The new frontier: Singaporean and Malaysian public relations practitioners' perceptions of new media

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Abstract

Recent research into social media use identified mid-2006 to early 2007 as the period when Singaporean public relations agencies first recognised the need to embrace new media (Fitch, 2009a). This research draws on interviews conducted with ten senior Singaporean and Malaysian public relations practitioners in mid-2006 and offers an historical review of their attitudes to new media at that time. The results reveal that experienced public relations practitioners were fearful of the changing communication environment, even as some embraced the opportunities created by new media. These findings are significant in terms of understanding the implications of new media and changing communication patterns for public relations.

Keywords: new media; Singapore; public relations

Introduction

Public relations has faced major challenges since the mid-2000s with the increasing use of more interactive social media platforms. The communication environment is significantly more complex; publics have a newfound capacity to share information and to develop relationships. The implications of low cost, high speed, networking opportunities for 'traditional' public relations are profound. Several scholars point to the dearth of research into the impact of new media, and in particular, of social media, on public relations. Kent (2008) and Wright and Hanson (2008) suggest there has been a lack of critical analysis and research into the role of blogs (as one kind of social media) in public relations, and Australian researchers argue that an "ambiguity exists in the literature" and that "from a public relations perspective, there has been limited investigation and understanding into the nature of cyberspace as a communications medium" (Herger & Howell, 2007, p. 93). This paper attempts to address this gap by investigating the impact of new media on public relations.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the attitudes of mid-level and senior public relations practitioners in Southeast Asia towards new media at the time new media became more interactive, mainstream and easier to use. It is based on ten interviews with practitioners in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, which took place in 2006. This period was a significant time for public relations and new media. It saw the introduction or relaunch of many mainstream social network sites including: the introduction of Twitter in 2006; the expansion of Facebook to include all networks in 2006; the increasing popularity of Friendster in Singapore and Malaysia (when it was losing customers in the United States); along with the rapid growth in internet forums and blogs "indicat[ing] a shift in the organization of online communities" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 6–9). Later research conducted with Singaporean public relations practitioners working exclusively in social media found that the Singaporean public relations industry identified the need to better understand and incorporate new media into their practice in 2006, and made the first forays into more interactive social media with the appointment of specialised practitioners early in 2007 (Fitch 2009a).

This research explores how experienced public relations practitioners perceived these changes. The implications of new media for 'traditional' public relations practices were profound. Cook and Hopkins (2008) argue "the 'old' communication style [would] be seen increasingly for what it is—old-fashioned, behind the times and irrelevant" (p. 5). Indeed, later research confirms that the practitioners employed by Singaporean public relations agencies to work in social media did not even see themselves as public relations practitioners (Fitch, 2009a). Similarly, Kelleher (2009) suggests in a study of the use of corporate blogs that public relations functions are "distributed" and performed "by a wide range of people communicating interactively while representing an organization"; however "these people do not think of themselves as public relations people" (p. 185). Other research concludes that practitioners who are frequent users of social media enjoy increased status and prestige (Diga & Kelleher, 2009, p. 3). Given this, it is significant to consider the attitudes of senior practitioners towards new media in order to understand its implications for the industry. This paper thus explores historical background to the appointment of non-practitioners to perform public relations roles and the shift in communication patterns brought about by more interactive new media platforms.

Scholars have pointed to the lack of research specifically into public relations in Asia; for example, Sriramesh (2004) refers to Asia as "the silent continent" in terms of the limited and inadequate amount of research (p. 2). One difficulty, according to Sriramesh (2004) is:

> Western definitions of public relations assume a democratic political structure where competing groups seek legitimacy and power through public debate and elections, which is not always the norm in many parts of the world, including Asia. Particularly difficult to discern are the "emerging democracies" of Asia where alternative views may be

> encouraged in theory, but not in practice. As a result, various covert
> and overt forms of self, social, and government censorship can be seen.
> (Sriramesh, 2004, p. 8)

This recognition is particularly relevant to a research project into new media, as new media may offer a forum which allows the expression of alternative points of views in countries where the traditional media is controlled or strongly influenced by government, and there operates a degree of self-regulation (Lee & Kan, 2008). By offering research into public relations in Southeast Asia, this paper contributes to a better understanding of the diversity of public relations in an increasingly globalised world.

