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Fuzzy, Transparent, and Fast: Journalists and Public Relations Practitioners Characterize their Connections and Interactions in Social Media

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Abstract
This mixed-methods study, based on a survey including open-ended responses from 167 journalists and public relations practitioners, examines views on social media interactions between these professionals. Grounded in journalism ethics and news production research, the study examines how professionals navigate rapidly changing social media. Results show journalists and PR practitioners see themselves as working in the same digital space. Journalists and PR professionals responded that it was ethical to become social media "friends" and followers with each other. Still, these relationships are evolving.

Journalists and public relations practitioners have little option today but to engage in social media. To stay relevant in digital spaces, news organizations must solicit the public's assistance in completing stories and gathering information, using platforms that

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allow bloggers, entrepreneurs, citizens and communities to gather and share news (Jarvis, 2009). In terms of public relations practice, a sample of members of the Public Relations Society of America reported that nearly 82% of their organizations used social media, with about half of respondents embedding social media usage into crisis communication planning (Wigley & Zhang, 2011).

Social media spaces and platforms, then, are sites of information sharing for journalists, public relations practitioners, and the public. Journalists sometimes use social media in their work to connect with expert sources through websites such as profnet.com and helpareporter.com (Help-A-Reporter-Out or HARO). This trend was termed "media catching" by Waters, Tindall and Morton (2010), who conducted a content analysis of HARO requests to understand social media's role in the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners. They found that "a variety of media outlets are engaged in the media catching trend to cover national and regional topics that range from business and finance news to lifestyle and entertainment features" (Waters et al., 2010, p. 255). Peter Shankman, the founder of HARO, reported that as of 2009, the service had 80,000 sources, was used by 30,000 journalists and issued 3,000 queries in a month (Waters et al., 2010, p. 259). A more recent study shows that the practice of media catching is growing, providing more evidence that journalists are turning to social media to keep track of emerging issues on their beats (Tallapragada, Misaras, Burke, & Waters, 2012).

Yet what happens when journalists—who are tasked with a watchdog function—interact with public relations professionals who are Facebook friends or Twitter followers? How do journalists and public relations professionals view these interactions and transactions? What ethical principles guide these professionals? This survey research project, conducted in summer 2012, included both closed-ended and open-ended questions and uses the responses and words of more than 150 professionals to track patterns of social media usage to gauge their comfort in using social media for reporting, information sharing, interviewing, and personal interactions.

This study is grounded in journalistic ethics and in news production research, which examines how news practices may contribute to the distortion and bias of news. For example, journalists' dependence on "official sources," including spokespersons and PR practitioners,

can result in warped versions of the news. A prime example is war coverage, including the now-notorious inaccurate reporting of weapons of mass destruction in the Iraq War (Baran & Davis, 2012; Gitlin, 1980). However, some scholars and professionals argue that the rise of new sources of information made possible by newer forms of media, including the Internet and social media, actually allow more voices to be heard and more perspectives shared, leading to more comprehensive news coverage (Baran & Davis, 2012; Rosen, 2009).

Journalists, PR practitioners, and social media

The relationships between journalists and PR practitioners have changed over the years, and continue to shift. Traditionally antagonistic interactions between journalists and PR practitioners are transitioning to a more "mutually beneficial" model, with social media's ability to counteract the traditional gatekeeper role of journalists, (Avery, Lariscy & Sweetser, 2010, p. 193). A 2010 study based on a 2009 survey showed that few practitioners were employing social media (Avery, Lariscy & Sweetser, 2010). However, anecdotal information and survey information show that social media tools such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook rapidly have become essential to public relations jobs (Wigley & Zhang, 2011).

