Reassessment of Audience in Public Relations Industry: How Social Media Reshape Public Relations Measurements

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Abstract

The growing adoption of social media in PR practice has provided opportunities for newer audience measurements and contributed to cultivating newer conceptions of their audience. This study conducts a historical textual analysis of articles in PR Week US to establish the conception. The analysis maps the structural transformation of the field that has guided the PR industry's reconceptualisation of their audiences from the quantity of media placements to the quantity and the quality of behavioural outcomes.

Keywords: PR measurement, social media, institutional effective audience, output measurement, outcome measurement
INTRODUCTION

The measurement of campaign effectiveness in public relations (PR) is an important aspect of PR practice. The audience measurement enables an assessment of a PR activity’s contribution in achieving campaign objectives and helps link campaign outcomes to business outcomes. To measure campaign outcomes, the PR industry has developed several audience measurement tools, such as advertising value equivalents (AVEs), media monitoring/clipping, and reach of publications via circulation numbers (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2011). The growing adoption of social media in PR practice has made it difficult for PR practitioners to employ these traditional measurement tools and spurred them to explore newer approaches to audience measurement. Although an important transition in the field, there is little scholarly understanding of how the PR industry has dealt with the changing environment that created these needs. In particular, previous studies have mainly identified the limitations of traditional measurement tools in the social media environment (Baskin, Hahn, Seaman, & Reines, 2010). To understand the structural transformation in the field of PR, this study investigates recent changes in audience measurement practices and how the changing environment has affected PR practitioners’ notions about their audiences.

In this paper, we first introduce the concept of *institutionally effective audience* (IEA), which helps establish associations between transitions in audience measurement techniques and the changing notions of audience among actors in an institutional field. We next explore the current state of measurement in the PR industry where traditional analytical approaches to media audiences have become less stable with the use of social media in recent years and note the changing conception of IEA in the field. We then pose our research questions, which build on this study’s main goal of identifying how IEA has changed in recent years. In the sections that follow the questions, we conduct a historical textual analysis of articles reporting on PR measurement in *PR Week US* from 2001 through 2013. We conclude the paper with a discussion of how PR practitioners’ notions are changing in an environment where social media dominate the industry discourse and provide evidence that contributes to this changing notion of IEA within the field.

Literature Review

Institutionally Effective Audiences and Their Evolution

The term audience, as commonly defined in communication studies, is understood as a collection of receivers based on Schramm’s (1971) simple sequential model of the mass communication process (McQuail, 2010). However, mass media generally reach an audience that is dispersed in space and time (Webster & Phalen, 1997), making it difficult to estimate an “actual audience” for the content (Napoli, 2003). Therefore, commercial media markets understand audiences “through the generation, distribution, and interpretation of a web of information” (Anand & Peterson, 2000, p. 271) that is regularly processed in the form of reports termed “market information regimes,” supplied “in a predictable format with consistent frequency” and compiled by an “independent supplier” (Anand & Peterson, 2000, p. 271). For example, television, media owners, advertising agencies, and advertisers jointly commission market research firms (e.g., Nielsen) to design and implement “audience information systems” (Napoli, 2011). These systems provide audience ratings through a software program on a weekly/daily basis via an independent supplier. Based on these data, media markets conceive actual receivers “not merely as audiences, but as *institutionally effective audiences* that have social meaning and/or economic value within the system” (Ettema & Whitney, 1994, p. 5).
The conceptions of IEA are subject to change with changing institutional interests because “in such a conception, audiences are seen to be … the site of contestation among media firms, measurement services, advertisers, interest groups, government, and other agents of institutional power” (Ettema & Whitney, 1994, p. 16). For instance, with the advent of computers in advertising agencies in the 1960s, media planners could compute reach and frequency figures of advertising campaigns. They then re-conceptualised television as a more effective medium for reaching a mass national audience than magazines, which were reconceived as more effective for specialised audiences (Barnes & Thomson, 1994). Similarly, the television industry’s decision to replace household meters with people meters in the mid-1980s allowed the IEA for television to be reconceived as individuals, replacing the earlier conception of households (Barnes & Thomson, 1994).

