

# THE ELEVATION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

A discussion paper on a profession's present – and its possible future

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Canadian Public  
Relations Society

Advancing Public Relations &  
Communications Management

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*Many thanks to those who contributed interviews and ideas to this paper, including Terry Flynn, Ph.D., APR, FCPRS; Kevin McCann; Sheridan McVean, MBA, APR, FCPRS, Amy Thurlow, Ph.D., APR, FCPRS; and Guy Versailles, APR, FCPRS.*

## Introduction

This short paper, commissioned by the Canadian Public Relations Society, seeks to provide an overview of some of the most notable trends affecting the public relations profession today, and to put forward hypotheses about future opportunities and challenges facing PR professionals, organizational communication and the profession itself. It reflects the input of various senior public relations practitioners, researchers and educators, and a survey of recent publications from researchers, consulting firms and other sources.

This paper does not presume to resolve the conversation about the future of the public relations profession; quite the contrary. Its purpose is to stimulate new conversations between CPRS members – and to inform decisions about how the society can best support our individual and collective professional journeys.

## The megatrends shaping public relations today

One can call it revolution or evolution, but none can deny that public relations is changing with astonishing speed, creating a landscape of both opportunity and risk for public relations professionals.

There are seven interconnected megatrends shaping public relations today:

- 1. The rising business value of reputation, relationships and communication.** With intangible assets now comprising a huge part – often the majority -- of a typical company's market value, effective CEOs understand the value of reputation – and the role of PR and communication management in building the relationships that drive it. In addition, CEOs see communication as one of the most critical aspects of the modern executive's skillset. As a result, a well-managed organization's dominant coalition is more open to public relations than ever before.
- 2. The empowered audience:** Access to global publishing power via the social web has empowered each of us as citizens and consumers, creating new risks to organizational reputation, and new challenges for organizational communication. Notwithstanding these risks and challenges, organizations benefit from this empowerment, too, enjoying new, low-cost access to 'owned media,' which presents new opportunities to create content and build relationships with key publics.

**3. The content shock:** The explosion of content available to all of us has created what writer Mark Schaefer calls [content shock](#), “the emerging marketing epoch defined when exponentially increasing volumes of content intersect our limited human capacity to consume it” – let alone “engage” with it.

**4. Many speak, few listen:** While giving voice to publics is widely accepted to be fundamental to successful public relations, as well as democracy and social equity, most organizations use communication technology to improve amplification, not to improve listening. Australian academic Jim Macnamara makes this point in [summarizing his research into organizational listening](#), noting that while organizations “‘talk the talk’ of two-way communication, engagement, dialogue, conversation, consultation, collaboration and relationships with their stakeholders and publics... organizational-public communication is overwhelmingly comprised of organizational speaking to disseminate organizations’ messages using a transmissional or broadcast model.”

**5. Disintermediation, fake news and the decline of journalism:** Disintermediation (see section two, above) and the endless torrent of free content have decimated the revenue and ranks of modern journalism. These forces have also made it harder to differentiate ethical, professional journalism from content that, maliciously or not, distorts the truth and deceives the audience. While some publishers are adapting and monetizing their content, most are struggling, many are in crisis and many have disappeared.

**6. A gap in wealth – and trust:** Globalization and automation have made the world wealthier – but the concentration of wealth has created a worrisome gap between well-educated, affluent knowledge workers and the mass public – a gap reflected in the ugly nativism, populism and polarization that plague politics in many countries. The communications trends listed above – poor organizational listening, the shock of content and the contagion of fake news – exacerbate the long-term decline in public trust in both private- and public-sector organizations.

**7. AI comes to PR:** The rapid advance of artificial intelligence (AI) presents a near-term future in which software will increasingly be used to create content; content marketing will be driven by algorithms; bots will manage public enquiries; and decisions of channels and tactics will increasingly be automated, driven in real time by public responses and behaviours.

***“For years, PR has ‘pitched’ the newspaper to carry a story; now, we’re effectively ‘pitching’ the algorithms that determine what people see.”***

***– Kevin McCann***

# The implications for the PR of tomorrow

If this is a snapshot of the present, what are the implications of the future for public relations professionals, for organizational communication, and for the profession itself? Here are some hypotheses:

## 1. The future of PR isn't just about content; it's about relationships.

**The opportunity:** The social web has energized public relations in the last decade, and mastering its use to manage issues and relationships online has helped many professionals break out of the media-relations 'box.' Some PR practitioners have gone even further, rebranding themselves as 'content marketers.' Given the implications of content shock – coupled with the prospect of artificial intelligence driving both content creation and marketing – this movement should be reconsidered. PR must claim higher ground: that of being stewards of the organization's relationships and reputation with each of its publics.

***“We’ve heard the cliché that content is king; a better axiom for today is that relationships are royalty. Content must serve the organization’s ‘public relationships.’” – Daniel Tisch***

The good news is that this higher ground of 'relationships' is accessible to public relations. It is familiar territory for PR professionals; relationship capital has unprecedented value to executives and organizations; and the growth in data to measure real-time and long-term impact on public attitudes and behaviour presents a compelling opportunity to measure this value.

