

**THE ROLE OF NEW PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS AS  
SOCIAL MEDIA EXPERTS**

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In Partial Fulfillment

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by

Nicole Marie Lee

Spring 2013

**SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY**

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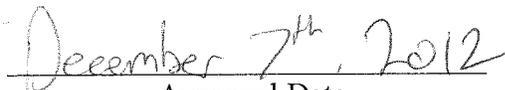
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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

The Role of New Public Relations Practitioners as Social Media  
Experts

by

Nicole Marie Lee

Master of Arts in Communication

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This study uses the theoretical framework of public relations roles research (Broom & Smith, 1979; Dozier, 1983; Dozier & Broom, 2006) to examine the roles performed by new public relations practitioners with five or fewer years of professional experience. Recently, social media tasks have become increasingly prevalent in the practice of public relations (Wright & Hinson, 2009b). Observation has shown that professionals with five or fewer years of experience perform these tasks far more often than more experienced practitioners. This qualitative study explores this phenomenon through in-depth interviews with new public relations practitioners across the U.S. from a variety of organizational settings. The findings from this study provide insight on (1) why new professionals are performing this role, (2) whether social media tasks are being performed as a manager or technician function, and (3) what the implications are of new professionals focusing on this role. This study differs from other roles research in that it focuses on new practitioners and looks at their perspective of the roles they perform. This study is designed to benefit new public relations practitioners and the future of the public relations profession by determining whether new professionals are obtaining the diversity of skills necessary to advance the profession or whether new methods of training and assigning tasks should be assessed.

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## INTRODUCTION

For more than 30 years, researchers have examined public relations by looking at particular roles that are played by professionals (Broom & Smith, 1979). These roles relate to specific tasks performed by either technicians or managers (Dozier, 1983).

One task or set of tasks that has become more and more prevalent in the field of public relations is the utilization of social media tools (Wright & Hinson, 2009b). Research has shown that younger practitioners spend a greater portion of their time in this role than do veteran practitioners (Sha & Dozier, 2012). The purpose of this study is to examine why young professionals are the ones to fill the need for social media practitioners and the implications of this trend.

In addition to social media and public relations roles, this study will also explore the idea of pigeonholing. Pigeonholing is a phenomenon that happens in various professions and is often associated with minority professionals (Acello, 2008). However, professionals in various industries can end up being pigeonholed based simply on situational circumstances such as what type of work is available when they start their career (Acello, 2008).

The pigeonholing of new public relations professionals can have serious implications for the future of the field of public relations. The writing skills of entry-level practitioners are already a concern for many industry veterans (Cole, Hembroff & Corner, 2009; Hines & Basso, 2008; Wise, 2005). The findings of this study could shed light on whether new professionals are getting the writing practice and other experiences they need in order to accomplish their career aspirations such as advancing to more senior practitioner levels or starting their own agency.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Literature that framed this study came from five areas: (1) public relations roles, (2) social media, (3) gender and public relations, (4) new public relations practitioners, and (5) pigeonholing.

### **PUBLIC RELATIONS ROLES**

Dozier and Broom (2006) describe organizational roles as “abstractions, conceptual maps that summarize the most salient features of day-to-day behaviors of organizational members” (p. 137).

#### **Conceptualization**

Research on public relations roles began with an exploratory experiment by Broom and Smith (1979). The focus of the study was clients’ perceptions of the roles or tasks performed by public relations professionals (Broom & Smith, 1979). The study identified five major roles: the technical services provider, the expert prescriber, the communication process facilitator, the problem-solving/task facilitator and the acceptant legitimizer (Broom & Smith, 1979). The acceptant legitimizer, which helps clients simply through listening and supporting, was dropped based on the experiment findings. Broom’s (1982) refined the remaining four roles and called them the expert prescriber, the communication facilitator, the problem-solving process facilitator, and the communication technician.

The expert prescriber is a practitioner who identifies communication problems between an organization and its publics and proposes solutions to those problems (Broom & Smith, 1979). In this role, the practitioner works independently and does not seek input from organization management (Broom & Smith, 1979). The expert prescriber’s relationship with their client or organization has even been compared to the relationship between a doctor and patient (Broom & Smith, 1979). In this role, the practitioner is expected to be the most knowledgeable person in the organization both about public relations and communication problems (Broom & Smith, 1979). One issue that arises with this role is that clients or organizations can become dependent on their expert prescriber due to their relatively passive role in problem solving (Argyris, 1961; Broom & Smith, 1979). Since the organization is

simply doing as the practitioner prescribes rather than engaging with their publics, programs or solutions posed by the prescriber are often asymmetrical and are not typically the most successful in the long-term (Argyris, 1961; Broom & Smith, 1979).

As the name indicates, the role of the communication facilitator is to facilitate communication between an organization and its publics (Broom & Smith, 1979). Originally, “the communication process facilitator,” this role acts as the “go-between” or “information mediator” (Broom & Smith, 1979). The concept of the communication facilitator stemmed from literature on the role of consultants (Broom & Smith, 1979). A primary purpose of this role is to encourage two-way dialogue between an organization and its publics (Broom & Smith, 1979). The communication facilitator plays an important role in helping organizations practice two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Two-way symmetrical communication ensures all parties have adequate information to make decisions of mutual benefit (Broom & Smith, 1979; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The role of problem-solving process facilitator is similar to that of the expert prescriber in that the goal is to identify and solve problems (Broom & Smith, 1979). However the main difference is that the problem-solving process facilitator works with organization management and collaborates to find where communication problems are and what the best solution is (Broom & Smith, 1979). “Only by involving the client in each step can the consultant expect the project to remain relevant to clients’ need and acceptable in the client system” (Broom & Smith, 1979, p.7). While practicing this model is more tedious at the time, it generally results in better long-term results for the organization (Broom & Smith, 1979; Dozier, 1992).

Finally, the communication technician role focuses on the actual production and dissemination of public relations materials (Broom & Smith, 1979). Technician tasks include writing press releases, creating fliers, and updating media lists (Broom & Smith, 1979). The distinguishing characteristic of technicians is that they perform tasks that the client or dominant coalition decides are necessary (Broom & Smith, 1979; Dozier, 1992). Unlike practitioners in the other roles, this role is not involved with identifying or solving problems (Broom & Smith, 1979). While technicians may execute certain aspects of a program under this model, the success or failure of the model really lies with the client who diagnoses the problem and chooses the solution (Broom & Smith, 1979).

Research on these four original public relations roles found that the first three were highly correlated, but the role of communication technician was not correlated with the others (Dozier, 1983). Because of this, Dozier simplified the roles and combined the first three to become what is known as the manager role, and the technician role he found to remain separate. In the two-role typology, technicians are still those who tend to produce and disseminate materials based on what the client or manager deems important (Broom, 2009). Managers are practitioners who are part of decision-making (Dozier, 1992). Managers also use research to inform their strategies (Dozier, 1981, 1986; Judd, 1987) and evaluate their success (Dozier, 1984). Whether using the original four roles, or the two-role dichotomy, no practitioner will fall into a single role at all times (Broom, 2009; Dozier & Broom, 1995; Moss, Newman, & DeSanto, 2005). However, practitioners do tend to have a dominant role they enact most often (Broom, 2009).

