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## Medium: An exploratory study of PR professionals in Taiwan

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# The Internet As A Public Relations Medium: An Exploratory Study of PR Professionals in Taiwan

*This paper seeks to explore the attitudes and practices of public relations (PR) professionals in using the Internet as a PR medium in Taiwan. Specifically, the paper addresses three research questions: (1) What do PR professionals think about the function of the Internet and the roles of online communication in comparison with those of offline communication in Taiwan? (2) Will IT-related corporations be more likely to have a wider scope of Internet applications than non-IT related corporations? (3) Do IT corporations perceive the role of PR differently from non-IT related corporations? Using a semi-structured questionnaire, we conducted in-depth interviews with eight corporations' PR and marketing department professionals in Taiwan from May 18-June 18, 2001. The findings show that (1) Although the Internet is widely used by PR professionals, it does not alter media strategies significantly; (2) PR professionals in IT corporations tend to practise more Internet communication functions than those in non-IT related corporations; (3) IT corporations are more likely to support the management role of PR professionals, as compared to those in non-IT related businesses. The study suggests that the applications of the Internet vary according to industry type, business strategies and roles of the PR professionals within an organisation.*

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Recent survey data show that the number of Internet users is growing significantly in Taiwan with 2.9 million Internet users in 1999 (Commonwealth Magazine, 1999). Yam.com, an important search engine company, provides detailed descriptions of users' online behaviours in 2002. They show that the Internet has become one of the major communications tools in Taiwan. Thus, many corporations in Taiwan have mobilised more online

resources to meet their public's needs. However, scholars pay little attention to the impact of the Internet on PR practices in Taiwan, except that some English academic literatures have examined cultural dimensions of professional PR practices (Huang, 2000; Wu et al, 2001).

Public relations scholars (e.g., Botan, 1992) suggest that international public relations are cross-border in nature, requiring corporations to formulate strategies to handle communications affairs. But due to regional variations, there is no universal way for corporations to respond (Vercic et al, 1996). Therefore, it is important to examine the effects of globalisation and the Internet and to identify restrictions and specific principles that might influence PR practices, especially using the Internet as a PR tool for subsidiaries of multinational corporations (MNCs) in different countries.

Because the Internet represents both many-to-one and many-to-many communication models (Ha & Lincoln, 1998), its application to PR practices is an important research question. The Internet also means users can initiate communication within a Web site, instead of being just 'passive receivers'. Some researchers indicate that web-based information is customised to the consumer's needs, and interactive features are mostly included to facilitate two-way communication (Capps, 1993; Holtz, 1999; Middleberg, 2001). They predict that new computer technologies will increase the power of users, and thus challenge monopolies and hierarchical structures in the status quo (Gilder, 1990; Coombs, 1998; Heath, 1998).

The Internet also alters the PR principles. It is considered as the first controlled medium in which the message disseminator has absolute control over the content that will reach the receiver (White & Raman, 1999). Many communication professionals advocate that the Internet is an ideal PR medium for two-way communication, therefore providing opportunities and challenges for organisations (Gleason, 1997; Holtz, 1999; Middleberg, 2001).

Studies concerning PR and the adoption of web-based communication reveal results that warrant further investigations. Interviews with persons who are responsible for making Website decisions indicate that competition and establishing an Internet presence are the driving forces leading to the development of Websites (White & Raman, 1999). Although PR practitioners anticipated benefits from using the Internet as a prominent communications tool, very few of them conduct formal research on their target publics before launching web-based communication campaigns (White & Raman, 1999; Hill & White, 2000). Hill and White's (2000) research indicates that some practitioners even regard web-based communication as a secondary task, and they hold a skeptical attitude toward the effectiveness of the Internet.

Taiwan, as an emerging economic power from the Pacific Rim, has attracted many MNCs to set up their subsidiaries over the past

few decades. Compared to local firms, many MNC subsidiaries serve as the forerunners of Internet communication. Based on the rising needs of using the Internet as a PR medium, this paper will explore and describe the current practices of MNC PR professionals using the Internet in Taiwan. Specifically, the following research questions (RQs) are:

*RQ1: What do PR professionals think about the function of the Internet and the roles of online communication in comparison with those of offline communication in Taiwan?*

An analysis of business Websites in the United States indicates that different industry types show different preferences for Web formats (Ha & Lincoln, 1998). Other researchers suggest that industry type is related to the organisational performance in terms of web-based communication (Esrock & Leichty, 1998). Many studies identify the antecedents and consequences of the organisational adoption of technological innovations so as to describe how the organisational attributes, including industry type, determine the strategic use of new technologies (Damanpour, 1987, 1991; Fulk & Steinfield, 1990; LaRose & Hoag, 1996; Flanagin, 2000; Cornelissen et al, 2001).

