

**The Agile Practitioner? Changing Roles of PR and Communication Consultants
in North West England**

by

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to consider the changing nature of work among public relations or communication practitioners. The rationale for tackling this topic is the work itself in the sector has changed rapidly, largely but not entirely, because of digitalised technologies (L'Etang 2013). Guided by role theory and concepts related to public relations, the thesis will critically address the nature of contemporary communication practice and how industry expectations are being shaped by progress in digital and social technology.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with communications and marketing practitioners in different roles and with varying levels of experience based in North West England between November 2018 and January 2019. Twelve and a half hours of interviews were recorded on an audio device and full transcriptions were produced. Respondents included in-house practitioners, agency consultants and freelancers. The data was anonymised, analysed and coded using NVivo 12 software.

Findings: As a result of the fieldwork, and strongly influenced by the international agency Weber Shandwick's "value-based communities" organisational structure, a four-point typology is proposed in which the modern communicator plays four dynamic roles of "Business Strategist", "Content Creator and Relationship Manager", "Upskiller and Improver" and "Digital Engager."

Ethical issues: UCLan's Research Ethics Committee formally approved the research proposal before the fieldwork was undertaken. The researcher ensured anonymity in respondents' replies and that appropriate measures were taken to gain informed consent and to protect data in hard copy and digital form.

Limitations: While the sample of 18 interviews proved sufficiently rigorous for this study, it is acknowledged that the geographical spread of respondents from North West England was limited and makes generalisations problematic. Future studies may use observational research in a qualitative perspective to compare with the

interview data. This will enable the researcher to see if practitioners are acting as they claim in their day-to-day work.

Contribution to theory and practice: This study responds to previous research, especially by von Platen (2016), and addresses the challenge of conceptualising the role of the modern communicator by suggesting an adaptable typology that is far removed from previous static descriptions of PR roles from analogue eras. Included in the appendices of this study are examples of best practice and digital and social tools as highlighted by practitioners.

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INTRODUCTION

Public relations and communication specialists are wrestling with profound changes to their industry. Pressures from emerging technologies and changing expectations of businesses and clients find the PR industry “at the crossroads” (Wolf and Archer 2018). An existential crisis is nothing new to a specialism that has long had to contend with external criticism over its perceived tendency to “spin” and manipulate public opinion. Now the industry, which employs up to 83,000 people nationwide and is worth an estimated £13bn to the UK economy (PRCA 2018), is facing disruption from technological step changes, organisational integration and encroachment from marketing.

This thesis has been carried out as part of a period of study in which the candidate is seeking to achieve a Master’s by Research at UCLan. From the individual’s perspective, the qualitative inquiry has been instrumental in enhancing research competence and contributing to personal expertise in the field. More broadly, the research project aims to contextualise the challenges and opportunities facing communication practitioners from those recently entering the profession to experienced directors. It considers communications work from the technical to the strategic. A workable framework is required to explain and understand the role of the practitioner in a business world facing uncertainties because of disruptive technologies and political upheaval (Waddington 2018). Role theories and rival schools of scholarly debate in public relations discourse help establish the meaning of communications work in 2019.

There have been a number of attempts to formalise the “fragments of competency” (Jeffrey and Brunton 2011, p. 60) into clear frameworks for digital communication competency. Examples included the European Body of Knowledge (EBOK), the European Communication Monitor (ECM) and the European Communication Professional Skills and Innovation (ECOPSI) programme. According to Moreno *et al* (2015), the greatest challenge to public relations is not in identifying the required skills but in using them strategically. This led to the Global Capabilities Framework which was the culmination of a two year-research project (Gregory *et al* 2018). The Global Capabilities Framework sought to bring a degree of order to the confusing

terminology to adapt a shared set of standards that were divided across three areas of communication, organisation and profession. One of the key findings of the Global Capabilities study was the appropriateness of the label “public relations”.

This study has been strongly influenced by two key sources – one an academic paper and the other an example of how a leading PR agency has reshaped its business model to better represent the work of its employees. The journal article posits that Scandinavian communication practitioners are struggling to make sense of new technology (von Platen 2016). The business example relates to Weber Shandwick’s move to “value-based communities” in which all employees belong to one of four distinct but complementary workplace communities to better serve clients (Holmes Report 2018). In this thesis, the theory and practice are inextricably linked. Von Platen (2016) provided the inspiration for the original proposal and that study was closely – though not directly – followed when fieldwork was undertaken. Weber Shandwick’s organisational structure seemed to join many of the dots between the roles of the practitioner and how those roles could be meaningful in business. The four-point typology proposed in this study therefore owes much to the reimagining of the communications role in a leading global agency.

