

Spring 3-1-2017

# Media Relations in a Changing Media Landscape: A Study of Interviews with Public Relations Practitioners

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# **Media Relations in a Changing Media Landscape: A Study of Interviews with Public Relations Practitioners**

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*March 2017*

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to discover the current state of dialogue between public relations practitioners and members of the media. At its core, media relations deals with the relationships between public relations practitioners and the journalists they frequently interact and hope to build relationships with. Technology changes rapidly, and so does the communication field, so an ongoing assessment of these dovetailing industries is necessary for the productivity of professionals in a digital and multimedia society. This research captures perspectives and experiences from public relations practitioners in agency and corporate environments alongside external, peer-reviewed research. It examines the contributing factors in how technology enhances, neutralizes or diminishes complex practitioner-journalist relationships.

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## 1. Introduction

Communication between journalists and public relations practitioners have undeniably changed from the early 1900s to the 2000s. The emergence of social media platforms contributes to the dialogue with a focused approach on relationship-building and maintenance. As the following study suggests, just as personalities and strengths vary among individual practitioners, so do communication tactics.

Social media platforms are being used by researchers, reporters and practitioners alike as information distribution channels. However, the use of social networks, including LinkedIn® and other platforms that specifically cater to professionals, are almost innately akin to off-the-record communication. Consequently, there is a lack of extensive literature that measures current media trends and practices among PR practitioners and journalists.

Ongoing examinations of this field will help familiarize academics, professionals, and researchers with the ever changing scope of media. We conducted a series of interviews with PR professionals to study the current state of media relations. Quotes from professionals are included in this body of work to give historical and practical context to media relations research.

## 2. Literature Review

### Practitioner-Journalist Relationships

To understand the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists requires an understanding of media relations, the “give-and-take” exchange between the two entities (Lahav & Zimand-Sheiner, 2016, p. 398). Kaul (2013) compared this often acrimonious relationship between “PR-ists” (Nicoleta, et al., 2014) and reporters to “troubled marriage partners” (Kaul, 2013, p. 59).

Media relations, at its best, focuses on the active involvement of practitioners in building relationships with media members like producers and writers (Kaul, 2013). This is an ongoing process, as relationships develop over time. Additionally, new technologies have had a significant impact on the practice of media relations.

Lahav and Zimand-Sheiner (2016) noted in their recent study that the Internet has “completely” changed media relations by streamlining channels of communication between the media and practitioners (p. 398). Researchers found that more journalists are taking proactive roles in media relations to retrieve and report news (Waters et. al, 2009). Journalists and PR practitioners have multiple communication channels from which to use, and Kaul (2013) argued that however those connections are made, it’s important to maintain and “cherish” them (p. 72).

In separate analyses of PR practitioners and journalists, the relationship between the two were described as both interdependent and dependent (Kaul, 2013; Nicoleta, et al., 2014). However, when Kaul (2013) highlighted this dependency, he emphasized that it’s a two-way street between PR practitioners and journalists who rely on each other to inform publics and meet tight deadlines. In fact, DeLorme and Fedler (2003) found in their research that many former journalists transition to PR.

Despite the overlap between journalism and public relations, these industries have a history of hostility that dates back to the late 19th century (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003). Journalists have described PR practitioners as disingenuous publicity “pimps” (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003, p. 106) with one-sided interests (Nicoleta et al., 2014; Kaul, 2003). Conversely, PR practitioners have described journalists as insecure whiners who complain about their jobs, salaries and work conditions (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Kaul, 2013).

Literature has documented the claim of ongoing acrimony between journalists and PR practitioners (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Sallot & Johnson, 2006). However, Sallot and Johnson (2006) characterized it as “love-hate relationship” rather than an affiliation rampant with adversity (p. 154). Interview reports from a study they conducted showed that a majority of journalists were optimistic about an improved relationship with their PR counterparts in the future (Sallot & Johnson, 2006). Current research supports that the climate of hostility has decreased among public relations professionals and journalists (Tkalac Verčič & Colić, 2016). These professionals who continue to interact face-to-face and those that use nontraditional means are reshaping media relations (Archer & Harrigan, 2016; St. John & Johnson, 2016; Sung-Un & Joon Soo, 2009; Waters et al., 2010).

#### Media Relations and Nontraditional Journalism

Nontraditional communications, specifically in the practice of journalism, can include the practice of capturing and delivering news without a professional news affiliation (St. John & Johnson, 2016). For the purpose of this research, the scope of this topic will focus on public relations practitioners and how, and if, they are initiating and developing relationships with bloggers in the digital sphere. Thanks to the Internet, citizen journalists in particular have been at the forefront of breaking news stories throughout the 2010s that informed the public of social justice issues in the United States (St. John & Johnson, 2016).

Documentation of the significance and legitimacy of citizen journalism on PR practices is limited, despite its extensive influence on the newsgathering process (St. John & Johnson, 2016). In 2016 research, citizen journalists expressed doubt in the value of utilizing public relations professionals (St. John & Johnson, 2016). St. John and Johnson (2016) speculated this may be a result of ignorance among PR practitioners

who don't know how to network with citizen journalism sites. However, his research also revealed that citizen journalists actually want to build relationships with their PR counterparts, but are unsure where to start.