In general, three dimensions – developments in measurement technologies, desire for greater accuracy, and changing market conditions – motivate institutional fields to revise the methodology for compiling audience information. In this literature, “measurement technologies” refer to the media platforms that make possible newer ways of seeing audiences. For instance, digital trace data that are generated from people’s digital media usage have made it possible to “see” audience activity at the census level that couldn’t be seen in analog media. Industry practitioners usually work with whatever audience measurement system dominates at the time, but they are always aware of its limitations (Napoli, 2003). Therefore, select groups within the industry (e.g., Advertising Research Foundation) constantly work to improve audience measurement. “Desire for accuracy” refers to such ongoing industry-wide efforts to improve methods by adopting new measurement technologies. However, any new measurement technology that promises to make measurement more accurate must be adopted by the field at large. This is only possible when the “market conditions” are favorable. For instance, the people meter was adopted for television audience measurement because the growth of cable networks and advertiser interest in them provided favorable market conditions within the institutional field for such a transition (Barnes & Thomson, 1994). Other creative industries such as book publishing (Andrews & Napoli, 2006) and music recording (Anand & Peterson, 2000) have also witnessed such changes in measurement technologies, which have subsequently altered the ways in which participants conceive their audiences and interpret these markets.

In recent years, social media technologies have put the traditional conception of IEA under tremendous strain in a number of creative industry segments. This is because social media allow audience members to share their experiences with each other on a mass scale and many of these conversations are visible to producers. For example, people frequently talk about television shows on Facebook and Twitter, and broadcasters and advertisers can see these conversations. The industry has responded to this affordance by incorporating social television analytics as a newer form of audience measurement (Napoli, 2014b). This change in measurement technology is associated with a change in the institutionally effective conception of the television audience from “passive masses” based on traditional metrics of exposure (e.g., reach of programs) to a newer conception that privileges “audience engagement” metrics such as likes, favorites, comments, and retweets.

These examples demonstrate that changes in audience measurement systems are associated with altered conceptions of IEA. New technologies spur newer forms of audience activity and changes in audience measurement systems try to capture these changes in audience behaviors (Napoli, 2003). Once newer measures begin to circulate in these industries, the measures alter the dominant images that creative industry executives have of their audiences. These newer measurement systems and the revised conception of IEA further contribute to a reconstruction of organisational strategies, competitive arrangements, and content production decisions in creative markets (Adams, 1994; Andrews & Napoli,
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2006; Barnes & Thomson, 1994).

The literature just reviewed indicates that the concept of IEA has been applied to analyse the changing notions of audience associated with changes in audience measurement systems in a range of creative industries. Given the importance of audience measurement in PR practice, we advocate “change in IEA” as a useful analytical device to identify the driving forces that have recently contributed to the changing notions of audiences among PR practitioners. This idea motivates the research questions posed in this study. However, before offering the research questions and discussing how we apply IEA to the field of PR, we review the existing literature on changing audience measurement systems in the public relations industry.

Traditional PR Measurement in the Social Media Age

The PR industry has made efforts to measure its audiences to link PR campaign outcomes to financial value for a long time (Phillips, 2001). A traditional PR campaign aims to deliver an organisation’s key message to target audiences through mass media. PR measurement then seeks to quantify the size of coverage and its tonality by measuring the extent to which media cover a message favorably. For this reason, PR practitioners regularly monitor media reports, collect media clippings of the coverage, and then estimate AVE, which is calculated by multiplying the column inches of clipped media coverage by the advertising rates for the page, to put a financial value on the campaign delivery (Watson, 2012).

Although traditional PR measurement techniques have long been in use in PR practice, they have been constantly criticised as unscientific (Watson, 2013). In general, traditional PR measurement mainly concerns measuring a message output in media (i.e., the quantity of media placements) rather than evaluating audience behavioral outcomes (i.e., opinion, attitude, and behavior change) after a PR campaign is conducted (Xavier, Johnston, Patel, Watson, & Simmons, 2005). Many PR scholars have demonstrated a skeptical attitude toward the validity of output measurement, as techniques based on measuring output only value what has appeared in media coverage and thus organisations cannot assess what has actually been achieved through their PR campaigns (L’Etag, 2004; Xavier et al., 2005).

Despite widespread criticism of output measurements, they were widely used to put a monetary value on PR campaigns for more than half a century (Watson, 2012). For example, the results of a survey conducted by PR Week US in 2002 showed that AVEs were considered the most common technique for measuring PR effectiveness among 263 PR practitioners in the US (Houston, 2002). Similarly, Walker (1997) found that media monitoring was the most frequently used measurement tool among Australian PR practitioners. Also, a 2008 survey of European PR practitioners found that media clipping was the most frequently used evaluation technique whereas the survey was the least favored (Baskin et al., 2010).