Weber Shandwick’s Value Communities Organisation Structure



Figure 1 Source: The Holmes Report 2018

If public relations truly is “at the crossroads”, the question is whether the future path offers opportunity or irrelevance. According to Valin (2018) large parts of public relations and marketing are prone to disruption because of automation. This could involve bots managing enquiries from the public and artificial intelligence (AI) having a significant impact on activities such as copy writing, planning and social media relations. In fact, some estimates suggest that the majority of the tactical functions will be automated by 2030 (Abdulkarim 2018). Furthermore, AI tools could help influence opinion as well as enabling communicators to better monitor and report on the impact of campaigns. Rather than being a threat to communicators, the new technology could enhance their expertise and safeguard their value to businesses (Phillips 2018).

However, there are different perspectives on what leadership truly involves in communication. Ewing and Remund (2017) suggest younger graduates favour a definition of leadership which emphasises forward looking and innovation, while more senior practitioners focus on accountability and organisational reputation. In addition, whatever the role or the involvement of new technology in this, a more fundamental issue of trust remains central to the credibility of the PR professional. Often the senior practitioner must play a key role of “trust strategist” to gain the confidence of stakeholders outside the confines of an organisation (Bourne 2013).

Amid this uncertainty, public relations and communication practitioners must clarify their status and responsibilities in managing relationships with key stakeholders to advance the interests of organisations, clients, individuals, causes and campaigns. Practitioners work in-house, for consultancies or independently. PR is an important – and growing – trade in North West England, an area of 7m people which stretches from Cumbria in the North to South Cheshire, and from Merseyside in the west to the Pennines of Greater Manchester (Young and Sly 2011). The region’s emphasis on public relations practice is partly attributable to the importance of reputation management with the North West having a higher percentage of employees in the public sector compared with other regions. High levels of urbanisation in the North West and the growing power of Manchester as a key regional business hub are important factors to note. Public relations and communications is an important area

of employment in the North West region. This is reflected by the fact that there are 600 members of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR 2019) based in the region and 39 organisational members in the Public Relations Consultants Association North West branch (PRCA 2019)

This study will begin with a literature review featuring a critical discussion of texts covering sociology and public relations theory in what is still a comparatively new specialism. The methodology positions the qualitative study, considers the advantages and disadvantages of researching in an interpretivist tradition and emphasises the ethical standards and methods required for this project. A full discussion of the 18 interviews, which took more than two months to carry out and produced 12 and a half hours of audio recordings, will be outlined. The findings will lead to a new four-point typology that reflects the need for a dynamic interpretation of the roles of the communicator. These roles will cross job titles and seniority levels and are “Business Strategist”, “Content Creator and Relationship Manager”, “Upskiller and Improver” and “Digital Engager.” The findings are discussed and compared with the literature and the research will demonstrate areas of good practice from practitioners.

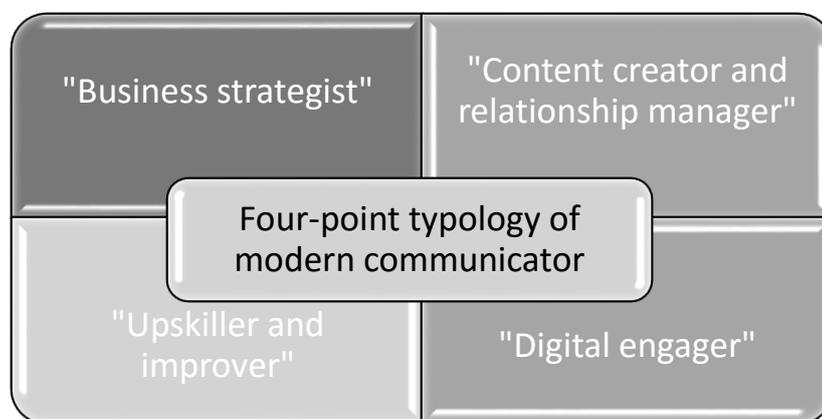


Figure 2 Source: CS research 2018-19

Naturally, the sample of respondents from the North West is modest, and in any qualitative study, generalisability will always be contentious. As will be discussed later, the role of the researcher in creating meaning will inevitably cause unease for positivist or critical realist traditions. Such concerns are legitimate and at the conclusion of this study, the researcher will reflect on the limitations of the research

and suggest that an observational study could add rich data to future inquiry in this subject.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will address three areas of research related to developments in the use of technology and its impact on the public relations and communication industry. The first section highlights social science research and its impact on the development of thought in communication study. In the second section, theories, concepts, and the development of a body of knowledge in the area of modern-day PR and communication will be addressed. Finally, the third section of this chapter tackles contemporary issues in communication, looking at PR's longstanding claim for legitimacy and the work of von Platen (2016) in studying growing complexity and the challenges of communicators in using new technologies in their work.