Since the original conceptualization by Broom (1979) and then by Dozier (1983), there has been a great deal of research on public relations roles and how they relate to other phenomena in the practice of public relations.

### **Role Antecedents**

Role antecedents are factors that influence role enactment. There has been much research done on antecedents of role enactment such as gender (Broom, 1982; Sha & Dozier, 2011; Toth & Serini, 1998), education (Broom, 1982; Broom & Dozier, 1986; Dozier & Broom, 1995) and professional experience (Sha & Dozier, 2011).

Formal education has been found to have a surprisingly small influence on role enactment (Dozier & Broom, 1995). With his 1979 PRSA survey, Broom (1982) found that education in public relations had no significant impact on manager role enactment. In 1991, formal education was found to account for approximately 2 percent of the variance between manager and technician role enactment (Dozier & Broom, 1995). Dozier and Broom (2006) speculate that the actual measures used to assess education may contribute to how little influence it has been shown to have. The measures used look at whether practitioners have a college degree and in what area of study (Dozier & Broom, 2006). This does not take into account the specific courses the practitioner took (Dozier & Broom, 2006). This is important

because much of the education in public relations, especially undergraduate education, focuses on technical skills and not manager role expertise (Dozier & Broom, 2006).

Professional experience has been found to have a positive relationship with manager role enactment (Dozier & Broom, 2006; Sha & Dozier, 2011). Generally, practitioners begin their careers in a technician role and progress to a manager role (Broom & Smith, 1979; Dozier & Broom, 2006).

Age is another factor that is positively correlated with manager role enactment (Broom, 1982; Dozier & Broom, 1995). Both in the 1979 PRSA survey and a 1991 International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) survey the correlation between the two variables was both positive and significant (Broom, 1982; Dozier & Broom, 1995).

Gender is likely the most-studied demographic in public relations and in the roles research in particular. The research in the area is included in the thesis section titled “Gender and Public Relations,” starting on page 18.

### **Role Enactment Consequences**

Several consequences of role enactment have been identified and include strategic decision-making (Broom, 1982; Broom & Dozier, 1995), income (Broom & Dozier, 1995) and job satisfaction (Broom & Dozier, 1986).

Research has shown that manager role enactment and participation in the strategic decision-making process are highly correlated (Broom, 1982; Dozier & Broom, 1995). This is significant because, according to Dozier and Broom (2006), “practitioners cannot effectively perform the function if they are not participants in *strategic decision making*, the choices made about long-term goals, required courses of action, and allocation of resources” (p. 156). One of the main reasons for this is that public relations as a function requires more than communication; effectively building relationships with publics requires organizations to also consider the actions they take (Dozier & Broom, 2006; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Income is also related to role enactment (Dozier & Broom, 2006). Salary is positively influenced by professional experience, participation in strategic decision-making and manager role enactment (Dozier & Broom, 2006). However, even when professional experience and participation in strategic decision-making are controlled for, manager role enactment is still found to have a positively correlated with income. Tenets of the manager

role, which result in higher salaries, are acknowledged expertise and responsibility for the success or failure of public relations practices (Dozier & Broom, 2006).

Job satisfaction is another consequence of role enactment that has been studied (e.g., Broom & Dozier, 1986). The relationship between role enactment and job satisfaction is somewhat surprising. Broom and Dozier (1986) found that manager role enactment is not positively related to job satisfaction as one may assume. In a longitudinal study of data collected between 1979 and 1985, practitioners who started in the technician role and moved to predominantly the manager role reported a small gain in job satisfaction over the six years, while those who remained in the technician role reported a much greater gain in job satisfaction (Broom & Dozier, 1986). Interestingly, strategic decision-making is positively correlated with job satisfaction and when this variable is controlled manager role enactment is not (Broom & Dozier, 1986).

### **Roles and New Technology**

Looking at role enactment and its relation to the adoption of new technology is something that came along before social media or even the World Wide Web (Anderson & Reagan, 1992; Dozier, 1989). Dozier (1989) posited that new technologies can either help public relations practitioners do something they already do or let them do something completely new. He also asserted that new technologies might be more beneficial to managers or technicians, depending on what the new technology helps the practitioner do (Dozier, 1989). Tools that are only useful in improving communication are more beneficial to technicians, while tools that improve research capabilities are more beneficial to managers (Dozier, 1989). One example Dozier (1989) used was the creation of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), which is predictive analytics software that enabled practitioners to conduct sophisticated research more easily. As a research tool, SPSS is more useful to practitioners in the manager role.

Findings from Anderson and Reagan (1992) backed up Dozier's (1989) theory. Anderson and Reagan (1992) conducted a mail survey of practitioners and measured their participation in various roles as well as their use of technologies that were new at the time, such as personal computers, teleconferences and email. The findings indicated that both managers and technicians had not fully embraced these new innovations (Anderson &

Reagan, 1992). While neither had adopted technology more quickly, managers and technicians had adopted different tools based on the tasks they perform (Anderson & Reagan, 1992).

## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social media has become a common topic in both public relations practice and research.

### **The Concept**

Social media has become a common topic in both public relations practice and research. However, there is no one definition for the concept that has been agreed upon. Many studies provide their own definition, while others assume that there is some common meaning.

Wright and Hinson (2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b) began in 2006 a longitudinal study on social media use by public relations practitioners. Each year they have conducted an online survey about practitioners' behaviors and attitudes regarding different social media tools. At first the studies focused mostly on blogs, but they have evolved to incorporate new tools as they are invented. Despite their years of studying social media, Wright and Hinson (2009b) claimed, "it still is difficult to define exactly what social media are" (p. 3). Even though they recognized the difficulty with defining such a concept, Wright and Hinson (2009b) developed their own definition and argued that "social media deliver web-based information created by people with the intention of facilitating communication" (p. 5).

The definition that is the most commonly seen in public relations research is Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) definition, which described social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (p. 60). Based on this definition, they came up with six categories of social media: collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). While such a list is useful when applying a definition or making it more tangible, the original definition is important because when new tools arise the definition gives parameters that help distinguish whether the new tools are social media or not (Chaffee, 1991).

Although Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) definition is the most cited, it fails to address social media's ability build and manage relationships, as well as its ability to facilitate multi-directional dialogue (Lee, Tisdale & Diddams, 2012). These qualities of social media are particularly important in public relations, making them necessary additions to the definition.

A central part of the practice of public relations is Organization-Public Relationships (OPR). Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000) posited that OPR:

...are represented by the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics. These relationships have properties that are distinct from the identities, attributes, and perceptions of the individuals and social collectivities in the relationships. (p.18)

OPR models, such as that by Hung (2002), explain relationship antecedents, maintenance strategies and outcomes. Antecedents are necessary factors for OPRs to exist, meaning one party must have consequences on the other (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Ledingham, 2003). Maintenance strategies are simply techniques to cultivate good relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham, 2003). Finally, relationship outcomes are qualities of a relationship that are measurable (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Hung, 2007; Ledingham, 2003). Research has shown that social media is particularly useful for building and cultivating relationships (Levenshus, 2010; Sweetser, 2010), making it a valuable aspect when defining social media (Lee et al., 2012).

