

Public Relations Curriculum: A Systematic Examination of Curricular Offerings in Social Media, Digital Media, and Analytics in Accredited Programs

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ABSTRACT

As public relations (PR) students prepare for life in the professional world, the educational experiences inside of the college classroom should reflect transformations within the profession. To that end, this study included a systematic analysis of all domestic Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) and Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) accredited graduate and undergraduate PR programs to understand how social media, digital media, and analytics courses have been incorporated into PR program curricula. The data was collected over the summer months of 2019 and the fall semester of 2019. The results included 94 schools that offer PR as a major. This comprehensive study was meant to provide a thorough examination of the current state of curricular offerings related to emerging technologies.

Keywords: public relations curriculum, social media curriculum, analytics, digital media, public relations education

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As the lines between public relations (PR), advertising, and marketing continue to blur, further advances in data, analytics, digital media, and artificial intelligence (AI) lend an even greater influence on where the industry is heading. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and mediums like podcasts, have promoted new forms of participation for users by allowing them to generate messages as a creator and take collective actions, which relate to interactional empowerment (Shirky, 2011). To meet these industry demands, educators within higher education have developed digital and social media-related courses particularly for students majoring in PR (Ewing et al., 2018); however, the degree to which PR education is responding to shifts within digital spaces remains understudied.

This research, conducted over the summer months of 2019 and fall academic semester of 2019, carried out content analysis of all domestic Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) and Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) accredited graduate and undergraduate PR programs to understand how and where social media, digital media, and analytics courses have been incorporated into the PR curricula (Appendix A-C). Through manual coding, quantitative and qualitative analyses, this research provides a comprehensive look at the state of social and emerging media course offerings within accredited PR programs. Findings reveal gaps and opportunities that exist in social and emerging media education, and to what extent, the proliferation of these areas of study was being taught within the 21st Century PR curriculum in the United States. This research provides a snapshot of the classes offered and their course descriptions at ACEJMC and CEPR universities in the U.S during a specified time.

On the heels of the development of digital media tools including social media, educators seem to recognize the importance of adopting

digital and social media. In Auxier's (2020) study of 39 educators, when asked how important teaching their students content related to social media and tools associated with social media, 77.5% of them responded "very important" or "important," with only 17.5% responded only 'slightly to moderately important.' Research has shown that teaching new media tools bring multiple benefits to students, including increased interactions with educators and peers, convenience of learning (Chugh & Ruhi, 2018), and developing their technical skills further (Larrondo Ureta & Peña Fernández, 2017), which can be useful in professional fields afterwards. They discovered that students who learned multimedia and social media tools developed not only teamwork or skills to interact with audiences but also technical skills including search engine optimization skills.

Despite these recent findings on the importance of teaching social media-related tools, the degree to which PR education is responding to these shifts within higher education remains unclear.

Review of the Literature: Evolution of Digital in Public Relations

Scholars offer some perspective on the importance of digital technology to PR over the course of the past decade, and how it relates to principles of best practice. Macnamara (2010) initially found support for the idea that practitioners were effectively exploiting social media for interactive, two-way communication by maintaining dialogic models of PR (Kent & Taylor, 2002), the Excellence Theory of PR (Grunig & Grunig, 1992), and Gini Dietrich's PESO model (2014). Further, Moreno et al. (2015) investigated the relationship between practitioners' personal and professional use of social media. Results show that practitioners with a high level of personal usage of social media give more importance to social media channels, influence of social media on internal and external stakeholders and relevance of key gatekeepers and stakeholders along with a better self-estimation of competencies.

Over the past decade, scholars examined this relationship through

a variety of PR contexts, including corporate social responsibility (Cho et al., 2017), crisis communication (Romenti et al., 2014), nonprofit communication and fundraising (Carboni & Maxwell, 2015), government and political communication (DePaula & Dincelli, 2018), stakeholder dialogue (Elving & May Postma, 2017), cultivating credibility (Kim & Brown, 2015), relationship cultivation (Pang et al., 2018), strategic public identification and engagement (Watkins, 2017), and social presence (Men et al., 2018).

Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018) summarized the twenty-year body of study on digital communication in PR as “an indispensable part of public relations practice. It is clear from the state of research and practice in public relations that the question is no longer *if*, but *how* to best use digital communication technologies to build relationships with publics” (p. 60). The emphasis on social and digital media in terms of two-way communication is not new. A meta-analysis of the 20-year body of research on communication in social and digital media used in PR, of the 79 studies identified as relevant, 83% were concentrated on content analysis, 75% discussed practical applications, and only 25% presented theoretical implications (Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018). Examining big data on digital spaces has been found as a crucial strategy for researchers to explore dialogic communication, as Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018) identified the next opportunities for research in big data, where analytics have opened the door for new research opportunities in the discipline and to better understand the impact of this approach to social and digital media in PR.

