



## Connecting Pedagogy to Industry: Social and Digital Media in Public Relations Courses

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### Abstract

This paper discusses a qualitative content analysis of course descriptions in an exploratory effort to identify the focus and emphasis of public relations curricular offerings in emerging technologies and their strategic application. Findings show an emphasis on an integration of disciplines and technology, an emphasis on content production and strategic application of social and digital media, and applied learning approaches designed to promote professional development among students. Findings also show a limited discussion of models of best practice, absence of theory as it relates to practice, shortage of appropriate methodology in analyzing big data, and a limited discussion of branding and influencers as emerging strategic resources and topics of discussion. The paper also identified future directions for expanded analysis to better understand the relationship between social and digital media courses and if they serve to appropriately train future industry professionals.

### Introduction

Public relations (PR) programs have been growing on the heels of the development of the media industry. Research highlights the importance of teaching emerging communication platforms to students in public relations degree programs, as technology does not “stand still” (Commission on Public Relations Education [CPRE], 2018). Digital tools are chang-

ing the way we understand and communicate current issues, such that the need for understanding technologies should be at the forefront of public relations (PR) education.

Recent dialog among educators in journalism and mass communication articulates a definitive need to carefully consider how we integrate new technologies to ensure an equitable, sustained quality of instruction

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at large and small mass communication programs (Luttrell, Wallace, McCollough & Lee, 2020). Previous literature illustrates that scholars are considering how digital technology impacts teaching and learning of public relations, as well as effective professional preparation of students in the classroom by consulting with industry professionals (Luttrell & Capizzo, 2021, Ewing *et al.*, 2018; Brunner *et al.*, 2018; Wolf & Archer, 2018; Freberg & Kim, 2018; Fang *et al.*, 2019).

Further scholarship suggests that educators and their academic administrators see the call for professional digital literacy, and it is driving integration in the classroom. Auxier (2020) conducted an examination of the motivations and strategies for integrating social media technology in the classroom. The study found educators now teach an average of 3.8 social media tools in their classes. Most educators said teaching their students new technologies is very important (65%) or important (12.5%). Further, 85% reported being encouraged by administration efforts to integrate. The goal of this exploratory study is to establish a preliminary understanding of how emerging forms of media are being taught in accredited PR programs to facilitate further study to determine if PR education is keeping pace with industry.

The greater debate concerning whether or not public relations is a profession (Kerr, 1995) and how to assess the merits of connecting students to the profession have been topics of discussion for decades. Public relations training, digital certification, internships, experiential learning, support from membership associations, and advanced degrees bring PR closer to the elements that are defined by numerous scholars as attributes of a profession (Greenwood, 1957; Freidson, 1988; Miller *et al.*, 2006). In that the idea of connecting theory to practice has been used time and again as a tagline for public relations classrooms, courses, and even some programs to articulate the desire for students to be prepared to move seamlessly from classroom to the boardroom bringing closer the elements of competency and profession through public relations education (Janssen, 1985; Grunig, 2003; Welch, 2016). Are educators doing enough or covering the “right” topics to get students ready to work? Are we doing enough to test students for the profession in the classroom and in the field through experiential-based learning experiences?

Ideas and concerns for advancement of public relations abound and with that has come the identifi-

cation and critical need for education that is relevant and well-connected to the practice of public relations. Since the 1999 Commission on Public Relations Education Report, technology has been deemed “essential” in that content for PR education should “address new public relations tools and techniques, especially current and emerging technology and its application in the practice of public relations,” (CPRE, 1999, “Content”) and PR programming and production, “should include advanced programming and production principles, particularly related to new technology, the Internet and telecommunications as well as the practices and theory of message preparation, visual communications principles, and other communication techniques” (CPRE, 1999, “Content”).

A broader body of academic programs reinforces and supports the call for integration of professional practice in the classroom. Scholarship on teaching and learning in communication demonstrates how bringing industry practices to the classroom has long-term benefits for students entering the industry (McCullough, 2018; Parsons & MacCallum, 2019), for the communities they engage (McCullough & Gibson, 2018; McCullough 2019; 2020), and for the academic units (Huda *et al.*, 2018; McCullough, 2019; 2020). With these factors in mind, the authors seek to identify how educators in accredited public relations programs are addressing the demand for industry-relevant proficiency with social media, analytics, and digital media courses.