Literature review

New media and public relations

Public relations is generally considered to be changing in response to new media and digital technology. It is "undergoing a revolution" (Hazelton, Harrison-Rexrode & Kennan, 2008, p. 91), a "paradigm shift" (Fawkes & Gregory, 2000, p. 122) or experiencing "the greatest evolution in the history of PR" (Solis, 2008, *xvii*). Others suggest that the effects of the internet on communication for organisations will be "instantaneous and far-reaching" (Owyang & Toll, 2007, p. 1). Recent research suggests that practitioners believe public relations is becoming more dialogic in response to new media, but that the increase in communication channels makes it difficult for practitioners to manage communication (Wright & Hinson, 2008).

Anne Gregory (2004) argues there are two approaches to the internet in public relations:

> The first, which emanates largely from and is apparent in discussion with
> practitioners, largely regards and uses the various elements of Internet-
> based communication as extensions of traditional methods. Hence, for
> example, e-mail is seen as a modern incarnation of the memo or letter,
> a web site is often seen as a location to post an electronic form of the
> corporate brochure. (p. 246)

Other research suggests "most public relations practitioners treat the internet as another channel for one-way, top-down information dissemination", despite recognising its potential for increasing opportunities for dialogue; ninety per cent of Australian practitioners perceive computer-mediated communication as "fundamentally changing the way organisations communicate with their stakeholders" (Dougall, Fox & Burton, 2001, p. 17, 18). Surveys of practitioners in several countries suggest that the potential of new media has yet to be fully realised in mainstream public relations (Weaver, Schoenberger-Orgad & Pope, 2003; Sun, Lau & Kuo, 2002; Dougall, Fox & Burton, 2001). It seems astonishing now that in 2006, in a research project conducted for the Institute of

Public Relations in the U.S., nearly two-thirds of corporate executives of Fortune 1000 companies were not convinced that blogs were a credible communication medium (Goodman, 2006, p. 9).

According to Anne Gregory (2004), an alternative approach to the internet "recognises the potency... and its unique characteristics and the opportunities it provides for enhanced, two-way communication between an organisation and its publics" (p. 246). Ambivalence towards new media, which embraces both aspects suggested by Gregory, is common among practitioners. For instance, practitioners may use the internet to disseminate information rather than exploit its potential for responding to publics in meaningful ways despite recognising its potential to transform public relations (Fitch, 2009b; James, 2007; Chia, 2002). Barriers to exploiting the dialogic potential of new media include "the digital divide" and "a generation gap" (Hazelton, Harrison-Rexrode & Kennan, 2008, p. 97), and a lack of confidence and a lack of training on the part of practitioners (Theaker, 2008, p. 353). According to a recent survey of European public relations practitioners, the lack of "employees with the necessary skills to handle the new communication challenges posed by social software" is "the strongest and most powerful factor holding back the use of weblogs in organizations" (Euprera, 2007).

This lack of knowledge of new media, and, in particular, the lack of understanding of social media with its emphasis on interactivity, participation and engagement, among experienced practitioners has implications for public relations. Social media platforms, through their "conversational human voice" and authentic communication style offer new possibilities for public relations (Kelleher, 2009). Traditional public relations concepts, such as measuring and evaluating public relations activity do "not fully apply to the real-time and conversational nature of social media" (Owyang & Toll, 2007, p. 7).

Hazelton, Harrison-Rexrode and Kennan (2008) identify three main impacts of new media on public relations: the fragmentation of mass audiences (which makes public relations more cost-effective than advertising); new media users are active rather than passive participants; and, finally, that practitioners require different knowledge and skills to use new media than those required in traditional public relations (p. 99). This final point has significant implications for established practitioners. The challenge for public relations, then, is to find ways of using new media to create greater opportunities for meaningful participation by, and consultation with, publics (Fitch, 2009b).