With the advent of social media in the 2000s, journalists began to employ sources and content provided by the public in their reporting. This content includes video, audio, eyewitness reports and announcements posted on social media sites (Lariscy, Avery, Sweester & Howes, 2010). Live reporting and live tweeting are other ways journalists employ social media tools. Reporters use Twitter and other social media to transmit breaking news, and because of their interactive nature, other users may add to or enhance journalistic accounts, making news distribution a collaborative effort known as crowdsourcing (Clayfield, 2012). Journalists also turn to social media to keep track of emerging issues on their beats. In a 2010 study, Avery, Lariscy and Sweetser compared journalists' use of social media tools with public relations practitioners'. They concluded that public relations practitioners are more apt than journalists to use social media tools such as podcasting, video sharing and social bookmarking. Public relations practitioners also log more hours on social media than journalists. However, journalists make more use of social media

to track and monitor issues. "Keeping up with information through social media has enabled these journalists to maintain a larger set of informants and contacts as they perform their watchdog function" (Avery, et al., p. 201). Avery et al. also found that reporters were more inclined to work with PR practitioners who used social media tools. The Pew Center's annual "State of the Media" report in 2012 showed Americans are abandoning news in printed form in favor of online news, with 54% of Americans getting their news from desktop or laptop computers (Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Christian, 2012). Mobile devices are expanding as well, since "nearly a quarter of U.S. adults, 23%, now get news on at least two devices–a desktop/laptop computer and smartphone, a computer and a tablet, a tablet and a smartphone, or on all three" (Mitchell, et al., 2012, para. 9). Social media sites are important links to readers, listeners and viewers. For example, digital apps within the highly popular Facebook (with 133 million U.S. users), send story links to users' Facebook friends (Olmstead, Sasseen, Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2012). Twitter, with 24 million active U.S. users, has been used by major media organizations, including the Associated Press, *The New York Times* and NPR, to break news (Olmstead, et al., 2012). Readers have become active participants in news, which intertwines social media and journalism, writes Geneva Overholser, former director of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Journalism: "The less loudly journalists applaud this development, the further behind we'll be left until we fade to irrelevance" (Overholser, p. 6). Mark Briggs, author and digital media executive, notes that journalists must connect with their communities to gain credibility and to stay relevant. Social media, including Twitter and blogs, are methods to connect, advancing the idea that "news is a conversation" rather than a one-way form of communication (Briggs, 2008, p. 40).

Public relations practitioners have employed social media and new media tools in their work for more than two decades, beginning with email, blogs and websites, continuing with video-sharing and more recently with social media (Avery, Lariscy & Sweetser, 2010). Traditional public relations tools based on writing and media relations, such as pitching stories through news releases, are waning in effectiveness. Waters et al. (2010) recommend that public relations practitioners "should openly embrace social media because it enables real conversations" (p. 259). Journalists, they noted, are no longer

"passively receiving news releases and kits from practitioners wanting to get publicity for their own organization," they are seeking information from practitioners through social media (p. 260).

Codes of ethics

The popularity and widespread use of social media sites by both communicators and publics should be pushing news organizations and public relations practitioners to reexamine their ethics codes and guidelines, yet the legal and ethical ramifications of using social media are little understood by many communicators (Stewart, 2013). Under even more intense deadlines and a desire to be first, communicators have less time to reflect or discuss stories and messages, while defamation, invasion of privacy, copyright and other issues may take time and deliberation to avoid. Less like traditional codes of ethics and guidelines, social media guidelines can vary wildly, from detailed and several pages long, as the Associated Press Social Media Guidelines (AP, 2012) display, to just a few words, like at the *News & Record* in Greensboro, N.C., with the simple rule espoused by former editor John Robinson, "Don't be stupid" (Buttry, 2012).

Before traditional news organizations began using blogs in 1999 (Briggs, 2010), print journalists did not have the ability to publish information directly to the public in real-time. The idea of retweeting, or sharing another user's post (boyd, Golder & Lotan, 2010), did not exist until Twitter's founding in 2006. This raised new ethical questions, such as what it means to share someone else's post. It also led many journalists to include the disclaimer that "retweets do not equal endorsements" on posts to say they simply are sharing information, not agreeing with what was tweeted. Still, readers may not make that delineation and news organizations disagree on the practice (Sonderman, 2011b). Journalists also use social media such as Twitter and Facebook to locate and "friend" sources. In 2008, when the use of social media by journalists was a new practice, some journalists said the idea of "friending" sources on Facebook made them uncomfortable. Writing in *American Journalism Review*, Mendoza noted that "there is a big difference between a personal friend and a Facebook friend, but many are still cautious about befriending sources online" (Mendoza, 2008).