The blogger-PR relationship, the group that interview questions in this study specifically explores, reveals similar implications (Sung-Un & Joon Soo, 2009; Walden et al., 2015). Blogs are popular for conversational styles of interaction that help promote trust between site owners and site visitors (Walden et al., 2015). Sung-Un and Joon Soo (2009) refer to this as the "salience of narrative structure," (p. 344) a rapport-building and dialogue-promoting aspect of blogging.

Public relations outreach of organizations is reliant on the same principles bloggers are apt to utilize through their audience interactions, including trust and satisfaction (Walden et al., 2015). Amid these overlapping variables, PR practitioners and bloggers express skepticism about trust in their relationship, a similarity among the significant misconceptions these two professionals hold about one another. Findings indicate "transparent communication" as the antidote to this lack of clarity (p. 532). Practitioners and academics recognize technology's rising influence on media relations (Allagui & Breslow, 2016; Avidar, et al., 2013; Lahav & Zimand-Sheiner, 2016; Schauster & Neill, 2016; St. John & Johnson, 2016). Still, researchers acknowledged that computer mediated activities are also subject to critique and analysis (Avidar, et. al 2013; Waters et. al, 2010).

### Computer Mediated Communication

Computer mediated communication (CMC), as made popular by behavioral scientist Joseph Walther, was once defined as "synchronous or asynchronous electronic mail and computer conferencing, by which senders encode text messages that are relayed from senders' computers to receivers'" (Walther, 1992, p. 52). Informally, this

concept is understood as social information processing theory, the analysis of interactions and messages encoded and decoded through online channels. One caveat Walther raised about CMC is that it is a slower form of interaction than face-to-face communication.

Walther (1992) found that although CMC may help facilitate communication, it may “impede” quick and efficient communication (p. 80). This lengthens the amount of time it takes to cultivate relationships. Previous research about CMC also emphasized the importance of communication professionals not only being accurate and thorough in their online outreach, but being interactive and timely, the Achilles heel of CMC (Allagui & Breslow, 2015; Utz & Breuer, 2016; Valentini, 2015; Walther, 1992).

Researchers have tackled – and remained to be largely unclear over the past decade – about whether or not CMC makes interactions less personal (Valentini, 2015; Walther, 1992) because parties don’t see their real-time facial expressions, vocal utterances and other organic responses. Specifically, Walther’s research dealt with social presence, the idea that people with whom we are interacting are mutually participating in the communicative actions (Walther, 1992). Social presence ties into the Public Relations Society of America’s definition of PR as a “strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (About Public Relations, n.d.). The idea of joint interactions and reciprocity in relationships are emphasized in both.

### Public Relations and Social Media

Building and maintaining relationships are an essential part of the PR role as a media entity (Kaul, 2013; Lahav & Zimande-Sheiner, 2016). The proliferation of social media throughout the early 2000s led PR practitioners to take on the task of adapting and cultivating those relationships (Allagui & Breslow, 2015; Waters et al., 2010). Even

excluding social media spaces where “PR-ists” are having an impact (Nicoleta et al., 2014, p. 56), a majority of adults are active online for other reasons. Pew Research reported in 2013 that 73 percent of adults use social media sites and 42 percent of them use multiple platforms (Duggan et al., 2013).

Measuring success through online communication is rather murky (Allagui & Breslow, 2015; Utz & Breuer, 2016; Valentini, 2015). In an era where organizations measure impressions, likes and views, research indicates that social media campaign success should not be merely defined through statistical terms (Allagui & Breslow, 2015). Rather, a streamlined effort to interact with publics, promote conversation and maintain connections offline should take precedence (Allagui & Breslow, 2015; Utz & Breuer, 2016; Valentini, 2015).

This impulsivity some practitioners display towards making use of every market trend can be attributed to social media’s role in democratizing information and connecting everyone, everywhere, all the time (Avidar et al., 2013; Kim & Lee, 2016; Valentini, 2015). Taking into consideration the vast number of people on social platforms (Duggan et al., 2013), researchers have also acknowledged that each social site and its users are unique (Kim et al., 2014). While limited experiential evidence exists for how social media tactics can be best employed to connect with publics, Valentini (2015) found that an abundance of PR practitioners cling to the notion that “social media is good” (p. 175). She posits this stance is questionable despite previous scholarly findings showing benefits in how social media facilitates interactions between individuals and organizations by breaking down power boundaries, among other reasons (Fleck & Johnson-Migalski, 2015).

Valentini (2015) argues that PR practitioners use social media’s potential for “good” as an easy way to combine two separate parts of their professional identities:

technical and interpersonal communicators (p. 175). It would better suit public relations practitioners, journalists and their audiences if professionals discussed and analyzed the personal and professional implications of their online actions – beyond reaching out to target audiences and rolling out campaigns (Kim & Lee, 2016; Valentini, 2015).

### **3. Research Questions**

Before attempting to address how PR practitioners have or could perhaps adjust their application of media relations protocol at the speed of changing technology, it is important to better understand their current interactions with journalists. Therefore, the following research question is posed:

RQ: How, if at all, are relationships changing between public relations practitioners and members of the media in the wake of widespread social media use and advances in technology?

### **4. Methods**

The data and reflections in this article result from interviews with six communication professionals who conduct media relations within their respective organizations. All participants worked in the metropolitan Atlanta area. The interviews were conducted between November 2016 and February 2017.

Interviewees were selected through non-probability purposive sampling, and they were either personal contacts or referees of the researcher or the adviser. Each interviewee currently works in a media relations role, has five or more years of experience in media relations, and at least have the title of account manager or the equivalent.