Public relations and new media in Singapore and Malaysia

There are some common factors in the history of public relations in Singapore and Malaysia. Public relations in both countries faces the challenges of moving "from a profession dominated by government campaigns designed to bolster the nation-building process to a profession with a strong private-sector presence" (Freitag & Stokes, 2009, p. 131)[1]. Both countries continue to have a relatively controlled media, and limits on freedom of speech, in comparison with other democracies, and both have culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Because of this diversity, "making assumptions about a general description of cultural communication patterns in Malaysia would lead to difficulties" (Freitag & Stokes, 2009, p. 127). Malaysia is in transition from "a developing nation to industrialized nation" (Freitag & Stokes, 2009, p. 127). Public relations is considered important in terms of "social engineering" to develop social unity "among all Malaysians irrespective of race" (Idid, 2004, p. 220). The relationship between the media and government is considered to be "the most distinctive" feature of Malaysian public relations, in that the government controls the print media through legislation and licences, and all media is expected to cooperate with government efforts to inform its citizens (Freitag & Stokes, 2009, p. 128).

Public relations in Singapore in the 1980s saw an increase in the number of multinational companies, which broadened the scope of public relations, and in the last two decades, the industry has grown and matured, in tandem with the competitive, knowledge-based economy (Lim, Goh & Sriramesh, 2005, p. 319). Public relations is considered to have a lower status than marketing and advertising (Lim, Goh & Sriramesh, 2005, p. 336) or is seen as "interchangeable with advertising and marketing", with "an excessive focus on media relations and publicity" (Freitag & Stokes, 2009, p. 132–3). Echoing the comments regarding public relations in Malaysia in the preceding paragraph, public relations in Singapore is described as being "in transition from a preprofessional to a professional status" with a "an excessive focus on media publicity" (Chay-Nemeth, 2009, p. 157). The internet is identified as influencing the growth of public relations as a profession, by offering an increasing focus on corporate branding and strategic communication programs rather than media relations and publicity (Chay-Nemeth, 2009, p. 160).

In Singapore, in 2006, the industry recognised the need to incorporate new technologies into public relations practice, and the first attempts to systematically use social media in public relations campaigns were in early 2007 (Fitch, 2009a). Other research, while not specific to public relations, identifies a general shift in the official attitudes towards new media in Singapore in 2006,

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1 It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully consider the impact of Western understandings of public relations on how public relations in non-Western countries is perceived and researched. In the descriptions offered here, public relations practice in Singapore and Malaysia is considered "pre-professional" and even unsophisticated in comparison to more Western understandings of public relations. For a fuller investigation, see Fitch and Surma (2006) or Curtin and Gaither (2007).

and pinpoint this to the general election held that year when, for the first time, both the government and the news media recognised blogs were legitimate and increasingly mainstream (Lee & Kan, 2008). Social media was recognised as offering an opportunity for citizens "to express themselves socially and politically", and social media such as blogs "continue[s] to place technological and regulatory pressure on the authorities" (Lee & Kan, 2008, p. 18).

Like Lee and Kan (2008), Freitag and Stokes (2009) highlight the Singaporean government's somewhat ambivalent attitude towards new media, in that it promotes internet access and technological advancement but at the same time attempts to maintain controls on freedom of speech. In 2006, the Singapore government, through its Infocomm Development Authority (IDA), released the Intelligent Nation 2015 (iN2015) masterplan. Its aim is to assist Singaporean citizens in "realis[ing] the potential of infocomm over the next decade" (IDA, 2006) with the somewhat ambitious aim of being the number one country in the world in "harnessing infocomm to add value to the economy and society" (p. 7). In 2005, two-thirds of homes had internet access (M.C. Lee, 2006). There was a 25% increase in internet use in 2000–5 in Singapore and the most common uses in 2005 were emailing, sourcing or requesting information, lodging forms and internet banking (M.C. Lee, 2006).

Similarly, the Malaysian government emphasises the importance of information technology and has developed a national IT agenda to enable Malaysia to develop its technology and increase internet access, with implications for public relations practice (Idid, 2004, p. 228). Internet use is slightly lower than in Singapore, with an internet penetration of 63%; however, growth in users is more than double that of Singapore in the period 2000–8 (Internet World Stats, 2009). According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Authority (MCMA), Malaysian use of the internet became more intense in 2006, with users surfing the net an average of 15 hours a week compared with only nine hours in 2005 (MCMA, 2006, p. 14). The most popular uses of the internet were getting information, communication, entertainment (through music and video downloads), education and financial activity (MCMA, 2006, p. 15).