**The challenge:** The ease with which we can create content today – in words, images, video and sound – makes the view of public relations as a content engine alluring. With more journalists entering the field, the skillset of the typical PR team may be better aligned with content creation than with strategic relationship management between an organization and its publics.

## 2. The C-suite is open to PR – but getting there requires different thinking

**The opportunity:** Public relations is playing more central roles than ever before in organizations. Not only are PR practitioners developing and delivering the organization's message, but many are also defining the most fundamental things about the enterprise: its character, values and purpose – and the extent to which it is living up to them in the eyes, hearts and minds of internal and external publics. PR professionals are also frequently involved in the definition and stewardship of the organization's societal role and responsibility. According to the Arthur W. Page Society's most recent research on the [“New CCO,”](#) since the CEO understands the value of relationships with publics, and values communication intuitively, the apex of PR practice is higher (the C-suite)

and broader (more room in the C-suite for communicators). The C-suite is more open to public relations than ever before.

***“The Chief Communication Officer provides ‘horizontality’ to strategy development, much like the CEO. Other C-suite members have a vertical perspective.” – Terry Flynn***

***“The best PR professionals are the conscience of their organizations.”  
– Daniel Tisch***

***“The best PR professionals hold up mirrors to senior management so senior management clearly understand how publics really view the organization.”  
– Sheridan McVean***

**The challenge:** Notwithstanding his or her openness to the leadership role of public relations, CEOs are frustrated that they can’t find the senior-level PR talent they need. So, while the ‘summit’ of the C-suite is more accessible, many professionals are inadequately prepared for the climb. To become a C-level executive, one must be able to think beyond one’s own silo. Too often, our thinking is limited to the tactics of communication. As a result, we miss opportunities – and let others manage sustainability and CSR; we see HR professionals manage internal communications; we see legal departments manage public affairs; we see marketers manage the social community; we see urban planners manage public consultations; we see the growth of change management as a discipline – often without the involvement, let alone the leadership, of public relations.

***“We must seek to become not leaders of PR in organizations, but leaders of organizations who come from PR. To convince the CEO we can lead, we must first convince ourselves.” – Guy Versailles***

### **3. PR must transform organizational listening**

**The opportunity:** Public relations has a compelling opportunity to shift organizational thinking from communication as speaking to communication as listening. Jim Macnamara calls for an ‘architecture of listening’ – one that includes a listening culture, policies, politics, structures/processes, technologies, resources, skills and the articulation of all of the above. The Reputation Institute’s research has found a strong correlation between reputation and the way an organization is perceived to behave in the marketplace; it is therefore reasonable to argue that improving listening, and then communicating what was done as a result, can help increase both reputation and trust, while likely leading to better-informed decisions.

**The challenge:** The most common metrics of communication remain overwhelmingly geared toward evaluating the results of outbound communication, often meaning the performance of content: impressions counts and audience reach; content analysis; and shifts in awareness, understanding and support. The measurement of listening and its impact is more challenging, and yet more primary in evaluating the health of the relationship between the organization and key publics.

#### 4. PR must be driven by data

**The opportunity:** Public relations should become the custodian of data on publics, their attitudes and their behaviour.

***“The evolution of modern PR tracks the evolution of the internet. As technology gives us more data about everything related to our publics, PR must be there to understand it in real time, and act on it.” – Kevin McCann***

Public relations professionals will need to become experts in ‘social physics’ – the science of using mathematical tools inspired by physics to understand the behaviour of crowds. While this is not a new idea, thinkers such as [MIT professor Alex Pentland](#) have given it new currency, arguing that in the age of ‘big data,’ we can begin to answer, in quantitative, predictive ways, the question of how ideas move from person to person. To do so effectively, public relations must go beyond the ‘campaign mentality’ in favour of ongoing research and data collection in order to understand and predict stakeholders’ behaviours.

**The challenge:** The public relations industry still lacks a culture of research and data, and, as a result, PR budgets are often starved of resources for research. We overwhelmingly attract and employ people with the hearts of artists, not scientists. As communication continues to move online, there’s a legitimate question about whether public relations needs to become more deliberate about transforming itself into a blend of art and science – in the way we define the profession, describe its value, develop curricula for academic programs, and recruit people into academic programs and workplaces.

***“Past changes in IT -- from the internet to social media – have benefited PR by making organizations more focused on communication and reputation. Will AI help us? Perhaps, if we can use it to understand public behaviour and make better decisions.” – Sheridan McVean***

## 5. Strategic and analytical capabilities are the secrets of PR success

**The opportunity:** New Canadian research led by Amy Thurlow of Mount Saint Vincent University (to be unveiled this spring) suggests that educators, employers and senior professionals believe the most valued capabilities of Canadian public relations practitioners will be aligning communication planning with strategy and purpose, and applying critical thinking and problem-solving to organizational issues. Traditional skills such as writing, strategic planning and relationship-building remain foundational, and many schools are teaching new skills: technology-driven content development, social media management, and even paid advertising. As noted earlier, the greatest gaps in the current PR professional skillset may be in data management and analysis, and the ability to incorporate data-driven insights into strategy.