Interviews were conversational and semi-structured, following a list of prepared interview questions (See Appendix). All interviews were transcribed, excluding one fill-

in questionnaire, producing roughly 34 pages of data. Phone interviews took an average of 30 minutes each. The Institutional Review Board at Kennesaw State University approved the research ethics for all phases of the study.

Each meaningful segment of transcribed data, approximately one to three lines, were thematically analyzed, through a combination of a priori codes based on interview questions, and emergent codes. The first cycle of coding involved an analysis of interview composition, including responses participants gave in context with questions posed. Commonly used keywords and phrases and were identified among interviewees. These keywords were given category labels such as “Journalists and Time,” “Impacts on Media Relations” and “Process of Pitching Media.”

After two of six interviews were transcribed and thematically coded, a record of the patterns was kept to reference for the remaining interviews. After all interviews were coded, the themes were examined for similarities and grouped into major themes and subthemes. Segments excluded from the research and coded as ‘not applicable’ included the following subject matters: interviewee stating their name, introductions, inaudible background noise and off-topic asides (e.g. interview talking to someone else in the room, introducing subjects outside of research realm such as paid marketing content, etcetera.)

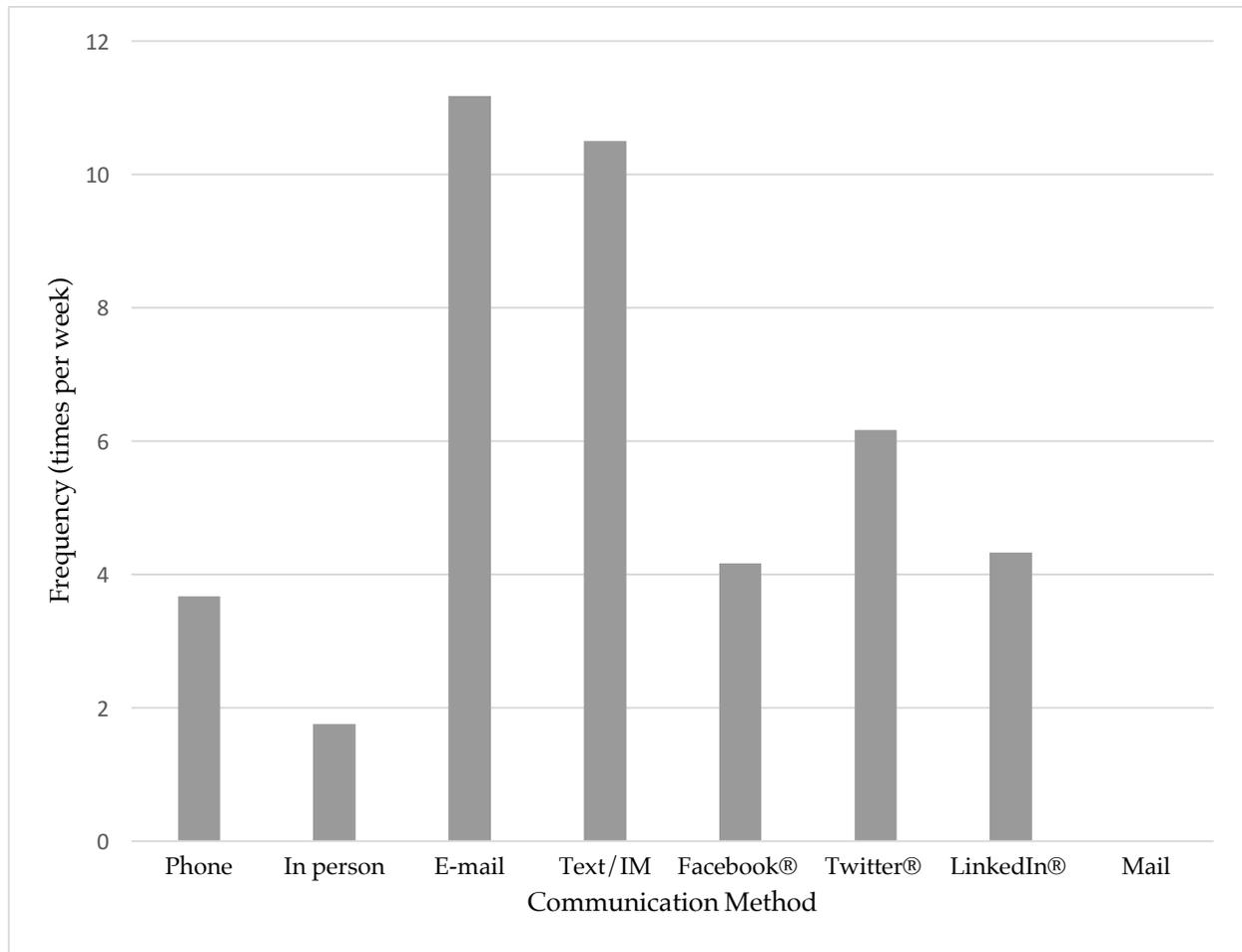
As outlined, this study aimed to discover and analyze the nature of interactions between journalists and PR practitioners in a dynamic digital age. Research findings detailed practitioners’ responses to questions as organized by themes and patterns that emerged among participants. The names of the practitioners were excluded to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

## **5. Findings**

### Average Work Week of PR Practitioners

The sample was distributed between participants who had 0 to 10 years of experience in public relations (N=2), specifically two participants with eight years, 11 to 21 years of experience (N=2) and 22 to 30 years of experience (N=2). The mean years of experience is 16.33.