Another important quality of social media is its ability to facilitate multi-directional dialogue (Lee et al., 2012). Communication is traditionally thought of as being one-way or two-way, but social media platforms allow multiple users to communicate simultaneously in multiple directions as illustrated by the multi-directional communication model (Thackeray & Neiger, 2009). In this model, the original sender or creator of a message will often lose control of its dissemination (Thackeray & Neiger, 2009).

Keeping the importance of OPR and dialogue in mind, Lee et al. (2012) built off of Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) definition and defined social media as "an electronic communication platform built along the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 for multi-directional communication, which enables the development and facilitation of dialogues and organizational-public relationships" (p. 12). This definition of social media will be used throughout this thesis.

## **Social Media in Public Relations**

Social media has quickly emerged as an essential tool for public relations professionals. However, just ten years ago, the Internet in general was a low priority for practitioners (Hill & White, 2000). Although much research is being done in the area (Hill & White, 2000; Levenshus, 2010), technology is changing as quickly as studies can be conducted and published; furthermore, the long-term effects of social media are yet to be fully explored.

A study by Hill and White in 2000 shows how quickly the tools used by public relations practitioners can change. They found that in 2000, Internet strategy was low priority for public relations practitioners. However, they did find that even at that time practitioners recognized the Internet as a potential tool to manage relationships with publics (Hill & White, 2000). “A Web site was not viewed as a replacement for face-to-face contact, but it was perceived as a way to strengthen relationships that already existed, mainly because of the e-mail function” (Hill & White, 2000, p.42). The use of online tools has grown exponentially since 2000 both for public relations practitioners and the population in general, giving researchers a whole new area to study.

Recently, many studies have examined the use of new technology by public relations practitioners (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008; Sha & Dozier, 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2009b). New technology more recently adopted are social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, YouTube and Pinterest. The adoption of social media has come at an accelerated pace. In 2008, the use of blogs and podcasts was common among PR professionals, but social networking sites were still utilized by only 24 percent of practitioners (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008). Today, social networking is considered an essential part of most public relations campaigns.

The use of social networking tools is part of a trend that emphasizes the importance of two-way or multi-directional communication in public relations rather than the dissemination of information (Deuze, 2007; Van Ruler, Vercic, Buetschi, & Flodin, 2004; Wright & Hinson, 2009b).

Wright and Hinson (2008a, 2009b) have found that most public relations professionals believe that the use of social media has had a positive impact on public relations. They have also found that about 85 percent of public relations professionals believe

that these new tools and traditional media complement each other rather than compete (Wright & Hinson, 2009b). A greater number of public relations practitioners believe that blogs and social media impact what traditional news media outlets choose to cover (Wright & Hinson, 2008a, 2009b). However, the same study found that public relations professionals gave traditional media outlets higher scores on ethics, credibility, accuracy and truth (Wright & Hinson, 2008a, 2009b). This shows that although the benefits of social media are recognized by the industry, traditional media remains important and is seen as more trustworthy.

### **Social Media and Public Relations Roles**

Where social media fits into organizational roles is a question currently being examined by researchers (e.g., Lee et al., 2012; Sha & Dozier, 2012). A study by Diga and Kelleher (2009) looked at whether practitioners that are predominantly managers or predominantly technicians used social media more than did the other. They found that there was no significant difference between the amount of time practitioners spent on social media for work-related activities based on their organizational role. Their study, however, did not take into account the type of things the practitioners were using social media for.

Sha and Dozier (2012) explored this topic further by including two social media items in a survey of public relations practitioners. One questionnaire item was logically linked to the manager role and measured social media use for environmental scanning, while the other was linked to the technician role and measured social media use for disseminating information (Sha & Dozier, 2012). Using exploratory factor analysis to see how these utilizations correlated with the 10-item dichotomous role set (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995), they found that the social media items created a third factor separate from both the manager and technician role measures. Sha and Dozier (2012) concluded that utilizations of social media or any new tool should not be treated as role enactments, but rather as consequences of enacting certain roles. This is consistent with advice given by Dozier and Broom (2006) to “treat new role set measures as separate constructs for the purpose of analysis, then correlate them with the original item set” (p. 164).

Lee et al. (2012) used this approach to conceptualize different utilizations of social media that are consequences of enacting each role. However, these scholars used Broom’s

(1979) original four roles rather than the two-role dichotomy. “Assigning individuals to the all-encompassing role of ‘manager’ fails to account for variances between tasks, strategies, and methods” used by public relations practitioners on social media (Lee et al., 2012, p. 4). In addition to the original four-role typology, they conceptualized four utilizations of social media: Social Media for One-Way Message Dissemination, Social Media for Non-Aligned Purposes, Dialogic Social Media Utilization, and Social Media for Organizational Change (Lee et al., 2012).

Social Media for One-Way Message Dissemination is simply using social media as a one-way channel to distribute information. Social Media for Non-Aligned Purposes is when social media practices and goals are unrelated to the organization’s goals or exist so an organization can simply have a “presence” on social media. Dialogic Social Media Utilization is using social media to facilitate open conversation between an organization and publics, as well as among publics. Social Media for Organizational Change is using social media to inform strategic decision-making. Each utilization was logically linked to one of the four roles, leading to their four propositions:

P1: Technicians are more likely than practitioners enacting other organizational roles to use social media for one-way message dissemination.

P2: Expert prescribers are more likely than practitioners enacting other organizational roles to use social media for non-aligned purposes.

P3: Communication facilitators are more likely than practitioners enacting other organizational roles to use social media for dialogic social media utilization.

P4: Practitioners enacting the problem-solving facilitator role are more likely than practitioners enacting other organizational roles to use social media for organizational change. (Lee et al., 2012, p.15-21)

The authors’ four social media utilizations serve as a guide for this study in regards to the types of tasks new professionals perform on social media. Although each utilization is logically linked to a role, the social media utilization concepts were designed to be measured separately from role enactment for the purpose of analysis, as suggested by Dozier and Broom (2006) and Sha and Dozier (2012). The way a practitioner utilizes social media may not reflect their role enactment overall (Lee et al., 2012).

## **NEW PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS**

Since social media is often thought to be a tool more commonly used by Millennials, looking at this new generation of public relations practitioner is a central part of this study.

### **Millennials and Technology**

Millennials, or Generation Y, refers to the generation currently entering the workforce. Dates for when this generation starts and ends vary slightly, but generally, the term Millennials refers to those born between the early 1980s and the mid- or late 1990s (Gilbert, 2011).

Growing up in the dot-com era, Millennials are accustomed to having the Internet and other technologies at their disposal. “Like learning a language, people who start using technology at an earlier age generally have greater facility with the new language (technology) than do people who began using it later in their life,” (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010). Therefore, Millennials tend to be more comfortable with technology than previous generations (Deal et al., 2010). There are plenty of Gen Xers or Baby Boomers that are equally comfortable with technology, but on average Millennials are more comfortable with the Internet, smartphones, social networks, etc. (Deal et al., 2010).

