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Transforming media relations: A qualitative study of public relations 4.0, digital tools, and professional skills

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DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.22271/27084450.2025.v6.i2a.119

Abstract
This study investigates recent developments in public relations (PR), with a specific focus on thematic shifts and the evolving landscape of strategic media relations. Grounded in a qualitative descriptive methodology, the research synthesizes contemporary academic debates alongside in-depth interviews with PR practitioners across various sectors. The analysis explores how traditional PR practices have transitioned into digital paradigms characterized by the integration of artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and interactive digital platforms, collectively shaping what is now termed PR 4.0. The findings reveal a significant transformation in media relations practices, where digital tools such as social media, live streaming, and online forums have transcended traditional methods like press releases and press conferences. These digital innovations foster real-time, interactive engagement, allowing organizations to respond swiftly to public sentiment and tailor communications to specific audiences. However, the study also underscores the continued relevance of foundational PR skills such as persuasive writing, relationship-building, and strategic storytelling which remain essential in sustaining credibility and fostering long-term stakeholder trust. Through thematic analysis, visual frameworks, and comparative tables, the paper illustrates the hybridization of traditional and digital media relations, highlighting the dynamic interplay between established communication methods and emerging technologies. Furthermore, the research identifies the critical competencies required for modern PR professionals, including digital content creation, data analytics, strategic crisis management, and cross-platform engagement skills. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for academic institutions and professional training programs to integrate digital literacy and data-driven decision-making into PR curricula. It offers actionable recommendations for practitioners and scholars, positioning strategic media relations and digital proficiency as essential components of effective public relations in an increasingly complex and digitized media ecosystem.

Keywords: Public relations 4.0, digital media relations, artificial intelligence and big data analytics, social media engagement, strategic communication

1. Introduction
Public relations (PR) has long been a central pillar of organizational communication, serving to cultivate, manage, and sustain relationships between organizations and their various publics. Historically, PR focused predominantly on media relations, crisis management, and reputation-building through conventional platforms such as newspapers, radio, and television (Cutlip, Broom, & Center, 2009) [5]. However, in the contemporary digital age, this traditional model has undergone profound changes driven by technological advances such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and social media platforms.
The transition from Public Relations 1.0 characterized by one-way, top-down communication through mass media to more interactive and dynamic models such as PR 4.0 reflects broader societal shifts in media consumption and audience expectations (Grunig, 1992; Arief, 2019) [7, 2]. Scholars such as Huang, Wu, and Huang (2017) [8] argue that this

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shift has moved PR from being primarily a reactive discipline focused on message dissemination to a proactive and strategic function centered on audience engagement and real-time interactions. Digital PR leverages platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn to foster two-way communication, empower user-generated content, and monitor public sentiment dynamically (Moreno, Navarro, Tench, & Zerfass, 2015) [12].

Scholars also highlight the critical role of artificial intelligence in contemporary PR strategies. AI-powered tools now facilitate tasks such as predictive analytics, sentiment analysis, and automated content generation (VanDyke & Lee, 2020) [14]. This technological integration has enabled organizations to personalize communications, automate customer interactions, and optimize campaign performance. As noted by Mahendra (2020) [11], this new digital environment has significantly broadened the PR toolkit, transforming media relations into a multidimensional practice that integrates social media engagement, influencer outreach, and digital storytelling.

Moreover, digital technologies have amplified the speed and complexity of crisis communication. Wright and Hinson (2008) [16] observed that blogs and social media significantly altered the way PR is practiced, requiring professionals to engage with stakeholders instantaneously and transparently during crises. This immediacy has reinforced the need for PR professionals to develop competencies in data-driven decision-making, digital content production, and online community management (Flynn, 2014; Permatasari, 2021) [6, 13].

At the core of these shifts lies the evolution of strategic media relations. While traditional media outreach through press releases and formal press events—continues to hold relevance, modern PR increasingly integrates digital tools for audience targeting, real-time analytics, and interactive engagement (Kent & Taylor, 1998) [10]. According to Wigley and Lewis (2012) [15], effective digital media relations require an understanding of platform algorithms, audience behaviors, and the nuances of digital discourse, all of which are essential for crafting persuasive and impactful narratives.