Findings revealed that the average workweek for public relations included two categories of activities: actively communicating with the media, and information gathering and drafting. Approximately 50 percent of the workweek of practitioners is spent actively communicating with media through the following activities: phone conversations, in person meetings, email, text/instant message, Facebook®, Twitter®, LinkedIn® (See Fig. 1). All practitioners said e-mail is the primary form of communication they use when interacting with journalists. Many put direct phone conversations on par with email conversations in terms of preference.



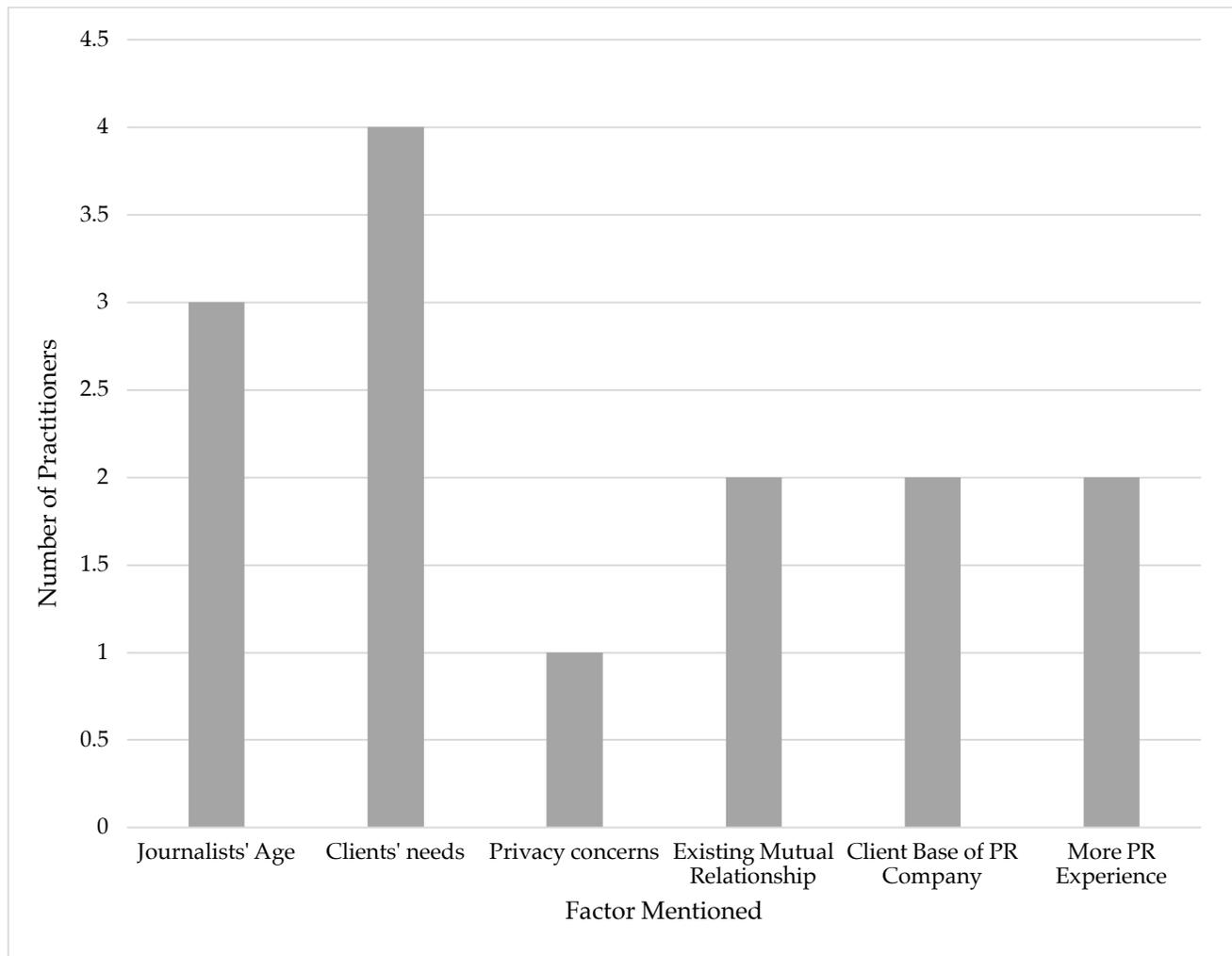
*Fig. 1: Frequency of Techniques PR Practitioners Use to Contact Media*

Results of the research indicated that the other 50 percent of the public relations professionals' workweek is spent doing activities that contribute to media contact. Activities mentioned by practitioners were writing speeches, generating online content, drafting news releases, managing social media profiles and managing internal protocols for marketing.

### Practitioner-Journalist Interactions

Factors PR professionals mentioned as crucial to how media relations is conducted included the clients' needs, reporters' age, PR practitioners' preference of contact method, privacy concerns of social media, existing relationships, an increase in

PR experience, and the audience of the PR agency/organization (e.g. real estate, education, art, etc.).



*Fig. 2: Factors Affecting How PR Practitioners Interact with Journalists*

Several PR practitioners mentioned the age of the journalists they deal with affecting their media relations practices, specifically as a gauge for how casual or creative outreach can be when implemented. One practitioner stated that younger journalists offer more vitality and ease some pressures of the job when asked if she has noticed a greater prevalence of younger, less experienced journalists. She described older journalists, in contrast, as sticklers for facts, saying:

With the younger crowd, you can be a little bit more casual and kind of make jokes. And when you pitch them, you can be a little bit more vague. But then with the older journalists, you have to have the hard numbers and the source that they definitely want to talk to (phone interview, Feb. 2, 2017).

