Communication Practice Trends in Asia-Pacific: Focus on New Technologies, but Concerns about Trust and Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Beyond some unsurprising findings, such as increasing use of social media for communication management and public relations, the 2020/21 Asia-Pacific edition of the global Communication Monitor found that practitioners in the region are giving increased focus to the use of 'big data' and artificial intelligence such as bots and algorithms, but many harbor concerns about ethics in these practices and maintaining trust. The survey across 15 Asia-Pacific countries and territories shows that practitioners are coming to grips with social media and day-to-day digital technology, but 75% see the use of bots, algorithms, and big data analytics as emerging issues. Building and maintaining public trust while using such technologies has become the third highest rated strategic issue, after being ranked seventh in 2017. Concerningly, however, almost one-third of communication professionals in Asia-Pacific have never participated in ethics training and many reported a lack of IT skills, which pose challenges in implementing ethical and socially responsible practice. The findings offer a contribution to practical theory in place of normative theories and, operationally, the findings indicate a need for increased professional development by employers, professional organizations, and educators, and potentially an updating of codes of practice and codes of ethics.

Keywords: Big data, AI, bots, Algorithms, Ethics, Social responsibility, Trust

Introduction

Since the beginning of 2020, all sectors of industry, professional practice, and society, have been undergoing changes unparalleled in recent decades. In addition to society-wide changes resulting from the existential crisis caused by COVID-19, rapid and accelerating change is being driven by emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs). It could be said that a second more advanced era of digitalization has begun with increasing access to and use of 'big data' and the application of

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artificial intelligence (AI) ranging from bots and algorithms to full automation of some processes.

This article reviews and discusses key empirical findings of the 2020/21 Asia-Pacific Communication Monitor (APCM), a biennial survey that is part of the global Communication Monitor series. The study, the largest of its type in the region, provides insights into the use of media and communication technologies and strategic issues of concern to practitioners working in communication management and public relations (PR). It also reports perceptions of directions in practice over the next three years. In this study, communication management is taken to include closely related fields of practice such as corporate, organizational, and government communication, as well as communication by non-profit and non-government organizations (NGOs), also often referred to as strategic communication.

Empirical findings are compared to a number of theories of communication management and PR to identify the extent to which practices adhere to existing theory, or illustrate gaps or conflicts. As such, the findings can contribute to the development of theory, particularly practical theory, which communication scholar Robert Craig describes as essential to link normative notions with the "technical aspects of practical conduct" (Craig, 2018, p. 289). He says communication is a practical discipline requiring practical theory--explaining that practical theory is not "merely practical in the colloquial sense of technical or occupational training" but involves "communicative praxis … to improve communication and disseminate better communication practices" (Craig, 2018, pp. 289-290).

The findings also contribute to professional practice by informing the design of future education and training, as well as industry planning to address the trends and challenges of the future.

The Framework and Context for Analyzing Communication Practice Today

Communication management and PR are broadly defined and described within a number of theories, including Excellence theory of PR (Grunig et al., 2006); contingency theory (Cancel et al., 1997); relationship management (Ledingham & Bruning, 2009); organization-public relationships (OPR) (Hung, 2005); and strategic communication (Hallahan et al., 2007; Heath & Johansen, 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018). More recently, the evolution of participatory, emergent, and networked strategic communication

(Falkheimer & Heide, 2015; King, 2010; Murphy, 2015) and dialogic theory of communication and engagement (Taylor & Kent, 2014) have provided further frameworks for examining practices. Contemporary corporate communication theory as outlined by Cornelissen (2020) echoes relationship, networked, and what he calls "adaptive" approaches that involve "balancing the mission and vision of the organization" (p. 111) with the interests of its stakeholders and the environment for ethical and socially responsible practice. These theories are discussed in an extensive body of literature, such as the references cited, and do not require elaboration here.

Given a focus of the APCM survey questionnaire on emerging channels and information and communication technologies (ICTs) as well as identifying other issues of strategic concern, and given substantial reporting of a "crisis of trust" in government, business, media, and many institutions (Edelman, 2021) and concerns about ethics and social responsibility in public communication (Macnamara, 2020), these three areas of communication management and PR theory are particularly relevant to this discussion. Accordingly, the findings of the APCM are examined within the context of (1) the use and affordances of emerging ICTs including 'big data', bots and other applications of algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI); (2) public trust, which has been shown to be affected by the use of ICTs; and (3) social responsibility and ethics. Key concepts and theories in relation to these three areas are briefly reviewed in the following as the framework for analysis of the survey findings.

New Information and Communication Technologies

The development and use of new technology in all sectors is widely documented, including the enormous changes ushered in to business, government, and society by new ICTs. Most recently, this has involved major advancements in data analysis, including of very large data sets referred to as "big data" (I. Lee, 2017) and a range of AI applications powered by natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning.