Methodology

This research is an attempt to investigate public relations practitioners' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, new media in a changing communication environment. It is a historical project in that research conducted in 2006 is reviewed in response to more recent investigations into social media in Singaporean public relations agencies. It is based on a series of in-depth interviews conducted with ten public relations practitioners in Southeast Asia. The research aims to understand how the increasingly interactive and collaborative nature of new media was perceived by senior practitioners in order to contextualise current industry practices. The researcher used semi-structured interviews because they offered the opportunity to elicit the perspectives of the interviewees. Importantly, they

allow "participants' interpretation of their experiences" (Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p. 167). The interviewee sample is not designed to be representative; rather, it seeks what L'Etang (2008) calls "multiple truths, alternative visions and critical perspectives", and employs a qualitative approach to understand the public relations processes of interpretation and meaning-making (p. 25; p. 249).

The interviews were conducted in June 2006 in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Interviewees were identified through existing contacts or through their relatively high profile in the public relations industry in each country. Initial contact was made by email, and all practitioners who were approached agreed to be interviewed. The hour-and-a-half long interviews were recorded and transcribed. Member checking was achieved by returning the transcriptions to interviewees for approval and/or amendment. One interviewee chose to make significant amendments, to ensure clarity. The researcher's university granted ethics approval and all interviewees provided written consent for their participation in the research.

The ten interviewees worked in communication management roles for a range of organisations, including government and non-government organisations, local and foreign multinational companies, public relations consultancies and an activist organisation. Nine interviewees were experienced and senior public relations practitioners: they were directors of corporate communication for multinational companies, government agencies, or public relations consultancies or they had senior communication management roles in their organisations. The interviewee who worked for an activist organisation did not see herself as a public relations practitioner, despite her primary responsibility being to manage communication with stakeholders to promote the organisation's aims. However, this experienced practitioner is included in this study in order to consider public relations in its diverse forms (Curtin & Gaither, 2007).

This research attempts a context-sensitive approach seeking to "understand the world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live and work in it" (Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p. 12) rather than attempting to adapt Western understandings of public relations. Curtin and Gaither (2007) argue that normative approaches, based on empirical research, have wrongly been assumed to be universal and may not adequately represent public relations in countries other than the United States (p. 5; p. 36). They call for more research into public relations by "examin[ing] countries according to the range of meanings they hold, as found in their respective histories, cultures, and political and economic systems" (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 256). A qualitative approach therefore suits the purpose of this research.

Results and discussion
The analysis of the interviews led to the identification of key themes summarised as:

- An expression of anxiety about the implications of new media;

- An acknowledgement of changes to public relations practices; and

- A recognition the industry is changing, or will be forced to change, in response to new media.

Anxiety towards new media

Several practitioners identified a resistance to using new media, with one practitioner describing the increase in new media use as "scary" for public relations as it involved the loss of interpersonal or "human" connections:

> I think a lot, maybe I'm a bit old school but I feel that PR still needs a lot of human touch, still needs an interpersonal feel, interpersonal relationship with the person you are dealing with and not just leave it to modern technologies to take over. (Interviewee 1)

She identifies the issue as generational:

> People are using text messages to say, "Are you free for lunch?" and people have forgotten that picking up the phone and talking to someone is definitely more interpersonal than texting messages, and a lot of the younger generation people are doing that. (Interviewee 1)

Another interviewee also considers traditional public relations to have a strong social or interpersonal dimension, and this element is fundamental to public relations practice:

> We are very social animals. You must have realised so the evening hours for drinks, for relaxing, to talk and to deliver some messages... and in Malaysia I still say face-to-face, a lot of interactive relationship is required, and I still say we work a lot by referrals and trust. (Interviewee 10)

This interviewee maintains that the personal relationship is "still the priority" for public relations practice, and that this element is lacking in new media. One Singapore-based consultant said that practitioners are "scared" of technology because they lack "an understanding of what technology can do" (Interviewee 3):