### Literature Review

*Evolution of Digital Media in Public Relations and Its Curriculum.* The rise of digital intelligence among public relations practitioners has been studied for well over a decade (Wright & Flynn, 2017) demonstrating increased need and dramatic changes to the field as a result of emerging technologies. Foundational scholars examined the relationship between digital technology and public relations in order to formulate best practices (MacNamara, 2010), explore dialogic models (Kent & Taylor, 2002), and explore theory (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Subsequent research explored various digital relationship-driven perspectives from corporate social responsibility (Gomez, 2020) to disinformation and activism (Luttrell *et al.*, 2021) to credibility (Lou & Yuan, 2019), and ethics (Luttrell & Ward, 2018).

Pew Research Center began tracking American internet behavior in the early 2000s when about half

of all adults were already online showing consumer behavior supports the evolution of public relations to fit the change in consumer communications needs. Furthermore, digital applications are not “just for young people” anymore. According to Pew Research (Perrin & Anderson, 2019) 69% of adults between 50–64 and 40% of those above 65 use social media. Perhaps more interestingly, 41% of Facebook users are 65+. Furthermore, as of the third quarter of 2020, Statista (2020) reported that 67% of adults above the age of 56 use YouTube.

Moreno, Navarro, Tench, and Zerfass (2015) investigated the relationship between practitioners’ personal and professional use of social media. Results show that practitioners with a high level of 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 competences. Sommerfeldt and Yang’s (2018) twenty-year study on digital communication in public relations emphasized this relationship as:

now 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. With new ways of engaging stakeholders on digital platforms and much wider-spread adoption of digital communication by organizations around the world, it is time to take another look at where we are and ask difficult questions about the potential for dialogic communication through digital media. (p. 60)

Kent and Taylor (2002) addressed tensions present between academia and practitioners surrounding the development of procedures and rules of dialogic communication but later concluded that “in order to bring dialogue to the attention of organizations interested in fostering more effective communication systems, scholars and practitioners must be able to provide concrete structures—not just idealized descriptions of human communication” (p. 33). Resolving the tension between idealized descriptions and concrete structures of organizational communication is an important issue that Wirtz and Zimbres attempted to address in the 2018 meta-analysis, which reviewed research that applied principles of dialogic communication to digital media used in public rela-

tions like Facebook, Twitter, and websites. Their results revealed 79 studies identified as relevant, 83% were concentrated on content analysis, 75% discussed practical applications, and only 25% presented theoretical implications.

Additionally, Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018) identified the next opportunities for research in big data, where analytics opened the door for new research opportunities in the discipline, clarifying the impact of a dialogic approach to social and digital media in public relations. Navarro, Moreno and Zerfass (2018) addressed strategies mastering dialogic tools while chasing the elusive engagement metrics in social media with public relations practitioners. Finally, Davies and Hobbs (2020) presented a new critical framework marrying models of dialogic public relations with a critical eco-systems perspective examining influence and influencers.

The fragmentation of opinions on these matters naturally leads to support for the perspectives of social media studies critic Valentini (2015), who called the practice of using social media for publics, organizations, and public relations “questionable,” noting that public relations scholars and professionals clung to an “over positive” value of social media from a technological-deterministic perspective. She posits that “the positive view of social media held by many public relations scholars is grounded on the profession’s need to reconcile the two sides of public relations identity—the rhetorical and the relational. She challenged others to continue to scrutinize the value of social media use beyond the consideration of professionals so that “professionals will assess the nature of their social media actions so as to be able to provide ethical, responsible advice to their organizations” (p. 175).

While today’s learners are considered digital natives it is clear from both anecdotal and empirical evidence that a very different approach is needed to teach digital natives professional digital literacy, including evaluating information (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021, Kesharwani, 2020; Breakstone *et al.*, 2018), understanding differences between “lifestyle” and “workplace” skills (Kumar & Nanda, 2019), politics and citizenship (Sievert *et al.*, 2017), safety (DiFranzo *et al.*, 2018), audience and shareholders (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019), use of data (CPRE, 2018), and much more. We must be careful, however, to acknowledge that exposure to technology and personal use cannot be equated with its skillful use. The term digital native overstates essential skills in digital me-

dia and may be a cause for omission from school curricula. Auger and Cho (2016), however, found that public relations curriculum specifically was meeting industry needs for entry-level roles while giving them foundations for higher application including ethics, law, research, and rise in globalization in their analysis of course content. The authors' noted, however, that educators still fell short in connecting educational standards and professional needs.