A noted theme of considering client needs in determining how to interact with journalists emerged through interview analysis. One practitioner said bluntly, “Facebook® might not be what [some clients] need” (phone interview, Nov. 14, 2016). Another practitioner spoke more on that subject, saying:

Not every platform is appropriate for everyone. We have some clients that are great for Facebook® because they’re more consumer-facing, but then we have some that are business-to-business that are much more interested in LinkedIn® because it’ll target their audiences better (phone interview, Feb. 3, 2017).

Among the practitioners who expressed that client needs change their media relations practices, one person echoed the sentiment of those who mentioned age affecting pitches. However, she cautioned against practitioners who limit their outreach to veteran reporters. Instead, she and one other practitioner, defended existing relationships between practitioners and journalists as the driving force behind media relations decisions:

You can’t base your outreach only to people who’ve been writing about something for a long time. It definitely changes your pitch... it just has to be tailored to who that person is. And that’s again doing research on the people (phone interview, Nov. 14, 2016).

Findings also revealed that privacy concerns affected the media relations actions of one practitioner who adjusted her social media techniques when interacting with journalists. She said, “If I’m not already friends with them, I’m most likely not going to

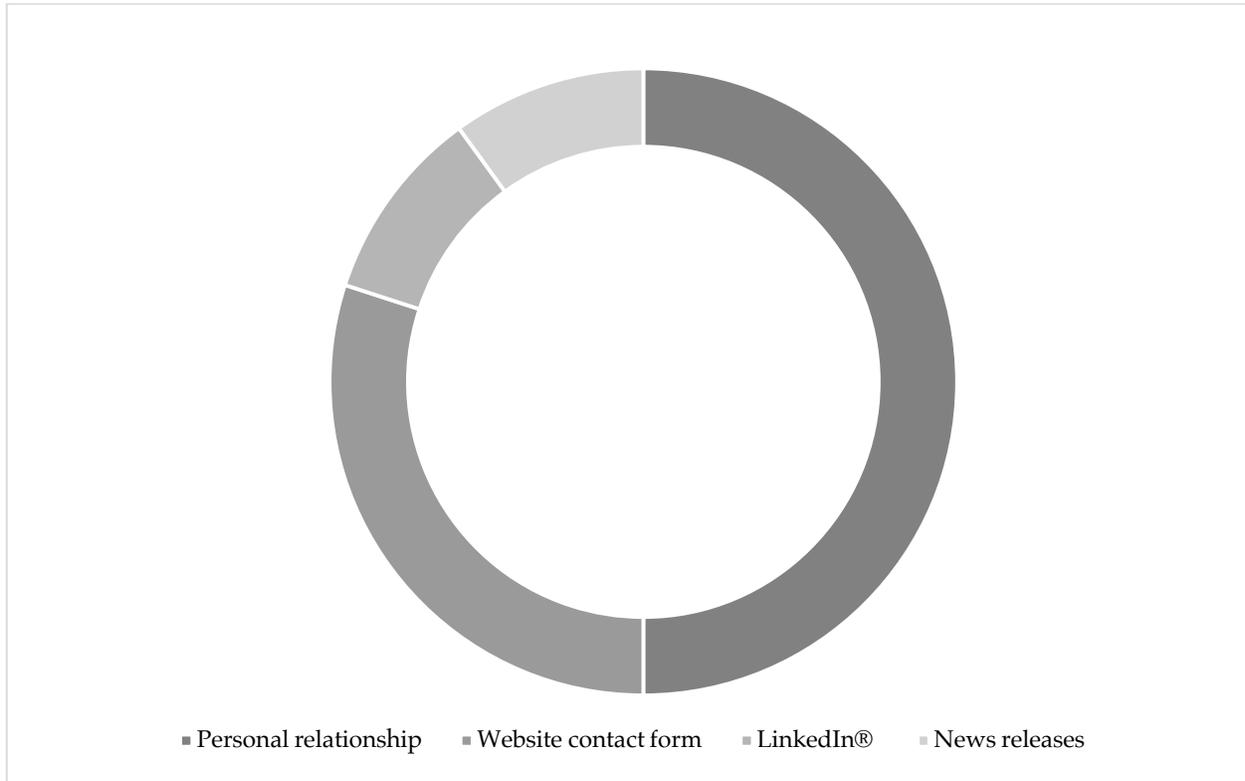
pitch them because then all of their followers will see it” (phone interview, Nov. 14, 2016).

Existing mutual relationships were highlighted by multiple participants as factors in how PR professionals interact with journalists. Specifically, practitioners spoke about how existing relationships with the media alter their communication techniques due to familiarity and expectations of off-the-cuff interactions:

I still very much do a lot of my immediate pitching by email. Once you’ve established a relationship with a reporter, then it can go more to telephone and figuring that out, but very few want to be pitched by the phone or very few even pick up their phone. I don’t either. So that’s definitely not an option. But that’s again, that kind of goes down to once you actually have a relationship with someone and you’re maintaining that relationship, then... the social aspect goes out the window. The social platform aspect goes out the window and you can contact in any way... So if I’m already friends with them, then I’m most likely going to email, call, text” (phone interview, Nov. 14, 2016).