The changed news environment warrants a renewed look at ethical policies and guidelines. In 2011, Stewart found that several profes-

sional organizations' media policies and guidelines had not been updated to reflect social media. The Society of Professional Journalists last updated its Code of Ethics in 1996; the Public Relations Society of America revised its Code of Ethics in 2000 and did not include electronic communications; and in advertising, the American Advertising Federation's Code of Ethics was drafted in 1984, and American Association of Advertisers' code in 1990. A newer organization, the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, which was founded in 2004, updated its code of ethics in 2009 and uses an automatic yearly review. The Word of Mouth Marketing Association's code emphasizes the importance of an authentic identity and disclosure of affiliation for digital interactions.

Traditional journalism ethics codes emphasize common values and themes, including commitment to accuracy, independence, and fairness (Detroit Free Press, 2005; Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 2008; Gannett, 2012; Los Angeles Times, 2005; NPR, 2010; New York Times, 2005; ProPublica, 2008). The goal of the guidelines and codes is to help journalists navigate potentially difficult decisions they encounter each day. For example, National Public Radio's Guiding Principles states, "The art of ethical decision-making is as much about the way we make decisions as it is about what we decide" (NPR, 2010). Of course, the guidelines cannot cover every possible ethical dilemma. Therefore, many guides also suggest seeking additional outside guidance when questions arise. The nonprofit news organization ProPublica's Code of Ethics succinctly states what journalists should do when unsure about ethical questions: "Indeed, the most important wisdom about dealing with these questions is: When in doubt, ask" (ProPublica, 2008). The Poynter Institute, a journalism think tank, has its own ethics hotline journalists can call when they need a second opinion, and other ethicists suggest seeking out academics or a respected colleague (Buttry, 2012).

Issues of news credibility abound with the use of social media to report news in real time. Accuracy may suffer, as in January 2011 when large, respected news organizations, including NPR, Reuters, Fox News, CBS and CNN, erroneously reported on Twitter that Rep. Gabrielle Giffords had died when she was shot (Silverman, 2012). Another inaccurate report came in June 2012, when CNN's and Fox News' websites reported that the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled against the Affordable Care Act, when actually the court had ap-

proved the portion of the act it was considering (Sonderman, 2012). The news organizations quickly corrected their errors.

Various media ethics policies warn journalists to "be careful in who they associate with online for fear of compromising their appearance of independence and neutrality" (Stewart, 2011, p. 12). Stewart found varying policies on using social media sources in reporting, from *The New York Times'* contention that a Facebook friend is "almost meaningless" unless the person is a true personal friend of the journalist, to *The Wall Street Journal's* stricter policy, which requires editor approval for confidential sources to be added as Facebook friends (Stewart, p. 12). Journalists also are advised not to friend sources that may indicate they are taking sides on controversial issues. Some news organizations caution journalists that social media has no expectation of privacy; therefore, journalists should treat anything they post as public rather than personal. An NPR policy states: "Everything you write or receive on a social media site is public" (Stewart, p. 14).

Theoretical perspectives on news routines and production

The interactions and relationships between journalists and PR professionals over social media raise ethical questions as well as practical ones. While journalists ideally report the news in an unbiased, objective way, in practice they depend upon officials and experts to serve as to sources and provide information, as news production research shows (Baran & Davis, 2012; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Commonly, PR practitioners facilitate these interactions through their relationships with reporters and editors. Press conferences and news releases are traditional methods of disseminating "official" information to reporters, in addition to personal interactions between reporters, often those covering specific beats, and PR practitioners who feed or "leak" information (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Reporters, who often work under deadlines, depend on these sources for quick and easy information. They also tend to gravitate to the same sources to keep up with the competition, sometimes leading to pack journalism, the phenomenon in which journalists follow each other and obtain information from the same sources. Such routines can exclude information from the news and manipulate news content. Rosen (2009) argues that social media and the Internet are eroding journalists' and the public's dependence on official sources. "What's

really happening is that the authority of the press to assume consensus, define deviance and set the terms for legitimate debate is weaker when people can connected horizontally around and about the news" (Rosen, 2009, para. 20).

