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COMMENTARY

Relational PR: Relationship-building and Trust at the Generative AI Crossroads. Does the Practice Choose Greatness or Irrelevance?

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The emergence of Artificial intelligence (AI) across our economy will be a revolution with profound effects like those of the industrial revolution when it disrupted agrarian society. AI is reshaping how we live, work, build our sense of self and develop and manage relationships. AI's ability to mimic and alter what we consider our humanity will first confuse our sense of what it means to be human, and then extend it. We will spend a lot of time communicating with machines. Those machines will communicate with us and for us.

In the post-war, the practice of public relations chose media relations as its focus. This was a departure from Edward Bernays' more expansive vision for the practice to manage relationships, shape and "crystallize" public opinion. Indeed, it was a move toward Ivy Lee's more limited view that public relations should focus on media relations. This had telling consequences, both positive and negative.

The leading negative consequence would be ceding much of the professional territory concerned with relationship management, image, and brand management to other functions in the organization. With this diminishment of the scope of its mandate, PR found its institutional prestige diminished.

On the positive side, Ivy Lee's model meant a lucrative and straightforward workflow - PR officers would deal with editors and journalists, to co-create messages through a negotiation that would create texts and images that could reach thousands or even millions.

Mass media achieved greater dominance and an uneasy pact developed between public relations practitioners and their counterparts in the senior ranks of the news media. As the reach of mass media spread wider, so did its power to shape narratives, giving public relations practitioners significant influence over public discourse. Through the constant renegotiation of their pact and the interests they represented, PR practitioners and journalists built a media sphere that tried to serve the public interest. Public relations became the facilitator of organizational-public relationships with media in the role of intermediary.

When social media washed over the world's cultures and societies, it changed everything. Suddenly, everyone had to maintain a symbolic existence alongside their physical one. This transformation meant a massive change in how most people conceived of their lives - from a previously concrete existence to an ethereal one that had hitherto been reserved only for celebrities and public figures.

We argue that public relations missed the social media revolution. Comfortably ensconced in their dialectical relationship with mass media, many PR practitioners scoffed at social media, with its short bursts of text and propensity to glorify the silly and the mundane. As such, social

media and the corporations that developed it grew and matured in absence of PR practitioners. The uneasy pact that was so productive between journalists and PR practitioners was never offered by PR to the social media companies. Nor did journalism understand the massive behavioral change that social media would bring in how people inform themselves. Journalists were used to the public listening to elite opinion, rather than “people like them.”

We contend that social media is like a gentle wave compared to the tsunami that AI will represent for our culture, society, economy, and selves. Social media gave people the chance to have multiple identities and find others who shared those identities anywhere in the world. Artificial intelligence will push us into the new realm of completely artificial people, who will be our assistants, friends, doctors, therapists, teachers, advisors, coaches, and lovers. The usefulness of AI is already winning over great swaths of the economy, altering or replacing jobs and automating cognitive and creative tasks, like writing, visual art, and design.

Automation is doing good things for PR. It will allow the practice to scale for the first time in our history, which will allow practitioners who learn how to use AI to become more strategic. Indeed, the fundamental challenge that AI poses to organizations is one of user experience, which is really one of communication and design. Websites, chatbots, search engines, site-specific Generative AI systems and many other applications will be adopted by organizations. The question is whether public relations will find a place at the heart of the economy-wide implementation of AI or whether it will find itself sidelined, focused on media relations.

Edward Bernays had an expansive vision for public relations. Contra Ivy Lee, he saw PR as a profession whose purpose it is to build relationships, transform perceptions and ultimately change behaviors. He understood the power such rhetoricians could wield when informed by data and masters of their craft. He was an example of this, quietly influencing arts, politics, and the corporate world. Bernays was a PR polymath who believed in the profession’s ability to contribute to society. He also believed in training.

If we are to follow Bernays’ model, PR must find itself at the center of the development of AI-based automated communications technologies. Indeed, there is no other function that has the same holistic understanding of the organization as PR - internal and external audiences, brand and image, and ethical commitments such as corporate social responsibility and advocacy, reputation, ethics, diversity, inclusion and belonging.

Organizational-public relationships are already transitioning to a new intermediary we call relational AI. Four developments in technology are helping shape that change. They are: voice AI that sounds human, synthetic media indistinguishable from people, sophisticated natural language responses, and multimodal training, that is, the ability of machines to process various types of data, including text to voice to translation or text to video. As consumers become more reliant on chatbots, they will begin to view these human-looking and sounding avatars as trusted confidants and digital companions. Yet the AI agents will be programmed to achieve business goals, will collect an endless stream of data, and will be able to shift the balance of power because of their ability to adapt based on real-time perceptions. We believe relational AI will usher in a new strategic role for communications practitioners, since guidelines around ethical behavior, transparency and authenticity have yet to be established or managed.

There will be much jockeying for leadership positions in the upcoming relational AI world, particularly in the arena of communications, since that will be the domain of UX. Those

who control the UX that the AI delivers will oversee the brand and brand relationships. PR practitioners have the training, ability and whole-organization understanding that should position our practice well in this struggle for control of AI and UX.

For PR to assume this leadership position, we will need to - as a practice - resolve a glaring issue. How do we train the next generation of practitioners, when all the work they usually do to learn the business - the low-attention writing, design, video, and visual art tasks - are automated and done in seconds by generative AI? Indeed, this remains an open question that we must resolve to make sure that the current generation of PR practitioners is not the last. How will they begin to grasp the implications of data and learn how to collaborate with and speak the language familiar to computer scientists and IT professionals?

Being able to script AI, build trusting relationships at scale, craft organizational brand and voice, while identifying potential ethical pitfalls constitute the primary strategy opportunity for PR to regain the position of institutional prestige the practice enjoyed in Bernays' time. This expanded influence could also mean the rekindling of the "uneasy pact" that PR enjoyed with journalists, however, this time it would be with the tech companies that developed the emerging AI agents.

PR is at a crossroads. Either it will reach for and attain greatness in the emerging relational AI world, or it will cease to be relevant, its core tasks commoditized and performed by machines, while other organizational functions supervise. For the sake of democracy and of human-centered business strategy, we hope PR will reach for the brass ring and fulfill Bernays' grand vision for the profession.