A few studies have identified reasons for the PR industry's traditional reliance on output measurements rather than outcome measurements (Baskin et al., 2010). One view is that lack of time, insufficient expertise, and limited organisational budgets make output measurement tools (e.g., media monitoring, AVEs) less expensive and relatively convenient for conducting PR measurement compared to implementing outcome measurement tools (e.g., pre- and post-campaign surveys) (Baskin et al., 2010; Xavier et al., 2005). These reasons are mainly related to the capabilities of organisations that implement PR campaigns. The skepticism toward outcome measurement tools themselves is often cited as an additional reason for their unpopularity. To elaborate, clients often believe that the effects of a PR campaign cannot be accurately measured in terms of real target audience behaviors.
and measuring behavioral outcomes of PR campaigns is not necessary for their PR activity (Baskin et al., 2010).

However, as many PR practitioners increasingly conduct their campaigns through social media, market conditions are changing in the field of PR, and these changes may lead PR practitioners to conceive of audiences and their measurement differently. Social media enable audiences to actively participate in communicating with organisations (Supa, 2014). This environment has led PR practitioners to pay attention to the possibilities of new outcome measurements through audience feedback and comments on social media. Also, a variety of social media analytics services have been launched in the PR market, which enables PR practitioners to measure audience behaviors more accurately and conveniently than through audience surveys. In summary, social media platforms have created new types of communication behaviors among audiences (Napoli, 2014a), which have contributed to the growing skepticism on the utility and validity of the output measurement techniques (e.g., AVEs) and simultaneously led PR industry players to pay attention to the new outcome measurement tools.

Associated with the changing conditions is an industry-wide movement urging the PR industry to adopt outcome measurements rather than output measurements, initiated at the European Summit on PR Measurement held in Barcelona in 2010 (AMEC, 2010). At this summit, a number of PR industry leaders from 33 countries agreed on the importance of global standards to measure behavioral outcomes in PR campaigns, thus discouraging PR industry players from the future use of traditional measurement techniques (AMEC, 2010). In particular, the industry leaders at the summit proposed the Seven Barcelona Declaration of Measurement Principles arguing the following: “Goal setting and measurement are fundamental aspects of any public relations programs (i.e., principle 1), “Measuring outcomes is preferred to measuring media results” (i.e., principle 2), “Media measurement requires quantity and quality” (i.e., principle 4), “AVEs are not the value of public relations” (i.e., principle 5), and “Social media can and should be measured” (i.e., principle 6).

Adoption of the Barcelona principles suggests that the criticism of output measurement and the need for new audience measurements have finally gained significant traction in the PR industry. As noted earlier, the desire for accuracy and appropriate market conditions help cultivate a newer conception of audience within an institutional field. Technological advancements facilitate both the altering of people’s media consumption and the methods the industries employ to gather information about media consumption: Together these contribute to changing the conception of the audience in the institutional field. In a similar manner, we argue that adoption of social media by publics and the ability of PR managers to monitor this activity have contributed to changing the notion of IEA in the PR industry. Although important, little research has identified how PR practitioners’ notions about audiences have changed and what factors contributed to initiating these ongoing changes in the conception of audiences.

To address these questions, this study investigates how the adoption of social media has facilitated a new audience measurement approach and how these approaches in turn have influenced a new conception of IEA within the PR industry. As noted earlier, three driving forces (i.e., measurement technologies, desire for accuracy, and market conditions) play a significant role when an institutional field makes a transition in IEA. Applying the three dimensions to the field of public relations, this study undertakes a systematic inquiry into the changing conception of IEA and identifies various contributing factors to the transition in IEA. Based on this objective, the study poses two related research questions, as follows:
**RQ 1.** How has PR practitioners’ notion of the institutionally effective audience changed with the advent of social media?

**RQ 2.** What driving forces have led to the changes stated in RQ1 of institutionally effective audiences in the field of public relations? Specifically:

- **RQ 2-a:** What significant developments in measurement technology have facilitated the changes in the conception of IEA in the field of PR?
- **RQ 2-b:** What significant events demonstrate the desire for accuracy among PR practitioners to transition to a newer conception of IEA?
- **RQ 2-c:** What market conditions have facilitated the changes in the PR industry’s conception of IEA?

**Method**

To develop a framework for understanding the evolution of a new measurement system in public relations, we employed historical analysis of the PR trade press. Historical textual analysis is advantageous for answering the questions posed in this study because it allows researchers to answer questions of how or why a contemporary phenomenon evolved in the way it did. By analysing a narrative about a specific topic based on disparate pieces of evidence, researchers can interpret various historical events, documents, and processes (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003). Since this study attempts to delve deeply into the changing process of PR measurement at the institutional level, historical analysis is particularly useful for exploring the proposed research questions.

