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## Public Relations Review



# Rethinking technology research and social media



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Over the last decade, interest in new technology research has increased tenfold, and technology related submissions to Public Relations Review now represent one of the top three areas of interest. Public relations scholarship should extend, refine or clarify, theory, research or practice.

Much of the focus of recent scholarship has been to examine technology interfaces (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), rather than focusing on the more important questions involving stakeholders, publics, communication, relational issues, and advancing the body of knowledge in the profession. Social media tools represent only a medium, or channel, through which public relations is practiced. More important than the communication channels are the questions that we ask. The focus of scholarship should be on public relations, communication, and stakeholders/publics, rather than whether a particular type of organization uses a specific social media interface effectively.

*Our technology scholarship should go farther:* We need to posit better research questions. Many professions are conducting much more sophisticated technology research, examining technology in order to solve real-world problems. For example, researchers at Microsoft are studying how to diagnose depression, using Twitter; Chinese firms are studying how to use location-based-services to anticipate the needs of their publics; health and crisis researchers, cartographers, and meteorologists, are developing applications to help people communicate during and after crises and natural disasters. The U.S. Military, DARPA, and the Central Intelligence Agency are using network analysis and social media data to track terrorists and develop lists of “friends” and “enemies.” Efforts such as these represent applications of social media tools to address real world problems and meet the needs of stakeholders and publics, rather than just asking whether some group uses social media in a particular way. Public relations scholarship must keep pace with technology. We should ask sophisticated, theory based, questions, solve communication problems, and lead the world in studying technology and communication.

Given the abundance of scholarship on social media and new technology, the following recommendations are intended to help guide technology related submissions:

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- (1) The focus of the research and scholarship should be on public relations, rather than advertising, marketing, journalism, or some other area. Although public relations professionals have an interest in many areas, dozens of more appropriate journals exist for articles that primarily deal with another scholarly or professional area.
- (2) New technology and social media articles should position themselves within the abundant public relations literature. Articles that fail to acknowledge the guiding theories and assumptions of public relations, position themselves within core areas of the field, or draw primarily on scholarship from another discipline (e.g., marketing, advertising, journalism, etc.) will be rejected.
- (3) The focus of scholarship should be on advancing the theory or practice of public relations. Tangential or ephemeral areas of scholarship that pertain only to narrow issues or segments of the profession should be avoided. Research should build on broad communication and relational principles.
- (4) Articles should make direct connections to the research, theory, or practice of public relations that go beyond corporate or agency settings. For convenience, many scholars implicitly assume that agency professionals are representative of the entire profession, or draw upon “Fortune 500” or other large corporations, ignoring the subtlety and complexity of public relations theory and practice. All research approaches should be methodologically sound beyond mere “convenience sampling.” Authors should take steps to explain how what was learned in each study also advances the practice of public relations among other constituencies: small and medium sized organizations, solo practitioners, activists, governmental professionals, educators, and others.