However, the growth of social media use in practice has yet to be successfully integrated into the PR curriculum. Auger and Cho (2016) conducted a comprehensive analysis of PR curricula and concluded that the current PR course offerings were not only meeting industry needs, but also providing foundational knowledge in ethics, law, research, and

globalization in course content. Unfortunately, educators fell short on social and new media, which students articulated.

The gap of integrating social and digital media into PR education is a critical need to be addressed, partly because of emerging challenges that social and digital media pose to communication practitioners. The long-standing problems of fake news (Nelson & Taneja, 2018), bots (Woolley & Howard, 2016), and racial tensions on social media with brands (Novak & Richmond, 2019) are all areas in which PR educators are needing to address in the classroom. In a digital media ecology, scholars and practitioners need to prevent the amplification of these problems in those being trained to enter the industry. This makes having students understand and address the issues using what they have learned from classes a stated priority in ACEJMC and CEPR standards. Therefore, it is important for educators to develop students' understanding of challenging issues in a digital media environment.

Current Status of Public Relations Curriculum

Scholars, educators, and practitioners set out to identify courses and competencies essential to graduates entering the modern workplace. According to the Commission on Public Relations Omnibus Survey findings (Commission on Public Relations Education [CPRE], 2018), educators reported that current required courses linked to technology were graphic design and social media, followed by courses that involve video production, digital media, and visual communication. Educators and practitioners both cited technology-based topics such as social media, analytics, web coding, and graphic design as important competencies for the workplace. Also noted was the importance of data literacy to modern practice for graduates. They need to not only know how to find available data but also to be able to pull out valuable information from it in order to make smarter decisions.

The integration of digital technology is evident in the entry-level

positions. Brunner et al. (2018) found that writing remains a priority for employers, but a healthy emphasis on social media writing (47%) and blogs (27%) were present in the postings. Social media was a clear priority for employers, with a general mention of social media aptitude (32%), or references to specific platforms like Facebook (14%), Twitter (12%), LinkedIn (7%), YouTube (7%), Instagram (2%), and Pinterest (2%). The authors' findings suggest the importance of integrating social and digital media into production and writing courses in the PR curriculum. With some perspective on the growing emphasis on digital in PR work, the authors focus on a more effective definition for the digital PR curricula.

Research highlights the importance of teaching emerging communication platforms to students in PR degree programs, as technology does not 'stand still' (CPRE, 2018). Digital tools are changing the way we communicate and the way we understand current issues, so that the need for understanding technologies should be at the forefront in PR education. Duhé (2015) argues three pillars of PR education in the future: (a) fast-forward thinking, (b) interdisciplinary learning, and (c) analytical prowess. Of these, analytical prowess particularly refers to data gathering and analysis, which requires students to find, summarize and present information in an effective manner (Duhé, 2015). However, a disconnection between educators and practitioners in PR in terms of what should be developed further in the academic curriculum of PR programs persists.

In addressing the issue that faces PR education, Wright and Flynn (2017) provide two reasons behind the disconnection between PR practitioners and educators: PR programs are mostly subsets of other disciplines (e.g., journalism, mass communication, business, etc.), and interaction between educators and practitioners on curriculum development is rare. Such limitations in current PR programs relate to the lack of developing technology-based courses that connect PR curriculum

to recent trends in technology. To follow the current trends of media, courses not related to technology should also include activities connecting technology trends (CPRE, 2018).

Previous Research Regarding Digital PR Curriculum

The literature illustrates that scholars are considering the impact of digital technology on the traditional teaching and learning of PR, as well as effective professional preparation of students in the classroom by consulting with industry professionals. Neill and Schauster (2015) made use of in-depth interviews with executives in advertising and PR agencies in the United States to identify the core competencies needed to have successful careers in the new media landscape. The findings indicated that while writing and presentation skills remain essential, employers identified math and data analysis commonly associated with social media listening and analytics as critical for new employees.

Indeed, digital technologies are now seen as the norm for PR practitioners, as supported by Wolf and Archer's (2018) research, which illustrates that the dialogic qualities of digital and social tools do not only support traditional PR capabilities but have become an essential part of it. Related, Fang et al. (2019) note that the continuing technological development of the advertising and PR (PR) industry and increasing transfer of marketing expenditures from traditional channels to emerging digital media have placed a heavy burden on advertising and PR education to train aspiring practitioners for strategic use of these technologies. Through a content analysis of 99 universities with advertising and PR programs, Fang et al. (2019) found that nearly a quarter of advertising and PR courses taught digital media, placing a greater emphasis on skills courses.