Following large-scale abuses of personal data and manipulation such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which reportedly influenced the results of the UK EU Referendum (Brexit) and the 2016 US Presidential election (Berghel, 2018; Chen, 2018), sociologists have warned of "data colonialism" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. xiii) involving "more brutal forms of exploitation" than previous decades of political and cultural colonialism (p. 85). Couldry and

Mejias argue that citizens are being "colonized by data" to support and serve capitalism, with communication focused on capturing, trading, and exploiting personal data for profit (p. x). A 2020 analysis claims that new technologies have created a "perfect datastorm" and those technologies are frequently being "used against society rather than for society" (Macnamara, 2020, pp. 8, 163) [original emphasis].

Numerous studies also warn that ICTs are being used to accelerate the distribution of misinformation and disinformation (Davis, 2019; Kavanagh & Rich, 2019; Macnamara, 2020), potentially leading to a post-truth society (McIntyre, 2018). For example, in 2020 at the height of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the world faced an "infodemic" as well as a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). The United Nations subsequently went further, declaring the pandemic a "disinfodemic" (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020) because of disinformation that undermined public health communication and risked lives.

Nevertheless, communication professionals are under pressure from their employers and clients and competitive forces to adopt and optimize the capabilities of ICTs including big data analysis and AI. The 2021 IPR Future of Communications in Asia Report (Institute for Public Relations, 2021) identified the "exponential growth of technology" (p. 3) in the communication sector. In particular, they study noted that practices in Asia often "leapfrog" the traditional stages of technological development (p. 14), which puts additional pressure on Asian practitioners to adopt new technologies quickly.

In the interest of balance, it is important to note that new technologies bring benefits to many sectors of society. However, the use of rapidly evolving ICTs and AI tools by companies, political parties, and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter is the subject of considerable concern and scrutiny within governments (House of Lords, 2020) and among academic researchers in several disciplines (Davis, 2019; Flew, 2019a; Kavanagh & Rich, 2019).

Within communication management and PR, Bourne (2019) has warned of the "PR profession's myopia" regarding AI, which she says is narrowly framed by "21st century neoliberal capitalism" (p. 109). In discussing a 2018 RAND Corporation study of "truth decay", CEO of the Institute for Public Relations (IPR), Tina McCorkindale, stated: "I do think PR bears some responsibility for truth decay" (Field, 2018, para. 5).

Research also has indicated that communication practitioners lack competence in relation to ICTs. The previous edition of the Asia-Pacific Communication Monitor in 2017/18 found that, despite the stated importance of digital and social media, only a small proportion of communication practitioners (7.7%) reported having 'very highly developed' capabilities in using these channels and tools. More than 40% reported having only 'moderate' capabilities and 11.4% reported having 'low' or 'very low' capabilities in using digital and social media (Macnamara et al., 2018). While technical IT skills in relation to big data and AI applications are not expected of communication practitioners, their general understanding of these new technologies and related ethical and societal implications are also reported to be low (Gregory & Halff, 2020).

A "Crisis of Trust"

Abuses of data, misinformation, and disinformation are correlated with and have arguably contributed to low levels of public trust in government, media, business, and even NGOs in many countries, including in Asia-Pacific. The Edelman Trust Barometer, an annual survey of more than 30,000 people in almost 30 countries, reported that in 2021, only slightly more than half of the population globally (53%) trust government. Even less trust media (51%), and only 57% of the general population trust NGOs (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021, p. 6). Trust in all main sources of information has declined significantly over the past two years from already alarming levels, with only 56% of people trusting search engines; 53% trusting traditional media; just 41% trusting owned media; and only 35% of people trusting social media (p. 24), creating a "crisis of trust" in many countries (Flew, 2019a, p. 25; Macnamara, 2020, p. 39). Flew (2019b) specifically identified a "crisis of digital trust" in Asia-Pacific countries (p. 4738).

Relevant to this analysis, the 2020 Ipsos MORI Veracity Index in the UK reported that, while nurses, doctors, teachers, judges, and scientists are highly trusted, advertising professionals, politicians, journalists, and business leaders are at the bottom of the trust index, along with real estate agents and footballers, trusted by as little as 13% of the population (Ipsos MORI, 2020). A broad description of advertising was used in this study, suggesting that PR and related contributors to promotional culture (Davis, 2013; Wernick, 1991) were included in this category.

A specific 2019 Trust in Communicators study conducted in Europe found that only 12% of the general population trust PR practitioners and 38% actively distrust them (Zerfass, et al., 2019). Such findings indicate that there is

much to be done by organizations and their communicators to regain and maintain public trust.