This study aims to address three main research objectives. First, it seeks to map the historical evolution of PR from traditional, one-directional communication models to the contemporary, interactive landscape of digital PR. Second, it investigates the changing dynamics of strategic media relations in the digital era, focusing on how practitioners leverage both traditional and digital tools to engage with stakeholders effectively. Third, the study explores the evolving competencies required of PR professionals, drawing from qualitative interviews with practitioners across various sectors to understand the skills necessary for success in the digital communication environment.

By synthesizing academic research and practitioner perspectives, this paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the contemporary PR landscape. It contributes to the growing discourse on digital transformation in PR, providing actionable insights for scholars, practitioners, and educators alike. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of hybrid competencies merging traditional communication skills with digital literacy as essential for navigating the complexities of modern PR practice.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Evolution of Public Relations: From Traditional to Digital

The field of public relations has witnessed significant transformation over the decades, shaped by rapid technological advances and shifts in media consumption patterns. Traditionally, PR was centered on mass communication platforms such as newspapers, television, and radio, following a one-way, top-down model of message dissemination aimed at managing organizational reputation (Cutlip et al., 2009; Jefkins, 2003) [5, 9]. This era, often referred to as Public Relations 1.0, emphasized controlled communication with limited avenues for audience interaction (Grunig, 1992) [7]. The evolution of PR entered a new phase with the rise of the internet, giving way to Public Relations 2.0. In this stage, organizations began using websites and online forums to engage more directly with stakeholders, allowing for limited but growing two-way communication (Kent & Taylor, 1998) [10]. As digital technologies advanced, Public Relations 3.0 emerged, characterized by social media proliferation, real-time engagement, and highly interactive communication channels (Wright & Hinson, 2008) [16].

Contemporary PR practices are now entering the era of Public Relations 4.0, which is marked by the integration of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and predictive algorithms (Arief, 2019; VanDyke & Lee, 2020) [2, 14]. PR 4.0 emphasizes hyper-personalized content, interactive dialogues, and rapid audience feedback loops through platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram (Moreno et al., 2015) [12]. According to Huang et al. (2017) [8], this digital transformation has not merely altered PR's communication tools but has redefined its fundamental philosophy and practice. Permatasari (2021) [13] highlights that today's PR professionals must be adept in digital literacy, data analysis, and digital content creation, in addition to traditional competencies like persuasive writing and media relations. Furthermore, scholars such as Mahendra (2020) [11] stress that the contemporary audience expects authenticity, transparency, and responsiveness, necessitating a more agile and data-driven approach to communication.

The literature consistently emphasizes that while digital technologies are reshaping PR practices, traditional principles such as ethical communication, credibility, and relationship management remain essential (Flynn, 2014; Alexander, 2016) [6, 1]. This hybridization between digital fluency and classical PR skills forms the basis of modern public relations, setting the stage for the growing importance of digital media relations.

2.2 Digital Public Relations and Strategic Media Relations

Digital Public Relations (Digital PR) represents more than a shift in communication mediums; it reflects a deeper transformation in how organizations engage with their audiences. Unlike traditional PR, which relied heavily on journalists and news outlets for information dissemination, Digital PR leverages digital platforms ranging from social media and influencer networks to search engines and blogs to shape public perception (Moreno et al., 2015; Wigley & Lewis, 2012) [12, 15]. Strategic media relations have undergone substantial changes in the digital era. Historically, media relations focused on press releases, face-

to-face interviews, and press conferences (Cutlip *et al.*, 2009) [5]. However, these conventional practices are now complemented by digital tactics such as live streaming, online pressrooms, and interactive social media campaigns (VanDyke & Lee, 2020) [14]. Scholars such as Kent and Taylor (1998) assert that the key advantage of digital media relations lies in its dialogic capacity allowing organizations to engage in two-way, real-time conversations with diverse stakeholders.

Recent research has also shown that digital media platforms enable precise audience targeting, real-time analytics, and the rapid dissemination of tailored content (Permatasari, 2021) [13]. For instance, Alexander (2016) [1] emphasizes the efficiency and flexibility of digital PR in crisis communication, noting that digital channels empower organizations to respond swiftly and proactively to emerging issues. Furthermore, digital tools such as sentiment analysis and predictive analytics provide valuable insights for campaign optimization and reputation management (Arief, 2019; Huang *et al.*, 2017) [2, 8]. These capabilities not only enhance the effectiveness of media relations but also enable continuous learning and adaptation in communication strategies. Nevertheless, scholars caution that digital PR requires a specific set of competencies beyond traditional communication skills. Flynn (2014) [6] argues that PR professionals must master digital storytelling, data visualization, and platform-specific content strategies to remain effective. The convergence of digital tools with classical PR methods necessitates a multidisciplinary approach that blends communication theory, data science, and creative media production (Mahendra, 2020) [11].