To specifically understand how educators were integrating social and digital media analytics into PR courses, Ewing et al. (2018) examined pedagogical practices documented on students' learning outcomes

on course syllabi and Twitter chats between educators and industry professionals. Their findings suggest that developing concepts and skills, measuring results, contextualizing data, and learning how to use tools to engage in social listening were priorities in practice. Furthermore, some integration of industry-standard measurement platforms was needed. In 28% of the courses studied integrated social media platforms for course communication and activities as well as professional certifications programs.

Focusing more on social media education, other scholars interviewed 20 industry professionals to seek industry insights on the topics that should be covered in PR courses including social media, as well as what roles educators need to serve in these courses (Freberg & Kim, 2018). Industry professionals identified multi-platform content creation, marketing and PR principles, writing, analytics, and crisis communication. Importantly, the roles highlighted by industry professionals were liaisons between the academy and industry, experienced content builders, and role-models and mentors. Overall, these findings, which evaluated how social and digital media were reflected in PR-focused disciplines, altogether suggest that a gap between industry expectations and the academic courses should be mended.

In addition to examining professional skill-building, other scholars tested the effectiveness of social and digital media integration in PR classroom activities that reinforce theory and principles of practice. Fraustino et al. (2015) discovered that integrating case study discussions could create conditions for an experiential learning process, which allowed students to exchange theories and concepts with other peers. While another study was extended to examine teleworking and cross-institutional conditions (Madden et al., 2016).

However, integrating digital media presents challenges, although it is considered an essential adaptation in the teaching and learning of PR.

Novakovich et al. (2017) found that introducing professional social media skills into the curriculum provoked a significant amount of resistance on the part of learners. Students lack a sense of agency on social networks and required guidance when articulating modes of online authenticity. The scholars also found an alarming gap between students' everyday practices on social networks and professional practice. Research documents that other factors should be considered such as perceived usefulness, ease of use in platforms, or desirability to use platforms, to encourage students for their continued use of digital media for learning (Dalvi-Esfahani et al., 2020). With a discussion of studies exploring the digital PR curricula, in general, the focus shifts to digital PR as a required course in the curriculum.

Social Media, Digital Media, and Analytics as a Required Course in PR Curriculum

Grounded by the uses and gratifications theory (Katz & Blumler, 1974), college students frequently use digital and social media for diverse purposes, including interacting with friends or family or entertainment (Ezumah, 2013). Although students today are considered 'digital natives,' those born after the 1980s and exposed to these digital technologies at a very early stage of their lives (Prensky, 2001), more courses about digital media should be developed, as self-assessed digital skill does not always indicate that students have much expertise in digital media used in the professional world (Kumar et al., 2019). For example, a multigroup analysis demonstrated a clear pattern of differences in effect exists between digital natives and digital immigrants (individuals born before the 1980s), or before the existence of digital technology (Prensky, 2001) with respect to the sequential belief updating mechanism with regard to adoption and use of digital tools (Kesharwani, 2020). While the results are relatively stable over time, digital natives desire instructor guidance to build their familiarity with new technology. This improved pedagogy

would further enhance their compatibility with the system being used by PR practitioners, as frequently, digital media are used for getting to know audiences and building relationships in a community through social media encourage meaningful and critical discussions (Moody, 2010). By learning how to use social media effectively, students can become active participants in conversations (Quinn-Allan, 2010). Students can understand the role of digital media platforms in connecting a community, and how they can use the medium to facilitate conversations with audiences, which are essential skills of communication professionals.

Additionally, incorporating social media into PR programs can enhance students' abilities to produce and share information efficiently (Locker & Kienzler, 2013), which is related to *data literacy* or "knowing how to identify, collect, organize, analyze, summarize, and prioritize data," and "how to develop hypotheses, identify problems, interpret the data, and determine, plan, implement, and monitor courses of action" (Mandinach & Gummer, 2013, p. 30). Given its importance, Ridsdale et al. (2015) offer several tips for data literacy education, including teaching the benefits of using data, relating workshops with practical experiences, module- and project-based learning that has real-world applicability, and using real-world data that can spur students' interests. Relating digital PR courses to the real-world can make students prepare to be a communication expert. This educational approach should go beyond allowing students to become familiar with using technologies.

On the basis of the stated literature, the researchers posed the following research questions:

RQ1: Where are social media, digital media, and analytics taught in accredited PR programs?

RQ2: How are social media, digital media, and analytics being taught in accredited PR programs?

Methodology

The research team used a systematic approach to investigate where in the PR curricula social media, analytics, and digital media courses were being incorporated into undergraduate and graduate programs across domestically located ACEJMC and CEPR accredited schools (Appendix A). This research was not meant to compare courses offered at ACEJMC accredited universities to those offered at CEPR accredited schools; rather, it provides a descriptive compilation of curricular offerings. Using predetermined categories, the research team collected data from fully accredited ACEJMC and fully accredited CEPR universities. A comparable approach to the quantitative research that Langan et al. (2019) conducted was applied wherein they investigated AACSB accredited programs within marketing curricula to understand how digital marketing courses were incorporated into domestic marketing programs.