Social Responsibility and Ethics

Communication management and PR frame their work within theories of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and claims of high ethical standards. CSR has particularly been championed in PR literature (e.g., Carroll & Brown, 2018; T. Lee, 2017) and in corporate communication (Wong & Dhanesh, 2017). Most recently, the related concept of social purpose which is increasingly applied to all types of organizations including corporations, (Business Roundtable, 2019; Schlag & Melé, 2020), is also pertinent in examining communication management and PR today. Ethics also has long been discussed in the field (e.g., Pearson, 1989a, 1989b; Bowen, 2007, 2008; Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006; Taylor & Kent, 2014), with suggestions that, in addition to acting ethically themselves, practitioners can act as an "ethics counsel" and a "corporate conscience" in organizations (Bowen, 2008, p. 271).

In her text, Ethics in Public Relations: A Guide to Best Practice, Parsons (2016) says that "strides have been made by many professional bodies and educational organizations" in relation to ethics, citing the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) in the UK as having "a compulsory module [for] all those undertaking their annual continuing professional development program to maintain Accredited Practitioner or Chartered Practitioner status" (p. xiii). However, CIPR Fellow Stuart Bruce reported in a recent interview that, of the CIPR's 10,000 members, only around 300 have completed the professional development training and attended the one-day accreditation program to become chartered practitioners--just 3% (as cited in Macnamara, 2020, p. 194).

Bowen warned in 2007 that 70% of PR practitioners in the United States had little or no training in ethics, with 30% reporting that they had no academic ethics study of any kind and another 40% saying they had a few lectures or readings on ethics (para. 24). In early 2021, UK PR practitioner and education advocate, Kerry Sheehan, conducted an analysis of online PR courses and training programs to examine how often ethics is taught as part of degrees and short courses. She reported: "The answer, in short, is almost never" (Sheehan, 2021, para. 6). She found that when ethics is taught in PR education and training, it is "siloed" as "a side issue" (para. 8). She called for greater integration of ethics into university degrees in public relations and short courses, particularly in relation to "technologies, including artificial intelligence" (para. 6).

Compounding this paradox--the pressure to use powerful new communication technologies when public trust in media and communication is low and practitioners lack training in ethics--is the existence of considerable evidence that communication professionals are perpetrators of unethical practices and do not demonstrate social responsibility in a worrying number of instances. In an analysis of twentieth century PR, Surma and Demetrious (2018) say that "the practice of public relations and its relationship to communicative ethics played an integral … political and cultural role in shaping the emergence and development of the neoliberal project in the twentieth century". They describe PR as involving "plastic words" and propaganda that contributed to "neoliberal transformation of twentieth century discourse" and "propagating the reach and impact of neoliberalism" (p. 92). In Beyond Post-communication: Challenging Disinformation, Deception, and Manipulation, Macnamara (2020) points to the historical links of PR and communication management to the campaigns of Big Tobacco and Big Oil; recent scandals such as the closure of UK PR firm Bell Pottinger after revelations of corrupt practices; promotion of convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein; and contemporary practices such as astroturfing and non-transparent 'pay-to-play' methods such as advertorial, native advertising, and paid influencers. Analyses also identify and critique the role of communication professionals in greenwashing; corporate corruption cover-ups; fake accounts; and misleading political campaigns (Macnamara, 2020; Reid & Dotto, 2019; Stauber & Rampton, 1995). In a recent analysis, Edwards (2020) states that "disinformation and fake news are well-established tools in public relations work and are implicated in the current crisis" (p. 1). Ihlen et al. (2019) also identified connections between PR and post-truth.

In terms of new and emerging technologies, an analysis of attitudes towards AI by Bourne (2019) described PR practitioners as "cheerleaders" without adequate concern for ethics and consumer protection. A study by Buhmann et al. (2019) found little critical reflection on ethics in relation to use of big data and algorithms, and an analysis by Gregory and Halff (2020) argued that social damage is being done by data-driven public relations.

Such concerns and reported shortcomings indicate that ongoing research is important to track changes in practice, attitudes, and the concerns and needs of practitioners in these fields that play a leading role in the public sphere (Habermas, 1989), or what some critics call the post-public sphere (Schlesinger, 2020).

Methodology

The Asia-Pacific Communication Monitor (APCM) is conducted biennially to explore the practices, channels, and methods of communication most used and the strategic issues of most concern to communication management and PR practitioners, as well as to explore their perceptions of trends into the future. The following analysis examines a number of key findings of the 2020/21 APCM study within the context of relevant research literature.

The research uses quantitative methodology and statistical analysis across a substantial sample, as outlined in the following.