The integration of digital technology is evident in the entry-level positions organizations look to hire. Writing remains a priority for employers, including social media writing (47%) and blogs (27%) were present in the job postings analyzed by Brunner, Zarkin, and Yates in their 2018 study examining entry-level job descriptions in public relations. Social media was a high priority for employers, with a general descriptor of "social media aptitude" (32%), or references to specific platforms like Facebook (14%), Twitter (12%), LinkedIn (7%), YouTube (7%), Instagram (2%), and Pinterest (2%). Meganck, Smith, and Guidry's (2020) study reaffirms the relevance of traditional skills, while advancing digital and social media skills. Having addressed the growing role of digital in public relations and concerns about the need to better prepare students to meet professional expectations in digital public relations work, the authors will now focus on the body of literature examining the contemporary public relations curriculum.

*The Status on Public Relations Curriculum:* Digital tools are changing the way we communicate with each other and the meaning we derive from complex issues through a variety of media we consume regularly. A 2020 study by eMarketer reports that United States adults (18+) consume media on average 12 hours, 9 minutes per day with over seven of those hours categorized as "digital" (eMarketer, 2020). Additionally, today 3.96 billion people use social media with more than two hours spent in the United States on social media alone (He, 2020); total digital time is now on track to surpass eight hours by the end of 2022 (eMarketer, 2020). Therefore, the need for understanding technologies remains among the top issues addressed in public relations curricula.

Duhe' (2015) maintains the need for three pillars of the future of PR education: the first; fast forward thinking, second; interdisciplinary learning, and third; analytical prowess. The latter refers mostly to collection and analysis of information present in an efficient manner. This framework emphasizes a fracturing be-

tween education and practice in PR along the lines of what should be developed and taught in academia. Furthermore, unity of education and practice is seen as critical in Marcia DiStaso's (2019) examination of CPRE recommendations from the 2018 report Fast Forward. She suggests that "the secret to the success of undergraduate education is collaboration between educators and practitioners. Together they can provide the foundation for a cohesive focus on knowledge, skills, and abilities to prepare undergraduate students for their future careers" (p. 19).

While predating the CPRE recommendations, Wright and Flynn (2017) provide three reasons behind the disconnection between public relations practitioners and educators: (a) public relations programs are mostly subsets of other disciplines (e.g., journalism, mass communication, business, etc.), (b) interaction between educators and practitioners on curriculum development is rare, and (c) public relations practitioners are barely involved in curriculum discussions. Such limitations in current public relations programs relate to the lack of developing technology-based courses that connect public relations curriculum to current industry trends. To follow current media trends, educators should include activities connecting technology trends in all courses (CPRE, 2018). With CPRE also weighing in that "new, more relevant standards for hiring educators in public relations ... (should) balance the relevance of public relations industry experience with that of academic experience" (p. 89) and "as much as possible, technology tools should be incorporated into courses" (p. 92). This illustrates an exceedingly high importance of and focused relevance on integrating social and digital media into the university PR curriculum.

*Examining Earlier Digital Public Relations Curriculum:* Previous scholars pondered the impact of digital on PR: Neill & Schauster (2015) found that math and data analysis, commonly associated with social media listening and analytics, as critical for new employees. They also reported a deficiency in skills necessary for crisis management associated with online community management in university curriculum. Wolf and Archer (2018) found that digital technologies are now seen as the norm for PR practitioners. Fang, Wei, and Huang (2019) note through a content analysis of nearly 100 universities with advertising and PR programs that nearly 25% of them taught digital media and that digital media courses often put greater emphasis on general skills courses. They also noted

that the continuing technological development of the advertising and PR industry and increasing budgets that emphasize digital media over traditional media have placed a heavy burden on advertising and PR education to train new practitioners for immediate and effective use of these technologies.