Sociological perspective

Scholars of public relations and communication management have long struggled with a discourse that can prove too narrow and managerialist, leading to “numbing reductionism” (Elmer 2000). In order to provide a richer understanding of communication theory and how it might relate to practice, scholars have often sought inspiration from the work of Durkheim, Weber and in critical traditions, Marx. A useful starting place in a discussion of sociological influences is the view of the influential French philosopher and sociologist Pierre Félix Bourdieu. His stance was that social research should be the “maieutic” or the midwife of the voice of the citizens (Robbins 2017). This viewpoint positions social research as a stronger framework for communication theory, which is a discipline in need of theoretical bolstering. Therefore, norms of three research traditions: social sciences, interpretive studies and critical analysis, play a principal role in the communication discourse (Rothenberger, Auer and Pratt 2017). Central to Bourdieu's thinking is the concept of habitus which can best be understood as the internal and external factors that

determine a person's worldview and how they interact and communicate with the wider community (Robbins 2017). Habitus enables "typifying" and categorising things and people. In addition, Bourdieu's theoretical framework and his work on capital have been especially influential in positioning the role of communication practitioners, their influence and their empowerment to work ethically in a modern organisation (Edwards 2006). For those who possess high levels of social and cultural capital the changing communication landscape offers rich opportunity, but the increased use of digital communication risks further exclusion of marginalised groups.

Sociology's strong influence on communication theory is also seen in the heated scholarly debates between the technological determinists, associated closely with Martin Heidegger, and the critical traditions of the Frankfurt School and, in particular, Jurgen Habermas's critical view (Outhwaite 2017). Habermas's dynamic concept of a "public sphere" is one in which commercial and non-profit organisations could expect to be accountable to a variety of interest groups. Habermas was concerned that democratic oversight could be manipulated by companies using misleading publicity to advance their interests (Outhwaite 2017). To counter this, a theory of communicative action was advanced in which honesty, integrity, legitimacy and accountability become the building blocks of the relationship between organisations and their publics. Through such communicative action, a form of mutual agreement could be established between the organisation and its internal and external interests. Such arguments have been hugely influential among public relations and communication scholars (Jensen 2002; Pieczka 2011). Indeed, as we shall see, this quest for dialogic or "symmetric" communication, has dominated the body of knowledge in post-war public relations and has been at the heart of disputes between rival camps.

Advances in digital and 21st Century communication have transformed the expectations of stakeholders in their relationships with brands and organisations with an emphasis on disruptive technologies (Sheldrake 2011). This chapter will now highlight the development of scholarship in public relations and the challenges facing practitioners. It will critically discuss paradigms of public relations theory – broadly defined as the normative or systems; rhetorical, dialogic; and critical schools. Discussion will then seek to question whether traditional, dominant

paradigms of public relations theory can still be seen as relevant, given the changing landscape of media and communication.

Change has been a common theme of post-war discourse around communication. One element of this is the theory of organizational ecology (Trist 1977) which looked beyond the “organizational set” and included the wider environment with an emphasis on contextual rather than transactional communication.

Rival paradigms of public relations scholarship

Public relations and communication management themselves have long struggled for a sense of academic identity as a result of “fragmented scholarship” (Windsor 2005, p. 401). There is even disagreement over whether it is possible to agree on the number of competing paradigms. Fawkes (2018) outlines four major schools of thought: excellence, advocacy, dialogue and critical or cultural. In contrast, Valentini (2015) identifies rival rhetorical and relational schools of thought. Moreover, public relations borrows from a myriad of specialisms and has been dominated by western and especially American research contexts. These perspectives have provoked debate over the role of public relations in mediating communication with stakeholders and whether the subject area should be considered a strategic management function or a creative tactical role (L’Etang 2013; Russell and Lamme 2016).

The wide range of terms used to understand public relations indicate some of the challenges scholars and practitioners encounter in defending their subject from attacks by critics who accuse it of being unethical, one-sided and manipulative. According to Russell and Lamme (2016) press agency, publicity and propaganda were commonly used in the first half of the 20th Century and were replaced by terms such as public affairs, public diplomacy, strategic communication and public information. Bernays (1986) accepted that non-PR specialists were likely to be confused by the variety of job titles and roles and this could damage the credibility of the practitioners’ status in the organisation, and as consultants.