> We are scared shit of it. We do not have an understanding of what technology can do... Most PR person's notion of IT is like a web page. We need to understand these things. We need to make use of these things. (Interviewee 3)

This suggests that this practitioner recognises that public relations will by necessity change in response to new media, but that other practitioners see it very much in static terms of information dissemination. In addition, he said of the public relations industry:

> We have not put our minds to the technology that is happening ...that the era of broadcasting is dead. One paper to all masses is dead... if you can't wait for your program to come up, you can podcast it to your MP3 where you can listen to it at your convenience. In one foul swoop, radio scheduling has gone awry because now I can get my thing when I want it. (Interviewee 3)

This practitioner was not alone in suggesting that the communication environment would transform in response to new technology. Others recognised that new media was transforming public relations; even if most practitioners did not yet use it:

> Well I think right now it is not fully utilised or understood by the practitioners. They have absolutely no clue that this whole thing actually puts your whole PR paradigm on its head...the Internet has captured the whole, the source, the channel, the receiver, the message, in a whole laptop, anywhere, anytime, and that has not been factored in by the PR person. (Interviewee 4)

Others articulated the struggle they had with technology, with one arguing that experienced practitioners were leaving the public relations industry because of new media: "some of us are leaving because we are not tech savvy and we are struggling" (Interviewee 7). That particular interviewee saw the impact of new media on public relations in terms of a loss, as she articulated her struggle with technology: "we are so much more into language, into communication, the words, you know, and suddenly all technology is all wires, and I don't know, you feel like, you are not fitting in" (Interviewee 7). This comment is interesting because the interviewee, a Malaysian consultant, suggests that due to her lack of knowledge and confidence with new media, she no longer suits the role of professional communicator. The loss, though expressed here in terms of loss of language, perhaps reflects earlier comments about the perceived lack of interpersonal connection in new media.

Implications for public relations practice

All practitioners indicated that new media had resulted in both an increase in workload and a change of pace in the way they worked:

> It makes us work 24/7 which is not that great...it speeds up our work but it also means that we have to monitor a lot more closely...before it was just print and radio and TV...you have to be a lot more responsive in a faster time than before. (Interviewee 9)

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Although most practitioners were using new media, they were doing so in relatively limited ways, such as email and websites. For at least two practitioners, new media offered easier communication and environmental solutions, including addressing the problem of Kuala Lumpur's notorious traffic. One said new media allowed more communication "without having to be burdened by traffic jams" (Interviewee 10), and another stated:

> We communicate with staff, the office staff, via email. There is always email broadcasting, telling them what is happening and what else? Sending your press releases by email, communicating with the agency... in KL...it can be quite a tedious process travelling so we just basically email each other, translate the release, send it out and all is done by email so it saves you from travelling, like even pictures, we just send them [journalists] soft copy of pictures...It is paper friendly, environment friendly. (Interviewee 6)

In addition to media relations and internal communication, that practitioner used the internet to research campaigns and monitor public opinion, although he stressed the need to evaluate such information:

> For me, like I say, gathering information, access to information is easier now sitting at the screen. I mean I can do research on bird flu, go to the W.H.O. [World Health Organization] web site, you can go to your folder and they have a room, or what they call an e-room. We download materials. It is easy to access. There is a lot of information. I am reading different blogs, online newspapers, gathering information but again you still need to have a very critical mind in making up your own mind on what is happening. So you are not just like, in a sense, sponging up everything but critically evaluating the information that you are getting. (Interviewee 6)

Another practitioner acknowledged that the internet had not just made research easier for practitioners, but that it "has made it very easy for the public to access information" (Interviewee 5). One interviewee, working in an activist organisation, welcomed the opportunity the internet provided for networking and information-sharing with like-minded organisations in other Muslim countries:

> Last March we invited [information from] academics and scholars from all over the world and studied their arguments on Muslim Family law... So what we are doing now is we study all the arguments and choose which is more suitable to our context...and this helps strengthen our argument on some positions. (Interviewee 8)

That interviewee enjoyed the speed and ease with which she could disseminate information to the group's membership base. Although the activist organisation did not have its own blog, it tracked relevant blogs and saw these as one way around censorship laws: "We don't blog but at least we know that bloggers pick up our issues and debate [them]" (Interviewee 8).

