



Artificial Intelligence Disruption in Public Relations: A Blessing or A Challenge?

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ABSTRACT: Artificial intelligence is bringing to the forefront of public relations functions new challenges as well as opportunity to achieve efficiency in communication with stakeholders. As shown in recent works, the acceptance and usage of artificial intelligence technologies by organization can help in measuring the return on investment of public relations efforts and ascertain congruency between organizational goals and objectives. This essay based on reflections and an interview with an experience public relations practitioner. The essay end by showing that artificial intelligence technology is here to stay. Therefore, public relations practitioners need to be adept of the technologies in order to increase the effectiveness of public relations functions.

KEYWORDS: Public relations; artificial intelligence; storytelling; communication

1. Introduction

If you still think artificial intelligence (AI) is some stone-cold robots in the labs, you may want to think again. Today, AI is everywhere. Just look around: from turning on the TV with Alexa, asking Siri about the traffic, using autocomplete search suggestions on Google, getting personalized recommendations on Netflix, AI has taken everyday life to a whole new level even without us realizing it. I remember watching *Ex-Machina* a few years back. Seeing how the AI robot was able to deceive humans, the film fascinated and terrified me at the same time. Right there and then, I had the same question everyone probably has had – *will robots wipe out the human race one day?* You probably have wondered the same thing – and this is where you will get some answers, *hopefully*. So, sit back, relax, keep reading, I assure you this article is worth your time.

Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to machines that simulate human intelligence [1]. In simple words, AI enables machines to learn, reason, and act like humans [2]. Broadly speaking, there are two types of AI, namely artificial narrow intelligence and artificial general intelligence. Artificial narrow intelligence, also known as *weak AI*, performs a single task because it is only equipped with a specific dataset. On the other hand, artificial general intelligence, also known as "*strong AI*," is so much more capable because it is equipped with human intelligence to do any task [3]. It is self-aware, sentient, and human-like [3].

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact time, but the popular idea is that AI existed way earlier than people realized. One of the most influential inspirations for AI came from Alan

Turing. If you watched the Imitation Game or have a £50 note, you probably know of Alan Turing, the mathematician who invented the Bombe machine that deciphered the Enigma code in World War II. In 1950, Turing published the famous paper, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," in which he explored the potential of machines to simulate human intelligence and ways to create and test intelligent machines [4]. Today, the Turing test that he created 70 years ago is still a benchmark to assess a machine's intelligence.

Turing set the wheels in motion, but the world only heard of the term artificial intelligence for the first time in 1956. It happened when computer scientist *John McCarthy* hosted *the Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence*, which marked the birth of AI and inspired a dedicated research field [5]. Between the 1950s to 1960s, with strong government and industry support, researchers laid the foundations for the artificial general intelligence we have today [1].

However, AI soon experienced its first winter in the 1970s because of funding cuts and technological limitations [1]. In the 1980s, a new wave of interest in AI resurged, although it was followed by its second winter that lasted until the 1990s [5]. Since then, AI has been unstoppable, thanks to a series of major breakthroughs in computing and, particularly, the emergence of Big Data [1]. And as you know, the rest of the story is still in the making as we continue to witness the milestones in the development of AI.

2. Artificial Intelligence here to stay

Fast forward to today, the question is no longer about whether AI will play a role in everyday life, but rather which roles it can and will play. Apart from being your virtual assistants, AI technology is now driving cars, diagnosing cancer, detecting emotions, writing poetry, and beating humans in chess, poker, and IQ tests [6]. As more and more imaginations of technology go from science fiction to feasible reality, it is simply not possible to imagine a future without AI.

While AI technology may feel "sciencey", it concerns the PR industry just as much as almost any other field. Panda et al. [7] call AI a "strategic disruption" in the PR field. In the context of PR, they conceptualize AI as "technologies showing humanoid cognitive abilities and performing humanoid functions in undertaking public relations activities, independently or together with public relations practitioners" [7]. According to Ardila [8], existing AI technology in public relations is capable of automating repetitive tasks, interpreting online conversations, designing data-driven campaigns, and even predicting a crisis; and don't worry, this technology's advancements aren't stopping there. With AI, PR activities now require less work and time while producing higher value and accuracy – and this is why AI is of high relevance and significance to the industry and deserving of attention. As future PR practitioners, we should and must care.

3. Let's hear from someone on the ground

A PR practitioner at a reputable consultancy firm in Kuala Lumpur works with clients in various industries, including transportation, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, healthcare, agriculture, food and beverage, and education. The practitioner specializes in PR activities, including client servicing, media engagement, influencer management, as well as strategic planning and thinking.

On the relevance of AI to PR professionals, the PR practitioner said that the PR industry is ever-evolving and adapting towards leveraging technology, especially AI, thanks to technology advancements and the implementation of Digital PR. Let's take media monitoring, for example. Back then, PR professionals had to physically go to newsstands to purchase printed newspapers from different publications and read through every single page to identify which news was relevant to report back to their clients, "the PR practitioner said. "Now, with amazing technology and media publications emerging online with various online news portals, all you need to do is search for a specific publication you want to read and enter the keywords that are relevant to your clients, and there you have it – news at your fingertips from a simple search button online." Certainly, the continuous process of such a transformation has changed and still is changing the ways PR professionals carry out PR activities. And the sky is the limit.