However, before looking in detail at pressures facing the contemporary public relations practitioner, it is important to consider the underpinning theories related to the specialism. While there is consensus on how public relations might benefit organisations, activist groups and individuals, there is less agreement on how the

specialism might bring this about and there remains a struggle to understand and adapt meanings in a time of rapid social and economic change (Tsetura 2010).

The Grunigian paradigm

It is somewhat curious given the thick history of rhetoric in communication discourse, that the dominant paradigm of public relations theory is regarded as the normative/management school. Strongly influenced by systems theory and the historic progress of public relations, James E Grunig's work dominated the subject in the 1980s and 1990s. Grunigian scholarship, which entails excellence and symmetry concepts, became the dominant paradigm with Grunig's academic papers and books the most frequently cited by academics (Pasadeos, Renfro, and Hanily 1999).

An important landmark was the proposition of the four models of public relations (Grunig and Hunt 1984). This suggested that public relations could be understood through press agency, which dominated towards the end of the 19th Century, to public information in the 20th Century and then two models of two-way communication that were described as asymmetrical and symmetrical. Systems theory and positivist traditions influenced this strain of management theory that was to emerge as a "mainstay" of public relations in the United States before influencing a growing body of knowledge in Asia (Freitag and Stokes 2009). Pasadeos, Renfro and Hanily (1999) who conducted a citation analysis of journal articles, found that the four models theory (Grunig and Hunt 1984) was the most cited public relations work of the 20th Century and that greater "topical diversity" was required in the subject area demonstrated the significance of the Grunigian paradigm.

Challenges to the Grunigian paradigm

After the turn of the millennium, Grunigian theory remained powerful, albeit subject to closer scrutiny by rhetors who criticised the systems emphasis as unethical (Brown 2010) and also by critical scholars (L'Etang and Pieczka 2006) who were sceptical of a utopian and top-down imprint of symmetry and excellence theory. Two-way symmetrical communication often overlooked the power dynamics between organisations and publics. Elmer (2007, p. 360) lamented the "relentlessly managerialist approach" and suggested that public relations was ill-equipped to deal

with current challenges of globalisation, let alone the dizzying changes in digital communication channels. Social media has not only proven to be a disruptive challenge to organisations, it has led some to engage in “self-serving two-way communication” to broadcast messages rather than engage in dialogue with publics (Sundstrom and Levenshus 2017).

As new digital platforms became commonly used in public relations and communication, proponents of excellence theory quickly sought to assert the relevance of the model in changing times. Grunig (2009) acknowledged that the new technologies were already having a profound impact, but that the theoretical frameworks established in the 20th Century were still relevant. Rather than ending notions of command and control one-way communication, digital platforms had simply confirmed that this approach was never viable in the first place. Indeed, social media was ensuring practitioners were more accountable and would therefore be unable to shortcut excellent communication standards. The potential for more detailed and meaningful media monitoring was also enhanced through digital media compared with traditional platforms. This all suggested to excellence scholars that rather than being overtaken by events, their vision for the industry was coming close to being realised as there would inevitably be more focus on “the strategic management paradigm” at the expense of tactical “interpretive paradigms.” However, Grunig (2009) warned that greater ethical challenges were certain to confront the public relations practitioners amid concerns around fake blogs, astroturfing and issues of transparency.

An alternative perspective was offered by Hutchins and Tindall (2016, p. 3) who argued that “traditional” methods of public relations had to be reconsidered or reconceptualised. Therefore, in its claims to modernisation, excellence theory would continue to emphasise the management of publics in a structure that overlooked those who didn’t neatly fit into defined categories of active and latent. Consequently, communications practice risked becoming more adversarial while neglecting emerging patterns of community management and participatory culture. A key feature of the new media landscape was the development of “transmedia” which can be defined as the use of narrative across platforms, gamification and immersive experiences. Together with the growing integration of marketing and public relations, these innovations would inevitably lead to changes in traditional

communication techniques (Hutchins and Tindall 2016). This reinvention of public relations would need to address three key issues of 24/7 content creation, reaching audiences in a saturated media environment and negotiating the blurring of amateur and professional media outlets. This would be experienced mostly by public relations practitioners working with influencers or “prosumers” who operate more freely in a participatory culture than mainstream media journalists.

Public relations’ long-standing challenge is that it is often considered a technical and tactical role rather than strategic and this might have been emphasised by organisations prioritising outputs rather than outcomes (Kent 2010). Furthermore, Alaimo (2017) argued that the importance of persona in communication had grown because of social media with organisations required to provide regular content, a feedback mechanism based on equality, and a “lighter”, more conversational tone in the content. These disruptive transformations to 21st Century communication might have caused an “identity crisis” in public relations and communication affecting both theory and practice in the specialism (von Platen 2016).