To obtain reliable evidence to support our claims, this study gathered data from the PR trade press. According to Caldwell (2009), the industry trade press is a form of inter-group communication that brings “the generalizing discussions of the nature and meaning of production from one corporate media company or craft group to another” (p. 203). By capturing texts about various discussions from the industry trade press at different points in time, this study interpreted PR industry players’ perceptions and responses to PR measurement systems over time. We obtained archives of *PR Week US* that is a reliable and stable source for historical analysis. Launched on November 16, 1998, *PR Week US* is the first American weekly magazine about the PR business. It provides the latest news, in-depth analysis, features, and jobs for PR practitioners across the U.S. It also covers news about PR industry trends and opinions of industry leaders.

We collected digital archival data from September 1, 2001, through December 31, 2013, utilising Lexis-Nexis search with the keywords “measurement OR metrics.” Although the Internet was in pervasive use by 2000, articles published on or after September 1, 2001, were available in Lexis-Nexis. The unit of analysis for the study was the individual news story. A total of 1,143 news stories containing the keywords in the title or body of the text were searched within the time period. We were interested in two types of articles: articles describing opinions about PR measurement and articles about industrial pioneers’ movements, new technology, events, or services in the context of PR measurement. We excluded news stories when a writer dealt with topics irrelevant to PR measurement or simply mentioned “measurement or metrics” in the article. After deleting the irrelevant news stories, we selected 126 articles for detailed reading. We then read and summarised each article and listed key quotations from news stories for the analysis that ensued.
Results

To systematically answer the research questions, we classified the period of 2001-2013 into three phases, each of which demonstrates key turning points in the changing notions of IEA in the PR industry. For each phase, we organised our finding along four dimensions. In the dimension that we term “IEA transition,” we capture the major events and practitioners’ notions about audience measurement that *PR Week US* highlighted during each phase. These phase-wise descriptions answer RQ1. Furthermore, we included three additional dimensions, “measurement technologies,” “desire for accuracy,” and “market conditions,” which correspond to the driving forces that guide the evolution in the conception of IEA in the PR industry.

“Measurement technologies” refer to the various PR measurement systems that the PR industry encountered from 2001 to 2013. In particular, we highlighted the new measurement techniques and services that research firms launched as more accurate measurement solutions for PR practitioners. We included this dimension to show how the new possibilities for measuring audience activity brought about by the advent of social media platforms stimulated research firms to develop new measurement services. Under “desire for accuracy,” we identified the prevailing PR industry view on making PR measurement more accurate and highlighted the efforts of the leading PR industry players (e.g., agencies, associations) to respond to the development of digital media. As noted earlier, institutional fields adopt new measurement technologies when “market conditions” are favourable. Hence, we highlighted developments in the digital media ecosystem that created favourable conditions for PR practitioners to implement outcome measurements on digital platforms. Tables 1, 2, and 3 describe IEA transition and the three driving forces in each of the four dimensions, as well as characteristics of each phase containing more granular details of specific events, over 13 years.

2001-2005: The Struggle with AVEs in the Digital World

In phase one, which extended from 2001 to 2005, it was clear that although the PR industry confronted challenges due to the archaic nature of traditional PR measurements, output measurements were the most popular techniques for showing the effectiveness of PR practice. Indicative of this trend is a 2002 article suggesting that many PR firms and clients considered media clippings a major barometer for PR measurement. The article reported that the major clipping companies (e.g., Luce Press Clippings, Burrelle’s Information Services) provided an extensive and fast clipping service for their global clients (Frank, 2002).

In addition, articles in this period often pointed out that accurate PR metrics were not effectively carried out because of the difficulty in quantifying PR campaigns (Macnamara, 2004; Spetner, 2003). The articles commonly argued that as the PR industry was experiencing a changing media environment in the digital age, it had to shift away from output measurement and establish new PR measurement standards (Creamer, 2004; Macnamara, 2004; Spetner, 2003). Nevertheless, by 2005, most efforts in the PR industry were at best geared toward improving the ways to efficiently measure coverage or count audiences. No real tool or technique existed to capture PR outcomes during that period (see Table 1, especially row entitled “Measurement technology”). Therefore, during phase one the dominant conception of IEA remained that of “quantity of media placements”.