The entirety of the data collected represents programs that offer either bachelor's or graduate degrees in PR, advertising, strategic communication, integrated marketing communication (IMC) and journalism. Of the institutions contributing to the dataset, a subset (n=94) of accredited institutions was examined; of which 74 held ACEJMC accreditation (Appendix B), 69 CEPR accreditation (Appendix C), and 52 holding both ACEJMC/CEPR accreditations (Appendix A). Figure 1 highlights this breakdown of program accreditations.

Additionally, of the 94 institutions of interest, each school was more closely examined for degree availability, with programs offering both a bachelor's and graduate degree in PR being of most interest. Figure 2 highlights eight ACEJMC, 12 CEPR, and a combined 27 ACEJMC/CEPR accredited programs offering a bachelor's degree in PR, while Figure 3 indicates that there are four ACEJMC, two CEPR, and a combined 17 ACEJMC/CEPR accredited programs offering graduate PR programs.

Figure 1

Number of ACEJMC and CEPR Accredited Schools Total

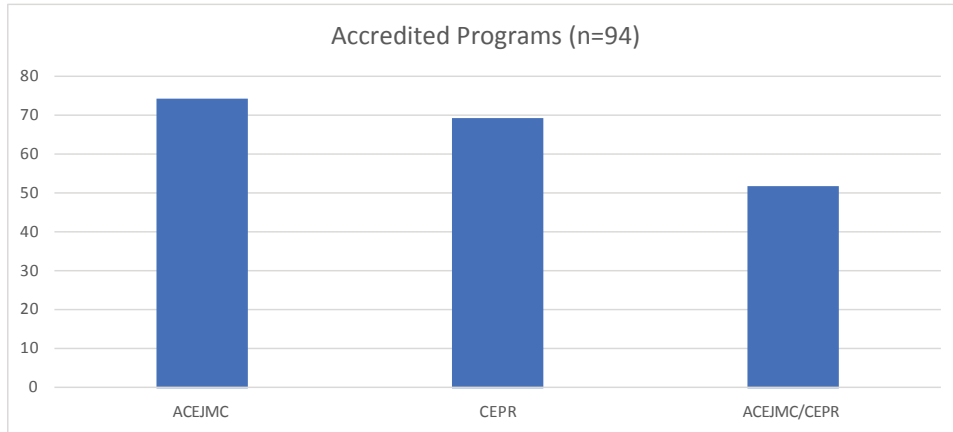
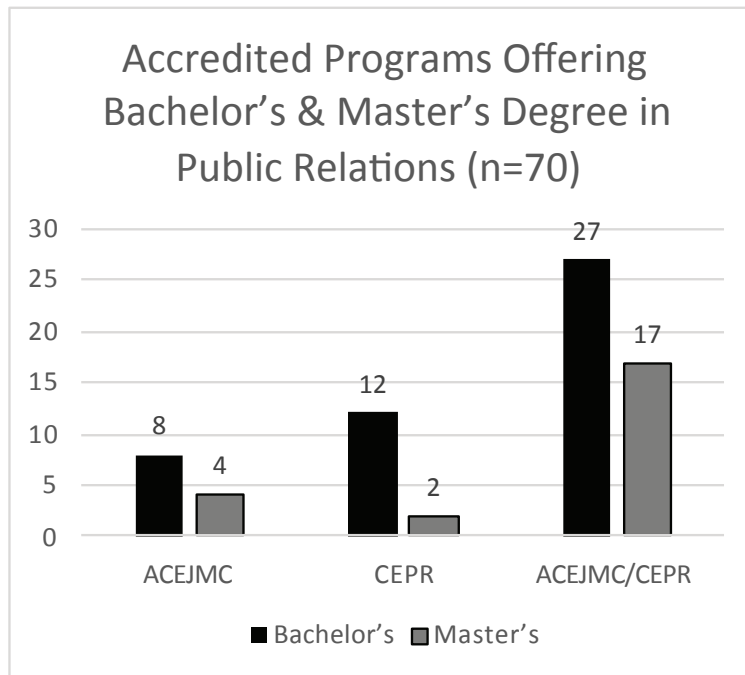


Figure 2

Accredited Programs Offering Bachelor's and Master's Degrees in Public Relations



Data Collection Procedure and Compilation

Qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were used to gather data to address the research questions. During the summer and fall of 2019, members of the research team collected and compiled data from 94 accredited colleges and universities. To ensure the accuracy of the data, specific research criteria were defined, guiding researchers with identifying the desired inputs for the broader dataset. The authors created a subset of the master list of relevant institutions and divided the list equally among members of the research team for the initial data collection, with each subset of data then undergoing a cross-validation from a different researcher for further validation.