Proponents of excellence theory favour open discussions and collaboration between tacticians and strategists (Dozier, Grunig, L and Grunig, J, 1995). To develop successful communication, the authors highlight the importance of knowledge in operations, research, negotiation and persuasion. These strategic skill sets are supported by the craft of practitioners who produce content. There is a clear distinction between the technical role expertise and the managerial, and although the authors seek not to downplay the technician’s contribution, they remark that competent tactical public relations work alone cannot guarantee excellent communications.

Rhetorical influences

A different perspective is offered by rhetoric in public relations discourse. Ihlen (2011) argues that the rhetorical tradition of Aristotle in which influence and persuasion are mobilised to convince strategic groups, is a crucial aspect of communication. Indeed, Elwood (1995, p. 5) remarks how Bernays views Aristotle as the “forebear of public relations”. Rhetors, who are the creators of rhetorical

discussion, include the human and corporate citizen. Pejorative definitions of rhetoric suggest its intention is to manipulate audiences into acting in a way they might not have done otherwise. However, a value-neutral approach towards rhetorical devices acknowledges they may be used for ethical or unethical purposes (Ihlen 2011). A popular rhetorical defence of public relations has been proffered as “the good organisation communicating well” (Heath 2001). This suggests that organisations ought to work to advance the interests of the society that gives them legitimacy through ongoing dialogue and involvement (Heath 2010).

There is an inherent danger of ignoring the rich variety of public relations activities undertaken outside corporate settings. Concern over the use of the word “function” led the Public Relations Society of America removing it from its definition of the discipline for fear it being top-down (Russell and Lamme 2016). The authors shared L’Etang’s unease that much PR discourse suggests an “organisation” practising PR rather than the complex network of individuals communicating internally and externally. There is also a concern over the distinction between professional (or paid) communicators and volunteers, such as activists.

Despite, or perhaps because of, Gunigian influence, complaints about the narrow parameters of public relations scholarship have continued into the new millennium. Arguing rather unconvincingly that public relations knowledge could only be traced back to the early 1980s, Toth (2006) called for new paradigms. However, for other scholars, cultural assumptions have distorted the debate and have presented a confusing picture to internal and external audiences alike. Many histories of public relations perceive the industry as originating in the United States (Cutlip 2013). However, other authors have rejected this US-centric view of the development of the profession (L’Etang 2008; Raaz and Wehmeier 2007, cited in L’Etang 2013) and argue that European influences have been every bit as significant. Explaining this context, Julien (2015) identifies the importance of norms, structures and behaviours dominated by US communitarianism traditions with a specific and well-developed view of civic engagement.

Dialogic theory

A further influence on public relations theory was the emergence of online communication from the late 1990s. Kent and Taylor (1998) began to develop a paradigm of dialogic communication. Dialogic communication was strongly influenced by the writings of the Austrian-Israeli philosopher Martin Buber, but it looked ahead to changes in the industry and the growing opportunities for stakeholders to engage in communication through emerging technologies or “webbed communities”. Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed five principles related to communication on websites: the responsibility for organisations to offer a “dialogic loop”, relevant content, accessible online information, the opportunity for web visitors to feel valued and the principle of encouraging returning visitors to websites (Kent and Taylor 1998). Four years later, the same authors developed their work to reflect the emerging discussions about relationships. Acknowledging that dialogue could be fraught and subject to power imbalances, Kent and Taylor (2002) offered a five-level orientation of their theory in which the key features were mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk and commitment. Twelve years later, and with the onset of social media and technology related to so-called Web 2.0, Kent and Saffer (2014) were emphasising themes of engagement, thereby reflecting a word regularly used by communicators to describe the use of online technologies. Defining engagement as a “promise” their re-modelled dialogic theory placed communication on a continuum from monologue or propaganda (bad) to dialogue (good). In the same paper, the authors referred to “rhetorical, collaborative modes of communication like dialogue” (Kent and Safferr 2014, p. 390).

Other scholarship has been influenced by Kent, Taylor and Saffer’s work (McAllister-Spooner 2009; Wirtz and Zimbres 2018) with academics mindful that the emerging paradigm could bring new relevance to the subject and update well-established theories. However, Theunissen and Noordin (2012) maintain that that dialogic theory has failed to make a real impact in PR theory, possibly because it is too philosophical and abstract for an applied subject. While criticising the systems approach for being “linear and mechanistic” (Theunissen and Noordin 2012, p.12)

they also suggest there are implicit dangers in dialogue, and the organisations might lean more towards persuasion.