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2006-2009: The Onset of Social Media Metrics

Phase two was the period in which social media rapidly expanded their influence in the media industry. A wide range of online media, such as blogs, podcasts, and wikis, experienced massive popularity in this period; in addition, active online users could influence other audiences' opinions on products and brands on social media (Krietsch, 2006). The changing environment prompted PR practitioners to both participate in dialogues with audiences and seek storytelling to gain sympathy from them. It also led PR practitioners to recognise the quality of message as an important communication outcome to effectively engage with audiences on social media.
### Table 1. Phase One: The struggle with AVEs in the digital world

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Media Coverage (AVEs)</th>
<th>PR Industry</th>
<th>Market Conditions</th>
<th>Measurement Technology</th>
<th>Desire for Accuracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>Measuring media coverage (AVEs) was the most common technique for showing PR effectiveness</td>
<td>The PR industry realised the importance of measurements. Media clipping was regarded as the most popular measurement.</td>
<td>Yahoo’s stock price skyrocketed during the dot-com bubble. Wikipedia was founded.</td>
<td>Millward Brown Precis, a market research firm, developed an internet-deliverable service, Precis.NET. Biz360 launched a new product that enables companies to monitor media coverage and online buzz.</td>
<td>Institute of Public Relations published the second edition of the IPR Research and Evaluation Toolkit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td></td>
<td>The PR industry began to discuss the limitations of traditional PR measurements.</td>
<td>LinkedIn was founded. MySpace was founded. Google acquired Blogger.</td>
<td>PRtrak launched an online measurement tool that shows media values for top 10,000 websites.</td>
<td>Council of Public Relations Firms published a workbook, “Demonstrating the Value of Public Relations”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td></td>
<td>Major difficulties in adopting outcome measurements were high cost, lack of demand, and time.</td>
<td>Facebook was founded (Harvard).</td>
<td>Millward Brown Precis launched a media analysis tool to measure the coverage of press releases on the web.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td></td>
<td>The PR industry encountered the difficulties when developing new measurements on digital media.</td>
<td>YouTube was founded.</td>
<td>Carma International introduced Carma Online. Fleishman-Hillard launched Communications Consulting Worldwide (CCW) that is a measurement-based consulting business.</td>
<td>Council of Public Relations Firms developed a booklet for PR measurements.</td>
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### Table 2. Phase Two: The onset of social media metrics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>IEA transition</th>
<th>Market conditions</th>
<th>Measurement technology</th>
<th>Desire for accuracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>• The quality of coverage became more important than the volume of coverage • PR practitioners started to seek stories and messages to engage with publics on digital media</td>
<td>• Twitter was founded • Facebook expanded the service to everyone • Google Analytics became available to online users</td>
<td>• Nielsen Inc. acquired BuzzMetrics and NetRatings • Waggener Edstrom launched Narrative Network, a text mining software to measure the effects of PR messages in online and offline media</td>
<td>• Chartered Institute of Public Relations presented Social Media Guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>• New media measurements faced a great challenge to measure the different categories of consumer-generated media contents</td>
<td>• Tumblr was founded</td>
<td>• Nielsen Inc. launched Nielsen Online • Omnicom Group launched Zocalo Group, a word of mouth (WOM) firm • Biz360 expanded their brand monitoring service into blogs to measure word-of-mouth impressions and identify influential bloggers on social media</td>
<td>• Ketchum partnered with Rob Cross who is an expert of social network analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>• The traditional audience conception began to wane • Engagement became an important PR metric</td>
<td></td>
<td>• CARMA international launched CARMA NewsAccess • Biz360 launched Opinion Insights, a measurement solution analysing public opinion on the Web</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>• Twitter became an important monitoring platform in the PR industry • Engagement was one of the most highly sought metrics when analysing digital dialogue</td>
<td>• Facebook ranked as the most-used social media worldwide with more than 300 million users</td>
<td>• Zocalo Group launched the Digital Footprint Index (DFI), a social media measurement tool • Edelman launched Tweetlevel to measure audience behaviours on Twitter • PR Newswire launched Social Media Metrics • MS&amp;L Digital launched the Multiloguer, a social media influencer management tool • Waggener Edstrom released, Twendz, a monitoring tool for Twitter conversations</td>
<td>• The first European Summit on Measurement was hosted in Berlin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Phase Three: Social analytics and big data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>IEA transition</strong></td>
<td><strong>IEA transition</strong></td>
<td><strong>IEA transition</strong></td>
<td><strong>IEA transition</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Engagement became the most prominent metric for measuring social media impact</td>
<td>• The PR industry underwent a major transformation from an impressions-dominated world to an engagement-driven future</td>
<td>• Big data became the challenges and opportunities in social media measurements</td>
<td>• The PR industry began to hire an analyst who has a big data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Market conditions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Market conditions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Market conditions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Market conditions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Instagram was founded</td>
<td>• Google launched Google+ to compete with Facebook and Twitter</td>
<td>• Facebook had 1,000 million users</td>
<td>• Twitter had 500 million users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Measurement technology</strong></td>
<td><strong>Measurement technology</strong></td>
<td><strong>Measurement technology</strong></td>
<td><strong>Measurement technology</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A variety of social media measurement tools (e.g., Klout, Tweet Reach) began to gain popularity in the PR industry</td>
<td>• Ketchum partnered with the Modellers, Omnicom marketing research agency, for developing PR analytics</td>
<td>• Edelman launched a specialised research firm, Edelman Berland, to capture market insights from social media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• PRNewswire launched new tools to measure audience engagement</td>
<td>• Edelman launched a research tool to measure employee engagement and behaviors</td>
<td>• AirPR launched an analytic platform to measure the effectiveness of PR campaigns. It provided insights in three areas: engagement, awareness, and optimisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Desire for accuracy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Desire for accuracy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Desire for accuracy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Desire for accuracy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The PR industry leaders agreed on developing global standards to measure PR outcomes at the second European Summit in Barcelona</td>
<td>• The PR industry leaders focused on developing global standards for social media measurement at the third European Summit in Lisbon</td>
<td>• The fourth European Summit on Measurement was hosted in Dublin. The PR industry leaders at the summit released social media measurement standards</td>
<td>• AMEC and Public Relations Consultants Association published a global guide for PR measurements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Institute for Public Relations rejected using AVEs as a measurement tool in the PR industry</td>
<td>• Coalition for Public Relations Research Standards was established to develop global standards for PR measurement</td>
<td>• Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity decided not to accept AVEs as a metric for awards entries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• PR Week decided not to accept AVEs as a method of measurement in PR Week industry awards</td>
<td>• PR Week decided not to accept AVEs as a method of measurement in PR Week industry awards</td>
<td>• GE, McDonald's, GM, and Southwest Airlines adopted the first round of measurement standards proposed by Coalition for Public Relations Research Standards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With the growing popularity of social media, the PR industry recognized the limitations of output measurement. For example, one article argued that output measurement limited PR practices to only the media relations function that was declining business (Iacono, 2007). Similarly, a 2008 article pointed out that traditional audience conceptions (i.e., media impressions) began to wane due to a falling print circulation whereas online networks were extending the reach to new audiences (Chang, 2008). In another article, Thomas, chief creative officer of MediaLink, emphasised that the PR industry needed to consider how to effectively measure the impact of contents in the social media environment (Maul, 2008).