Method

The APCM used an online survey of communication practitioners working in corporations, government, non-profit and non-organizations (NGOs), and communication agencies. The APCM was conducted in collaboration with 'sister' studies in Europe (Zerfass et al., 2020), North America (Meng et al., 2019), and Latin America (Moreno et al., 2019). With more than 80 countries participating globally using comparable methodology and sharing common questions, the Communication Monitor studies provided extensive data on communication practices and issues and concerns facing practitioners in the region and worldwide.

Research Instrument

The online questionnaire, activated between September and November 2020 in English and Chinese, consisted of 32 questions using dichotomous, nominal, ordinal, and numeric scales. A number of questions from previous APCM surveys in 2015 and 2017 (Macnamara et al., 2015, 2017) were repeated to gain longitudinal data, and a number of questions in the European, North America, and Latin America surveys were used to gain globally comparative data. All topics and options in multiple-choice questions were derived from literature on contemporary issues and topics in communication management and PR.

This analysis focuses on findings gained in relation to four research questions, namely:

RQ1: Which issues will be most important for communication management/PR practitioners in Asia-Pacific in the next three years?

RQ2: How challenging are the various communication practices in terms of ethics?

RQ3: How important are different communication channels and methods for addressing stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences today?

RQ4: How important will the communication channels and methods identified in RQ3 be in three years?

Research Sample

An invitation to participate in the survey was distributed via e-mail using the member database of the Asia-Pacific Association of Communication Directors (APACD) and the database of previous APCM editions, supplemented with invitations distributed by national collaborators and professional PR and communication associations in the region to their members. This ensured the integrity of the sample, restricting it to communication professionals in the identified sectors.

A total of 2,306 communication professionals responded to the survey, of whom 1,236 completed it. Responses from participants who could not be identified as part of the population were deleted from the dataset, leaving 1,155 fully completed responses from 15 countries and territories in the region.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a statistical program for social science research. Results were tested for statistical significance with, depending on the variable, Chi-square, ANOVA/Scheffé Post-hoc Test, independent samples t-test, Pearson's correlation, Kendall rank correlation, or Mann-Whitney U Test. The applied methods are reported in the footnotes of the figures. Only significant results ($p \leq .05$) and highly significant results ($p \leq .01$) are reported.

Demographic analysis shows that the sample included primarily senior professionals with tertiary qualifications and long tenure in the field. For example, two out of three respondents were communication leaders at the time of the survey, with 23.1% holding a senior position as head of communication in an organization or chief executive officer of a communication consultancy, and 34% were unit leaders or in charge of a single discipline in a communication department. The average age of respondents was 39.2 years and 50.7% have more than 10 years of experience in communication management. Almost two-thirds (64.1%) of the respondents are women. Almost all (96.6%) of the respondents hold a university undergraduate degree and 45.1% hold postgraduate qualifications.

Six out of ten respondents work in communication departments in organizations, with 18.4% employed in joint stock companies; 19.5% in private companies; 17.7% in government-owned, public sector or political organizations; and 5.0% in NGOs. A further 39.4% are communication consultants working in agencies or freelance. The respondents are based in 15

countries, territories and special administrative regions (SARs): Australia, Brunei, China (Mainland), Hong Kong & Macau, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Key Findings

Strategic Issues for Communication Management in Asia-Pacific

Unsurprisingly, given the focus on digital communication and social media in society, Asia-Pacific practitioners in communication management and PR ranked 'coping with the digital evolution and social web' as the leading strategic issue to address in 2020 and in the near future (RQ1). It was rated as a top-three issue by 38.1% of the respondents (see Figure 1). However, 'coping with the digital evolution and social web' has declined in focus from being rated a 'top three' issue by 53.1% of the respondents in 2015 and 48.9% in 2017 (see Figure 2). This suggests that communication professionals are coming to grips with digital and social media that are now commonplace.

Figure 1 Most Important Strategic Issues for Communication Management in Asia-Pacific until 2023

Coping with the digital evolution and the social web — 38.1%
Using big data and/or algorithms for communication — 36.9%
Building and maintaining trust — 34.3%
Strengthening the role of the communication function in supporting top-management decision making — 31.8%
Dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility — 29.9%
Exploring new ways of creating and distributing content — 28.2%
Linking business strategy and communication — 25.5%
Dealing with the speed and volume of information flow — 24.1%
Matching the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources — 22.7%
Elevating and adapting competences of communication practitioners — 20.3%
Tackling gender issues on the individual, organisational or professional level — 8.3%