*RQ2 Are industry type and levels of Internet experience related to the scope of Internet applications for PR purposes?*

Organisational attributes, such as organisational type, stage of adoption and scope of innovation, are important correlates of an organisation's overall performance (Damanpour, 1987, 1991). LaRose and Hoag's (1996) research suggests that early adopters of the Internet, who are also members of the IT industry, are more innovative.

One of the most compelling issues concerning the PR function and technological innovation is how new communications tools have contributed to the role of PR practitioners and to a symmetrical organisation-public relationship. Johnson (1997) defines "technologies used by PR professionals" as forms of computer-mediated communication that are interactive in nature. She suggests that it is important to explore the PR practitioners' perceptions of technologies. Johnson also investigates the process in which these interactive features help to facilitate two-way communication. According to her findings, the advent of new technologies enacts the management role of PR practitioners and helps foster two-way symmetrical communication. Therefore, the third research question is formulated as follows:

### *RQ3 Is industry type related to the role of PR professionals in Taiwan?*

Johnson (1997) proposes two roles concerning the practices of PR: management and technician roles. PR practitioners who play a management role will be highly involved in the decision-making process when they plan and implement communication programmes. PR practitioners who play a technician role will simply follow instructions from the management.

Case studies using in-depth interviews are employed to explore Internet practices by PR professionals in Taiwan. This qualitative method is not to generalise from the findings but to clarify particular categories and assumptions, in order to achieve a better understanding of subjects previously unknown (Berg, 1989). This will provide both depth and breadth in this exploratory study.

Eleven professionals representing eleven different MNC subsidiaries in Taipei are selected through a purposive sample, and eight of them agree to have interviews. Three selection criteria are used:

- (1) MNC subsidiaries are selected in order to observe the local variance under a general principle imposed by headquarters.
- (2) MNC subsidiaries are chosen based on their reputations in the global market.
- (3) Each MNC subsidiary's professionals included in the sample must have at least three years of experience of practising wired communication in order to obtain rich and detailed information from organisations with a well-established Internet environment.

Professionals from both IT and non-IT businesses are selected to provide comparisons. Five of the MNC subsidiaries selected are categorised as IT firms, namely, computers, the Internet service and telecommunications. The remaining three MNC subsidiaries are categorised as non-IT related firms, including pharmaceutical products, cosmetics and mail delivery services.

Although their job titles vary, all respondents in the study are responsible for the development of Internet communication. Two respondents hold titles of marketing or product managers, and the rest identify themselves as PR or public affairs professionals. The earliest establishment of a subsidiary dates back to 1956, and the most recent establishment of a subsidiary was three years ago. The use of the Intranet is also a variable examined in the study. The length of time using the Intranet ranges from three to eight years, and that of launching the Web site aimed

## Method

at external public groups ranges from one to eight years. Details of the MNC subsidiaries selected is shown in Table 1.

All interviews, using semi-structured questions, were conducted face-to-face in respondents' offices from 18 May to 18 June, 2001 (see Appendix I). Respondents are allowed to elaborate on each question as they wish, and more questions are added to obtain a complete picture of their perceptions, opinions, and practices of web-based communication. These interviews last for at least 90 minutes, and all interviews are recorded and transcribed verbatim for further analysis. Transcripts of interviews are sent to all respondents for verification and accuracy checks.