In 2008 and 2009, although the PR industry did not fully identify how social media measurement should be accomplished, many PR practitioners agreed on the importance of social media measurement in the PR industry (Garcia, 2009). Also, PR practitioners began to cultivate the notion that several outcome measurements (e.g., engagement, word-of-mouth) enabled them to analyse audience behavioural outcomes systematically. A number of PR Week US articles in this period emphasised “engagement” as a major quantitative and qualitative outcome measurement in PR practice (see Table 2, especially row entitled “IEA Transition). In this regard, phase two can be defined as the early advent of new IEA. Developments in this phase demonstrate both the decline of traditional audience conceptions based on exposure/AVEs and the early incorporation of engagement in the audience conception despite its vagueness.

### 2010-2013: Social Analytics and Big Data

Phase three typifies the new conception of IEA. During this period, social media established their dominance in popular discourse, and the PR industry underwent a major transformation from output measurement to outcome measurement. A 2010 article argued that engagement was considered the most prominent and obvious metric of social media impact (Burke, Krall, Marklein, Paine, & Sugovic, 2010). The article mentioned that engagement required evidence to show not only attitudes and influence, but also qualitatively changing behaviours that PR practitioners seek to achieve from their target audience. Similarly, Rob Flahert, chief executive officer of Ketchum, identified three key outcome measurement criteria: reaching target audiences, changing behaviour, and producing economic benefits (Kiefer, 2013). This article pointed out that in a new PR measurement system PR practitioners must pursue “behavioural analytics.”

In addition, articles in this phase suggested that data-driven measurement was becoming central to audience measurement in the PR industry. Ten or 20 years ago, one major database that PR practitioners possessed was a media list to contact journalists who might report on their clients. Now, advanced web analytics make it possible for PR practitioners to access to a vast database and in turn the analytics help them to precisely identify audience behaviours on digital media (Weiss, 2012). In the end, the obtained behavioural data through web analytics enable PR practitioners to develop online contents to effectively engage with their audience (Weiss, 2012).