Due to the inherent variability of the data of interest between institutions, intercoder reliability is important to ensure interpretation of latent content is consistent between coders. Common discrepancies between researchers and datasets tended to relate to the course naming conventions used by institutions and the associated coding, prompting additional discussions and exploration to determine if the course did, in fact, meet the defined research criteria. As the discrepancies were resolved, a refined search and documentation procedure was developed, allowing the larger list of remaining institutions of interest to be divided among researchers and investigated as part of the final dataset.

Table 1

Available Areas of Specialization Within Accredited Public Relations Programs of Study

Accredited Institutions	Minor in Digital/Social	Concentration in Digital/Social	Certification in Digital/Social	Track in Digital/Social	Total
ACEJMC	4	2	7	5	18
CEPR	4	0	2	4	10
ACEJMC/CEPR	8	8	15	1	32
Total	16	10	24	10	60

To examine data, a thorough content analysis of course descriptions was conducted, which is discussed in detail below.

Data Criterion

Leveraging a thorough review of the literature, the researchers understand how social media, digital media, and analytics have been incorporated into current PR curricula, which informs our data collection and analysis. The research team visited university and college websites pulling information from course catalogs to collect data based on the following variables:

Public Relations Major: We define PR major as any institution that offers a bachelor's or graduate degree in PR and that follows the accreditation standards for either ACEJMC or CEPR guidelines.

Required Courses: We recorded the names, course numbers, and descriptions of courses dedicated to curricula on social media, analytics, or digital media as requirements to graduate with a PR degree.

Elective Courses: The researchers recorded the names, course numbers, and descriptions of courses on social media, analytics, or digital media as electives offered within PR programs.

Tracks: The researchers recorded the number of institutions that offer a track in social media, analytics, and digital media.

Certificates: The researchers recorded the number of institutions that offer a university accredited certification specializing in social media, analytics, and digital media. Certifications offered through third party organizations such as Hootsuite or Google were not included in this analysis.

Social media courses: The researchers adopted a broad definition of social media as our criterion when analyzing course content as there are multiple definitions available (McIntyre, 2014; Otieno & Matoke, 2014). To that end, social media "are web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and

engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible” (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017, p. 17). Based on this definition, social media in our analyses includes diverse platforms that feature two-way interactions, such as YouTube, podcasts, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Digital media courses: Courses that provide an infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content via digital channels were defined as digital media (Howard & Parks, 2012).

Content Analysis Method

Using the course descriptions collected, the research team performed content analysis (Berelson, 1952) of the presence of key curricular areas present in the available course descriptions (N=154) to assess what content is delivered as well as how the content is delivered. The researchers adopted content analysis because it offers an objective, systematic manifestation of the content of communication, enabling the research team to explore what is actively present in the courses analyzed within accredited PR programs by facilitating a rich, complex body of data. Krippendorff (1980) maintains that content analysis offers technical sophistication and scientific rigor.

Findings

Based on content analysis, data collected from the aforementioned 94 institutions of interest, having obtained either ACEJMC, CEPR, or both accreditations for their undergraduate and graduate PR programs, a closer examination was completed to understand how social media, analytics, and digital media courses have been incorporated into the PR program curricula. Of the 94 identified schools, 50% ($n = 47$) offer a bachelor’s degree, 24.5% ($n = 23$) offer a graduate degree and 17% ($n = 16$) offer a minor in PR. Of these institutions, we found that only 30 programs (31.9%) require students to take a course specifically related to social media, digital media, or analytics to fulfill either their undergraduate or graduate degree requirements. The remaining 68.1% ($n = 64$) of

institutions did not require a social media, digital media, or analytics course within their PR curricula. Further, 15 of the identified institutions (15.9%) provided an option for students to take at least one social media, digital media, or analytics course as an elective within the curriculum. Of these same schools offering electives, only one program (6%) required a course within these domains, as well as offered an additional elective(s). Stated differently, only about one in three institutions possessing either ACEJMC, CEPR, or both accreditations require a social/digital media or analytics course within their core PR curriculum.

We recognize that programs offering undergraduate, graduate or minors in PR may also provide additional course offerings that are available to students with an interest beyond PR. This study specifically examined PR curricula. As noted earlier, at these 94 institutions of interest, social media, digital media, and analytics may also be available as either a certificate, track, or concentration.