Challenges for public relations

Several practitioners considered that despite increasing levels of internet use, the public relations industry had not yet grasped its full potential in a professional domain:

> Not the profession. No. No. Singapore in terms of the individuals using the technology at a personal level is very advanced. It has not been harnessed into a discipline. That's the problem. That is an issue. So a person dealing with...doesn't know how to use it. A person who is doing government does not know how to deal with it. A person in marketing communication does not know how to deal with it. They just go on. You can see they have not harnessed this new technology except for just email. (Interviewee 4)

Practitioners said the evolution of technology made it challenging for communication professionals: "it is not easy to keep pace with how fast the technology changes" (Interviewee 5). One practitioner said experienced public relations practitioners struggle with the professional use of new media:

> I think it is kind of tougher for people like us, people who are used to newspapers and just maybe TV scripts to actually tackle technology because we are not so sussed...yet all kinds of messages are coming through the Internet and certainly it is a lot of challenges with news spreading out so fast...on the practitioner's part because you are not so tech savvy yourself, you may have a problem trying to get your messages out through this new media because you are slow. (Interviewee 7)

Generally, new media was seen as the domain of the young:

> I think that most of who are over thirty-five are finding it very difficult because we didn't grow up with computers or the internet...I believe it is a trend that is seen across the world, the young are not actually reading newspapers and they are all turning to TV sets and your SMS and video streaming through phones and your Blackberrys, and what not. (Interviewee 5)

In addition, the interviewee who found that loss of interpersonal connections in technology use "scary" identified it as particular to the "younger generation": "They are just relying so much on technology that I think they are losing the human aspect of reaching out to people". (Interviewee 1)

One practitioner, a government communicator, identified the lack of IT literacy as a particular problem among people over sixty. For example, many do not have access to a computer and are illiterate, or may only speak a dialect. The problem, even though "Singapore makes an effort to ensure that people are IT literate" is:

> So how in the world do you make sure that while you are concentrating on the youth that you don't isolate your senior citizens? So that I think, if

> you ask me, in public relations and communication that is going to be the
> biggest challenge. (Interviewee 5)

New media was welcomed for offering alternative perspectives in countries
where the media might be highly regulated. Nearly all interviewees saw this as
a positive effect:

> Certain government-controlled publications are more propaganda, very
> pro, or very subtly they are trying to brainwash the masses but if you
> look online, for example, blogs which now have become very popular
> here...the media landscape is changing. It has internet communication,
> websites, blogs, a lot of people are blogging, sharing opinions, thoughts.
> (Interviewee 6)

Another Malaysian practitioner identified blogs and websites as offering a forum
for diverse opinions, particularly those of "underground people who actually
carry the opposition view" as opposed to the "rather tame" agenda of traditional,
pro-government media (Interviewee 10): "We have got very opinionated people
who write, and we know this. I mean I would make sure that I read them every
day, or every other day" (Interviewee 10). In contrast, the practitioner who works
for the government in Singapore argued for the need to restrict free speech,
citing a recent example of four bloggers who were charged under the Sedition
Act for promoting racial intolerance:

> And so the government used that episode...to show that one had to be
> responsible for one's comments. It does not mean one can't say what
> one thinks, you see we believe in freedom of speech, but not freedom
> of speech at any cost. There must be responsibility. And that is where
> those outside Singapore find [it] difficult to understand—the media,
> they say that the media here is muzzled; but actually it is this kind of
> self regulation that has helped to maintain harmony among the races.
> (Interviewee 5)

Another practitioner, based in Malaysia, welcomed the new "openness" and
"democratising" influence of the internet, which he said had resulted in a more
questioning or challenging mainstream, national media:

> There is more communication when you look at the newspapers, there is
> really a lot more, certain newspapers, like if you read the *Sun*...it is a lot
> more critical, a lot more open minded, the thinking, the challenging, the
> questioning, very, very good. That has come up probably in the last year
> or so and you can see that coming out. (Interviewee 6)