Question: Which issues will be most important for communication management/PR within the next three years from your point of view?
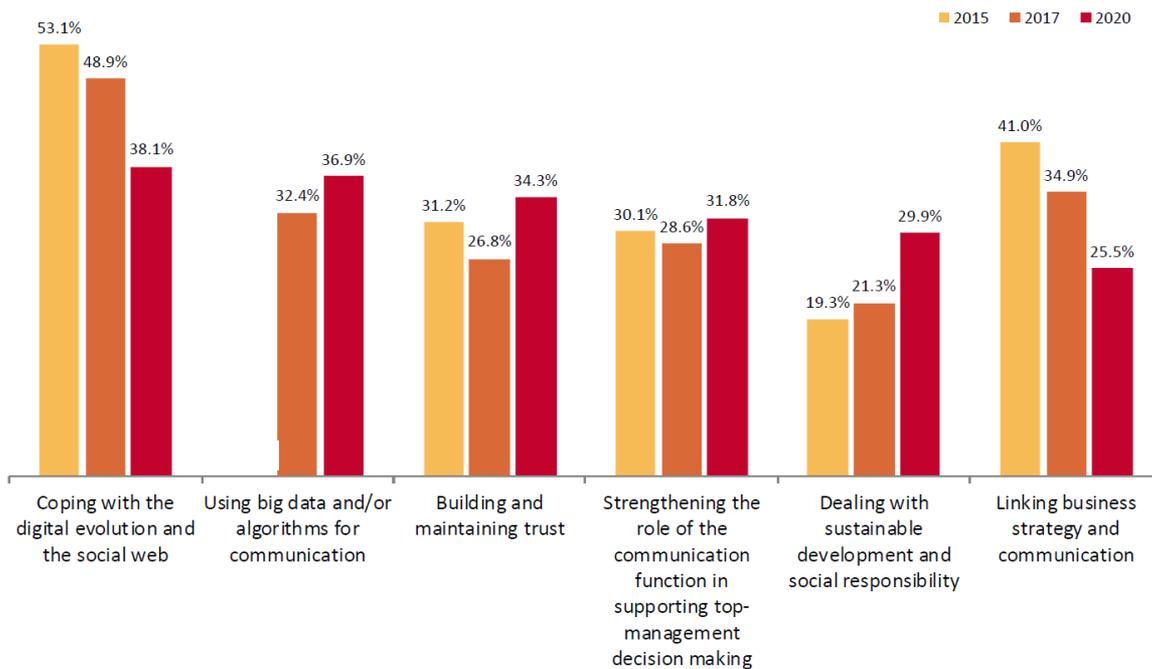
Note: $n = 1,155$; Percentages and frequency based on the top three issues.

Source: Macnamara et al., 2021, p. 18.

Significantly in relation to RQ1, 'using big data and/or algorithms for communication' was the second highest rated strategic issue looking ahead to 2023, identified as a top three issue by 36.9% of the respondents, as shown in Figure 1. Moreover, a significant change compared with previous years is that this issue is up from 32.4% in 2017 and zero in 2015 (see Figure 2). This indicates quite widespread and growing attention to the use of big data and AI tools such as algorithms. Consultancies and agencies are most focused on 'using big data and/or algorithms for communication', with 39.1% rating this a top three strategic issue over the next three years

Figure 2 Changes in Strategic Issues and Concerns Prioritized by Communication Practitioners in Asia-Pacific 2015–2020

Question: Which issues will be most important for communication management/PR within the next three years from your point of view?

Note: *n* = 1,155 in 2020; *n* = 1,200 in 2017; *n* = 1,306 in 2015. Frequency and percentages based on the top three issues.

Source: Macnamara et al., 2021, p. 19.

At the same time, recognition of a need for 'building and maintaining trust' over the next three years has increased with 34.3% of the respondents giving this issue a top-three rating, compared with just 26.8% rating this highly in 2017 (see Figure 2). More than 41% of non-profit organizations rated 'building and maintaining trust' as their most important strategic issue over the next three years, followed by companies (37.3%). Surprisingly, less than one-third of government communicators (33.2%) rated this as a top three priority.

Similarly, in relation to RQ1 'dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility' has increased substantially, with almost 30% of all practitioners ranking this highly in 2020 compared with just 19.3% in 2015. This finding is timely and encouraging, given the warning by social scientists such as Couldry and Mejias (2019) that new ICTs are being widely used to deceive and manipulate people and warnings sounded in the analysis of *post-communication* by Macnamara (2020).

Internal concern about 'strengthening the role of the communication function in supporting top management decision making' has increased marginally over the past five years from 30.1% in 2015 to 31.8% in 2020, while 'linking business strategy and communication' has declined

substantially as a strategic issue from more than 40% in 2015 and 34.9% in 2017 to just over one-quarter (25.5%) in 2020 (see Figure 2). The latter may be a reflection of the growth in significance of other issues, rather than declining interest in this issue.