Participants who worked in the industry for a mean of 24 years reported having more experience in public relations as a contributing factor to their media relations activities. These practitioners attributed their ability to connect with journalists and decipher newsworthy stories — something described by them both as a precursor to pitching media — to their longstanding careers. One practitioner, who worked in public relations for 15 years said simply, “You learn as time goes” (phone interview, Nov. 14, 2016).

## Journalists Reaching Out to PR Practitioners



*Chart 1: How Journalists Get in Contact with PR Practitioners*

Almost all participants interviewed identified personal relationships as the most common way that journalists are able to contact them. That is, journalists who they maintained contact with throughout the years, capitalize on relationships to reach out to PR professionals.

The second largest category for contact type, website information, was mentioned by three practitioners, which was half the sample size. Information available through news releases and on LinkedIn® were both mentioned by one practitioner each as a way that journalists contact PR professionals.

A majority of practitioners expressed that they believe it's harder to get in contact with journalists to pitch and place stories for the following reasons: job pressures to cover "sex and blood" stories, competition among journalists to get unique

angles, less journalists (e.g. beats combining, journalists operating as single entities to write stories and video footage), sections getting cut from print and online news platforms, and journalists having less time to meet with practitioners.

One PR practitioner didn't have an opinion when asked if it's harder or easier to get journalists to cover stories. Instead, she answered by placing an emphasis on by placing an emphasis on better narrowing down best targets for pitching a story. In brief, she praised focusing on quality over quantity in media pitching. That's a skill she said comes with job confidence:

I would say it's harder to narrow down who might be interested, but once you can have those [media] lists, I think it's easier... I think early on, people are more likely to just kind of do the whole 'spray and pray' kind of thing – just send the information out to as many people as you can and hope that they pick it up. But it's become more obvious, and I think people who are more comfortable in their careers are more likely to actually get rid of that (phone interview, Nov. 14, 2016).

Multiple practitioners mentioned journalists having less time as a factor in the way they conduct media relations, specifically stating that technology and streamlined communication makes in person meetings nearly impossible: "They don't have the time or staff capacity to meet - even for coffee" (fill-in questionnaire, Jan. 18, 2017).

Another practitioner said:

It's a lot harder to get a reporter to meet you for a cup of coffee or meet you for a meal. Once upon a time, a reporter – a newspaper reporter, all they had to do was write their story once a day and that was it. Now not only do they have to write their story once, they have to update it to the website two or three times during the course of the day, they have to blog, they have to Tweet about it, Facebook® it, put it on LinkedIn®. If they have a blog page for their newspaper, they have to write about that. It's a lot

more things they have to do with a story than once upon a time. And there's fewer of them (phone interview, Feb. 3, 2017).

### Relationship Building in a Digital Age

PR professionals were asked, "In the time that you've been working with journalists, has media relations changed?" Practitioners averaged 16.33 years in PR experience. Responses ranged from variations of yes and no. Three practitioners, with an average of 21 years in public relations, indicated that media relations has changed during the time they have been working with journalists. Snippets of responses include:

Yes. First, I think, a lot. Even just in eight years. I feel like editors used to be more willing to talk on the phone or they would be more responsive via email. But now a lot of them like to be contacted via social media (phone interview, Feb. 2, 2017).

Another practitioner, who has practiced media relations for approximately 30 years, also indicated agreement that media relations endured changes. In response to the question, he reflected on how he used to interact with journalists in the past versus the actions he is apt to currently take:

I think what's changed is how you contact media and how you interact with them a little bit more. When I started, there was no email, no social media. None of that. So the relationships were much more either by phone or in person. And the process – obviously the news process was a lot slower – you'd mail out press releases and press kits. And you'd have to wait a certain amount of time before they can get there in the mail and all that. It wasn't like now where you can email a reporter and instant message them, and get a response back in seconds or minutes or hours. You can see that the relationship has changed a lot (phone interview, Feb. 3, 2017).

A veteran PR practitioner for more than 25 years echoed those sentiments. She provided examples of how she and other practitioners have adapted to different communication techniques spanning more than two decades:

Throughout time, you were still using phone but email became the biggest source. And now with social media, it's kind of gone back and forth. When social media really started to take off and journalists were getting on Twitter® and all that, a lot of people were using that as a way of reaching out to journalists (phone interview, Jan. 19, 2017).

One PR professional who has been practicing media relations for eight years also indicated that she has changed her media relations behavior over time:

Journalists want everything up front more so than ever before, such as pictures, etcetera. They have less time to waste because there are less of them. They want to know you can provide what they need before they schedule an interview (fill-in questionnaire, Jan. 18, 2017).

One practitioner who has been working in PR for 15 years expressed a mixed view in her response, highlighting that while she notices clear changes in how media relations is conducted due to the advent of social media and email communication, not much has changed in how she interacts with journalists:

It's no question that obviously social has changed... There's a lot of people who talk about the old days of PR. But it's happened so quickly. Even when I was starting out as an intern, there were still people who accepted things by fax. There were still people who accepted a media kit in a folder with papers that you would mail. And that happened to change really quickly.... because while social obviously a huge way that things have changed. It still hasn't really changed the outreach and what I get responses back. It's still mainly email (phone interview, Nov. 14, 2016).