### **Writing Skills**

Various studies have focused on the writing skills or at least the perceived writing skills of new public relations practitioners (Cole et al., 2009; Hines & Basso, 2008; Wise, 2005). The writing skills of entry-level practitioners are a concern for professionals already in the field, and many of these experienced practitioners feel that writing should be emphasized more in undergraduate communications programs (Cole et al., 2009; Hines & Basso, 2008; Wise, 2005). Many communication professionals have expressed that the skills of new communications graduates do not meet their expectations for fundamental writing and editing (Hines & Basso, 2008).

Hines and Basso (2008) found that many practitioners blamed colleges for recent graduates' lack of fundamental writing skills. However, schools claim that writing is a major focus in media curriculum (Hines & Basso, 2008). The possible explanation for these conflicting views is the wide array of skills that media students must now be taught (Hines & Basso, 2008). As new communication technologies have been introduced, instructors have

had to allocate class time to teaching these technologies – potentially taking away from time spent on writing (Hines & Basso, 2008).

The findings from these studies (i.e., Cole et al., 2009; Hines & Basso, 2008; Wise, 2005) show quite clearly that public relations professionals value writing skills are unhappy with the writing skills of entry-level candidates. However, if new practitioners are spending their time working with social media and not writing, then their skills are not improving as they would with more writing experience. The findings from these studies (i.e., Cole, et al., 2009; Hines & Basso, 2008; Wise, 2005) may also suggest that new professionals may be assigned to work that they are already skilled at, such as social media, rather than areas where they may need more practice, such as writing.

### **GENDER AND PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Another topic relevant to this study is gender and public relations. In the 1970s and 1980s, a huge influx of women entering public relations changed the profession from a male to female majority (Lukovitz, 1989). When large numbers of women enter a formerly male-dominated field, it's called the feminization of a profession (Adams, 2005). Public relations is not unique in this phenomenon; healthcare and law have seen similar changes in recent decades (Adams, 2005). Such a shift in a profession comes with specific concerns. One concern is the threat of decreased compensation in the industry in general. According to Levanon, England, and Allison (2009), "occupations with a greater share of females pay less than those with a lower share, controlling for education and skill" (p. 865). There is debate among scholars as to whether a female majority causes the lower pay or if women tend to take lower paying jobs than do men (Levanon et al., 2009). Another fear is that the status of a profession will decrease as it gains a female majority (Aldoory, 2001; Levanon et al., 2009). Much like income, the issue of professional status is one that has been debated (Adams, 2005). Does a profession decrease in status as it gains a female majority or are women more likely to get jobs in areas of lesser status?

### **Income**

Study after study has shown that women practitioners in public relations earn less money than do their male counterparts. Years of professional experience and taking time off to have a baby are often blamed for this disparity, but research has shown that even when

controlling for such variables the gap persists (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Dozier & Sha, 2010; Dozier, Sha, & Okura, 2007). In fact, one study showed that women who did not take a break from their career to have a baby only earned \$148 more annually than those who did (Dozier, et al., 2007). The types of organizations men and women work for have also been a scapegoat for the income disparity, but again, even when this variable is controlled, the salary difference remains (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001).

Most recently, Dozier, Sha and Shen (2012) found:

. . .gendered income disparity in public relations can be attributed to years of professional experience, manager role enactment, participation in management decision-making, income-suppressing career interruptions, and career specialization. However, even with *all* these mediating variables accounted for, the average income was \$84,368 for men and \$76,063 for women, a difference of \$8,305. (p.22)

### **Gender and Roles**

Early on in the study of public relations roles, the roles were used to examine the tasks performed by men and women (Broom, 1982). This area of roles research is one that has continued since, and studies have consistently found that women enact the technician role more often than men do (Broom, 1982; Broom & Dozier, 1986; Cline et al., 1986; Sha & Dozier, 2011; Toth & Serini, 1998). Surprisingly, while women still enact the technician role more than do men, the most recent research has indicated that women also enact the manager role as much as men do (Sha & Dozier, 2011), although these authors cautioned that one year's worth of data does not indicate a trend of gender-equitable role enactment. Sha and Dozier (2011) have also found that role enactment does account for a small portion of the income disparity between men and women, but not all of it. In essence, women are doing it all, both technician and managerial, but for less money than are men.

The debate remains as to why women are not advancing to enact predominantly manager roles (Sha & Dozier, 2012). Some believe that women choose to stay in technician roles because of the focus on skills and creativity, while others argue that a "glass-ceiling" effect prevents women from being promoted to management positions (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Creedon, 1991; Cline & Toth, 1989; Sha & Dozier, 2011)

## PIGEONHOLING

The use of social media tools is not spread evenly among practitioners of all ages and experience levels (Dozier & Sha, 2012). Many young professionals appear to be starting their career as social media experts rather than well-rounded public relations professionals with a diversity of skills—something that may lead them to be pigeonholed in this role.

Traditionally, pigeonholing research in public relations has focused on race and ethnicity (Ford, 2004; Len-Rios, 1998; Tindall, 2009). According to Broom and Sha (2012) pigeonholing is, “the restricting of minority practitioners to working with minority clients, or dealing with minority publics, even when they might wish to work on ‘mainstream’ public relations programs or accounts,” (p.39). However, this same concept easily translates to young professionals that may be pigeonholed for reasons besides race or ethnicity. For example, Acello (2008) stated “pigeonholed attorneys are typecast in whatever role they started out in and in many cases find themselves stuck in a career rut” (p. 36). This is often the case when attorneys are good at whatever type of case they first take on so their supervisors or the partners at their firm are unwilling to risk giving them other assignments, even if they ask for them (Acello, 2008). The fear is that they may leave the area they have already excelled in or may not be as skilled in the areas they have yet to try (Acello, 2008).

The pigeonholing of new public relations practitioners may be comparable to that of attorneys. This study shall examine whether new public relations professionals are starting as social media experts and becoming stuck in that role because they have the most experience and skill in that area.

A study by Heyman Associates, Inc. looked at the career patterns and attributes that led public relations practitioners to stand out as particularly successful (Heyman, 2004). One of their top findings was that, “diverse work experience, more than years of experience alone, adds to the possibility of success” (Heyman, 2004, p. 45).

The pigeonholing of new professionals as social media technicians may also have a negative effect on more experienced communication technicians that are not learning these new skills that have become increasingly desired. Johnson (1997) found that public relations practitioners who felt they were unknowledgeable about certain technologies believed they must reduce the knowledge gap between them and more knowledgeable professionals in order to maintain their self-identity within the profession.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. RQ1: What types social media tasks do new professionals perform? Are the tasks mainly technical or strategic?
2. RQ2: How do new professionals become social media practitioners? What factors influence this phenomenon?
3. RQ3: How do new professionals perceive their role of social media practitioner and its impact on their professional future?

## METHOD

The method chosen for this study was in-depth one-on-one interviewing.

### QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

In-depth interviews are a form of qualitative field research that allows researchers to explore a topic in depth (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Described by Kahn and Cannell (1957) as “a conversation with a purpose” (p.149), in-depth interviews can range from structured question-and-answer sessions to fairly unstructured conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Field research such as interviewing tends to have greater validity than other methods such as surveys or experiments (Babbie, 2007). Interviews are more likely to have internal validity or measure what the study seeks to measure because meanings can be discussed in-depth in order to reach a mutual understanding between the researcher and participant (Babbie, 2007). However, because qualitative research relies on the understanding of the investigator, it is more often discussed in terms of credibility, rather than validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Aspects of research that make it credible are using established and appropriate methods, and the researcher’s familiarity with the culture being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability is another consideration in qualitative research that is similar to test-retest reliability, or a study’s ability to be replicated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviewing is very personal and relies on the inferences and characterizations of the researcher and is specific to the individuals in the study (Babbie, 2007). Because of this, transferability is more complicated than simply replicating a study, future researchers must consider all the contextual factors that may account for discrepancies in findings between two studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers must be aware of their own biases and experiences in all stages of the research process to mitigate their interference as much as possible (Babbie, 2007). Another consideration in in-depth interviewing is that the data collected is subjective, and interviewing is only valuable if the study seeks to learn about the point of view of the participant (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Finally, reliance on participant cooperation can present a challenge (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Participants must be willing to spend the time to be interviewed and willing to share their thoughts on the topics discussed (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

### **THE INTERVIEW PROCESS**

As a new public relations professional myself, my experiences naturally informed the questions I asked. For example, in my own experience as a new professional, I spent a great deal of time using social media and writing press releases. Therefore these are specific tasks I asked about. However, I was cognizant of my personal experiences throughout the study to ensure that they did not influence the framing of my conversations or my interpretation of the data I collected.

While the subjective nature of the data collected may be a limitation for some studies, this particular study focused on the points of view of new professionals and their feelings about the tasks they perform, making in-depth interviews an appropriate method of data collection.

Recruitment was a major challenge in this study despite my willingness to travel or work around the participants' schedules. However, cooperation during the actual interview process was not a problem. None of the participants declined to answer any question, and they were all very generous with the information they shared.

This study utilized semi-structured, in-person, one-on-one interviews. Face-to-face interviews are beneficial because rapport can be built between the researcher and interviewee more quickly than during phone interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). I guided the conversations to ensure specific topics were covered and certain questions were answered, but the sessions were unstructured enough to allow participants to bring up other topics they felt to be relevant. I took minimal notes during the interviewing process in order to be as unobtrusive as possible. Instead of taking extensive notes, I audio-recorded the conversations with the participants' consent. I used my iPhone to record the conversations and simply set the phone on the table between the participant and myself. In addition to producing high-quality audio that I could easily email to myself, participants seemed to forget about the recording device since most of them had their own cell phones sitting on the table as well.

Prior to each interview, the participants read an informed consent statement and verbally acknowledged their understanding of the statement. The statement included the purpose of the study and potential risks and benefits. It also indicated that if the participant felt uncomfortable at any time during the interview, they were free to decline to answer any of the questions or to discontinue their participation altogether.

### **THE INTERVIEW GUIDE**

The interview guide (Appendix) was designed to ensure each conversation covered all three research questions. The interview guide was divided into four sections: personal background, feelings toward public relations, tasks performed at work, and feelings toward tasks performed at work. Below, I detail the questions included in each section. However, the sequence of the interview as well as the actual questions asked were dependent on the individual conversations and the information participants disclosed without probes.

The background section was designed to assess an individual's personal, educational and professional background. Questions from this section were: (1) Please tell me a bit about yourself: where you were raised, your educational background, your career experience so far, and anything else you would like to share. (2) What drew you to pursue a career or get a job in public relations? (3) How long have you worked at your current organization? Where did you work before working there? (4) Please tell me a little about your place of work. Is it a firm or other organization? How many employees? What industry? What is your position? (5) (If working at public relations agency:) What type of clients do you currently work for? Size of companies? What industry?

The second section focused on the respondents' feelings about public relations and included two questions: (1) What are your goals as far as your career in public relations? (2) How would you define success in public relations? What qualities do successful PR practitioners have? What skills?

The third section covered the tasks participants performed at work. Questions from this section were: (1) I know this is difficult in public relations, but can you go through what your typical work day is like? (2) (Repeated for all major tasks, especially writing and social media:) You mentioned [social media], how much of your time do you feel you spend on [social media], compared to other tasks? How are [social media] responsibilities spread

among employees in your organization? How did this task become your responsibility? (3) How do you use social media? (e.g., disseminating information, researching publics, responding to publics). (4) Are your social media tasks part of a social media plan? Who created the plan?

The final section of the interview involved the participants' feelings about the tasks they perform at work. The questions included in this section were: (1) Thinking about the various tasks you perform, are there tasks you would like to perform more or less frequently? (2) If you want to do more or less of a specific task is this something you can ask your supervisor? How would that be received? (3) Earlier you mentioned that [skills] are necessary to be a successful practitioner. Thinking about these skills, what tasks do you feel are important for a young public relations practitioner to get experience with and at what point in their careers? (4) (For tasks that practitioners should be getting earlier in their careers:) Do you feel most young PR pros get this experience? How are they getting this experience? How do you come to these conclusions? Do you feel that you are getting this experience? Why or why not? (5) Is there anything else about your work as a new/young public relations professional that you feel I should understand? If so, what? (6) Is there anything else related to things we've discussed today that you feel I should have asked you but did not? If so, what?

### **SELECTION CRITERIA AND RECRUITMENT**

Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with public relations professionals that had five or fewer years of professional experience. The participants had to currently be working in public relations either at a public relations agency or in-house in an organization's public relations department.

Maximum variation sampling is a sampling technique that strives to capture the diversity of a phenomenon while using a small sample by including as much variety in the sample as possible (Babbie, 2007). This sampling method was used to obtain participation from a variety of male and female practitioners from a variety of U.S. cities, organizational structures and industries. In order to include subjects from a variety of cities and still conduct face-to-face interviews, the first nine interviews were conducted at a large public relations

conference that had attendees from across the United States. Due to logistics, the next eleven interviews were conducted in Southern California.

I used social media and my own personal and professional networks to recruit participants. For the first phase of interviews, I used the conference hashtag on Twitter to invite people to participate. I also used the hashtag to find new professionals in attendance. Since many young professionals connect their LinkedIn profile to their Twitter page, I was able to look at their work experience to determine if they qualified for the study. If the potential participants listed their email address on their LinkedIn page, I then sent them the recruitment email asking them if they were available to meet while at the conference. If they did not have their email listed, I sent them a direct message on Twitter asking if I could send them more information via email. In addition to social media, I recruited some participants while networking face to face during the conference. At this particular conference, new professionals wore ribbons to indicate that they were a “new pro,” making it easy to identify them and ask further questions about their experience to see if they qualified for the study.

My own personal and professional networks were also used to recruit participants for the second phase of interviews. I used LinkedIn to identify my own connections or those with mutual connections that qualified for the study. Once I found potential participants, I sent the recruitment email. I also used Twitter and the Public Relations Society of America New Pros Facebook page to recruit participants, but only one person volunteered without being asked individually. I recruited a few participants at public relations networking events where I was able to talk to potential subjects to see if they qualified. Finally, snowball sampling was used to recruit friends or former colleagues of participants. During each interview, I asked the participant if they knew anyone that would be a good fit for the study that may be willing to participate. This method garnered a few leads, but nobody that followed through.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

Due to the flexible nature of individual interviews, each participant was able to select a convenient location of their choice for the interview to take place, such as their office conference room or local coffee shop. Making the study as convenient as possible for participants helped ensure participation and made them feel more comfortable through the process.