The findings shown in Figures 1 and 2 reveal that focus on 'using big data and/or algorithms for communication' is increasing in parallel with identification of 'building and maintaining trust', and 'dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility' as key strategic issues. Given widely reported manipulation and deception of people through the use of big data and algorithms, the findings of the APCM 2020/21 indicate a tension and possible conflict in applying these new technologies while at the same time seeking to build and maintain trust and address social responsibility.

While on one hand, the concurrence of attention to public trust, social responsibility, and 'use of big data and/or algorithms for communication' could indicate an ethical and responsible approach, this is made problematic by a finding in relation to RQ2 that 'using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media' and 'exploiting audiences' personal data by applying big data analyses' are the leading

ethical challenges among communication management and PR practitioners (see Figure 3). Well over half of Asia-Pacific practitioners see 'using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media" and 'exploiting audiences' personal data by applying big data analyses' as extremely or very challenging, and more than 75% see these practices as at least moderately challenging.

Figure 3 Issues of Ethical Concern for Communication Practitioners in Asia-Pacific
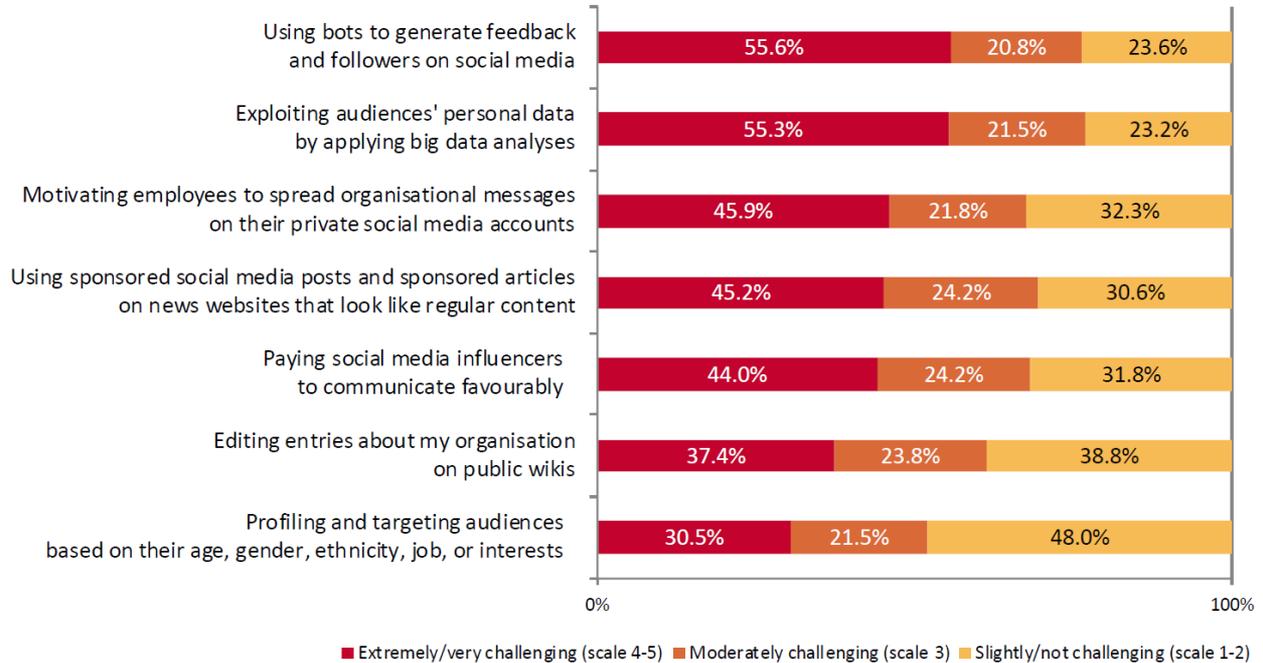
Question: *Strategic communication and public relations are constantly evolving and introducing new ways of communicating with stakeholders. How challenging are the following practices in your opinion in terms of ethics?*

Note: $n \geq 1,036$. Scale: 1 (Ethically not challenging at all) to 5 (Ethically extremely challenging).

Source: Macnamara et al., 2021, p. 53.

A further 69.5% of practitioners see 'using sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles on new websites that look like regular content' (i.e., non-transparent paid content and 'native advertising') as extremely, very, or moderately challenging, and 68.2% see 'paying social media influencers to communicate favorably' as extremely, very, or moderately challenging (RQ2). More than half (52.0%) are also extremely, very, or moderately concerned about 'profiling and targeting audiences based on their age, gender, ethnicity, job, or interests'.

Professional communicators in government and non-profit organizations reported experiencing the most ethical challenges, with 51.5% of government communicators reporting several ethical challenges in the previous year and 46.3% of communicators in non-profit organizations reporting similarly. Intriguingly, 56.7% of communication professionals in joint stock companies reported no ethical challenges in the previous year.