Power issues in public relations discourse

It is important to focus not only on where public relations “sits” in an organisation but on whose behalf this function is exercised. For all the discussion of empowerment and engagement, matters of privilege and exclusion cannot be overlooked. Among scholars from critical traditions or those researching issues around race and gender, systems paradigms may tend to offer too rosy a picture of communication practice. Banks (1995) asserts that diversity has often proved a challenge in communication scholarship and that goal-orientated organisations may impose their influence on publics without considering the everyday lives of people from other cultures and faiths. To treat intercultural communication more holistically, organisations can be challenged to consider their own role in society, their assumptions about communication practices and the importance of identities within segmented groupings (Banks 1995). Another essential concern here is that practitioners of colour might experience disadvantage related to wages, promotion and influence within an organisation (Len-Rios 1998). The risk of not responding to this challenge is public relations becomes “colonised” by interests that do not share wider public concerns about organisations, what they do and what they say (Edwards 2006). It could also be said that public relations’ discourse has been strongly influenced by “masculinist assumptions” (Aldoory 2005, p. 668). Concepts of gender, power and diversity have helped to construct a meaning of public relations from a mainstream perspective.

Inherent in the study of public relations is the concept of Bourdieu’s social capital which can be understood as “social networks and the norms and sanctions that govern their character” (Halpern 2005, p. 4). Social capital can be seen in informal networks which lead to a flow of information among these groups where intelligence and information about job vacancies can be shared. During times of disruption to traditional business practices, social capital within networks helps organisations to

withstand external shocks through concepts of know-how, know-what and know-who (Field 2008). However, it is possible to see social capital as an asset in its own right, but also a mechanism for embedding inequality within an organisation.

The roles of public relations communicators

Having considered the paradigms of public relations attention must shift to the roles of the practitioners and how these roles have been challenged by transformation in digital technologies. In an analogue era, Broom and Smith (1979) proposed a four-role typology of public relations, namely expert practitioner, communication facilitator, problem-solving process facilitator and communication technician. Later attempts were made to simplify or modify these roles (Dozier 1984), but there has developed a clear divide between tactical, activity-based public relations and high-level strategic communication, the latter being perceived as excellent communication (Grunig, Grunig and Dozier 2002). Other scholars have used social construction theory to consider how practitioners establish the meaning of their work through social, professional, gender and contextual influences. Furthermore, rhetors argue that public relations practitioners must be judged, not just by role or access to the boardroom, but by rhetorical skills of listening, empathy, understanding, judgement and a preference for dialogue over monologue (Heath and Coombs 2006, p. 13).

As seen in the discussions regarding the value of public relations and communication management, scholars have long considered their specialism to be concerned not just with technical implementation of agreed strategies but as “agents and managers of change” (Cutlip and Center 2013, p. 187). A focus on research and theory also allow communication practitioners to advance wider “prosocial agendas” (Botan and Taylor 2008, p. 659). However, academics from critical and systems perspectives agree that the goal of moving from the tactical to strategic is often unrealised (Dozier, Grunig, Grunig 1995; Elmer 2000 and 2007).

It can be argued that public relations’ backstory has hampered efforts of practitioners to establish their work as a genuine multi-disciplinary specialism rather than a shortcut to gaining publicity or banishing crises (L’Etang 2013). Practitioners have also struggled to differentiate public relations practice from that of advertising and marketing (Weaver 2001). At a time of growing complexity for communication professionals, other external factors including globalisation, downsizing,

organisational change and competition between business functions have further complicated matters (Johansson and Ottesig 2011). Practitioners have needed to build a deeper understanding of the academic and social context in which they operate (Toth 2006). However, PR practitioners in many territories, including the United Kingdom, do not require any license to operate. Calling for a reconsideration of public relations as a cultural practice, Elmer (2000) argues that the profession needs to be “un-managed” to remain relevant.

Defining public relations roles

The significance of roles in public relations and efforts to conceptualise these roles can be traced back to the work of Bernays in the 1920s. In this case “role” can be understood as “enduring patterns of organisational behaviour that individual practitioners enact over time” (Lauzen and Dozier 1992, p. 209). According to Grunig, Grunig and Dozier, (2002) roles are abstractions, which can help to measure what employees do in their everyday work. A key advance was Broom and Smith’s (1979) typology of four public relations roles discussed above. These were reduced to a dichotomy of managers and technicians by Dozier (1984) and this distinction has been influential ever since, helping to shape research into excellent communication (Grunig and Dozier 1992). However, Lauzen and Dozier (1992) argued that environmental factors in an organisation as well as power dynamics are central to understanding the role of the PR practitioner. Moreover, deeper issues related to feminism, power and diversity construct meanings of public relations practice yet are often overlooked in the research (Aldoory 2005).