Research on methods in which educators engage with social media analytics in the classroom found in Twitter chat content analysis that use of social listening could satisfy measuring and contextualizing results for strategic use (Ewing *et al.*, 2018). Qualitative data by Freberg and Kim (2018) gave insight on digital and social media topics that should be covered in PR courses including results congruent with CPRE results prioritizing multi-platform content creation, marketing, and PR principles, writing, analytics, and crisis communication.

Finally, Kumar and Nanda (2020) remind us that while college students, aka digital natives, can be thought of as social media experts, more courses about digital media should be developed, as self-assessed personal digital skill does not always indicate actual digital skill in a professional workplace environment.

### Research Questions

Based on the literature reviewed, the following research questions are posited:

RQ1: What role does interdisciplinary integration play in current courses on emergent technology in accredited public relations programs?

RQ2: What social and digital media concepts are central in current courses on emergent technology in accredited public relations programs?

RQ3: What emphasis is placed on professional development in current courses on emergent technology in accredited public relations programs?

### Method

To answer the research questions above, the researchers utilized content analysis that blended qualitative identification of themes (Patton, 2004) and quantification within the analysis (Morgan, 1993) to investigate how in the public relations curricula social media, analytics, and digital media courses were being incorporated into undergraduate and graduate programs across domestically located ACEJMC and CEPR accredited schools. The research team collected

data from fully accredited ACEJMC and fully accredited CEPR universities by accessing their online course catalogs to both identify the presence of specific courses and to collect their course descriptions. The entirety of the data collected represents programs that offer either bachelors or graduate degrees in public relations, advertising, strategic communication, integrated marketing communication (IMC) and journalism. Of the institutions contributing to the dataset, a subset (n=94) of accredited institutions were examined; of which 74 held ACEJMC accreditation, 69 CEPR accreditation, and 52 holding both ACEJMC/CEPR accreditations.

Additionally, of the 94 institutions of interest, each school was more closely examined for degree availability, with programs offering a bachelor and graduate degree in public relations being of most interest, consisting of 8 ACEJMC, 12 CEPR, and a combined 27 ACEJMC/CEPR accredited programs offering a bachelor degree in public relations, and 4 ACEJMC, 2 CEPR, and a combined 17 ACEJMC/CEPR accredited programs offering graduate public relations programs. To determine what concepts were covered in the courses, the researchers collected course descriptions (N=154), each approximately a paragraph in length, for each of the social media course offerings available at 22 of the 188 ACEJMC or PRSA accredited public relations programs. The researchers' choice of qualitative content analysis was intended to identify key areas of focus presented in the body of course descriptions (N = 154), to establish how educators are currently developing social and digital media course content in accredited programs.

The qualitative content analysis process consisted of four stages: decontextualization of the data, recontextualization of the data, categorization of the data into substantive areas of focus, and compilation of findings in the write up to ensure a thorough examination of the course descriptions (Berg, 2001; Neuendorf & Kumar, 2016). The intent of the four-stage examination was to achieve a latent analysis, in an effort to go beyond what is directly articulated in the course description and consider deeper meanings related to the philosophical focus of where social media courses in the public relations curriculum are now situated (Berg, 2001). Frequent debriefing sessions between the researchers were employed to ensure validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the findings as categories of course content and approaches to teaching were established (Shenton, 2004).

Consistent with some forms of latent analysis (Berg, 2001), the researchers performed some quantification in which items falling under categories are counted, adding a quantitative dimension to our qualitative study. While not normally done in other qualitative research methods, much qualitative data can easily be counted (Morgan, 1993). In combining a simple tally of occurrences of each theme in the larger body of course descriptions with a qualitative approach to organizing the content references, the reader can see how key themes are discussed across the course descriptions, while also seeing the frequency with which each theme is present across all course descriptions. The researchers adopted this approach to analysis due to the brevity of the course descriptions limiting the potential for deeper qualitative analysis and the potential value of quantification in explaining the presence of topics across courses.

### Findings

The analysis of the course descriptions (N = 154) provides some insights about the current philosophical focus of accredited PR programs in addressing industry needs. The data demonstrates an integration of technology in strategic practice, a focus on technician's skills in production and writing, and leveraging big data and analytics for research and evaluation, in addition to an emphasis on high-impact, experiential delivery of course content to promote learner experience with professional practice.