**The challenge:** Some leaders believe that the rise of artificial intelligence may endanger the ‘technical specialist’ streams of public relations – a development that could lead to fewer jobs that fit even the broadest definitions of public relations. The key is therefore to expand the scale and scope of the strategic role; professional development and practice may come to more closely resemble that of the management consultant, albeit with an orientation toward the impact of relationships, reputation and communication on the business.

*“PR still attracts humanities graduates more than science graduates. They like the literacy, writing, art and creativity – not measuring value or creating equations. There’s a wiring issue that we have not overcome.”*  
– Terry Flynn

## 6. Marketing becomes more like PR – but must not drive PR

The opportunity: Based on a poll of 800 PR executives around the world, the [2017 Global Communications Report](#) by the University of Southern California’s Center for Public Relations (sponsored by the Holmes Report) suggests that marketing and public relations are converging in many organizations, thanks largely to marketing’s acceptance of the higher credibility of an ‘earned-first’ approach with a more empowered audience. The growth of [ad blocking](#) will surely accelerate this trend. This presents a compelling opportunity for public relations professionals to become organizational storytellers -- not simply messengers -- in building relationships with stakeholders and publics. As marketing becomes more like PR, there is an opportunity for PR professionals to play a greater role, leading and influencing the way the organization communicates with all its publics.

**The challenge:** The challenge is that marketing remains a better-defined, better-understood discipline, with a clear return on investment. There are still too many organizations in which PR is seen to serve marketing – a risky proposition for the organization in that marketing is necessarily about building brands and relationships with customers first and foremost; public relations must necessarily take an enterprise-wide view, one that looks for business opportunities and risks in relationships with all stakeholders, and in the organization’s role in the society. Whether the CCO and CMO roles are integrated or separate within the organization, public relations and marketing strategies must remain distinct, yet integrated.

## The role of the Canadian Public Relations Society

This paper is designed to spark discussion not just about the public relations profession, but about how the Canadian Public Relations Society can support Canada’s PR and communication management professionals in seizing the compelling opportunities, and addressing the very real challenges, identified above.

There are various strategic imperatives for a professional society:

### External imperatives – outside the profession

There are two external imperatives, both likely too large for CPRS to achieve alone – but worth exploring undertaking in collaboration with other aligned stakeholders:

- 1. Marketing the profession:** While we often hear the phrase “PR needs PR,” it is more accurate (and perhaps ironic) to note that the public relations profession really needs a marketing strategy to ensure better understanding of the profession from its core customers – executives and organizations.
- 2. Demonstrating how ethical PR can fight fake news:** There’s a societal conversation happening today about fake news and its far-reaching, dangerous implications, and PR must be a part of it – positioning ethical, professional public relations as an antidote to this contagion.

### Internal imperatives – inside the profession

- 3. Supporting professional growth:** Despite the excellence of post-secondary public relations education in Canada, there are gaps in continuing education for professionals after graduation. There is considerable continuing education about the technical aspects of PR, but arguably not enough on the strategic functions, and on the management and use of data. PR professionals need support as they transform the way they think about themselves in their roles – learning how to earn influence within the most senior ranks of their organizations. This is worth exploring, in collaboration with educators and training organizations.



**4. Setting and promoting standards:** CPRS has been a global leader in setting standards in public relations education and ethical practice; the society also has longstanding credentialing and awards programs that are aligned with best practices identified by the [Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management](#). Making these standards more universal, more relevant and more recognized is a uniquely important role for a professional society.

**5. Creating community:** Professionals aspire to be connected – locally and globally – to their peers, and to those who can help them grow as people and professionals. The formidable challenge is to do this in a way that is truly unique and valued, and to do so at a time when the boundaries of public relations work are expanding. There may be an opportunity to connect practitioners to peers working in the same industrial sectors, or providing similar types of public relations services.

There are, no doubt, other strategic priorities that will emerge from CPRS members – and then there will be a need for deeper conversations about how the agreed-upon imperatives can be pursued most efficiently and effectively. This likely means a CPRS that is more flexible in its operations, and more collaborative in its partnerships with other associations and organizations.

We hope this paper will encourage these essential dialogues about the needs of public relations professionals as they seek to enhance their value to organizations, and to Canadian and global society.

**About the author:**

*Daniel Tisch, APR, FCPRS is the President and CEO for Argyle Public Relationships and the 2011-2013 chair of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management. He worked at senior levels in the Canadian government before embarking on a 20-year consulting career in which he has advised CEOs, boards, government leaders and some of the world's biggest brands. Tisch has a Master's Degree in Business Administration from Queen's University, and is Vice-Chair of the University's Board of Trustees. He received the Philip A. Novikoff Award for career achievement from the Canadian Public Relations Society in 2016.*