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# SPOTLIGHT SERIES

*Unicorns and Phone Calls:  
A Conversation about the Evolution  
of Technology Trends in PR*

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***CPRE Spotlight Series***

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ABSTRACT

The authors of the technology chapter within the *Fast Forward* (2018) report were joined by several Commission on Public Relations Education members on Zoom on April 21, 2022 to talk about updates they would add if they were writing that technology chapter today. Attendees touched on **new platforms/tools** that have come into the spotlight since the omnibus survey was distributed in 2016 and the *Fast Forward* report was published in 2018 (e.g., Zoom, TikTok) and **new uses for existing platforms** (e.g., Twitter Spaces, Facebook Stories, Instagram Reels). Attendees pointed out the importance of teaching students about **regulations** on social media use, and how technology training should incorporate conversations about **ethics and social responsibility**. The group discussed current expectations for new hires: (1) **generalists** are needed; (2) current job postings seem to seek the skills of three people in one—a **unicorn**; and (3) to be prepared for industry needs, PR students must have a **basic understanding of data**. Finally, the group discussed false assumptions about students' knowledge and comfort levels with **basic tools**; students tend to jump fearlessly into a new program, but they're afraid to make a phone call.

## **Unicorns and Phone Calls: A Conversation about the Evolution of Technology Trends in PR**

The authors of the chapter on technology within the *Fast Forward: Foundations + Future State. Educators + Practitioners* report (2018) and several Commission on Public Relations Education members met for an hour on Zoom on April 21, 2022 to talk about updates they would add to Ch. 8 if they were writing it today. Chapter authors Phil Gomes, Serena Ehrlich, Karen Freberg, and Emily Kinsky (in absentia Deidre Breakenridge) were joined by CPRE members Nneka Logan, Cayce Myers, Pamela Bourland-Davis, Spiro Kiouisis, and Katie Puello.

The group began the conversation by looking at highlights from the *Fast Forward* report, which was published in 2018, and the questions that were asked. Differences emerged in what the group would deem important to ask now compared to the survey questions that were developed and launched to public relations practitioners and professors in 2016. For example, the authors added a KSA question about app development on the survey back in 2016, but would not do so today. In the words of Ehrlich, “app use, yes, but not creation.” In the original report, the authors discussed privacy concerns very briefly and referenced “fake news,” AI, data literacy and data analytics, but each of these deserve expanded discussion and updates.

### **Changing Expectations**

The industry professionals on the Zoom call shared current expectations of newly hired practitioners in public relations. According to Ehrlich, “In 2018, we saw the start of the demand for the unicorn, and now in 2022, a unicorn is expected.” Gomes agreed, “I think that's a really good point because a lot of the job updates that I see for

people or job postings that I see on LinkedIn, I look at it and go, 'God, you're actually looking for three people.'" Gomes further explained how those job postings and expectations are tied to the economy:

When economic times are really good, our industry swings towards specialization, and when economic times are good, and you show up at an agency or whatever, and you say, "I am an expert at paid Google advertisements for the diaper industry in the Midwest," and it's like, "Boom, you're hired. Here's a fat salary." When economic times are less so, and if that's how somebody bills themselves, then they find themselves less valuable.

According to Gomes, "We are all very often looking for generalists, and we're looking for people who have equal facility in not only media relations, which has gotten less important to us over time, but content creation," which he said included "some facility with audio and video editing software." He predicted the demand for generalists will continue to be high.

Ehrlich shared her current needs, as well as how she sees the overall role of PR changing:

What I am hiring for—much more visual, much more tool knowledge. I expect people to have social media. That's not even an option. I feel like expectations have changed. . . . When this [2018 study] was written, one of the big things we talked about at the time was people being asked if they had design skills.

Today's hires, that's expected. . . . So I think tool change and evolution has probably changed some of it, but the expectation of this job has changed, and public relations, I think, has changed.

While she expects graduates to have a knowledge of tools, Ehrlich said, “I think when you get into tech and you look into the curriculum topics of social, measurement, digital, data, visual—I've seen digital start to break apart because it's become more complicated—so I think people need to have *knowledge* versus having to have depth on every tool.”