Research questions

RQ1: How do journalists view their social media interactions with PR practitioners?
RQ2: How do PR practitioners view their social media interactions with journalists?
RQ3: Is it ethical for journalists to interact with public relations professionals as Facebook friends or Twitter followers?

Method

An online survey using close-ended and open-ended questions was developed to capture participants' self-reported usage patterns of social media, participants' impressions of their own professional interactions in social media, and demographic information, following IRB guidelines from the authors' universities, which approved this study. Using email and social media sharing in Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, the authors sought participants through both personal and professional networks and through snowball sampling during four months in 2012. A goal was established to gather at least 150 completed surveys, with roughly equal numbers of journalists and public relations practitioners participating, to gather a broad range of journalists and PR practitioners. More than 190 participants responded to the survey, and 167 of these response sets were considered complete by the respondent answering all survey questions, and have been used for this study (n=167); 81 are classified as journalists, and 86 are public relations practitioners. In addition, open-ended questions were analyzed by theme to ensure that a saturation of response themes had been achieved.

The survey included three sections to gather these types of information:

- A participant's professional standing, job title, and length of employment;
- A participant's personal and professional use of social media;
- A participant's thoughts and beliefs about ethics and professional interactions in social media.

In addition, participants were asked for routine demographic information about age, gender, and education level. At the end of the survey, participants could include contact information that would be stored separately, if they were willing to be interviewed by the researchers, with a promise of continued confidentiality and anonymity for their survey responses.

Findings

Of the 81 participants working in journalism, 55 identified as "traditional journalists/broadcasters," 17 as "digital journalists," and nine as "other." In an open-ended field for "other," journalists called themselves "combination of traditional/digital journalist," "a journalist with digital tools and traditional journalism values," a "hybrid: print/digital journalist," "features writer/blogger," and "somewhere between print and digital." As a group, 70.4% of the journalists had six or more years of experience in the field. Eleven of 81 people had more than 30 years of experience.

Table 1. Social media usage by site (n=167)

Type of Social Platform	Journalists (n=81)		PR Practitioners (n=86)	
	Personal	Prof	Personal	Prof
Facebook	98.8%	84%	97.7%	80.2%
LinkedIn	79%	56.8%	90.7%	76.7%
Twitter	77.8%	87.7%	82.6%	83.7%
YouTube	59.3%	39.5%	47.7%	53.5%
Tumblr, Pinterest, blogging sites	39.5%	16%	58.1%	33.7%
Google+	30.9%	19.8%	38.4%	22.1%
Foursquare, location-based sites	17.3%	4.9%	37.2%	16.3%
Social bookmarking	11.1%	4.9%	20.9%	11.6%

Of the 86 participants working in public relations, 55 identified as "public relations practitioner," 14 as "digital public relations

practitioners," and 17 as "other." In an open-ended field for "other," practitioners called themselves "digital and traditional PR consultant," "both traditional and digital PR practitioner," "traditional and digital marketing," "social media expert," and "social media strategist." One respondent said, "PR is changing. I don't think you can separate digital from traditional … it is the new PR." As a group, 58.1% of those working in public relations had six or more years of experience. Only one person had more than 30 years of experience.