Conclusion

The practitioners demonstrate ambivalence towards new media, as they expressed
both anxiety about its increasing use in communication and acknowledged it
was something that would change the profession and which they would have
to embrace. Many saw advantages in new media, mostly with email, websites

and mobile phones. It facilitated inclusive communication, particularly in the workplace. It improved information dissemination to journalists and was more efficient in that it avoided the need for sitting in traffic in Kuala Lumpur. In both countries, new media such as blogs and internet forums were deemed to offer alternative perspectives to mainstream media, with several practitioners identifying a resultant shift in the mainstream media which one practitioner felt had begun to "challenge" and "question" the government (Interviewee 10). Another practitioner saw the advantages new media offered in terms of research, and the ability to gauge public opinion. The practitioner working for an activist organisation welcomed the low cost networking and information-sharing opportunities with similar organisations in other countries.

Practioners considered new media to be changing public relations practice, particularly in terms of speed and workload. There was consensus that new media was the domain of a younger generation, and that it was "tougher for people like us, people who are used to newspapers and just maybe TV" (Interviewee 7). Three practitioners acknowledged that they were "scared" of the impact of technology, with two viewing it in terms of loss of interpersonal contact, while the third expressed concern about the loss of "communication" and "language" and that public relations is in danger of becoming "all wires" (Interviewee 7). This contrasts with recent commentary and scholarship which identifies communication through social media as more personal and more 'real' or authentic (Kelleher, 2009; Owyang & Toll, 2007). This leads to one conclusion that the lack of knowledge and technical skill in working with new media meant that at least some public relations practitioners were not comfortable with the changing communication patterns, with a few even suggesting a strong sense of alienation from new media. It is relevant to note that at that point of time, none of the practitioners were active participants in social media: although some monitored blogs, none published their own blogs or had incorporated blogs or other social media into their public relations campaigns.

Many of the perceived disadvantages of new media were deemed to stem from the broader societal implications of new media, and the changing communication landscape. For instance, one government practitioner was concerned with the digital divide and the possible exclusion of "senior citizens" (Interviewee 5). Another practitioner said one of the challenges for public relations was working in an environment with "news spreading out so fast" (Interviewee 7). Several practitioners recognised a major paradigm shift in how public relations was understood and would be practised in the future. At the same time, they said "right now it is not fully utilised or understood by the practitioners" and it "puts your whole PR paradigm on its head" (Interviewee 4). Others stated that "the media landscape is changing" (Interviewee 6), and there was a strong sense that the future for public relations in such an environment was largely unknown.

This paper is titled "The New Frontier" in the sense that a frontier represents "the limit of knowledge" or "an outer limit in a field of endeavour, esp. one in which the opportunities for research and development have not been exploited" (dictionary.com). Given the rapid speed with which new media evolves, its full implications for public relations have yet to be explored. The Southeast Asian practitioners interviewed in 2006 were comfortable using email and developing websites, and generally using new media for information dissemination, and, in some instances, for research and monitoring purposes. However, the explosion in social media, and social network sites, and the increasing connectivity and interactivity through digital technologies, which was occurring at that time, posed additional challenges, which were, and arguably still are, a struggle for senior public relations practitioners. These senior practitioners recognised their lack of knowledge and skills in new media, particularly in social media, and appreciated that their industry would be transformed in response to new media. Experienced practitioners'perceptions of new media in 2006 still echo with practitioners today. Recent research suggests that although the Singaporean public relations industry has begun to embrace social media, primarily through the appointment of bloggers and new media specialists, it is still struggling to use new media in ways, which promote dialogue with publics and ethical forms of communication. Rather, its primary use appears to be promotional, further blurring the distinction between public relations and marketing (Fitch, 2009a).

The impact of new media on public relations requires more research, and in particular, more critical research. By this, I do not mean just 'how to practise public relations effectively in a new media environment', but rather an understanding of the role of public relations and of the broader social implications of public relations practice in a new media environment. Studying how established practitioners in Singapore and Malaysia perceive new media, and its broader social impact in countries where the government closely regulates the activity of traditional media, contributes to a better understanding of how public relations is changing in an increasingly globalised and networked world.

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