The first nine interviews, which were conducted while at a conference, were held at a café within the conference hotel. Of the next eleven interviews, two were conducted at restaurants over lunch, eight were conducted at cafés, and one was conducted in a private area at the participant's workplace. The first interview phase, which was completed at the conference, occurred in October 2011. The second phase of interviews, in Southern California, spanned from December 2011 until February 2012.

Although the interviews were semi-structured, they were very casual and friendly. This may partially be attributed to my individual background and characteristics, since I could be considered the participants' peer. Like most of the participants, I am in my early twenties, completed my undergraduate degree in public relations, and have fewer than five years of professional public relations experience. I feel that this helped participants feel that I could relate to them, making them very comfortable sharing their thoughts. Some of the information disclosed was rather personal and brutally honest when perhaps a researcher that was perceived to be their senior may have caused participants to say what they were "supposed to."

The recorded portion of the interviews lasted anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour. Recording commenced after participants read a confidentiality agreement and agreed to be recorded.

### **PARTICIPANT BACKGROUNDS**

The sample of participants consisted of 20 new professionals from a variety of backgrounds. Four of the participants were male and 16 female. Although the females heavily outnumbered the males, this is typical for entry-level public relations practitioners, where females are the majority (Grunig et al., 2001). The participants ranged in age from 23 to 28. One participant was born in Eastern Europe, but had moved to the United States more than five years before the study. The other 19 participants were born in the United States. Eleven of the participants worked in Southern California, while the other nine came from a variety of United States cities including Chicago, Detroit, Miami, Hartford, CT, and Oklahoma City. The number of years of professional experience of the participants ranged from 1.5 to 4.5 years. Nine participants worked in an agency setting while the other eleven worked in-house in a corporate or non-profit organization. The sizes of the organizations

ranged from fewer than ten employees to Fortune 500 companies with hundreds of thousands of employees. The participants worked in a variety of industries, including high technology, telecommunication, automotives, hospitality, healthcare, government, real estate, and consumer products. All 20 participants had obtained a four-year college degree in a field related to public relations. Most had focused on public relations in particular as part of a communication or journalism degree, but a few majored in advertising or media production. Two participants had also earned a master's degree in mass communication, focusing on public relations.

Although all 20 participants had fewer than five years of experience, their positions ranged from the most entry-level staff member in an organization to the most senior-level public relations practitioner. Four were the only public relations practitioner in their organization. Their titles included account coordinator, director of public relations, account executive, senior account executive communications analyst, and coordinator of public relations and social media.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

First, each interview was listened to without transcribing, and all portions of the recording relevant or potentially relevant to one of the three research questions were noted. Upon the second listening, all of the relevant portions of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, with transcriptions averaging four to five typed, single spaced pages each. Once all of the transcriptions were complete, the text was reread to determine themes related to each research question. Quotes from all the transcriptions were arranged based on these themes. For example, mentorship arose as a theme relating to RQ1, so quotes from all participants that referred to mentorship were grouped together. Each quote had a participant number attached to it in order to identify trends based on demographics. In instances where participants had differing views or only some participants brought up certain issues, their demographics such as organization type and years of experience were examined for trends.

## **FINDINGS**

### **RQ1: WHAT TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA TASKS DO NEW PROFESSIONALS PERFORM?**

Participants used social media in a variety of ways. The major themes that arose in relation to this question are outlined below.

#### **Information Dissemination**

Several participants admitted that they used social media for one-way message dissemination as discussed by Lee et al. (2012). However, it was recognized that this might not be the best use of social media platforms. One participant said, “truthfully, a lot of it [my social media use] is one-way. There are conversations where we are on Twitter or Facebook and someone will ask a question and I’m responding to that, but for the most part it’s...this is what our company is doing. It definitely could be improved, you know, getting to know who our followers are” (Participant 16, personal communication, January 27, 2012).

#### **Research**

Research is another area of social media that nearly every participant was active in whether they monitored social media for specific clients or just for general environmental scanning.

Monitoring social media for clients, even if they didn’t actually manage social media pages was a theme among agency practitioners. One participant said, “I monitor social media every single day because even though some of the clients don’t have the money invested in it, they still have money invested for media monitoring. So, I take it upon myself that when I’m monitoring traditional media, I also check social media” (Participant 19, personal communication, February 17, 2012). Likewise, another participant said, “we had a client who didn’t want to tweet—didn’t want to be out there, but they definitely wanted to monitor what people say about them” (Participant 10, personal communication, December 18, 2011). Overall, participants recognized the need to monitor social media whether their clients specifically asked them to or not.

Participants also said they use social media for general environmental scanning and staying informed about public relations trends. An account executive from an agency said, “right now, I would say the majority of the news that I read, breaking news, industry-changing news, I first find online via social media” (Participant 17, personal communication, February 7, 2012). This quote was representative of what many participants said regarding their use of social media as a news source.

One participant had a job that was focused on social media research and monitoring. This participant said, “I specialize in insights reporting, metrics and conversation analysis so I work a lot with what’s happening online and giving our clients strategic recommendations based on actual research and providing some digital strategy for how they can navigate the world, online” (Participant 3, personal communication, October 16, 2011).

### **Planning**

A minority of participants claimed to be heavily involved in the planning of social media campaigns. However, there were a couple of exceptions. One participant that was an account executive at an agency actually said he did more planning and strategy writing and the account coordinator he supervised did the actual implementation. Another participant who did not manage any social media pages for clients said she was still involved in brainstorming and planning for clients that decide to start in the social media realm.

### **RQ2: HOW DO NEW PROFESSIONALS BECOME SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTITIONERS? WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE THIS PHENOMENON?**

Many factors arose that were related to the assigning of tasks and of social media tasks in particular. Some of these were expected such as age, but other themes that were unexpected such as mentorship and resource allocation arose organically.

### **Pigeonholing**

Although many participants spent more time on social media than they did on traditional tasks, very few of them only did social media. Some participants were cautious of doing only social media. As one participant said, “I was originally hesitant to join an agency’s digital practice because I thought, ‘I’m just going to be sitting on Facebook and Twitter all day,’ but when I came to [my agency] I realized that’s not the case at all. We are

not silo-ed out from the rest of the agency; we are really integrated” (Participant 3, personal communication, October 16, 2011).

For another participant, it was her supervisors that kept her from focusing solely on social media. “I wanted to do more social media at the end of my internship, and I wanted to be only a social media account coordinator because I really like our social media strategist. But they encouraged me to continue developing my traditional PR skills and building my media relationships” (Participant 13, personal communication, January 4, 2012). At this particular agency, client accounts are divided between public relations and social media accounts. Clients may have only one or both, but the budgets are separate. Likewise, employees may work on only social media accounts or only traditional public relations accounts, but most of them do both. This participant held the title of public relations and social media account coordinator.