**Table 1:**  
**Respondents descriptions and background information**

Company	Year Established	Job title	Years of Intranet use	Years of launching Web sites
A	1956	Public Relations Manager	8	8
B	1970	Public Affairs Manager	7	7
C	1965	Associate Manager of Products	5	2
D	1980	Associate Manager of Public Relations	4	1
E	1973	Public Relations Specialist	3	2
F	1998	Senior Marketing Manager	3	1
G	1987	Senior Manager of Public Relations	4	2
H	1967	Public Affairs Representative	4	4

*Note: These multinational corporations' PR and marketing departments handle media relations, marketing communication, and internal relations.*

In terms of the first research question, the function of the Internet is operationally defined as the contribution, which web-based communications make to public relations practices. Two types of target publics, the general publics and the mass media, are used in order to describe the online communication process. More specifically, the general public is defined as consumers and potential consumers. The mass media refer to print and broadcasting journalists. Four Internet tools, including e-mail, e-commerce, online publication and online information concerning

the public interest, are used to build relations with the general public. Three Internet tools, including e-mail, online news conference and online news release, are used to build relations with the mass media.

Three major variables are involved in the second research question: industry type, levels of Internet experience and the scope of Internet applications. The scope of Internet applications is operationally defined as the aggregated number of Internet features such as e-mail, e-publication or other interactive features. Industry type is defined as a dichotomous variable: IT vs. non-IT corporations. The level of Internet experience is defined as the number of years that the corporations have used the Internet. Three levels of Internet experience are defined: high (seven to eight years), medium (four to five years) and low (three years) levels.

In terms of the third research question, two PR roles are defined: management and technician roles. The management role is operationally defined as the PR practitioner who participates in the decision-making process concerning the planning of communication programmes. The technician role is defined as the PR practitioner who handles the entry-level PR task and follows decisions made by the management.

*RQ1: PR professionals' perceptions of the Internet function and on/offline-communication comparison.*

The Internet has become an important communications tool for MNC subsidiaries in Taiwan. Those IT firms with a higher level of Internet experience tend to recognise more widely the value of the Internet, and applications of web-based communication are prevalent. In contrast, non-IT firms lack the advantage of technological innovations related to Internet applications. However, non-IT company respondents regard the Internet as a prominent indicator of a corporation's future success, and express a strong commitment to fully utilise the Internet to advance service quality. Overall current practices of Internet public relations in Taiwan are summarized in Table 2.

*RQ1A: The Internet Function: Facilitating the Communication Process*

Two types of public groups, consumer and mass media, are the main targets of Internet PR. Information about products or services is available from the Website so that both consumers and prospective buyers can obtain or ask for information online. All respondents say their official Websites do contain an e-mail

## Findings

address for general audiences, and six respondents send subscribers the electronic publication of products and services.

Providing e-mails for journalists and putting the electronic version of press releases on the Website are cited as the most common practice aimed at media reporters. Most respondents still regard the 'traditional media' to be important communication channels for news release. The following findings present the practices of web-based communication aimed at the general public and the mass media.

**Table 2:**  
**The public relations practices: Using the Internet as the communication tool**

Target Publics		General Public (incl. the Consumer)				The Mass Media		
Yrs. Of Using Internet	Company Codes	e-mail	e-commerce	E-publi-cation	Info-re. Public Interest	e-mail	On-line news conference	On-line news release
7-8	A	X	X	X	X	X		X
	B	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
4-5	C	X						
	D	X				X		X
	G	X		X		X		X
	H	X		X	X	X		X
3	E	X	X	X	X	X		X
	F	X		X				

*RQ1B: Using the Internet to Communicate with the General Publics*

Most respondents agree that maintaining a positive corporate image is not merely a PR task. It requires various efforts made by all members within the organisation:

“The main idea is to maintain consistency of the image. The headquarter has a web team that is responsible for maintaining a consistency. We follow a couple of templates provided by the web team and fill out the content. I’ll say this is a multi-task effort and PR staff alone can’t possibly achieve the objective of maintaining image consistency” (Company A).

“We wish to design a Web site that is both flexible and controllable. The Web as a controlled medium does provide an excellent opportunity for us to control the content. The main idea

is to present the best part of the corporation by fully utilizing the features of the Internet" (Company G).

"We regard the Web site as a way of building the corporate image. Therefore, we have put information about our commitment to serve the public interest. In addition, records of honors, awards and charity contributions are also put online to impress the publics in general" (Company H).

Respondents also express a pressing need to build closer relations with consumers:

"We pay particular attention to different needs in population. For the part of consumers, we provide the information about products, contact e-mails and FAQ's. We design a virtual gallery in the Web site where people can obtain interesting information about development of telecommunication technology and business. The key is to understand their interests and habits of using Internet" (Company G).