In conclusion, the literature demonstrates that Digital PR and strategic media relations are not merely about adopting new technologies they represent a fundamental evolution in PR philosophy and practice. The fusion of real-time engagement, audience segmentation, and data-driven decision-making now defines the core of strategic media relations in the digital age. Importantly, while technological proficiency is indispensable, the foundational goals of PR trust-building, relationship management, and reputation stewardship remain consistent across all eras.

3. Methodology
3.1 Research Design and Data Collection
This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, which is particularly effective for exploring the nuanced shifts and strategic adaptations within the field of public relations. As Berg (2009) [3] notes, qualitative approaches are essential for examining the contextual, interpretive, and experiential dimensions of communication phenomena. Given the rapid digital transformation in public relations, a qualitative framework enables in-depth analysis of practitioners' perspectives and experiences, offering insights

that would be difficult to capture through quantitative methods alone. Primary data for this research were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten public relations professionals. These participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who possess direct experience in both traditional and digital PR practices. The sample included practitioners from government institutions, private corporations, and non-profit organizations to ensure diverse sectoral representation (Alexander, 2016) [1]. Interviews were conducted via online video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, a method that provided flexibility and facilitated broad participation across geographical locations. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, and all sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent for accuracy and subsequent analysis.

The interview guide focused on four central themes:
1. The evolution of PR practices from traditional to digital modalities.
2. The strategic use of digital tools in media relations.
3. The emerging competencies and digital skills required for modern PR practice.
4. The comparative advantages and challenges of digital versus conventional PR approaches.

These thematic areas were designed to elicit rich, narrative responses, allowing practitioners to reflect on their professional experiences and perspectives.

3.2 Data Analysis and Visual Representations
The collected data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. As described by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting recurring patterns within qualitative data. Transcripts from the interviews were carefully reviewed, and initial codes were generated to capture key ideas. These codes were then grouped into broader themes aligned with the study's research objectives. The historical trajectory of public relations, from PR 1.0 to PR 4.0, is summarized in Table 1. This table highlights the evolving communication modes, from one-way dissemination to many-to-many digital interactions powered by AI and big data technologies.

Through this process, the following major themes emerged:
• The evolution from PR 1.0 to PR 4.0.
• The dynamics of strategic media relations in the digital era.
• The evolving skillsets required for modern PR practitioners.

To enhance clarity and accessibility, the findings were complemented by visual representations, including comparative tables and flowcharts that summarize key insights.

Table 1: Evolution of Public Relations Eras

PR Era	Key Characteristics	Communication Mode	Technological Influence
PR 1.0	Traditional media; one-way, top-down messaging	One-to-Many	Print Media, Broadcast Media
PR 2.0	Online media introduction; basic audience interaction	Horizontal, Interconnected	Early Internet Platforms
PR 3.0	Social media integration; real-time engagement	Two-Way Interactive	Social Media, Online Communities
PR 4.0	AI, big data integration; highly personalized, interactive dialogue	Many-to-Many	AI Tools, Predictive Analytics, Advanced Digital Platforms

As illustrated in Figure 1, modern PR practice demands a hybrid set of competencies, including digital content creation, analytical thinking, and traditional communication expertise. The distinctions between conventional and digital public relations approaches are clearly summarized in Table 2. As shown, conventional PR largely relies on traditional