Course Description Analysis

The content analysis of the 154 course descriptions found on university websites through their respective course catalogs demonstrates some intuitive understanding of the progression of the discipline to an integration of strategic communication sub-discipline, and the necessity for integration of technical and strategic aptitude with social media and digital media within the context of theory and principles of best practice. Figure 3 demonstrates a word cloud which is a visual representation of keyword frequency and relevance based on text data (Appendix D) from the course descriptions (Dubinko et al., 2006). The larger and bolder the word appears, the more often it is mentioned within a given text and the more important it is.

evaluation within the course descriptions, 15 focused on the relationship between evaluation and assessment and determining campaign outcomes.

Technician Work Over Managerial Mindset within Digital Media

In reviewing the course descriptions there is heavy emphasis on technical work, with minimal discussion of managerial focus across the social media courses available at accredited programs. An anticipated result is the abundant presence of a myriad social and digital media production skill set references (73) in course descriptions. Included among these references are content creation for social media and multimedia platforms (12), Web design (10), social media practice (9), graphic design (8), digital storytelling (7), search engine optimization including Google certification (5), mobile application design (5), music and audio engineering (5), video production (4), still photography (3), mobile communication (2), online interactive advertisement production (1), computing coding (1), and the use of drones for recording purposes (1). In addition to social media production skills, the researchers found a strong emphasis on writing within the social media course descriptions. Writing for media, news writing, and PR writing were referenced in 10 instances in the course descriptions. Specifically, relevant to strategic social media, audience engagement and interactivity is mentioned in 10 course descriptions. Associated with engagement and interactivity, audience or consumer behavior is discussed in three course descriptions, and user experience is mentioned in two course descriptions. There is clearly an emphasis on skill-building to accommodate one-stop shop work in social and emerging media.

Contemporary and Traditional Conduits for Strategic Communication

There is a strong presence of social and digital media platforms among the course descriptions analyzed. Social media platforms are mentioned in 26 different course descriptions, whether by specific platform or in general. Strategic use of blogs is referenced in three

specific course descriptions. Podcasting is referenced in two total courses, and really simple syndication (RSS) feeds are referenced in two course descriptions. AI and virtual reality, emerging platforms in PR and affiliated strategic communication sub fields, are referenced in one course description.

Strategic application of social and digital media platforms is present in 25 total courses. Discussion of strategic use of digital media, social media, new media, transmedia, and multimedia tactics are referenced in 10 total courses. Results revealed that the PESO model (Dietrich, 2014) is becoming a standard element within courses on social and digital media, reflecting its growth as a core component of PR industry practice. Macro-strategic applications of integrated, converged, and multimedia are mentioned in eight total courses. Consideration of the impact of emergent technologies in the discipline are present in 10 total course descriptions. The impact of emerging technology on strategic campaign design and development are present in five total courses. Additionally, the philosophical discussion of technological evolution, dynamism, and innovation is present in five total courses.

Data Analytics, Interpretation, and Visualization

Among the more dominant concepts in the analysis is an emphasis on the value of data analytics, data analysis, leveraging findings to maximum strategic effect, and articulating those findings in a meaningful way to strategic publics, clients, and organizational leadership. Analysis and interpretation are the strongest areas of emphasis, referenced in 32 total course descriptions. Specific concepts of discussion include analysis of data analytics in 16 courses, measurement and analysis of social media in 13 courses, data manipulation and interpretation in two courses, and keyword competitive analysis in one course.

The relationship between analytics and big data was discussed across 25 courses. In addition to the discussion of data analytics in 14

courses mentioned above, specific emphasis on social media analytics is present in 10 courses. Data insights, visualization, and presentation were also present in the review of course descriptions in 23 courses. Data visualization is present in 10 courses; data presentation is present in six courses; social listening, data insights, and Return on Investment are mentioned in one course apiece.

Certificates, Tracks or Concentrations

At the 94 educational institutions examined, social media, analytics, or digital media may also be available as either a university awarded certificate, track, or concentration. The analysis indicates that most schools with PR programs offer certificates (n = 24, 25.5%), concentrations (n = 10, 10.6%), or tracks (n = 13, 13.8%) in social media, analytics, or digital media.

Sociocultural and Professional Impact

Within the analysis of course descriptions, there is a strong presence of the intersection of media, culture, and society. Sociocultural considerations of the impact of emerging social and digital technologies are present in 24 course descriptions. Discussion about various forms of impact on social contexts are discussed in 17 course descriptions. Discussion of intercultural and global influence on strategic social media campaigns are present in three course descriptions.

Discussion of the sociological dimensions of online culture, network communication, online shaming, and the impact of social and digital media on celebrity culture are present in one course description each.

The impact of social media on the news industry, news consumption, and public information is a point of emphasis in 25 course descriptions. Discussion of the democratization of media content creation and co-created content is present in three course descriptions. A discussion of citizens' diverse media diet and media consumption

practices are present in four courses. Finally, the emergence of fake news and disinformation on social media has also begun to emerge in the social media curriculum, as three courses reference discussion and exploration of information credibility and defining truth.