### **Changing Tools and Platforms**

A number of new platforms have either been launched or greatly expanded since the report was published in 2018, including Zoom, Reddit, and TikTok, along with new tools within existing platforms, like Twitter Spaces, Facebook Story, and Instagram Story and Reels.

Myers pointed to the challenge of faculty covering all of the new tools and platforms. “A lot of times when I talk to the field, they'll say, ‘Why don't you train your students on some platform?’ But by the time we get the subscription and do all of that, it's no longer the platform, so we're chasing the technology. The industry is moving much faster than we can move just because of the nature of what we're doing.” In addition to covering the latest tools and platforms, Myers said faculty try to instill skills that are transferable.

Faculty members often feel overwhelmed that they need to know how to run every social media platform and monitoring software and tool, and to be ready to teach them all to their students.

### **Understanding and Using Data**

Professors are not alone in their challenge to keep up with data. Ehrlich said, “What I'm struggling with in my team, as we grow and evolve, is the analytics portion.

Everybody has data now. When I launch a single white paper, I have 13 sources of data. What am I going to do with 13 sources of data? Who has time to analyze 13 sources of data for one thing?"

Gomes added, "Whenever a new employee is presented with an Excel spreadsheet, very often that reaction is, 'Well, I got into PR because I suck at math.' You've got to have at least some basic notion of data, statistics, analytics, not to be a Ph.D. expert, but having some facility in analytics." Gomes said it is important for students to recognize what is real and what is important within the data.

Logan posed a thought-provoking question related to data and artificial intelligence connected to public relations:

How do we, from a PR perspective, figure out what our role should be in AI and big data? Data is king, but data is not perfect. So how are we going to educate students and practitioners to be thinking about how to decision data, how to humanize data so that we drive it, we drive the decisions made with data, not that it dictates what we do?

Myers agreed there are "inequities inherent in data," as well as regulatory issues to consider. Myers said, "everybody thinks about privacy is the Big Data issue, but there's more than that." He explained, "you cannot use the data for discriminatory purposes, and in fact, there's laws that prevent using data for certain types of promotional material." He expressed concern that these points may not be explored in most curricula:

We teach a lot about how to use Big Data or Google Analytics or whatever, but there are some other more complicated, ethical issues, legal issues that dovetail

into that, and of course, at the educational level, we're like, "Hey, we've got to teach you all of the major, and we've got to get this semester done, and we have time constraints," and these are more complicated issues, but it's something out there on the horizon.

## **Regulations**

The group broadly discussed the differences in expectations and legal issues for social media and other digital content that can be shared by regulated industries and publicly held industries and other special areas, such as healthcare. Ehrlich emphasized that “regulated industries have their own set of communication rules.” Myers added “there's another component that I think we often overlook, particularly in higher ed, because we're American institutions and American scholars, and that's the *international* regulation on social—that is where the most provocative and innovative regulation is coming from.” Myers encouraged public relations professors to look at EU regulations on social media because they generally influence regulations elsewhere, and currently, students are not aware of those rules. Myers said business courses probably are not covering those topics; “I think that's something where PR needs to step in.”

Continuing in the area of regulation, Myers mentioned privacy laws. “We see the states filling in where maybe the Fed is not, and that's largely around the issues of privacy.” Awareness of these laws is important for PR educators to learn and to share with their students. Myers acknowledged “you have to have expertise to teach that kind of thing and to train, and it's a conversation where the subject is very complicated and esoteric.” Although it may be challenging to learn, Myers pointed to a silver lining

when comparing understanding regulation to keeping up with new tools: “Knowledge about regulation is an area of opportunity to train people on, and those rules change more glacially than what’s the newest social media.”

### **Technology and Crisis**

Technology-related crises have happened since the report was published, including the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Other online crises discussed during the Zoom session included Reddit’s impact on the stock market. When users started “pumping the stock” for GameStop on Reddit, Ehrlich said it became a nightmare for the head of investor relations for GameStop as the stock price outvalued the price of the company. Ehrlich said, “Somebody else was controlling the stock price, and there’s nothing they can do but ride it out.” Ehrlich predicted social media will change the stock market, and situations like that emphasized how important it is to monitor Reddit. Ehrlich pointed to disinformation leading to a change in monitoring: “If you’re a company that could be attacked or disinformation could be held against you, there are new monitoring tools now just for that.” However, due to the expense and lack of access to those tools, she would not expect new graduates to have familiarity with them.