mass media channels such as newspapers, radio, and television, with a more formal and standardized style of communication. In contrast, digital PR utilizes contemporary platforms including social media, blogs, and websites, enabling flexible, creative, and highly personalized communication strategies.
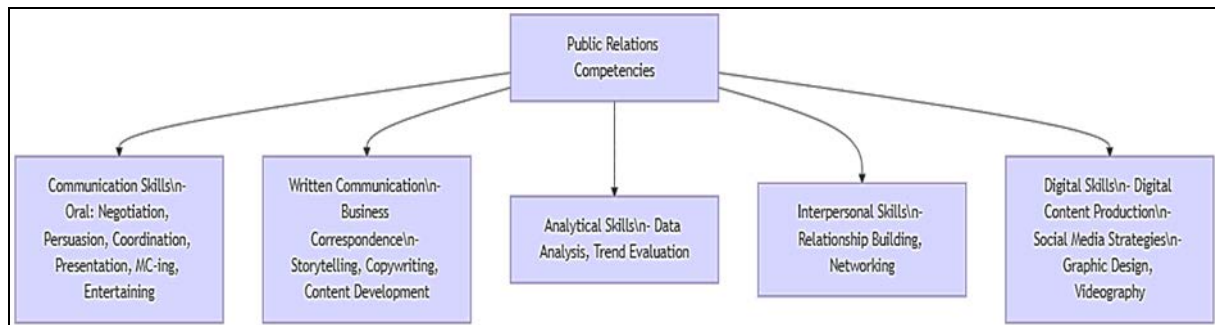
Fig 1: Key Competencies for Modern PR Practitioners

Moreover, the table illustrates that while conventional PR tends to involve time-consuming, geographically constrained methods, digital PR allows for global reach, real-time interaction, and sophisticated audience targeting through analytics-driven tools. The table also highlights how digital PR tends to be more cost-effective and efficient, offering organizations the ability to measure campaign

performance instantaneously and adjust communication tactics dynamically.

These distinctions emphasize the strategic advantages of digital public relations, particularly in an era where speed, interactivity, and data-driven decision-making are increasingly essential for effective stakeholder engagement.

Table 2: Comparison between Conventional and Digital PR

Aspect	Conventional PR	Digital PR
Media Channels	Newspapers, Radio, TV, Magazines	Social Media, Blogs, Websites, Influencers
Content Style	Formal, Standardized, Journalistic	Creative, Flexible, Personalized, Audience-Centric
Communication Approach	Direct, Physical, Time-Delayed	Real-Time, Virtual, Interactive
Cost and Efficiency	High Cost, Time-Consuming, Limited Analytics	Cost-Effective, Fast, Analytics-Driven
Audience Reach	Geographically Limited	Global, Broad, Targeted Segmentation

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Thematic Shift 1: The Transition from PR 1.0 to PR 4.0

The analysis of practitioner interviews confirms a substantial transformation in public relations, evolving from traditional, one-way communication (PR 1.0) to the highly interactive, technology-driven era of PR 4.0. Respondents consistently emphasized that while legacy practices such as press releases, media advisories, and press conferences maintain some relevance for credibility, digital platforms now dominate as primary tools for engagement. A key finding is the shift from one-way communication toward interactive, dialogic engagement. Modern PR leverages social media, instant messaging, and live forums to enable two-way, real-time conversations between organizations and their publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Wright & Hinson, 2008) [10, 16]. This transition has not only diversified communication channels but has also accelerated the speed of interaction and broadened audience reach.

Additionally, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and big data analytics—hallmarks of PR 4.0 were frequently cited by practitioners as transformative for campaign management and audience targeting. AI-powered tools allow organizations to analyze public sentiment, predict emerging issues, and automate certain communication tasks (Huang *et al*., 2017; Arief, 2019) [8, 2]. Interestingly, many participants noted the hybridization of traditional and digital approaches. Rather than replacing conventional media

entirely, practitioners employ a blended strategy that combines traditional outlets with digital tools for maximum impact. This hybrid model enables organizations to maintain credibility via traditional media while capitalizing on digital platforms for broader, faster, and more interactive communication (VanDyke & Lee, 2020) [14].

4.2 Thematic Shift 2: The Emergence and Dynamics of Strategic Media Relations

Strategic media relations have also been profoundly influenced by digitalization. Participants described a shift from controlled, pre-planned interactions with journalists toward real-time engagement across digital channels. Tools such as livestreams, social media campaigns, and influencer collaborations now complement traditional press interactions, creating multi-dimensional communication landscapes (Moreno *et al*., 2015) [12].

One critical aspect identified was the ability to monitor and analyze public sentiment in real time. Digital platforms enable organizations to track audience reactions during campaigns and quickly adapt messages accordingly. Practitioners noted that this real-time monitoring improves organizational responsiveness, particularly during crisis situations or sensitive events (Alexander, 2016) [1]. Another recurring theme was enhanced targeting and message customization. With advanced analytics, PR professionals can segment audiences by demographics, interests, and online behaviors, allowing precise and tailored outreach

strategies. This personalization enhances campaign efficiency and effectiveness (Permatasari, 2021; Wigley & Lewis, 2012) [13, 15].