Communication professionals in Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, and the Philippines reported the most ethical challenges faced in the previous year. Mainland China, Taiwan ROC, and Singapore reported the least, with more than 60% of their communication professionals claiming that they faced no ethical challenges in the past year.

A further potentially concerning finding is that young communication professionals (29 years of age or younger) have the least concerns about ethics in relation to paying social media influencers and exploiting audiences' personal data, and also low levels of ethical concern about sponsored content. These findings signal ethical issues increasing in the field in future.

Research literature that shows a low level of education and training in ethics among communication management and PR practitioners becomes a concern in light of these findings, revealing a gap in knowledge and competence required to ensure ethical and

socially responsible communication practice during what Macnamara (2020) calls "the perfect datastorm" (p. 163). The finding of previous APCM studies, and other research showing communication management and PR practitioners have moderate to low levels of knowledge and skills in using new technologies, attest to this gap. The 2020/21 APCM confirmed that communication practitioners lack skills in relation to information and communication technology, with four out of five practitioners acknowledging a need to increase their competencies (Macnamara et al. 2018).

The focus on 'using big data and algorithms'; 'using bots to generate followers on social media'; 'using sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles'; 'paying social media influencers to communicate favorably'; 'motivating employees to spread organizational messages on their private social media accounts'; and 'profiling and targeting audiences' also indicated a *one-way* rather than a two-way

participatory approach to communication—albeit ethical concerns in relation to these issues suggest that there is a desire for change.

Changing Importance of Communication Channels

When asked to rate the importance of various communication channels and methods to engage with audiences and stakeholders today (RQ3) and their importance looking ahead three years to 2023 (RQ4), Asia-Pacific communicators see a further 23.1% decline in the use of print media and a 15% decline in media relations with press, radio, and TV – although one-third see print media remaining important in 2023. Online newspapers and magazines are also expected to see a decline in use (by 8.7%), but remain the third most used channel of communication after social media and mobile communications (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 Perceived Importance of Communication Channels and Methods for Addressing Stakeholders in Asia-Pacific in 2020 and in 2023
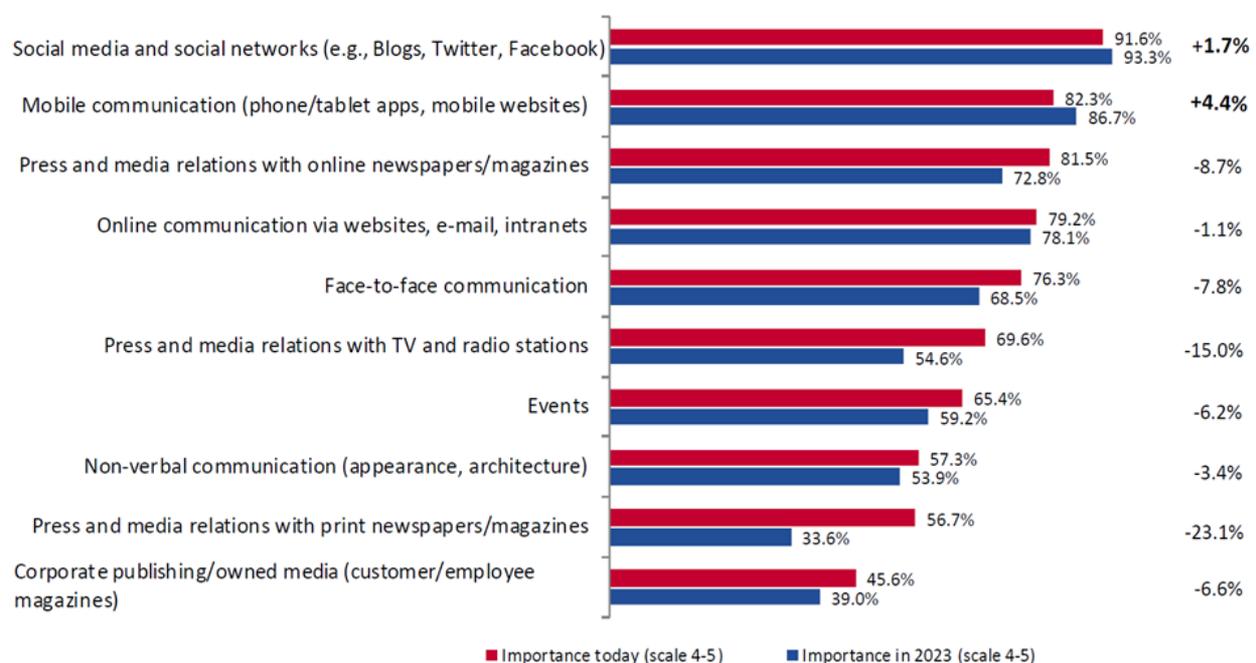
Question: How important are the following methods in addressing stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences today? In your opinion, how important will they be in three years?