In phase three, we observed that the PR industry transitioned to a newer conception of its institutionally effective audience. The industry began to conceive its effective audiences via quantitative and qualitative behavioural outcomes and aimed to measure conversational engagement with audiences through newer measurement techniques (see Table 3, row entitled, “Measurement Technologies”). In this phase, we noted that such thinking gradually came to dominate the PR measurement discourse within the entire industry. Social analytics and big data analysis techniques that can trace audience activities on social media certainly
helped in this transition and facilitated outcome measurement in the PR industry. This changing environment has compelled PR practitioners to think differently about their audiences, undermining traditional analytical approaches (Napoli, 2011).

Discussion

Driving Forces Leading to the New IEA

To demonstrate driving forces that led to the new audience conception in the field of PR, we identified three dimensions: measurement technologies, desire for accuracy, and market conditions. Applying these three dimensions to the PR industry, we described major milestones that helped achieve the IEA transition and discussed their meanings from an institutional perspective. We began by describing the market conditions that facilitated many of the changes the PR industry has long conceived. These changes can be seen as "exogenous" to the field of PR, but if not for these macro conditions, new "measurement technologies" wouldn’t have seen the light of the day. Finally, under desire for accuracy, we highlighted how these efforts gelled with the industry's overall desire for more accurate measurement. This section answers each question we posed as part of RQ2.

Market conditions.

In the early 2000s, web 2.0 environments were created after a large number of online websites and social networking sites started business. Originating from Wikipedia, major social media channels such as MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube were founded between 2001 and 2005. In phase two, the popularity of social media was rapidly rising after various social media platforms became runaway successes. For instance, starting as a project within Harvard University in 2003, Facebook ranked as the most popular social network site worldwide with more than 300 million users in 2009. Also, a micro-social media channel, Twitter, was founded in 2006 and its penetration dramatically increased over four years. In phase three, social media began to be widely used all over the world such that Facebook had attracted 1,000 million users and Twitter 500 million users, respectively, in their platforms by 2013.

The growing popularity of social media in the overall media market made PR practitioners realise that it was necessary to actively communicate with publics through social media to achieve success in PR campaigns (Supa, 2014). In particular, this popularisation of social media motivated PR practitioners to reconceive the notion of publics from passive message receivers to active conversation participants. Also, engagement, a hitherto theoretical construct with little practical utility, could now be operationalised and measured through social media platforms. These “new” communication platforms and their inherently measurable nature contributed to changing the notion of audiences in the field of PR where accurate measurement techniques for new audience behaviours became part of mainstream PR discourse.
Measurement technologies

Throughout the inquiry we observed, research firms utilised opportunities presented by digital media to develop PR outcome measurements. These efforts were first spurred by the advent of social media environment, but initially such efforts mainly focused on analysing online news coverage. For instance, Millward Brown Precis developed Precis.NET in 2000, which offered instant access to up-to-date media coverage analysis on a daily basis. In 2003, major research firms (e.g., Strategy One, Medialink) invested in developing an automated online media coverage analysis system. In 2005, Carma International, a leading media measurement company, introduced Carma Online, which enabled practitioners to conduct various media coverage analyses such as publication type, time frame, and circulation type.

After 2006, the growing use of social media motivated research firms and major PR firms to roll out new web analytics services, which stimulated PR industry players to consider more accurate PR measurement. For example, after acquiring BuzzMetrics and NetRatings in 2006, Nielsen launched Nielsen Online to provide market insight through web analysis of user-generated contents. A PR research firm, Biz360, released digital measurement services (e.g., MediaSignal, Opinion Insights) to analyse influential bloggers, word-of-mouth, and public opinion on the Web in 2007 and 2008. Also, a variety of social analytics tools (e.g., Klout, Tweet Reach) were launched in the market, which helped PR practitioners conveniently analyse audience behaviours across social media platforms. Finally, global PR agencies (e.g., Edelman, MS&L, Ketchum) worked to launch various measurement services and tools to provide qualitative and quantitative research and social analytics for effective PR campaigns.

Desire for accuracy

Our analysis would be incomplete if we omitted major industry movements that signal the desire to make measurement more accurate. First is the role of the European Summit on Measurement in 2010, 2011, and 2012. At the second European Summit in Barcelona in 2010, about 200 PR industry leaders from 33 countries agreed on the need for guidelines for PR measurement and proposed seven key principles for the changing media environment (i.e., Seven Barcelona Declaration of Measurement Principles). This summit tried to provide a framework for establishing global standards for PR measurement (i.e., principle 1) and simultaneously urged PR practitioners not to employ AVEs as major PR metrics (i.e., principles 2 and 5). Also, the PR industry leaders at the summit advocated the use of both quantitative and qualitative values in PR measurements. At the third and fourth European Summit on Measurement in 2011 and 2012, PR industry leaders from 33 countries focused on developing global standards for social media measurement in PR campaigns.