One practitioner who has been working in PR for 12 years, indicated that he did not find any changes in media relations, mentioning similarities to the practitioner above who maintains that outreach via email continues to be the top platform for communication:

Honestly, it hasn't changed a lot. And when I started working in public relations, email was the primary that I would be in touch with media and that continues to be the primary way that I'm in touch. I do some pitching over the phone too, which sort of depends on my relationship with the journalists, and also the type of outlet. But those are sort of my top two, and really it's been that way since I started in the field (phone interview, Jan. 26, 2017).

All six practitioners used relationship building as the meter stick for PR communications, highlighting the importance of first connecting with journalists and then adapting communication techniques only after relationships are established. One practitioner summed it up saying:

Pieces are changing. I still see the foundation of what we do a being the same. You still are trying to find that nugget of a story and that person who would be interesting in that nugget of a story (phone interview, Nov. 14, 2016).

Another emphasized that extensive relationship building (e.g. going to networking events and connecting with journalists outside of the scope of just trying to get a story placed) is important, but that it's becoming less prevalent among PR practitioners:

You still have to build a relationship with a reporter to connect with them on social media. If they don't know who you are, they're not going to connect with you. So you still have to do the leg work of trying to meet with them in person and get out to networking events and build that relationship so when they see your email or read your

instant message, your direct tweet or whatnot, they know you and they respect you and they'll take a look at it a little closer.... You have to go out after hours and you have to chat with somebody without necessarily pitching them on a story, just kind of getting to know them and having a conversation with them... It's a skill that is sometimes – most people don't have that skill anymore" (phone interview, Feb. 3, 2017).

### The Effect Media Changes Have on Practitioner-Journalist Relationships

PR professionals were asked how, if at all, the emergence of social media platforms and other advanced technological resources affected the personal and professional relationships they have with journalists. Most practitioners interviewed said they do not believe technology has affected their relationships with practitioners. who replied in the affirmative, the majority suggested that the reason was that they kept their public and private lives separate. One practitioner, in particular, stressed his view on the matter, warning that failing to separate the two is a mistake:

I still treat journalists like journalists, not like they're friends... if you get too comfortable and blur the lines being friends with them and being a professional resource for them, that can have bad effects in some fashion if you're not careful (phone interview, Feb. 3, 2017).

One practitioner who said that relationships weren't altered by changing technology did not provide any explanation via her fill-in questionnaire. She did, however, indicate in other responses that the reason for some of the lack of or increase of certain communication techniques with journalists is related to the industry in which she conducts PR: real estate.

The other practitioner who didn't indicate a 'yes' or 'no' response to the question posed, briefly highlighted the role of power in practitioner-journalist relationships as

she addressed what she described as an imbalance. She stated briefly, “We need them more than they need us. I think that’s it” (phone interview, Feb. 2, 2017).

### Communicating with Journalists vs. Bloggers

Most PR practitioners reported current communication with bloggers. Findings revealed that practitioners emphasized the following aspects of their outreach when dealing with bloggers: creativity, casual conversation and connecting with the blogger’s audience and brand as its relevant to client needs. All practitioners who interact with bloggers said email was the primary source of contact. All six practitioners also said email was the first point of interaction for day-to-day media relations with traditional journalists as well.

Of the practitioners who did not interact with bloggers, one said that her industry (real estate) was a determining factor in why she doesn’t interact with bloggers, saying there is no need for that type of communication based on her target audience. She did mention, however, that she has previously used blogs. And similar the respondents who currently use blogs to interact with journalists, she placed an emphasis on creative and casual outreach.

Another practitioner who doesn’t interact with bloggers said she’s not sure where to begin, but that she sees potential value in that platform: “It’s something that we’re still trying to wrap our heads around. We recently hired a new social media specialist so we’re hoping she might be able to help us in that realm” (phone interview, Jan. 19, 2017).

## **6. Discussion**

### Relationships: The Glue That Holds Communication Professionals Together

Data that emerged from the interviews largely show that despite the advent of various digital communication options, including email, instant message, social media

and texting, relationships are the overarching constant in practitioner-journalist interactions. While technology has considerably impacted media relations protocol (Lahav & Zimand-Sheiner, 2016), practitioners still have to take to task actively seeking out and purposively crafting relationships with their media counterparts. After all, they are both integral parts of the newsgathering and distribution process, which are main sources of public information consumption (Kaul, 2013, p. 72).

Research consistently highlights a war of industry between journalists and public relations practitioners (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Sallot & Johnson, 2006). However, this study supports more recent findings that the level of acrimony is on a decline (Sallot & Johnson, 2006). In this study, practitioners expressed signs of understanding or at least speculating about issues journalists face in their career, such as considering staff beat changes and other job pressures. Perhaps, this speculation is healthy for the two parties and is indicative of a change in perspective among public relations practitioners and journalists. Media relations changes are not just affecting practitioners, but the journalists who hold the information that much of a practitioner's career success depends upon.

Although this study didn't gather information directly from journalists, practitioners indicated that relationships are important to journalists as well. In fact, existing relationships is the main way practitioners reported journalists find them. Additionally, these findings support current studies showing that journalists, too, want to keep up this momentum (Sallot & Johnson, 2006) and improve relationships with practitioners in the future. Similarly, practitioners are finding more value in sustaining relationships with another information powerhouse, bloggers.

### Approaching Bloggers: Where do practitioners begin?

Although practitioners and bloggers alike admittedly don't know where to start in building relationships (St. John & Johnson, 2016), findings reveal that practitioners feel compelled to build these relationships and learn how to connect with bloggers and their brands. While bloggers, in contrast with traditional journalists, are known for their conversational posts and public streams of interactions with their readers (Walden et al., 2015), practitioners are still applying nearly identical outreach strategies. Exceptions, according to practitioners, exist in instances where creativity, casual interactions or even vagueness — in one individual's example — are preferred to standard pitches.