"As an international corporation providing mail delivery services, we have established the tracking service online so that customers can check the progress of the delivery anytime. The vehicles for the tracking service, however, are not limited to the Web pages. Multi-channels, such as voice mails, fax and Wireless Application Protocol (WAP), are also used to provide convenient and speedy services" (Company E).

"I would say most corporations' Web sites are too broad in terms of their targets. Those official sites release information in which consumers are not interested at all. We don't need an 'elephant-like' Web structure. Instead of lumping all these items together, we plan to launch a Web site of special events designed exclusively for the consumer" (Company C).

#### *RQ1C: Using the Internet to Communicate with the Mass Media*

Sending e-mails to journalists and placing electronic versions of press kits on the corporations' Websites are said to be the common strategies when the mass media are the target group:

"When we use the Internet to deal with the mass media, we place the press release, the photos, and relevant product information online. If we are launching a campaign of major brands, we will place the video files on the website to meet the needs of broadcasting media" (Company D).

"The website provides a good opportunity for us to explore the multi-media features of information. We will use graphics, motion pictures, sound, music and video images to present ourselves and I am sure that they will attract many Internet users. Because of the increasing number of broadband users, the message should be carefully arranged, designed and presented interactively

(Company G).

“The decision to use Internet or other communication tools is rather strategic. We need to clearly define the objective, the target audience and weigh each communication channel’s advantages in terms of cost and effect. If we decide that the PR plan bears potential news values, we will go to the traditional media for publicity. If we launch a smaller-scale of the special event, we are more likely to announce it and pull users online” (Company F).

### ***RQ1D: The Roles of the Internet Compared to those of Offline Communication***

According to most of the respondents, the advent of new communication technology does not change the practice of PR professionals significantly. It seems that using the Internet to distribute the corporate messages is rather a secondary task. All respondents say that the mass media are still the major targets for press releases:

“We still regard the print and broadcasting media as the primary objects for news releases. The only change is that we will put the same news release online. The advantage is that the Internet allows us to prepare for a longer and detailed version of backgrounder or datasheet, and we can update them whenever possible. The headquarter does have a well-established data bank for media reporters where they can download audio, video and textual files. However, due to the limitation of money and time in subsidiaries, we cannot provide that many functions to Taiwanese reporters” (Company A).

“The primary target is the mass media instead of the Internet. All of the news releases in my company are related to product features. We work as the supporters of marketing department and the main goal is to promote products by contacting the mass media for the publicity purpose” (Company D).

Results of the interviews indicate that the broadcasting and print media remain the primary targets of press releases. Building good relations with the mass media is considered more important than using the Internet to disseminate messages. One PR practitioner mentions that she will not spend time updating news information online regularly, because reporters can easily access the English Website maintained by the headquarter, making it somewhat “redundant” for her to place the same content in Chinese online.

Another respondent mentions that personal influence, namely *Guanxi*, is crucial to the corporation-media relationship.

Overall, using the traditional media to release information plays a more important role than using online communication in PR practices.

*RQ2: Factors Related to the Scope of the Internet Applications*

The study proposes two organisational factors related to the practices of Internet communication: industry type and levels of Internet experience.

*RQ2A: Industry Type and the Scope of the Internet Applications*

As shown in Table 3, IT-related corporations have more Internet applications than those non-IT corporations. The total number of Internet applications is eight and the number of non-IT firms is five. The finding suggests that IT firms are more likely to use the Internet as a primary PR medium than non-IT firms.

**Table 3:**  
**Number of Internet applications by industry type  
and levels of Internet experience**

IT v.s. Non-IT Corporations	Number of Internet Applications
IT Corporations	8.0
Non-IT Corporations	5.0
<b>Levels of the Internet Experience</b>	
High	10
Medium	5.5
Low	6.5

It is obvious that IT firms give priority to the Internet as a major communications tool for achieving better competitiveness. The case of non-IT firms is otherwise. To them the Internet does not constitute as a major factor influencing sales volumes.

*RQ2B: Levels of Internet Experience and the Scope of Internet Applications*

Table 3 shows that the relationship between the levels of Internet experience and the scope of Internet applications is not linear. Corporations with the highest level of Internet experience tend to have a larger number of Internet applications (ten), while corporations with a medium experienced level have the fewest applications.