Discussion about the impact and influence of technology and media are present in 25 course descriptions. Media effects research and discussion of the consequences associated with social media use are present in nine course descriptions. The impact of technology on the PR profession is present in eight course descriptions. Finally, the economic and financial impact of social media and emerging technology are discussed in eight course descriptions. Affiliated with the discussion of the influence of technology is a discussion of media history and past impact of emerging technology on society and communication practices, which is present in six course descriptions.

Discussion

The overarching goal for the study was to examine and understand where and how social media, digital media, and analytics were being taught in accredited PR programs as well as how these areas were being taught in accredited PR programs, given the growing importance of these fields to employers. The quantitative and qualitative analysis provides some encouraging details about the philosophical focus and emphasis of curriculum development associated with emerging technology and practices. There is a clear alignment of social and digital media courses to traditional models of best practice in strategic PR. That said, the current presence of only 30 programs among the 94 accredited degree programs examined demonstrates that while social and emerging media are present, improvement is essential to satisfy the need expressed by employers in the discipline. Our findings are aligned with the latest report out of the Institute for Public Relations. Their October 2020 Career Path of a Social Media Professional reported that of the 400 respondents, 80% had not

taken a course in social media because none was offered at their university (DiStaso & McCordindale, 2020). Our research highlights that social and emerging media are woven throughout curricula; however, universities must be more proactive in developing specific courses, as well as considering complete majors or minors in these areas.

The emphasis on research, strategy and tactics, and evaluation in particular demonstrates a commitment, albeit incomplete, to going beyond technical training in the technology to helping aspiring professionals see how to integrate emerging technology into professional practice.

While limited in emphasis, it is clear that objective setting is also present in the current instruction on applying emerging technologies to the discipline. These findings certainly align with Sommerfeldt and Yang's (2018) call for the discipline to go beyond looking at whether social and digital media are used in PR to an exploration of how it is applied strategically.

The authors are encouraged by the emphasis on establishing the value of quality writing within social and digital media used in strategic settings among the growing body of course offerings and programs available. This is in keeping with past literature that reinforces employers' value of quality writing among aspiring professionals (Neill & Schauster, 2015), but the data also illustrates a concerted effort by educators to address the needs established by prospective employers in past literature.

Also encouraging is the emphasis on exploring the impact of these new technologies and practices on existing models of practice, sociocultural norms, and political communication practice and engagement. Further, a clear discussion of the impact of these emerging media on public opinion, behavior, and how we interact in society are present in the course descriptions provided. An area of potential expansion may be putting further emphasis on the legal and ethical considerations and implications in the curriculum. While the authors acknowledge

that these may be present in standing ethics and law courses, the latest Commission on Public Relations Education report (2018) calls for integration of ethical discussion in a central course as well as within individual courses.

The authors also note the prevalence of emerging trends within the course descriptions that align with existing literature on the need for knowledge of data literacy and management (Ridsdale et al., 2015). Clearly, educators are putting emerging technology and applications at the forefront of their courses, which will require consistent examination and updates for the perpetual evolution of practices and integration into instruction. There is also a heavy emphasis on big data, analytics, interpretation of data, and data visualization. It is clear in the course descriptions that educators are making a clear effort to articulate the value of these new elements to strategic practices within the existing models of best practice. It is also clear that this emphasis will require effort on the part of educators to help instruct aspiring professionals on the importance of effective data management and processing for analysis, which does get some limited attention in the course descriptions. A better articulation of data management and analysis will better align with existing literature emphasizing the importance of data literacy (Mandinach & Gummer, 2013).

An element of concern is the balance of focus on emerging trends and practices being articulated purely from a technician's role in the course descriptions. While the authors acknowledge that it is important for aspiring professionals to understand how to use technology and tools professionally (Kumar & Nanda, 2020), there needs to be an effort to ensure that aspiring professionals sustain a manager's mindset and role when integrating these emerging tools and technologies in practice (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). While the authors acknowledge that it may be present in other areas of the curriculum, there is an incomplete articulation

of a managerial perspective in the courses offered, or the descriptions.

Further, an area of growth and consideration for schools of communication would be to move beyond certificates, tracks, and concentrations. There is an opportunity for programs to create social media or emerging media majors, particularly within undergraduate curriculum. As the literature review revealed, the profession needs students who are astute in emerging media technologies (Fang et al., 2019; Brunner et al., 2018; Elving & May Postma, 2017).

Limitations/Delimitations

The authors note that there are certainly limitations within the qualitative aspects of this study worth acknowledging. One limitation is that we are only examining accredited PR programs of study, leaving the larger body of communication, mass communication, and their subfields yet to explore. This clearly merits a broader examination of the body of social media, data analytics, and digital media courses available across the discipline. The potential integration of this curriculum in advertising, integrated strategic communication, digital journalism, or communication with PR coursework is not lost on the researchers, and merits extension of this study to explore the other avenues identified. The authors also question that while the curriculum is integrated in disciplinary and technological focus, why key themes associated with disciplinary or technological integration are not coming through more consistently in the course descriptions at the class level.