A further challenge to the role of the public relations practitioner is the risk of encroachment from functions such as marketing or human resources (Lauzen 1992; Edwards 2006). Overlapping goals between public relations and marketing could lead to integration although a concern is that content marketing and brand journalism are especially prone to argument. This could weaken the role of communicators who might be called in to deal with the impact of cases where “influencer marketing goes wrong” (Gesaualdi 2019, p 374). While digital channels offered huge opportunities

to communication practitioners to leverage power in organisations they also might lead to boundary tensions and a further confusion about the work of public relations. However, by conducting strategic research and planning (or environmental scanning) and by enacting the manager role, communication specialists can prove their value and gain influence among members of the dominant coalition in an organisation (Lauzen 1992). While all practitioners are required to carry out a variety of technical and managerial tasks as the circumstances demand, the predominant role is the set of activities that are enacted most often (Lauzen 1992).

Although research from Broom, Smith and Dozier was significant in establishing some of the terms of engagement for PR practitioners, there was frustration that roles were considered through a US-centric lens. According to Hogg and Doolan (1999), the earlier research on PR roles was flawed because it seemed to suggest that the roles were shaped by the individual instead of the social systems and the practitioner's perception of how they are viewed by colleagues, clients and managers. Efforts to develop wider and more detailed understanding of the work of public relations practitioners led to scholars conducting field studies in an attempt to identify knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours of relevance to UK practitioners (Macnamara *et al*, 2018). Dissatisfied with Broom and Smith's four-role typology and Dozier's manager-technician dichotomy, Moss, Newman and DeSanto (2005) sought to move from a limited study of tasks to consider the "how" and "why" of management. This resulted in a five-dimensional model made up of PR management expert, issue management expert, key policy and strategy adviser, trouble-shooter/problem solver and communication technician. Critiquing the "static perspective of role enactment", the authors claim that their model better reflects the growing complexities of the manager job. In addition, Gregory (2008) interviewed 17 participants in leading UK FTSE 350 companies and developed 10 competency titles for senior communicators in the private and public sectors. The titles emphasise advanced communication and strategic expertise, decision-making, persuasion and relationship-building. Later, international scholars in the Global Alliance organisation issued the Melbourne Mandate to guide 160,000 members worldwide. The Mandate identifies three critical roles for communicators: defining organisational character and values, building a culture of listening and engagement, and fulfilment of responsibility in all dimensions (Gregory 2015). The Melbourne

Mandate roles also influenced subsequent public affairs research (von den Driesch and van der Wurff 2016).

Roles in public relations and communication management have to be considered alongside discussions of professionalism. This latter concept has emerged from the work of Weber, Durkheim and Comte before Parsons developed the functionalist perspective which sought to advance universalism, specification and resources being allocated on the basis of performance (Brante 1988). Taking up this theme, Elmer (2000) developed Brante's market-based measurement of professional value and warned that the constant growth of stakeholders with their demands would make it impossible for practitioners to monitor the variety of channels and interests. Moreover, Cremin (2003) feared the emergence of an identikit corporate employee might stifle individuals and their skills to meet a "commercially-proven" set of characteristics. Cahaya Putra (2009) argues that qualities of sociability, management, negotiation, analytical knowledge and human psychology might be more effective in identifying professionalism in communication practitioners.

New and disruptive technologies

This literature review will now consider issues stemming from media convergence, digitalisation and other transformational developments in communication between and among organisations and stakeholders. This can be seen as much more than a narrow technological shift and one that has a huge impact on industries, markets and the working practices of professional communicators (Jenkins 2004). These changes are forcing practitioners to reflect on their own working practices and suggest a struggle to make sense of new channels, especially for those who worked in public relations and communication before the digital shift (Sheldrake 2011). A critical study of these themes will influence the research questions which will seek to investigate the impact of technological developments on practitioners and has been influenced by an article that discussed the pressures brought about by sectorial competition, convergence and new knowledge requirements (von Platen 2016). Von Platen's work was guided by role theory and it sought to address a weakness in

understanding of professional roles in public relations and communication professionals working as consultants or in agencies.