Some participants liked the idea of new professionals being able to have social media as a specialty, while others warned against it. “Make sure you’re well rounded as a new professional, so you’re not the social media guru. You have to have a niche, but you don’t want the only time somebody thinks of you to be when they’re talking about social media” (Participant 17, personal communication, February 7, 2012). This is similar to what Acello (2008) found when studying attorneys. New attorneys that found a niche early in their career struggled to take on new types of cases and grow as well-rounded professionals (Acello, 2008).

### **Age**

The impact of age on task assignment was a theme that arose during several interviews when discussing social media tasks in particular. Many participants seemed to think that younger people are naturally more adept at social media. But this was certainly not the consensus, and other participants provided other reasons that new practitioners take on social media tasks that will be discussed in the following sections. One participant working in an agency said that the senior staff in his/her organization sees social media as “a really huge opportunity for young professionals within the organization to have an immediate positive impact on the organization”(Participant 3, personal communication, October 16, 2011).

Although in her twenties herself, another participant working in a management position in-house said, “I have actually given [social media] over to the PR coordinator. He is actually a little bit younger than me and little more into the latest, greatest tools, and so he kind of reports to me his findings on what he’s hearing about out there” (Participant 8, personal communication, October 17, 2011).

Some participants disagreed about social media being for young professionals and recognized the need for more experience with strategy. “I think that perhaps a lot of companies looking for social media managers and what-not just kind of hire someone that’s young and knows what Facebook is and is on Facebook,” said one agency practitioner. “PR is a lot more nuanced than that” (Participant 6, personal communication, October 16, 2011).

### **Resource Allocation**

Based on the interviews, resource allocation plays a large role in social media task assignment. A few participants from agency settings claimed that entry-level practitioners were assigned social media tasks based on their relatively low billing rates. Although they claimed that senior-level staff understood social media, those that billed at a higher rate would not fit into clients’ budgets. As one participant explained it, “social media work falls heavily on the account coordinator level. In terms of the overall planning of a project or campaign, the more senior-level staff are involved. They definitely understand the social media aspects that go into it, but they are not the ones sitting there thinking in 140 characters.” When asked why this was, the same respondent said, “I think some of it is time management. [Social media]’s very time-consuming, so budget-wise that falls on junior staff” (Participant 12, personal communication, December 29, 2011).

The challenge of paying someone to monitor social media was not unique to public relations agencies. One participant who worked in-house at a technology company was the only public relations practitioner at her organization. She explained, “It’s easy to put content out there a lot, but it’s difficult to engage with people when you don’t have someone that’s dedicated to social media. Timeliness is everything . . . we don’t have enough manpower to supervise it. I can’t do it. . . . My boss won’t justify my time being spent on social media; let’s just put it that way” (Participant 15, personal communication, January 23, 2012).

The discussion of whether an organization can hire a practitioner to focus solely on social media came up in multiple interviews. In an interview with a participant from a large non-profit organization, the conversation led to whom a company may hire for such a job. According to this participant, a practitioner with a lot of experience in building strategy might be the best choice, but she said, “I don’t think senior leadership is ever going to want to pay what that senior practitioner is worth [to do social media]” (Participant 18, personal communication, February 9, 2012). Instead, she believed that social media is undervalued and therefore inexperienced practitioners are hired, although they might not be as good at the job.

### **Mentorship**

The importance of mentorship was a theme that naturally occurred time and again, even though it was not something I had originally set out to discuss. The topic generally arose when participants discussed professional development and their ability to take on new tasks and assignments. One participant said, “Where I have been, I have been lucky to have had mentors that have given me the opportunity and have been a champion for me and look to me for like a reverse mentorship as well. So, I think you need those champions as a young professional that will really invest in you and your career” (Participant 9, personal communication, October 17, 2011).

Another participant said, “I feel like your education can only take you so far, so [you] need somebody that’s actually been in the real world and using those skill sets and just has more experience to give you feedback on what you are doing right and what you are doing wrong” (Participant 16, personal communication, January 27, 2012). Nine different participants brought up similar experiences in regards to mentorship.

### **Autonomy Over Tasks**

A topic that was discussed in relation to task assignment was the participant’s control over his/her tasks. Something that I asked in particular was whether or not they would be able to ask their supervisor to do more or less of any given task. The responses to this question varied greatly. But in general, those working in agency settings seemed to report having more flexibility in this area, while those working in-house were limited by the number of public relations professionals in their organization. A few participants were the

only public relations practitioner in their organization so, although they did not always receive tasks from a supervisor, they had to do whatever public relations tasks were needed regardless of whether they enjoyed it or thought it would benefit themselves in the long run.

One respondent from an agency stated, “we’re small and everyone is very open, and they’ve definitely mentioned, ‘let us know what you like doing best and maybe we can give you more of that’. On the other hand, sometimes you are overwhelmed with work and projects and you just have to get it done. There’s only so much time” (Participant 10, personal communication, December 18, 2011). Not everyone in an agency felt like his or her opinion would make a difference though. Another agency practitioner said that asking to do tasks more or less frequently would be, “a scary conversation” to have with her supervisors. This participant continued by saying, “I don’t want to say it wouldn’t be received well, because obviously they want our feedback, they are open, they would smile and nod, but whether [getting different tasks] would actually go into effect, I’m not entirely sure to be honest” (Participant 12, personal communication, December 29, 2011).

### **RQ3: HOW DO NEW PROFESSIONALS PERCEIVE THEIR ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTITIONER AND ITS IMPACT ON THEIR FUTURE?**

In general, participants had a positive view of their use of social media in the workplace. However, the idea that other practitioners beside themselves may focus too much on social media was a viewpoint that came up in several interviews.

When asked about new practitioners and social media, one participant said, “I think they need to shy away just from social media... Social media talk is for social media. You wouldn’t send an email to a client the way you would talk to someone on social media.” (Participant 7, personal communication, October 16, 2011).

Some participants recognized their organization as the reason they were able to diversify their experience and realized that peers at other organizations might not have that opportunity. One practitioner who worked in-house at an organization said, “I know people who work for PR firms and all they do is social media. They don’t write press releases, they don’t talk to media, they might talk to bloggers, but still part of the social sphere” (Participant 4, personal communication, October 16, 2011).

However, other participants felt that it was up to them to gain different experiences and their personal attributes were the reason they were more well rounded than others. More than one participant discussed their drive and ambition. For example, one participant said, “I do [feel that I’m gaining different skills], but I’m also really eager to learn and move up the ladder” (Participant 19, personal communication, February 17, 2012). This suggested that the participant believed that other people who are less diverse in their experience are not as driven.

Overall, participants felt that new practitioners should gain a variety of skills and experiences and not focus on social media. Many participants also felt that other new practitioners focused too much on social media, but they were an exception. This pattern is similar to the third-person effect where people believe that others are more influenced by media than they are themselves (Davison, 1983).