Note: *n* = 1,149. Scale: 1 (Not important) to 5 (Very important). Frequency based on scale points 4–5.

Source: Macnamara et al., 2021, p. 21.

However, interestingly, the shift to social media and mobile communication has not been as significant as predicted in the previous edition of the APCM study in 2017. Instead, the use of social media has grown steadily, and use

of mobile communication such as mobile web and phone and tablet apps has remained stable.

Contrary to predictions of the "end of newspapers" a quarter of a century ago (Meyer, 1994), press and media relations remain a major

activity, with only a small decline since 2017--albeit the focus is now online newspapers. More than 80% of practitioners continue to rate press and media relations as important in the online environment.

Looking ahead to 2023, practitioners in Asia-Pacific see continuing growth in the importance and use of social media and mobile communication, and stable patterns in use of websites, with continuing gradual decline in online as well as print newspapers, radio, TV, and events.

Conclusions

This study shows that communication management and PR practitioners in Asia-Pacific see the use of big data and AI technologies such as algorithms as increasing in strategic importance, but at the same time, they hold ethical concerns about ICTs and AI technologies such as using bots and applying big data analysis. Also, they concurrently recognize a need to build and maintain trust and engage with sustainable development and social responsibility, with these two issues having the largest rating increase in 2020 compared with 2017 (see Figure 2). These findings indicate a tension between needing to engage with new technologies while acting ethically, which is necessary to build and maintain public trust.

This tension is exacerbated by research findings that practitioners have low levels of education and training—and sometimes no education or training—in ethics. This significant gap will likely impede ethical and socially responsible practices. Worse, the widely reported orientation of communication management and PR to neoliberal capitalism (Edwards, 2018; L'Etang, 2008; Surma & Demetrious, 2018), and early signs that practices using ICT and AI are applied to serve capitalism and power elites (Bourne, 2019), are likely to exacerbate the tension between ethical practices and market and political forces seeking to exploit new technologies.

Also, the finding that practitioners see significant challenges in activities such as using bots to generate followers on social media (i.e., fake followers); exploiting personal data; using sponsored content disguised as independent news and information; and employing paid influencers without transparency, further raises alarm bells. Without interventions to increase knowledge of ethics at an applied as well as a theoretical level and address the knowledge and skills gap in relation to new technologies, normative theories of strategic corporate, government, and organizational communication, public relations, and related fields are unlikely to be implemented in practice.

Implications for the Future

The findings in relation to lack of education and training in ethics and a lack of skills in using advanced communication and data technologies inform future practices, career development, and the design of education and training. At least four practice-level implications can be identified from this study.

1. In planning their careers, communication and public relations graduates need to give serious consideration to mobile communications and developments in data analytics and AI such as the use of algorithms, bots, and other machine learning applications.

2. Professional associations and institutes need to expand and update their professional development programs in these areas if practitioners are to have sufficient competencies and capabilities to address strategic issues and challenges of the future. It is difficult to see how communication management and PR practitioners can negotiate ethical challenges, let alone play the role of corporate conscience and ethics counsel in organizations, unless this gap is addressed.

3. The codes of practice and codes of ethics, which most professional associations and institutes have developed, likely need review and updating to provide meaningful guidelines in relation to new ICTs and AI tools and privacy legislation.

4. University educators also have a role to play, particularly in plugging the reported gap in ethics education in communication and public relations courses.

Theoretically, this analysis contributes to review and critical analysis of theories of public relations, strategic communication, and communication management and tests them against contemporary empirical data. In so doing, this analysis can contribute to *practical theory*, as advocated by Craig (2018). Craig calls for "deliberation on the normative" as well as technical aspects of communication (2018, p. 289) and argues that it is "imperative to improve communication and to disseminate better communication practices" (p. 290).

This study shows that the normative theories and concepts of excellence; organization-public relationships; participatory, networked, and emergent approaches to strategic communication; dialogue; dialogic engagement; corporate social responsibility; and claims of ethical practice will struggle to materialize in the frenetic mediascape of advanced ICTs and AI without interventions such as those suggested. To some extent, the challenges presented to practitioners and their concerns can be seen as the expected results of disruptive changes and the novelty of new digital tools. However, the concerns identified are also a result of habits, culture, capitalist economics, and

neoliberal politics deeply embedded in many societies and supercharged by powerful new systems of surveillance and targeting.

Given the disinformation, manipulation, and scandals in which communication practitioners are frequently implicated, better communication practices as advocated by Craig (2018) require continuing empirical research and longitudinal analysis to identify issues, concerns, trends, and theory-practice gaps to address.

Funding

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