The participants used a wide variety of social media and related digital platforms in their personal lives and for professional work (see Table 1). Facebook was the most popular site for personal use for the group overall, and Twitter was the most popular site for professional use. After these similarities, the two professional groups began to diverge. Twitter was used by public relations practitioners nearly equally for personal and for professional purposes (82.6% for personal, and 83.7% for professional). LinkedIn was used by a higher percentage of public relations practitioners in both their personal and professional lives, when compared to journalists (90.7% vs. 79% for personal; 76.7% vs. 56.8% for professional). Journalists were more likely to use YouTube personally (59.3% vs. 47.7%), but less likely to use it professionally (39.5% vs. 53.5%), when compared to public relations practitioners. For professional use, public relations practitioners were twice as likely to use Tumblr or Pinterest-type blogging sites, twice as likely to use social recommendation sites such as Reddit or Digg, and three times as likely to use FourSquare or location-based sites, when compared to journalists.

More than two-thirds of all participants used social media for personal use for at least one hour or more daily, with 66.7% of journalists and 76.7% of public relations practitioners selecting that they spent more than two hours or between one and two hours daily (see Table 2). More than 67% of public relations practitioners responded that they also spent that much time using social media professionally, while 60.5% of journalists said they spent more than one hour daily professionally using social media.

Of the 167 participants, 80, or nearly half, had separate personal and professional profiles in social media, and 87 did not. In this respect, journalists and public relations practitioners were similar, with 37 journalists and 43 public relations practitioners answering yes. Forty-one journalists posted for their organizations' official sites, and

76 public relations practitioners did the same.

Table 2. Social media use by time spent (n=167)

	Journalists (n=81)		PR Practitioners (n=86)	
	Personal	Prof	Personal	Prof
More than 2 hours daily	34.6%	29.6%	31.4%	27.9%
Between 1-2 hours daily	32.1%	30.9%	45.3%	39.5%
Less than 1 hour daily	28.4%	23.5%	22.1%	17.4%
A few minutes daily	4.9%	11.1%	1.2%	11.6%
No response	0	4.9%	0	3.5%

On a five-point scale from very easy to very difficult, the participants rated the ease or difficulty of distinguishing social media interactions between personal and professional situations. Ninety-nine rated it as easy or very easy, 48 as neutral, and 20 as difficult or very difficult, with both groups ranking this interaction in similar ways. Fifty-two journalists and 54 public relations practitioners—or 106 of 167 participants (63.5%)—said their organizations had rules for the use of social media. In an open-ended response to "What is the most important rule or guideline in using social media as a professional," only one participant specifically invoked a "code of ethics." In responding to whether it is ethical for a journalist to be a friend or follower in social media of a public relations practitioner, only four people responded "no," which included three journalists and one public relations professional. On the corollary question of whether it is ethical for a public relations practitioner to be a friend or follower of a journalist, only two people said no, both journalists. Only six people of 167 responded yes when asked whether it was a conflict of interest for journalists and public relations practitioners to communicate via social media.

Open-ended responses and themes

When asked to provide an important rule or guideline for professional conduct in social media, only one participant advised consulting a professional code of ethics. Nine people identified as public relations practitioners mentioned "brand" or "brand voice" as an important concept for online interactions, and four others mentioned organizational mission or vision statements as guiding principles. Twelve people invoked the surveillance of bosses, mothers, grandmothers, clients, and children as reminders of posting appropriate words or sentiments; several others advised not posting information that you wouldn't want "to share in a staff meeting" or "see on the front page of your local paper." Using the word "professional" was common; 21 people used it as part of their guidelines, which often made distinctions between professional and personal behavior. One participant wrote to "keep it professional but make it personable (make a connection)." Another advised that social media workers should "not give opinions about politics, news events, or newsmakers. And keep it professional."

Most used the term generally, as in "stay," "be," or "remain professional" or to "act professionally!" These admonitions to remember professional behavior seemed to indicate that social media were seen as a slippery slope into "personal" behavior. One participant wrote, "The professional/personal line is inherently blurry." Another participant simply wrote, "Don't blur the lines." Others offered admonishments that again showed the contrast between personal and professional conduct, such as "only share work-related information," "not mixing personal beliefs with the company's," or "if you identify yourself in your profile as a professional for a certain organization, do not let your personal bias/opinions into your updates/tweets/etc." Another wrote: "Be personal and professional without disclosing every little detail of your personal life."