*An Integrated Mindset:* An integrated approach to mass communication subfields is present in reviewing the course descriptions, though PR is the strongest among them. Public relations' 33 unique mentions is by far the most frequently mentioned disciplinary focus in reviewing the course descriptions. Strategic communication is mentioned 13 times across the course descriptions, and integrated communication is mentioned twice, offering an alternative nomenclature for the marriage of persuasive communication subfields. Looking at the subfields that make up an integrated strategic mindset, advertising (12) and marketing (9) are also mentioned, though far less frequently than PR.

*Writer-Technician Skill Sets Dominant:* Production work was the most emphasized, with minimal discussion of management. Social media and multimedia platform production (12), coding and design for Web platforms (11), strategic social media (9), graphic design (8), storytelling on digital platforms (7), search

engine optimization (5), mobile application design (5), audio engineering (5), video production (4), photography (3), mobile communication (2), interactive advertisement production (1), and recording with drones (1) made up the discussion of production.

Writing remains present in social and digital media coursework. Writing for media, news writing, and PR writing are referenced in 10 instances in the course descriptions, with two specific references to Associated Press writing style. Writing for Web and digital platforms was referenced six times, and writing for electronic forms of news, broadcast, advertising, and commercials was mentioned once. Finally, one course also integrated writing creative strategic briefs as a skill supporting social media campaign production.

Interestingly, the presence of theory within the course descriptions is limited. Theory and models of practice in PR are discussed in six course descriptions and strategic communication theory is present in two course descriptions, discussion of crisis communication and theory is present in four course descriptions, discussion of stakeholders and stakeholder theory is present in two course descriptions, relationship cultivation and relationship management is present in two course descriptions, and health communication theory in one course description. Theory associated with social media is referenced in four course descriptions. Classic mass communication theory is limited, with two references to uses and gratification theory (Katz & Blumler, 1974), and one reference to media diffusion (Rogers, 1995). Both Communication and Computer Media Communication theory see only one reference in course descriptions.

*Data Analytics, Interpretation, and Visualization:* Data analytics and analysis proved to be a dominant theme. Analysis and interpretation (32) were well represented. Specific topics include analysis of data analytics (16), social media measurement (13), data manipulation and interpretation (2), and keyword competitive analysis (1). The relationship between analytics and big data (25) and specific emphasis on social media analytics (10) stood out as strong elements in this theme. Interestingly, certification in data analytics is not (1). Data insights, visualization, and presentation were also present in the review of course descriptions in 23 courses. Data visualization (10) and data presentation (6) stood out, while social listening (1), data insights (1), and Return on Investment (1) are scarcely mentioned.

Methodology and data type received less atten-

tion. Data mining and cleaning (3), data stewardship and provenance (2), received limited reference in course descriptions. Types of data used in analysis receive limited attention, with big data (1), metadata (1), email campaigns data (1), Web site data (1), mobile applications (Apps data) (1), and video platform data (1). Finally, analytical tools are mentioned twice as spreadsheet usage (1) and parallel processing (1).

**Identity, Branding, and Influencers:** As one can anticipate in PR and social media courses, identity, brand, and brand-building are present, albeit less frequently than production or analytics. Descriptions focused on emphasizing the concept of identity, branding, and brand-building were present in seven courses. More specific in the realm of social media influencers, discussion centered on self-identity, self-branding, and social media influencers were present in five course descriptions. Finally, the relationship between branding, image, and reputation was only mentioned once.

**High-Impact Learning for Professional Development:** In reviewing all course descriptions there are 40 course descriptions that reference high-impact practices and an integration of industry perspective. Discussion of industry-relevant skills taught through project-based and hands-on learning are present in 20 course descriptions, and applied learning is referenced in seven course descriptions. Project work with real companies or clients (6), capstone and campaigns (3), Industry professionals or industry thought leaders as guest lecturers (3), and social media internships (1) illustrate an emphasis on experiential learning in the emerging pedagogy. Case studies (7), lectures (2), Socratic-style lectures (1), online lectures (1), and seminars (1) show that traditional approaches are present, but to a substantially smaller degree than high-impact learning.