3.1. How intelligent are we talking about?

In day-to-day functions, AI has started to assist PR professionals in many repetition-based tasks such as drafting press notes, transcribing speeches, creating media lists, writing emails, and producing reports [9]. The list goes on, but this is not even the most impressive part. The real asset is AI-powered analytical tools. These tools are able to identify trends, quantify sentiments, and generate accurate insights in real-time [9]. These data-driven insights will specifically inform PR professionals' approaches and allow them to proactively strategize their campaigns [8].

In two years as a PR professional, the PR practitioner leverages AI technology when developing communication proposals and quarterly reports for the clients. "At our consultancy firm, we have Relevance Radar, a powerful artificial intelligence listening platform that helps predict, mitigate, and measure opportunities for clients," the PR practitioner said. The PR practitioner said this AI tool supports the team in aligning public relations with the entire customer journey to maximise impact for their clients. For example, if I am developing a PR communications proposal for a brand that is in the automotive industry, I will be able to monitor the chatter online from their users, capture the amount of coverage the brand has received from the media, and understand as well as outweigh the positive, neutral, and negative sentiments towards the brand, the PR practitioner said. "This will help me create an impactful and relevant strategy for the brand moving forward," the PR practitioner said. When it comes to monitoring and measurement in PR, AI-powered tools are the obvious winner, with an impressively high level of accuracy and efficiency that humans cannot compete with [8]. And this brings us to the ultimate question today: *how will PR professionals survive the wave of AI?* PR professionals are not replaceable, *yet*. The remarkable capabilities of AI are one of the main reasons the technology is perceived as a threat to humanity by many, including Bill Gates and Steven Hawking. Kaplan [10] suggests that the proactive nature of the name "artificial intelligence" is attributable to its "PR problem," as it creates a false impression that machines are ambitious to replace humans.

3.2. Is this concern invalid, though?

While there is no absolute answer, industry experts claim that the two fundamental elements of public relations, trust and storytelling, rely heavily on intuition and a human touch, which AI robots cannot do, at least not yet [11]. Likewise, the PR practitioner said AI does not pose

any threats to PR professionals. This is a "human" industry that strives to harness the power of storytelling, which requires human intelligence and cultivating relationships with those we engage with, such as our clients, editors of different publications, and on-ground target audiences, the PR practitioner said.

"The depth of having meaningful conversations and building relationships with everyone we PR professionals engage with by taking the time, energy, and empathy to really connect with one another—that is not replaceable with AI technology," the PR practitioner said. The PR practitioner added that effective public relations and storytelling require emotional intelligence in addition to human trust. "Our creativity goes beyond imagination, humor and banter, unique and impactful storytelling and empathy, which is the core of our business, is why clients hire us to help be the bridge between them and their target audience," the PR practitioner said. Fundamentally, PR needs human input, and that is how we will ride the wave of AI. As industry experts foresee, human oversight is likely to remain relevant and essential for the next five years, even in the event of a radical transformation due to technological advancements [12].

3.3. Relieved? Not so fast

Needless to say, AI in PR is powerful. According to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), at least 12% of PR activities can be undertaken or enhanced by AI [12]. While AI may not be a replacement for PR professionals (for now), it serves as a powerful complement to PR activities and it is crucial, we learn how to use it to our advantage. However, the 2019 Global Communications Report shows that about 40% of PR practitioners are not at all knowledgeable about the potential of AI in communications, while another 46% are only somewhat knowledgeable. This indicates a skill gap that requires immediate attention and response before it widens any further as technological advances continue to transform the world.

The PR practitioner said that proficiency in AI technology essentially benefits PR professionals by allowing them to access data more efficiently. "With the support of these AI-powered platforms/tools, PR professionals can leverage on accessing relevant information in a timely manner, which allows PR practitioners the ability to focus on other activities such as creative thinking, strategic planning, and human instinct—attributes that AI technology is not able to comprehend." When asked what can be done to better prepare ourselves as future PR practitioners, "the PR practitioner shared some good advice I believe all aspiring PR practitioners would value." As PR professionals, we need to be ahead of the news, hijack the latest trends, and cultivate the audience. One of the skills we need to have is the ability to think outside of the box. "When coming up with a communication plan or campaign for your clients, you must be able to envision their presence and future, as well as take into consideration the past. Forward-thinking and coming up with bold and impactful ideas is what will set you apart in the industry. Most importantly, stay up to date on industry knowledge by participating in industry conversations, reading what key opinion leaders have to say, and staying up to date on current news and situations locally and regionally," the PR practitioner advised.

4. Conclusions

My final thoughts are; we should have moved past the stage of shock or fear of the technology by now. Like it or not, AI is here to stay. Looking forward, we must embrace the disruption

and strive for coexistence rather than exclusion. Turn our fears and worries into enthusiasm and motivation, because AI will not stop, nor will it be the last disruption we see in PR. So, keep moving – we do not want to just stay in the game, we want to stay ahead of the game.

Competing Interest

No conflict of interest is declared

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