This study focuses on the course descriptions available, which may not always reflect the depth of content offered in a course. To overcome this limitation, future analysis should strive to examine course syllabi to get a more specific picture of the depth and focus of content beyond the themes articulated in course descriptions.

Future Research

Thinking beyond limitations, the authors also note some clear

areas of examination that represent the next steps for study to develop a richer body of understanding about teaching and learning in PR education. Speaking to the discipline's ability to meet the needs of the industry (Brunner et al., 2018), the authors note that further examination of current practices within the industry to better identify what areas of need further emphasis, addition, or revision in the content to better reflect needs. Integrating the perspective of employers, industry veterans, and entry-level professionals on essential skills, principles of best practice, and philosophical and ethical considerations will better help educators to develop, offer, and assess graduates' proficiency in knowledge of skills, principles of practice, and theory that best meet the needs of the discipline and allow us to answer the call for better industry integration in the classroom (Krishna et al., 2020).

The authors also acknowledge the need for additional research on the integration of PR principles and managerial perspectives in PR in social and emerging media courses. The authors note that these elements are likely present in other courses throughout the curriculum. That said, the authors note the value of integrating managerial perspectives and principles of best practices to facilitate scaffolding of concepts in social and emerging media courses that ultimately facilitate stronger integration of practice in upper level and capstone courses of study.

The benefits of increased research surrounding PR curriculum are multitiered: to enhance the way students are learning; to augment traditional methods of teaching; and to advance the use of social media, analytics, and digital media technology beyond personal use to make connections to the classroom and the profession. Furthermore, as a greater number of universities adopt curriculums that incorporate these areas of study, the needs of Generation Z as learners will be more closely met. It is important to continue research within this field, particularly as it relates to educating students who are entering the PR and communications field

because, as educators, we want the next generation of PR professionals to be better trained when they enter today's technology driven workforce.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this research provides an initial picture of the current programs and courses related to social media, digital media, and analytics available among accredited PR programs. It is evident, based on the findings, that these areas of study represent a core component to ACEJMC and CEPR accredited universities. That educators are working to meet the needs of the industry through skills and research-based course offerings are unmistakable. We believe over the next few years that more universities will require additional courses in these areas, as well as, data, machine learning, natural language processing, network analysis, and AI, to ensure graduates are prepared to work in a social media and data driven environment. The important conclusions found within this research introduce new data highlighting a multitude of relevant benefits to incorporating emerging media within a PR curriculum.

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Appendix A

Schools both ACEJMC and CEPR accredited during study duration (2019)

ACEJMC + CEPR (2019)	
American University	St. Cloud State University
Ball State University	SUNY Buffalo State
Bowling Green State University	Syracuse University
Central Michigan University	Temple University
Drake University	Texas State University
Eastern Illinois University	University of Georgia
Elon University	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Hofstra University	University of Iowa
Indiana University	University of Kansas
Iona College	University of Kentucky
Kansas State University	University of Memphis
Louisiana State University	University of Minnesota
Loyola University New Orleans	University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Marshall University	University of Nevada, Reno
Michigan State University	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Middle Tennessee State	University of North Texas
Murray State University	University of Oklahoma
Nicholls State University	University of Oregon
Ohio University	University of Southern Mississippi
Pennsylvania State University	University of Tennessee
Savannah State University	University of Tennessee at Martin
Shippensburg University	University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire
South Dakota State University	Washington and Lee University
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale*	West Virginia University
Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville	Western Kentucky University

*on a 1-year delay ACEJMC COVID

Appendix B

Schools ACEJMC accredited during study duration (2019)

ACEJMC Only (2019)
Arizona State University
Arkansas State University
California State University, Chico
California State University, Fullerton
California State University, Northridge
City University of New York
Colorado State University
Florida International University
Howard University
Jacksonville State
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University
San Jose State University
St. Bonaventure University
University of Alabama
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville
University of Idaho
University of Mississippi
University of Missouri
University of Montana
University of New Mexico
University of North Alabama
University of South Florida - St. Petersburg
University of Southern California

Appendix C

Schools CEPR accredited during study duration (2019)

CEPR Only (2019)
Eastern Kentucky University
Ferris State University
Lee University
Monmouth University - New Jersey
Ohio Northern University
Quinnipiac University
Radford University - Virginia
Union University
University of Central Missouri
University of Cincinnati
University of Colorado, Boulder
University of Florida
Valdosta State University
Virginia Commonwealth University
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech)
Wayne State University