## **IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

This study has several implications for public relations theory, practice, education and future research.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS THEORY**

This study has two implications for public relations theory. First, findings from this study support research suggesting that social media tasks are a skill set that acts as a consequence of role enactment (Sha & Dozier, 2012). As consequences, social media tasks should not be used as predictors of role enactment or be added to Broom's (1982) original role measures. This study found that although the participant's social media tasks were theoretically linked to different roles, those roles were often not the same ones that the participants predominantly enacted offline. For example, some participants reported that they were solely responsible for an organization's social media practices that were separate from an overall public relations plan. According to Lee et al., this is using social media for unaligned purposes, a consequence of the expert prescriber role (2012). However, many of these same participants reported that they did mostly technician tasks offline such as writing press releases and building media lists in order to execute a broader public relations plan created by someone else.

Second, research suggests that women are more likely to do technician tasks than men are (Sha & Dozier, 2011). However, this study was unable to replicate this pattern, most likely because of the relatively small sample size (N=25) and small number of male participants (N=4). Within this sample there were female participants who focused the majority of their time on managerial tasks and one male participant who did primarily technician tasks. Using new professionals is another related factor since years of experience and manager role enactment are correlated (Sha & Dozier, 2011).

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE**

This study has two implications for the practice of public relations that can be immediately implemented by new professionals and their employers. First, professionals with the greatest diversity of experience and those that seemed the most satisfied with their careers

were the ones that claimed that they had a mentor in their organization who advocated for their professional development. While the benefits of mentorship seem intuitive, this study is a reminder for new practitioners that having a mentor at their place of work can not only have an intrinsic benefit, but also an extrinsic one directly impacting the experience and skills they have the opportunity to develop. While formal mentoring programs may work in some organizations, new professionals should seek out mentors that they naturally have a positive rapport with. Senior practitioners can also benefit their organization and industry in general by mentoring young practitioners and aiding in their professional development.

Second, the practitioners that seemed the most satisfied with their careers were also the ones that claimed they felt permitted to ask for new responsibilities or tasks that they were interested in or wanted experience with as well as the ability to ask for less time assigned to tasks they particularly disliked. Of course, all of these participants understood that not all requests could be met, but even the impression that their opinions were listened to seemed to make a difference.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION**

This study has an evident implication for public relations education. Although many respondents emphasized “real-world” experience over classroom learning, nearly all of them went to college for public relations or a related major.

This study suggests that practitioners understand the tactical side of social media, but may not be getting experience or knowledge, either in school or on the job, related to how their social media tactics relate to broader public relations goals. Incorporating social media into strategic public relations education could help new practitioners make this connection.

### **LIMITATIONS**

Like any research, this study has several limitations. First, twenty participants is a relatively small sample size. Although the sample included a maximum variation of men and women from a variety of cities, industries and organizational settings, a researcher doing qualitative research cannot easily know how many participants is “enough.” That said, as a qualitative study, these findings are not intended to be generalized to the population of new public relations professionals.

Second, the study only looked at the point of view of the new professionals. As with any study utilizing in-depth interviews, the data collected can only illuminate the participant's point of view, which may or may not be representative of the actual patterns in their life (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). To observe actual events other methods must be utilized such as interviews with managers or workplace observation.

Third, qualitative methods are restricted by the researcher's interpretation. Although I did my best to mitigate any bias, a different researcher may have interpreted the participant's responses in another way. Individual experiences, backgrounds and knowledge inevitably influence the understanding of communication phenomena.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study may lay the foundation for several future studies. Several of the themes that naturally arose in the interview process could be used as the basis for additional qualitative or quantitative studies.

The first possibility is a more focused study on the role of mentorship in public relations. This is an area highly neglected in public relations literature, yet one that the participants in this study considered to be very important in their professional development. Such a study could collect additional qualitative data by interviewing public relations practitioners that act as mentors for entry-level practitioners in order to obtain the perspective of both sides of the relationship. The topic of mentorship could also be explored through a quantitative study that surveys public relations practitioners of all experience levels.

Another area for further research is the impact of billing rates in agency settings on task assignment and what that means for social media. A major finding in this study was that some of the entry-level practitioners completed certain tasks for clients simply because their time was relatively inexpensive and they fit into client budgets. Social media tasks often fell into this category because social media can be time consuming and requires constant monitoring. Further research is needed to determine if this is typical among public relations agencies and how resource allocation impacts social media campaigns and who works on them.

There are also ways that this particular study can be extended. One way to do this is to further explore the organizations the participants work for and interview other people

within the organization to get their point of view and see if it aligns with that of the new professionals. This study also has potential to become a longitudinal study. Contacting the same participants at a set interval over the course of their careers could give insight into how practitioners' perceptions change and how focusing on social media early in their career has an impact long-term.

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**APPENDIX**  
**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Background	<p>Please tell me a bit about yourself (for example, educational background, where raised, etc.)</p> <p>What drew you to pursue a career or get a job in public relations?</p> <p>How long have you worked in this organization? Where did you work before working here?</p> <p>Please tell me a little about your place of work. (Probes:)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--- Is it a firm or other organization?</li> <li>--- How many employees?</li> <li>--- What industry?</li> <li>--- What is your position?</li> </ul> <p>(If working at public relations agency:) What type of clients do you currently work for? (Probes:)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--- Size of companies?</li> <li>--- What industry?</li> </ul>
Feelings Toward Public Relations	<p>What are your goals as far as your career in public relations?</p> <p>How would you define success in public relations?</p>

Tasks Performed	<p>Can you go through what your typical day is like at work?</p> <p>(Based on tasks mentioned:)</p> <p>--- You mentioned social media, how much of your time do you feel you spend on social media, compared to other tasks?</p> <p>--- How are social media responsibilities spread among employees in your organization?</p> <p>--- How did this task become your responsibility?</p> <p>---How do you use social media?</p> <p>-----Disseminating information?</p> <p>-----Interaction?</p> <p>-----Research?</p> <p>--- You mentioned media relations, how much of your time do you feel like you spend on media relations, compared to other tasks?</p> <p>--- How are media relations responsibilities spread among employees in your organization?</p> <p>--- How did this task become your responsibility?</p> <p>--- In what ways, if at all, do your tasks related to social media and media relations overlap? In what ways are your tasks in these areas distinct from each other?</p> <p>--- You mentioned writing, how much of your time do you feel you spend on writing, compared to other tasks? Traditional writing? Writing for social media? Writing for traditional media?</p>
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	<p>--- How are writing responsibilities spread among employees in your organization?</p> <p>--- How did this task become your responsibility?</p>
Feelings Toward Tasks	<p>Thinking about the various tasks you perform, are there tasks you would like to perform more or less?</p> <p>Thinking about all the skills necessary to be a successful PR practitioner, what tasks do you feel are important for a young PR practitioner to get experience with and at what point in their careers?</p> <p>(For tasks that practitioners should be getting earlier in their careers:)</p> <p>--- Do you feel most young PR pros get this experience? How are they getting this experience? How do you come to these conclusions?</p> <p>--- Do you feel that you are getting this experience? Why or why not?</p> <p>--- Is there anything else about your work as a new/young public relations professional that you feel I should understand? If so, what?</p> <p>--- Is there anything else related to things we've</p>

	<p>discussed today that you feel I should have asked you but did not? If so, what?</p>
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