**Professional Development and Career Paths:** Career paths in PR and strategic communication using social media are being incorporated in the current body of courses, though very diffuse in articulation of specific niche areas of practice and subfields. Areas of practice include organizations, systems, and organizational communication (6), social media and internet marketing (3), corporate communication (2), social media management (2), while internal communication (1), external communication (1), community relations (1), consumer relations (1), and social marketing (1) received limited attention. Niche subfields include health communication, sports communication, government relations, nonprofit PR, and public service

and public education campaigns, each of which is mentioned in one course description apiece.

A smaller area of emphasis in the review of course descriptions is the emphasis on essential PR and professional skills. Social media or online community management (9), account management and planning (2), media planning (1), and promotion (1) are mentioned in course descriptions. Essential skill development in critical thinking and analysis (7) and fiscal management (2) suggests additional attention on areas of professional development.

### Discussion

While it is unsurprising that PR principles dominate social media course descriptions in accredited PR programs, it is clear that integration of technology and communication subfields is apparent within the body of courses offered across social media course offerings. This reflects the growing integration of disciplinary fields and technology that is occurring across the professional practice (CPRE, 2018; Duhé, 2015). The findings demonstrate heightened attention to the value of social media's application in PR and other affiliated strategic communication fields, specifically how it is used professionally, and an emphasis on professional development through the use of applied forms of learning (McCollough, 2018; Parsons & MacCallum, 2019) that aligns content with the areas of practice emphasized by industry professionals (Brunner et al., 2018; DiStasio, 2019; Ewing et al., 2018; Luttrell & Capizzo, 2021; Wolf & Archer, 2018; Freberg & Kim, 2018; Fang et al., 2019).

Also clear in the findings is a mix of content production skills, aligned with literature on necessary content in social and digital media in public relations and strategic communication courses. The emphasis on content production skills, specifically in social and digital media suggests an emphasis on training aspiring practitioners to leverage technical strategies that are both creative and engaging (Fang, Wei, and Huang, 2019; Freberg & Kim, 2018). While the descriptions are limited, one can infer the motivation is to encourage user engagement and promote brand identification, reputation management, and relationship cultivation and maintenance (Rosado-Pinto & Loureiro, 2020). The commitment to balanced writing focused on engaging and interactive content production aligns the new branch of PR curriculum with the traditional value of writing among educators and professionals alike (Meganck & Smith, 2019).

Strategic use of conduits is a clear element of consideration in accredited programs. While this is unsurprising, it is invaluable to aspiring professionals who are expected to work proficiently on a diverse body of media conduits. The presence of a discussion of traditional platforms indicates an effort on the part of PR educators to demonstrate the application of new technologies to traditional practices, including media relations and presentations. The gap in articulation of how traditional consideration of the managerial mindset leads the researchers to consider whether educators are emphasizing consideration of the fundamental impact on strategic PR campaign design, development, and implementation, which are essential to helping aspiring practitioners to cultivate a managerial mindset about emerging technologies and the impact on professional practice, moving forward.

The findings also point to an emphasis on strategic use of digital applications, both in craft of content and in research and evaluation. The emphasis on strategic targeting of audience, conduit, and message remains critical in using emerging technologies for strategic PR (Ewing *et al.*, 2018; Neill & Schauster, 2015). Emphasis on data analytics, analysis, and presentation of data among the courses offered is in keeping with the prioritization of research and evaluation of social and digital media in the strategic PR work (Volk, 2016), as is the emphasis on data visualization and presentation (Weincierz & Rottger, 2019).

The scope of coursework associated with strategic research and analysis has its limits. A notable limitation in reviewing the course descriptions is a slim consideration of theory, whether associated with PR, communication, mass communication, or computer mediated communication. The findings may suggest that the curriculum may benefit from a stronger foundation in the interrelationship between relevant theory and best professional practice. This question will become clearer with deeper analysis in subsequent research. The limited emphasis on data measurement, cleaning, and stewardship also suggests a need for a stronger commitment to instruction on data gathering and measurement methodology in service of strategic research, analysis, and assessment.