Beyond general rules about professionalism that might fit both face-to-face and social media interactions, a few comments specifically addressed the emerging context and language of social media: "Be extremely selective when choosing Facebook friends," "Try to make your social media posts search engine optimal for more hits," "A RT ends up counting as a personal endorsement," or "Understand each network's best practices."

Common ethical principles were also mentioned when partici-

pants offered guidelines for personal or professional behavior: transparency (10); honesty (7); accuracy (18); fairness (5); and do no harm (2). Three people used the exact term "Don't be stupid," matching the social media admonition of the *Greensboro News & Record* editor. Most surprising among the findings was what 167 participants did not mention. Although 10 people mentioned transparency, only one participant mentioned the newer principle of true identity in digital spaces. Only one participant mentioned privacy, and it was in the context of "client privacy." Branding was invoked in many responses, but no participant mentioned the principle of loyalty. Not one participant mentioned acting independently, nor acting with accountability or objectivity.

Discussion and conclusion

While many participants praised social media for transparency and speed, or expressed that social media were just another communication channel like telephone or email, others saw clear ethical implications for these interactions and made note of the blurred lines presented when professional contacts were reduced to "friends" in Facebook. Implications for these two professions include attention to codes of ethics, especially the Society of Professional Journalists Code, which hasn't been updated since 1996, well before current social media platforms were created. Many respondents indicated that social networking sites yield benefits, while acknowledging pitfalls if journalists and public relations practitioners didn't exercise good judgment or common sense, rather than more rigid rules or ethical codes. Their responses come with an assumption that most journalists and public relations practitioners are professionals who know how to behave in an online environment; since more than 63% of their employers had rules for social media, this could explain why many felt the rules were obvious and "common sense." Most respondents believe an online relationship does not translate into a personal endorsement.

Social media are central to the work of journalists and public relations workers, with Facebook, Twitter and Linked playing central roles in their communication transactions. These communication tools are becoming entrenched methods of keeping up with information, trends, sources, and media contacts. Both groups consider it ethical to friend or follow each other on social media. One respon-

dent, who described herself as a traditional PR practitioner, said, "A journalist has the right, and possibly need, to follow a PR person at a company who posts organization updates and breaking news stories/press releases." Another respondent, who described himself as a traditional journalist/broadcaster, said, "Following or befriending someone in social media doesn't carry the same connotation as in real life. Being plugged into them online simply means you're monitoring their activity, which is the nature of our positions in the media anyway. As long as the relationship stops there, I see no issues with it. I'd say the ability to connect with said PR person is an asset. In the end, it only gives you more options to connect with or contact that person when necessary if other means fail."

In addition to the evolution of social media, journalists and PR professionals are also grappling with the definition and boundaries of their job descriptions and titles. Some see limitations in the names—not wanting to let go of the term traditional even as they become exclusively digital or seeing themselves as both traditional and digital. Other respondents do not feel comfortable with those traditional labels, reinforcing how some participants see their professions changing. Among the descriptions were "modern day storyteller," "social media strategist," and "freelance whatever." In some cases, new job titles have been created including "digital media producer," "digital communications strategist," "social media administrator," "creative and social media director," "director of community engagement & social media," "director of interactive media," and "web presence professional." Many of those job titles do not clearly reveal if the person is working in journalism or public relations, and in some cases people with similar titles may work in the traditionally opposing roles.

As social media evolve, so do these two professions. In some ways, the jobs of journalists and public relations practitioners have converged, merged and blurred as they find themselves working in the same digital spaces to collect and curate information, create content, provide feedback, follow up with questions, and continue conversations. The boundaries and power structures have shifted, job titles have changed, and the personal and professional selves have blurred. These disruptions have undoubtedly affected the ways that ethical values and principles are articulated, but it is also clear that these professionals are relying on simple and personal concepts of ethics and professionalism in a quite complicated context. "Don't

be stupid" and "Be professional" might be memorable slogans, but accountability, independence, privacy, and identity are absent from these professionals' ethical vocabularies. Yet these are essential concepts in digital spaces.

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