*RQ3: Public Relations Roles and Industry Type*

The top management's attitude toward PR practitioners and the main marketing strategy of the corporation will determine whether the management role or technician role will play-out in their corporations.

"Attitudes of the top management toward PR are very positive, and I think such perceptions lead to a higher status of PR roles. It is fair to say that our practices in Taiwan play the decision-making role and help to make crucial communication choices. We have garnered enough resources to execute many communication tasks so far" (Company A).

"Our task is to communicate with the media. Each brand in our corporation has its own PR staff responsible for marketing communication. The main responsibility is to meet marketing demands by building a positive relation with the mass media" (Company D).

"We have been acting low-key. To follow the principle imposed by the headquarter, the PR staff adopts a rather reactive strategy to media inquiries. We don't contact media proactively. We have to act in accordance with the orders from headquarter and the top management. Our job is to answer questions" (Company C).

The technician's role is primarily to handle media relations and does not participate in the decision-making process, while the empowering management role manifests PR functions in various aspects. As a respondent explains: "It is natural for us to emphasize the importance of web-based communication because we are in the telecommunication business. The headquarter designates three major areas of PR practices: internal, external and investor relations. However, as a subsidiary, we are not responsible for the investor communication. Our main duty is to communicate with internal (the employees) and external (the customers) publics locally. It is quite special that we, as PR staff, play the leader's role in putting all information together on the Web site. We define the target audience, the content suitable for them and we even design the structure of the Web site on our own" (Company H).

Table 4 shows that most IT firms allow PR practitioners to assume management responsibility. All members of non-IT firms say that PR professionals play a technician role in their organisations. It appears that the marketing department in non-IT firms plays the leading role in planning the communication programme in general.

**Table 4:**  
**Relationship between Industry Type and Roles of Public Relations Professionals**

	Management Role	Technician Role
IT Corporations	4	1
Non-IT Corporations	0	3

All respondents of the MNC subsidiaries selected in the study value the Internet as an important PR tool. They regard the Internet as a great facilitator of the communication process. Online communication tools, such as e-mails and e-publications, are commonly used to communicate with consumers, prospective buyers and the mass media. However, the extent to which wired communication is practised depends on whether these MNC subsidiaries are related to the IT industry or not. That is to say, industry type may serve as a discriminator of various PR practices in Taiwan. The present study also finds that the relationship between levels of Internet experience and the scope of Internet applications is not a direct one. Corporations with the highest level of Internet experience have more wired communication programmes, but the relationship between corporations with lower levels of Internet experience and the number of applications is not clear.

In addition, MNC subsidiaries in IT-related business are more likely to support the management role of PR professionals, as compared to those in non-IT related business. The finding is consistent with Johnson's (1997) observation that the advent of new technologies enacts the management role of PR practitioners.

Several issues emerge from the present study. The first issue concerns the relationship between functions of public relations and marketing. Whether the PR function should be aligned with marketing needs has been debated hotly (Leuvan, 1991). Some respondents say that the performance of PR and marketing communication is under the supervision of marketing department, and the marketing manager is in charge of budget allocation. Many agree with the opinion that PR and marketing should cooperate with each other to achieve the company's communication goals. Although Lauzen worries that integrated communications may reduce PR to a product-publicity function and threaten the independence of the PR function, advanced communication tools will inevitably lead to a higher degree of organisational flexibility between departments (Lauzen, 1991). It appears that the more flexible the corporation in organising strategies, the more likely it is for PR to manifest its effects (Leuvan, 1991).

## Discussion

The second issue deals with the phenomenon that respondents from most MNC subsidiaries do not monitor or observe "opinion climate" online. Even if they do, the staff they assign are not always suitable for such a task. Only two respondents in IT business say that they install a monitoring system, and one of them say that "web engineers" are responsible for environmental scanning online. When asked if they provide solutions to online rumors, one respondent, who does not scan online messages, cites the questions and answers section provided by headquarters as the antidote.

As Bordin and Rosnow (1998) observe, rumor communication is no longer a one-way transmission of distorted messages. People, when facing a rumor, may seek information, authenticate their comments with suitable references, and express anxiety, belief and disbelief. Web-based communication provides an important realm for people to express opinions and generate rich discussions about rumors. Noticing the prevalent negligence of online scanning among MNC subsidiaries in Taiwan, PR professionals should pay more attention to individuals' needs to reduce psychological discomfort when they handle the problem of rumor transmission in the future.