Of note was the limited emphasis on branding and social influencers within the courses offered. While limited at the individual level, there was a stronger presence associated with organizational identity and brand. It is clear there is room for discussion about social media influencers as a strategic con-

sideration (Wallace *et al.*, 2020, Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Smith *et al.*, 2018), but the current curriculum leaves room to grow with respect to this aspect of the industry. So, branding building and influencers grow in consideration and research, it has yet to extend to the classroom. This seems to present another opportunity to better bridge between the classroom and the discipline (CPRE, 2018).

Another area of concern for PR educators is the scarcity of legal and ethical discussion present in the descriptions for courses focused on emerging technology (Luttrell & Ward, 2018). While there may likely be discussion of these issues in existing law and ethics courses, it does raise some questions associated with the recently renewed call for a stronger discussion of ethics in PR courses raised by the Commission on Public Relations Education report (CPRE, 2018). Further, the limited discussion of legal issues and implications within social media courses may lead to unintentional legal and ethical consequences for aspiring practitioners.

Finally, dominance of high impact learning practices in social and digital media public relations courses coincides with the emphasis currently in place in higher education (CPRE, 2018; McCollough, 2018; Setiawan *et al.*, 2019), and within PR pedagogy (Fraustino, Pressgrove, & Colistra, 2019; Smudde, 2019; Wilder, 2020). Specifically, their application is connected to better preparing students to successfully enter the industry with a strong body of experience in practice as they enter the workforce (Brunner, *et al.*, 2018; McCollough, 2018). This finding suggests that there is an emphasis on professionalization in the larger body of social and digital media courses offered by accredited public relations programs.

As this is a foundational study intended to set the stage for further scholarship, there are certainly limitations within this study, and the authors acknowledge them. First, this study is only examining PR courses at the undergraduate level, leaving the larger body of communication, mass communication, and their sub-fields yet to explore at both the undergraduate and graduate level. This clearly merits a broader examination of the body of social media, data analytics, and digital media courses available across the discipline. Another clear limitation being that this study focuses on the course descriptions available. This limited the capacity for the researchers to engage in a deeper qualitative content analysis, and merited the integration of quantification to demonstrate prevalence of



themes and concepts to help answer the exploratory questions. Future analysis should strive to incorporate multiple avenues to gain a deeper focus beyond the themes articulated in course descriptions. Further research could include survey or interview research of faculty teaching in these areas, as well as an examination of course syllabi.

Limitations aside, the authors note clear areas of examination that represent the next steps for study to develop a richer body of understanding about teaching and learning in digital PR. Considering the discipline's ability to meet the needs of the industry (Brunner et al., 2018), the authors note the need for further examination of the needs of the industry to better identify what areas of need further emphasis, addition, or revision to better reflect needs. Integrating the perspective of employers, industry veterans, and entry-level professionals will aid educators in developing, offering, and assessing graduate's proficiency in knowledge and skills that meet the needs of the discipline and allow us to answer the call for better industry integration in the classroom (Krishna et al., 2020).

Finally, exploring institutional challenges that educators face in developing and providing a meaningful curriculum that effectively meets industry needs is essential. Further scholarship engaging educators and administrators to better understand the potential body of challenges, including resource scarcity, institutional politics, competition among units, and other barriers they face in developing and implementing a curriculum that prepares new practitioners for work in digital PR is crucial in providing a more holistic answer to the long-standing question of how to better bridge the chasm between course content and industry needs. This becomes particularly relevant in considering an equitable integration of current industry practices and technology in academic programs of any size or scope (Luttrell, Wallace, McCollough & Lee, 2020). A concerted focus on these additional areas of study will enable educators and practitioners to bridge more thoroughly the disconnect between curriculum and current professional practice to better prepare aspiring practitioners to enter the workforce (CPRE, 2018; Wright & Flynn, 2017).

### Conclusion

The goal of this exploratory study was to establish a preliminary understanding of where and how emerging forms of media are being taught in accredited PR programs to facilitate further study to determine

if PR education is keeping pace with industry. The need to demonstrate care in the integration of digital tools into PR curriculum can only be accommodated if first a baseline is known. In this paper, we have demonstrated that baseline for future study of impact, reach, and need for when, how, and why digital tools are used in public relations classroom which benefits both educators by way of curriculum development and practitioners in expectation building, in order to challenge both the academy and the profession to improve and grow as the expectations of PR pros accelerate.

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