitigating risk and increasing engagement with audiences. In addition, we argue that new knowledge must incorporate critiques of data-driven utopias that refuse to abstract data from reality. Rather, they will insist on situating the development and use of data – whether for the purposes of creating fake news, client stories or algorithmic interventions – in its social and political context.

Inevitably, this would lead to a pedagogy that instils in students an ethical sensibility going beyond decision-making models and generic principles that cannot be applied to practice. On the contrary, PR ethics needs to be taught in a way that reaches beyond the immediate realm of persuasion, to draw on the context for and consequences of communication in the wider world, so that future practitioners are aware of the impact they have when they engage with persuasion architecture. Beyond public relations, ethical debates focused on the different dimensions of the digital age are common. They consider, among other things, the ethics of big data, the notion of consent, the trajectory of AI and algorithmic technologies, and ethical dilemmas around specific applications, such as driverless cars or the spread of surveillance technologies. Within the field, however, such discussions are notable for their absence, and their inclusion in both pedagogy and practice is long overdue.

Ethical viewpoints, practices and procedures within PR have always been complex and inconsistent: ethics is acknowledged as important, yet *managing* ethics in PR is limited and poorly communicated (Jackson and Moloney 2019: 88). So, how might ethics debates be changing in the digital age? We suggest there are two main areas of concern. First, and as Jackson and Moloney (2019) argue, the effect of PR's involvement in/exposure to digitalisation and technological convergence, facilitated by the abundance of social media platforms, means that consumers now occupy the same communicative spaces as companies, products and brands. Inviting customers to engage and *integrating* organisational presence into their private worlds through effective – and often unobtrusive – “targeting”, simultaneously invites their input into organisational operations. Consumers and other stakeholders have more opportunity to fact-check and opine on moral standards of companies in public spaces and in real time (Jackson and Moloney 2019). The question then arises as to whose ethical critique counts, whose is ignored, and what the basis is for such judgements. At its most fundamental, this is a question of voice. It offers the possibility of a more democratic way of managing organisations as social actors, where society (manifest as cus-

tomers, consumers and communities) enjoys a level of recognition that validates the importance of its input. How democratic public relations is depends on the breadth of voices taken into account, and the degree to which engaging with their critique is performative rather than genuine (Edwards 2016).

The second arena of change relates to the structure of the “persuasion architecture” that PR practitioners use in the course of their work. Constructed by Amazon, Google, Facebook and other digital advertising platforms (Tufekci 2017), this architecture, as noted above, is built on platforms that deploy algorithms with a baked-in bias against minoritised groups. Using these algorithms, intermediaries from advertising, marketing, PR and data-science professions can isolate citizens in digital “filter bubbles”, while spreading disinformation and triggering crises in digital privacy. In the process, they buy into the discriminatory structure of promotion in the digital age. While promotion has always been biased towards “useful” audiences, ignoring those whose “market value” is limited (Aronczyk, Edwards, and Kantola 2017), the digital age runs the risk of masking this bias under the guise of myths that celebrate universal access to voice via platforms and networks that know no boundaries. It thereby lulls PR practitioners into a false sense of ethical security, believing that their practices no longer perpetuate social inequalities. This situation raises questions of personal and professional ethics for practitioners. Furnished with the knowledge of the actually existing effects of practice, rather than what the industry would like practice to be and do, questions of ethical practice can extend beyond the acceptability of work for a client or industry, to questions of whether and how practices could be adjusted to work around the limitations of persuasion architecture and mitigate discrimination.

As Sloane (2018) argues, a focus on “ethics” and “bias” does not necessitate an acknowledgement of the historic patterns of unequal power structures, discrimination and multi-faceted social inequalities that *cause* algorithmic and data “bias”. Nonetheless, moving PR’s ethical debate into the digital realm inevitably exposes many of the weaknesses in the field’s past approach to ethics. It draws the ethical gaze from the present towards the past, in the struggle to understand how the profession’s own history leads to its current role in bias and discrimination. That said, much of PR’s association with the digital realm and AI remains a “black box”, and in-depth investigations of practice are still necessary if we are to unpick how the profession’s history is shaping its present and future. Therefore, we agree with Jackson and Moloney’s (2019: 98) observation that PR could “benefit from ethnographic and observational work”, which would go behind the public personas currently presented by the PR profession, to understand the new and existing ethical tensions inherent to 21st century PR work, and how it shapes professional identity within the context of everyday practice.

## 5 Conclusion

A renewed ethics in pedagogy and practice requires a significant rewrite of the current curriculum for public relations and communications science. The lack of ability to learn from history, and the absence of ethical training that addresses contemporary issues, all leave practitioners ill-equipped to deal with the constantly changing communication landscape, characterised by shades of grey, rather than black and white oppositions. Noble argues that bias in algorithmically driven culture should be a wake-up call for people living in the margins – we argue that it, alongside the rest of the complex digital communications landscape, should *also* be a wake-up call for the PR profession.

From a practical perspective, and as data scientists become increasingly influential intermediaries (Beer 2019), entry-level PR roles may increasingly require pattern recognition, visual verification and linguistic analysis as part of the skill set for detecting “fake news” and disinformation, for example. But PR education should also incorporate compulsory courses in critical thinking, inequalities, data studies and critique. If *all* voices matter (Couldry 2010), then PR must “challenge the distance” that neoliberal logic installs between marginalised voices and those who possess the practical resources and symbolic status to command a (digital) platform for recognition. An ethical public relations practice must avoid giving the public the *impression* of voice (see, e.g., Cronin 2018), while allowing corporate elites to use algorithmically driven communication to retreat from meaningful interactions. An ethical public relations must further commit to transparency, by specifying the human agency behind AI-led communications. The profession needs to engage with, and actively value, dissenting voices offering resistance to platform capitalism and its associated discourses. Finally, existing discussions of social media as a tool for media relations and stakeholder engagement in PR (e.g. Cronin 2018; Hutchins and Tindall 2016; Motion et al., 2016) need to expand to consider the broader meaning of platform capitalism, data science, algorithmic tracking technologies and AI. Some useful foundations for this digital scholarship have already been laid (e.g. Bourne 2020; Collister 2016; Moore 2018), but more needs to be done.

The resulting knowledge would enable practitioners to address the complex and urgent challenges presented by today’s “wicked problems”: deeply material, global political-economic, environmental and social issues such as climate change, migration, and the changing global balance of power. All these problems are shaped by the communicative landscape in which PR operates, and communication is fundamental to any attempt to resolve them, as well as to combating movements that could lead to the destruction, rather than the preservation, of humanity (Willis 2016). Communicators deeply affect how these problems unfold, are understood, and are dealt with in practice. As we have argued, normative models of communication, which put the organisation at the centre of events, are manifestly unsuitable for the environments in which practitioners now operate and the tools they deploy. Solutions, including

communicative solutions, must mirror the complex causes, multiple dependencies and networked effects of the problems themselves – but must also accommodate the difficult ethical issues that inevitably arise around voice, diversity and, ultimately, the profession's ability to contribute to social justice in the contemporary world.

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