### **Broader Issues and Bigger Questions**

Across the classroom discussions and training sessions related to technology, there are bigger topics that should serve as foundations. One of those topics that undergirds all professional communication is ethics. Logan said, “one of the things that should be a question for PR practitioners and us scholars going forward is what is the role of social responsibility in this and ethics in this and how we educate our students

and then also practice PR.”

In order to understand the context of organizational decisions, crises, monitoring needs, and data analytics, students need to understand the bigger picture of the organization itself and its goals. Gomes said, “Basic business knowledge, the business of business, is absolutely necessary.”

### **Pandemic Impacts**

In the 2018 chapter, Skype and Google Hangouts had been mentioned. Although Zoom has existed since 2011 and had many users within its first year, it was not as well known during the writing of the *Fast Forward* report. During the COVID-19 pandemic, its use skyrocketed. According to Krishen (2021), Zoom’s onomatopoeic name helped it “become the ‘BandAid’ of pandemic life” (para. 2) and its search engine optimization shot Zoom to top of mind when considering video conferencing as so many people shifted to working from home (WFH).

This shift to WFH impacted public relations practice. Serena Ehrlich explained that her company (Business Wire) is now completely remote, and because of that, Zoom has become the main meeting channel. She said, “you’re now pitching through Zoom, and what that means is you’ve got to have the right background. . . . there’s Zoom etiquette. You have to think about recreating and extending that experience that’s normally one to one.” Ehrlich continued:

It’s a presentation style. It’s a familiarity. It’s being able to flip through screens.

It’s being able to present. If you’re a PR person, you’re going to be presenting to clients, you’re going to be presenting to reporters, so it’s really knowing that tool as well as you can, but also how to use that tool to not bore the ish out of

everybody who's listening to you. You've got to do this, you've got to have some razzmatazz.

Ehrlich said, “Zoom's replacing a lot and that impacts the sales funnel. . . . you can't do these in-person meetings anymore. You've got to extend it. You've got to make it worth your while.”

Freberg continued the discussion of how companies that were in person shifted to fully remote status. “I think there's that skillset of being able to build relationships naturally online, whether it's video conferencing or changing it to social and managing these relationships in different channels. I think that is a skill that Zoom, like with everything that's gone on with the pandemic, really forced us to” use multiple channels, such as a video chat followed with an email or a Slack message; however, Freberg pointed out that communicators need to balance those messages in a way that do not overwhelm the receiver.

### **The Telephone**

A surprising discussion emerged during the Zoom conversation about the telephone. Gomes pointed out the phone is the number-five app used on our phones, and Myers shared a story about an executive's son who ran around not knowing what to do when his phone rang.

Gomes mentioned there were problems prior to the pandemic related to phone use by younger employees. He said, “the in-person piece of things had to be made less important or even supplanted by computer-mediated communication [during COVID-19], but we were already in a situation where I would just look around and go, ‘Have any of you picked up a phone and called a reporter?’ And it's like, ‘What?’

‘Okay, that thing on your desk that says Cisco on it, makes the funny sound when you take it out of the cradle, that's called a dial tone.’ . . . I think there is a generation that comes into it thinking that, ‘Well I'm just going to email and tweet my way to success.’ And I'm like, ‘No, the most successful people still do a lot of wearing out the shoe leather.’”

Freberg agreed and shared that there have been times when she had to teach her students how to use their phones. Freberg said, “I've had to tell my students, ‘Yes, that little icon on your phone, that's the phone. You should call someone and talk to them.’” Logan also noted “an aversion among young people sometimes to actually picking up the phone . . . the thought of actually picking that up or answering it is frightening.”