The importance of building “mutually beneficial relationships” (About Public Relations, n.d.; Kaul, 2013; Lahav & Zimand-Sheiner, 2016) still exists for the practitioner-blogger relationship. This is in part because even though the job titles of bloggers and journalists who work for news organizations differ, the practitioners' job remains the same as does the practice of getting information by giving information (Lahav & Zimand-Sheiner, 2016).

This study found that practitioners are communicating with bloggers primarily through email, and have not expressed any qualms about this practice. Emailing was also found to be the top form of interaction between traditional journalists and practitioners as ways to communicate quickly and accurately. In one example, a practitioner said journalists no longer want information by paper because of the convenience digital documents provide, such as journalists being able to cut and paste information from news releases to use in articles. In this case, and others, it's clear that practitioners are not viewing CMC as a burdensome communication tactic.

## Digital Communication and Building Media Relationships

Studies show that computer mediated communication continues to significantly impact the practice of media relations by simplifying communication (Lahav & Zimand-Sheiner, 2016). However, previous studies of social information processing, the theory behind CMC, highlight its potential for slowing down the communication process and limiting the authenticity and interactive aspects that face-to-face relations provide (Walther, 1992).

Despite this reported connection between impersonal and inorganic reactions present in CMC, practitioners find that their relationships aren't affected by advances in digital communication. Instead, the reporters' age, the experience of practitioners, client needs, privacy concerns, client base and the existence of longstanding relationships between practitioners and journalists are more indicative of the experiences practitioners are having online.

This investigation found that cultivating and preserving strictly-business relationships with media sources has maintained its importance throughout various stages of practitioners' careers. Social media's role as a platform to connect industry leaders with their audiences can certainly lead professionals astray and distract from the professional duty practitioners hold in maintaining online relationships. But professionals who take each pro and con into account while tailoring their approaches to each client, are able — and continue to utilize social media by adapting to its dynamic platforms and enhance, rather than replace, those years-in-the-making relationships they've built with journalists.

## **7. Conclusion**

Findings in this study and current literature support the idea that digital innovations are impacting media relations by providing diverse and direct ways for

practitioners and journalists to connect. Still, relationship building and maintaining whether face-to-face or otherwise, overshadows any changes that that have been introduced in the media. Some practitioners even reported that from more than 20 years ago when social media was nonexistent and email was less accessible, the way they interact with journalists remains the same. While factors such as a journalist's age and a practitioner's experience impact outreach and pitching strategies, findings suggest that the productivity of media parties is still primarily reliant on existing relationships.

### Limitations

This study was largely limited by scope. Six practitioners were interviewed, which provided a less-than-representative sample from which to base research findings. Practitioners with varying levels of experience and industry exposure were interviewed; however, the sample limitation doesn't allow the research to be generalizable to the practitioner-journalist experience.

This project was also limited by time. Deadlines in conjunction with additional coursework set up barriers for how many, at what time, and at what date interviews needed to be conducted and completed.

### Opportunities for Future Research

Perhaps in the future, a study that samples a larger pool of participants, including journalists, bloggers and citizen journalists, would be more representative of the general population of communication professionals. Interview questions would also need to be adjusted to reflect the emergence of new social media platforms sure to come and the experiences of the sample selected.

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## APPENDIX. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS USED IN THESIS

The following interview questions were asked of PR Practitioners in the study in the form of five telephone conversations and one fill-in questionnaire.

1. How long have you been doing media relations?
2. What types of journalists do you deal with? What kinds of beats do they write for?
3. About what percentage of your workweek do you spend on media relations?
  - 3b. Does it vary depending on the type of journalists' beats and type of media you're contacting? If yes, how?
4. In the time that you've been working with journalists, have media relations changed? If yes, how?
5. Have changes in media – such as staff reductions – changed how you conduct media relations? If yes, how?
  - 5b. Are you finding more frequent changes in beat staffing?
  - 5c. Are you finding greater prevalence of younger, less experienced journalists?
6. Have new technologies like Facebook®, Twitter® and Instagram® impacted how you conduct media relations? If yes, how?
7. When you initiate a contact with journalists currently, how are you doing so?
8. How often are you using the following when you initiate a fresh conversation with journalists (how many times per day, how many times per week)?
  - Email?
  - One-on-one telephone conversation?
  - Personal meeting?
  - Texting?
  - Facebook®?
  - Twitter®?
  - Any other form of social media?
9. Do you do any contacting of journalists by express mail? Surface mail? Fax? Are there any other ways you contact journalists?
10. How do you typically interact with bloggers? How is it similar to pitching traditional journalists? How is it different?

11. How often do journalists or bloggers contact you for information? (percentage of interactions)
  - 11b. How are journalists finding you? Website content? Response to Facebook®? Twitter®? Blogs? Anything else?
12. Have your professional and/or personal relationships with journalists shifted because of changes in media and/or changing technologies?
  - 12a. If yes, has this impacted your ability to form professional and/or personal relationships with journalists? If yes, how?
13. Do you find journalists have less time to interact with you because of staff cuts, deadline pressures, more streamlined communication?
13. In general, would you say it is easier or harder to motivate journalists to cover your stories now than, say, a few years ago? If it has changed, how and why do you think it has changed?