Despite these advantages, many respondents emphasized the enduring relevance of traditional PR competencies, including storytelling, persuasive writing, and relationship management. Successful practitioners today combine these foundational skills with digital competencies, enabling them to craft compelling narratives that resonate across both traditional and digital media environments.

4.3 Thematic Shift 3: Evolving Competencies for Modern Public Relations Practitioners

The shift toward digital communication has redefined the competencies required for effective PR practice. Practitioners identified five key competency areas essential for navigating modern PR challenges:

a) **Communication Skills:** Oral and written communication remain essential, especially for crafting persuasive narratives, conducting interviews, and engaging with diverse stakeholders across platforms (Cutlip et al., 2009; Flynn, 2014) [5, 6].

b) **Digital Skills:** Professionals must master digital content creation, including graphic design, video production, and social media management, to engage online audiences effectively (Permatasari, 2021) [13].

c) **Analytical Abilities:** Competence in data analysis, digital metrics, and audience research was frequently highlighted. These skills enable data-driven decision-making and allow practitioners to measure campaign success precisely (Arief, 2019; Mahendra, 2020) [2, 11].

d) **Interpersonal Skills:** Relationship-building, networking, and influencer collaboration remain vital in both traditional and digital contexts, as trust and credibility are central to PR (VanDyke & Lee, 2020) [14].

e) **Strategic Thinking:** Crisis management, ethical decision-making, and proactive issue anticipation were repeatedly emphasized as critical for success in today's fast-paced media landscape (Alexander, 2016) [1].

Participants stressed that PR education and training programs must evolve to integrate these digital competencies alongside traditional skills. They noted a significant gap in formal digital training, particularly in data analytics, digital ethics, and multimedia content production. As summarized in Figure 1 earlier, these competencies are interconnected, requiring a holistic approach that combines both digital literacy and classical communication expertise.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the profound thematic shifts occurring within the field of public relations, particularly focusing on the digital transformation of media relations and the evolving competencies required for contemporary PR professionals. Through qualitative analysis of practitioner insights, three major themes emerged, providing a comprehensive understanding of the changing landscape of public relations in the digital era.

The first key finding is the transition from Public Relations 1.0 to PR 4.0. This evolution signifies a shift from traditional, one-way communication approaches to highly interactive, technology-enabled practices that leverage artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and social media

platforms. While legacy media channels still retain some value in specific contexts, digital platforms now dominate PR strategies, offering real-time engagement, audience feedback mechanisms, and dynamic content personalization (Huang et al., 2017; VanDyke & Lee, 2020) [8, 14].

Secondly, the study highlights the emergence of digitally integrated strategic media relations. Digital tools have fundamentally reshaped media relations practices, enabling PR practitioners to engage directly with diverse stakeholders, monitor audience sentiment in real time, and deliver tailored messages through sophisticated targeting techniques (Moreno et al., 2015; Permatasari, 2021) [12, 13]. This strategic shift facilitates faster, more effective communication and enhances organizational agility in response to crises or emerging public issues.

The third key conclusion pertains to the evolving competency requirements for modern PR professionals. In addition to traditional communication and relationship-building skills, practitioners now require proficiency in digital content creation, data analytics, social media management, and ethical decision-making (Flynn, 2014; Arief, 2019) [6, 2]. The integration of these skills is essential for maintaining credibility, fostering stakeholder trust, and navigating the complexities of digital media ecosystems.

The findings also suggest a pressing need for academic institutions and professional development programs to update their curricula to reflect these shifts. Current gaps in formal training particularly in areas such as data analysis, multimedia production, and digital ethics highlight the importance of equipping future PR professionals with a balanced, hybrid skill set that combines both traditional and digital proficiencies (Alexander, 2016; Mahendra, 2020) [1, 11]. Overall, this research underscores that while digital tools have revolutionized PR practices, the core purpose of public relations building and maintaining relationships, managing organizational reputation, and fostering trust remains consistent. The integration of digital and traditional competencies will be critical for PR practitioners aiming to remain relevant and effective in the rapidly evolving communication landscape.

Future research could explore the long-term implications of artificial intelligence on PR ethics, the role of emerging technologies such as virtual reality and the metaverse in public relations, and cross-cultural differences in digital media relations practices.

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