The discussion of phone use prompted a deeper consideration of what communication training students need. Freberg suggested “bridging the new and old school skill sets with Zoom is very important. I think you need to be aware of the basics—lighting, sound, video, making sure the background is all good—and I think that's important, but then also how do you moderate a conversation? How do you do an interview?” Ehrlich boiled it down and said it should fall under “Communication 101.” Ehrlich continued, “I think we think about this as media relations because in the old school of media relations, I remember when I had to train somebody on how to go and do a podcast. That's really what it is, it's media relations, but it's literally how to make a phone call. It's how to do media relations at the most basic level of what is the conversation. It's a scripted conversation.” Ehrlich made a helpful analogy to high school classes that trained students “how to open a checking account and write

checks.” Logan agreed:

Right, it's almost like an anytime, anywhere, anyhow approach to balancing out old school technology, middle of the road, and new school. It's like we have to prepare the students to do all of the above to be able to communicate in the channel that's needed to accomplish the goal at the time, whether it's a telephone, a tweet or what have you.

Freberg said she has walked students through simulations on how to pitch to the media and how to address an aggressive person. Freberg helped students to listen to their own tone, to think through how to answer the questions, and how to not be emotional in their voice. Myers said, “maybe we have to reassess what our expectation is of people's soft skills that they're coming into the workspace or classroom with.”

Freberg added:

We're talking about Zoom training, and in some ways, it's kind of the same thing. It's across every communication platform. We have to teach them how to write an email, you've got to teach them how to write a pitch, you've got to teach them how to write a press release—you've got to teach them how to talk on a phone.

With her students each semester, Freberg shares sample emails, both good and bad, using actual messages she has received over the years. When she has mentioned this training to industry contacts, they have been grateful “because students coming in have no idea how to write email.” In her training, she walks through email etiquette, and agreed “they need digital media literacy across the board, whatever channel they're using.” Ehrlich concurred and said the current training is missing the mark “if

we're not even teaching them these basics" and confirmed "it's a great point that we have to start there across the board." With so many tools available, Ehrlich said we should not assume everyone knows how to use every tool.

Ehrlich also pointed to a generational skill difference; she said younger workers have more visual fluency: "They can tell a story in an image, they can see and describe an entire asset through visuals, and that's the language of the future." However, she pointed out "business language is still words, and I think that's where we have to move back to that basic, to your point, writing the pitch. But I'm the one who has to be taught how to take a visual image."

## **Certifications**

The number of certification options related to PR and technology have expanded greatly since the 2018 report, where Hootsuite and Google Analytics were the main focus. Now there is a new problem for faculty of sorting through to discover the best third-party training programs to bring to a classroom. Agorapulse is a new supplier of training and certification for social media best practices, and likewise, Meltwater has expanded its free training offerings in Meltwater Academy. Google Analytics, which many professors have included in their class plans for years, is undergoing a massive change for 2023.

Several companies have offered special classroom access to their platforms, only to stop within a year (e.g., Sysomos, Meltwater). During the Zoom call, these companies' lack of vision to realize the return on investment was mentioned. Their investment in allowing students free access can turn into huge dividends for their platforms because students who are trained in their tools recommend it to their future

employers. Freberg said, “you have brand identity and awareness with students who are going out into the workplace.” From my own experience, I have heard from alumni that the business bought whatever tool that student came in ready to use, especially if the organization did not already have a monitoring platform in place.

## **Trends**

Over time, the perceptions of platforms and tools change. Sometimes that change is due to a crisis, like Facebook with Cambridge Analytica, and sometimes it is simply a generational shift. Freberg said, “today, in my student's final client presentations to our client, they said, ‘Instagram is old.’ I’m like, ‘Whoa, wait a minute, Instagram is old?’ And they're like, ‘Yeah, it's over.’”

Beyond specific branded tools, artificial intelligence incorporated into all sorts of programs has been a hot topic for years. Some people have feared it, while others have welcomed opportunities to reduce mundane tasks or to save money. Currently in public relations, AI is being used to automate certain tasks. During the discussion, one AI example was shared for generating tweets from a published blog post (i.e., [Lately](#)). Another use example was how some sports-related research companies use AI to watch for client logos.

It would be impossible to discuss all of the changes in technology between 2018 and 2022. As Freberg said, “So our work is not done. I don't think this report will ever be done.”

## **References**

Krishen, A. S. (2021, May 24). How ‘Zoom’ became the ‘Kleenex’ of video calling. *Fast Company*. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90639158/zoom-naming-strategy>