Applying the major agenda at the European Summits into a newer measurement standard, three associations in the PR industry, including Institute for Public Relations (IPR), Council of PR Firms (CPRF), and International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC), established Coalition for Public Relations Research Standards in 2011. The Coalition aims to develop global standards for PR measurement within the framework of the Barcelona Principles. Also, the Coalition proposed six stages of measurement standards with an emphasis on behavioural outcomes (e.g., engagement, advocacy).

To encourage newer forms of measurement, significant market movements constantly occur in various areas. For example, AMEC and Public Relations Consultants
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Association (PRCA) published a global guidebook for PR measurement in 2013. The global companies that are major clients of PR industry, such as GE, McDonald's, and GM, adopted the first round of measurement standards proposed by the Coalition. In addition, international PR award committees started to adopt the new evaluation rules when selecting award winners. To be specific, PR Week barred AVEs as a metric when evaluating entries for the PR Week industry awards in 2012. Also, Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity decided not to accept AVEs as a guideline for measurement in its PR award category in 2013. Such industry-wide activities are critical in securing industry-wide acceptance of newer ideas that were initially accepted only by a few industry pioneers.

In summary, our analysis shows how each of the three aspects we invoked (measurement technologies, desire for accuracy, and market conditions) have contributed to a renewed conception of IEA for the PR industry. Changing market conditions have facilitated new communication behaviors between organisations and publics in the social media environment. These conditions subsequently motivated research firms that wanted to accurately measure the effectiveness of PR campaigns to develop new measurement techniques to analyse new audience behaviors. Also, the conditions provided the impetus for PR industry players to advocate newer standards and directives; such changes became catalysts for industry-wide changes in how audiences were reconceived as institutionally effective in the field of PR.

Implications for Future PR Measurement Research

Throughout the three periods of this inquiry, audience measurement systems in the PR industry gradually progressed from output measurements to outcome measurements. As it became difficult to apply traditional public relations measurements such as AVE to current public relations practices on social media, the pioneering PR research firms initiated development of audience outcome measurements using extensive data about online users' behaviours. As a result, the conception of institutionally effective audience, which is facilitated by the rise of social media, shifted from “the quantity of media placements (e.g., AVEs)” to “the quantity and the quality of behavioural outcomes (e.g., engagement)” in the field of PR.

Based on this analysis, it is difficult to predict whether and when PR will eliminate output measurement and switch completely to outcome measurement. Using our framework, this transition will eventually depend on market conditions, which are “exogenous” to the PR industry itself. Theoretically, however, it is possible for both outcome and output measurement to function as separate market niches within the PR industry, as has been the case with other institutional fields when metrics are in transition (Anand & Peterson, 2000). Television advertising, for instance, continues to rely on traditional ratings due to broadcaster insistence, even though many industry players advocate and employ several alternate metrics based on set-top box data. Similarly, the trajectory in PR will be guided by the dynamics among many factors and players, which such analysis cannot foretell.

This study has several limitations. First, we employed one data source, PR Week US, for this study. Although PR Week US is a representative and reliable publication about the PR industry, the fact that our interpretations might be guided by the tone of the publication lessens the external validity of the findings. Also, this study mainly focused on the US PR industry in its historical descriptions. Although the US has the largest PR industry in the world, future research needs to incorporate other sources (e.g., alternative trade publications, interviews with PR practitioners) and regions (e.g., Asia, Europe).
Despite the limitations, this study makes several important contributions to public relations research. First, the study identified the changing conception of audience among PR industry players through the growth in popularity of social media. This historical perspective allowed us to gain a more holistic understanding of the evolution in practitioners’ notions of what constitutes “new” practices in PR measurement. Additionally, this study identified various driving forces generating such change in the PR industry by applying three dimensions (measurement technologies, desire for accuracy, and market conditions). While previous research simply identified the PR practitioners’ preferences in PR measurements or the challenges in measuring the effectiveness of social media, this study interpreted the phenomenon of change in PR measurement through a systematic inquiry guided by a concrete theoretical lens. Thus, the three dimensions identified in this study will serve as a useful theoretical framework for future public relations research on the conception of the institutionally effective audience.
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References


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