The third issue is related to the skeptical sentiments reflected by respondents concerning the effects of Internet communication. There appears to be "cynical realism," defined as the contradictory attitude toward the effectiveness of web-based communication (White & Raman, 1999). Hill and White (2000) suggest that this attitude is probably due to a low priority of using the Internet that is given to PR. The present study shows two causes of skepticism: (1) lacking an effective measurement of the Internet impact and (2) the limited budget that is used to develop Internet communication programmes.

The study also shows that the Internet is widely used by PR professionals, whether they are IT or non-IT related corporations in Taiwan. Contrary to previous findings in the US (Hill & White, 2000), the Internet is by no means a B-list task for PR practitioners in Taiwan.

MNC subsidiaries in the study suggest that the Internet is a powerful medium capable of global communications. However, the number of Internet applications varies, depending on industry type, business strategies and the status of PR professionals within an organisational structure.

A limited sample size does not allow us to generalise the findings. Although cross-tabulations of research categories generate interesting findings, the analysis and discussions concerning the predictors of Internet applications are rather preliminary and must be evaluated with caution. Unlike most

PR research conducted in Taiwan (Huang, 2000; Wu et al, 2001), the present study does very little to tackle the issue of cultural dimensions during the professional practices.

The wired world is evolving quickly. The rapid change in Internet usage makes it difficult to define web-based communication. The present study operationally defines the web-based communication as using e-mails, e-publications, e-commerce or other interactive tools to communicate with various public groups. However, new media such as the Internet comes in many forms, providing new research questions but making a consistent academic conclusion difficult.

The findings may provide several strategic suggestions for practitioners and researchers. For practitioners, although the Internet leads to a significant change in business communication, communication professionals should note that basic rules of good writing and editing remain the same (Marken, 1995). Several strategies are suggested to 'pull' more users to the virtual communication world; e.g., by establishing an easy-to-access database designed to meet the needs of target public groups, and fully utilising online information as a complementary tool for the customer and media services.

Moreover, PR professionals should conduct more surveys of Internet users to understand their needs and communication patterns. Additionally, a careful web planning capable of creating a "dialogic loop" is important to generate a mutually beneficial relationship (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Finally, PR efforts need to be compatible with the organisational goal, and it calls for an integration of corporate policies, business strategies and web-based communication planning as a whole.

There is a need to conduct a more systematic research concerning the impact of organisational features on the practices of web-based communication in the future. The study recognises industry type as the primary variable influencing Internet communication programmes. More variables, such as organisational size, business strategy, budget allocation and other environmental dynamics, can be added in future studies to examine the practices of using the Internet as a PR medium. ■

#### **APPENDIX I: Interview Guide**

1. When was your company established in Taiwan?
2. When did your company set up the Intranet? When did your company launch the Web site aimed at the general public?
3. How many people in your company work as public relations practitioners?

4. Describe the roles and functions of public relations in your organisation. Who is taking a lead - marketing, public relations or elsewhere - in terms of making a communication choice?
5. What types of 'webbed' communication tools do you use most in your job?
6. In terms of internal communication, what types of Internet tools are used and in what way?
7. What types of communication channels have been used most when there are needs to contact headquarters or other subsidiaries around the world?
8. In terms of external communication, who are the target groups and what types of Internet tools are used and in what way?
9. What types of communication channels have been used most to release news information? Do you revise the message or add more audio/video features when you put news release on-line? Why? or Why not?
10. What is the most common format of news release in general? What makes you decide whether to add audio/video features on-line?
11. What is the best on-line strategy to build a positive corporate image in your opinion? How about the case in your company?
12. How has the Internet changed the ways public relations practitioners communicate with the consumer, the community, the government and interest groups?
13. Have you conducted any formal research concerning 'web-based' communication in general?
14. Have you accessed the communication effects of the Internet by observing the feedback provided by on-line users?
15. Have you set up any on-line monitoring system to collect users' opinions or complaints about your company?
16. How do you handle on-line rumors?
17. Assess the overall impact of technological innovations on public relations work.

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