The significance of changes in society, technology and culture were spelled out by Castells (2010, p. xvii) who warned “these are indeed troubled times”. Castells bemoaned a disconnect between the revolution in communication technologies and practitioners’ ability to make sense of the communication. His optimistic vision was for open structures or networks that could enhance innovation, globalisation and decentralisation. In this case, the organisation would thrive on the basis of the capabilities of each worker rather than a centrally organised system. The theme of a digital journey has been studied by a number of academics. Jepsen and Drahokoupil (2017) suggest that the digital economy is transforming business models and society at large and these changes are far more profound than those already experienced in the mass media and social channels. These digitalisation changes are also likely to prove increasingly challenging because of job losses and casualisation in the gig economy. Valenduc and Vedramin (2017) identify a “digital turn” and consider it could mark the third or fourth industrial revolution.

Since Marshall McLuhan’s influential research in the 1960s, a growing body of work has considered the term “prosumer” in which the boundaries between the producers of communication and those who consume it have become blurred. Dickel and Schrape (2017) reject the utopian view that engaged internet users are participating more deeply in political and cultural discourse than previous generations. Indeed, Stephens *et al* (2017) consider the prevalence of communication overload. In the authors’ study, a four-item scale is presented to explore how workers were able to function given the potential for technology to prevent them being more productive, giving colleagues more access to their time as well as interrupting tasks and producing emails and voicemails that are not business-related.

In addition, the concept of the digital divide was well established by the turn of the Millennium with authors concerned that technological developments were not being disseminated across society. Their fear was that this could jeopardise education, social mobility and economic empowerment (Norris 2001; Van Dijk and Hacker 2003). Concerns about the digital divide helped shape public policy in the developed and developing world in the first decade of the century. However, Helsper (2017)

has advanced the debate with a concept of relative digital exclusion in the areas of access to technology, literacy and participation. These levels of exclusion could be at the macro or micro level and might be influenced by personality and skills. Helsper (2017) doubts whether measures such as digital champions and buddy systems would be effective in the workplace. Helsper's conception of Relative Digital Deprivation Theory is largely about perception but it also exists where individuals feel that the inequality they suffer is an illegitimate consequence of specific social group membership.

For public relations practitioners, new technology or Digital, Social and Mobile (DSM) (Vercic, D; Vercic, A and Sriramesh 2014) has presented a familiar technical trap in which new social channels are used tactically instead of strategically in managing communication. Rather than using new technologies to enhance dialogue, organisations seem to focus on narrower priorities of efficiency in workplace communication (Verheydena and Cardon 2018). Greater attention should therefore be paid to the quality of outcomes because of digital communication rather than the process itself (Vercic, Vercic and Sriramesh 2014; Lee, Place and Smith 2018; Plowman and Wilson 2018). In a study of the use of DSM among practitioners in Belgium, a concern emerged that senior managers remain fearful about surrendering control through genuine dialogue via the use of new technologies (Verheydena and Cardon 2018).

In some studies, the value of DSM seems to exceed the limitations of organisational efficiency and present new opportunities for male and female practitioners to demonstrate their expertise. In fact, the emergence of social media might appear to level the playing field and offer equal opportunities for men and women in the PR industry compared with the analogue era (Lee, Place and Smith 2018). Emerging automation, while offering new challenges, could also present opportunities for public relations to take on a more strategic role and free practitioners from dull and routine tasks. According to this argument, human interaction can never be replaced by bots (Galloway and Swiatek 2018). In contrast, Valentini (2014) expressed scepticism that the new social technologies have any beneficial impact at all.

Turning to von Platen (2016), her research considered "role-making" and how role actors purposefully engage in role constructivism to maintain legitimacy. In this

case, “role” is a construct and therefore gains meaning from its relationship with other roles which have a hierarchy of importance. Role theory is an area of research connected to psychology, sociology and anthropology that has developed since the late 1920s and whose central concerns are patterns of human conduct, expectations, social positions and the context and social structures (Biddle 1979). Roles are based on shared expectations and are also contextual. They can be a result of deliberate planning or they can be inadvertent or accidental. Within what Biddle (1979) refers to as an “eclectic” area of study, employees can experience role conflict (when performing unachievable tasks) and role overload (when too much is asked of one person). In the latter regard, Sias and Duncan (2018) suggest that the messy informality of roles leads to tasks being requested and completed by employees through negotiation based on personal relationships with managers. Where there are power imbalances, there is a clear risk of extra-role tasks being required that are assigned outside the employee’s role.

Role also refers to a cluster of values, norms, behaviours and skills that are thought to belong together. For roles to have meaning there must be difference and the most fundamental principle for differentiation is functional differentiation (or division of labour). Von Platen (2016) argues “jurisdictional” claims of professional expertise and values that constitute the core of a consultant’s role construct are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain in a digital society. Therefore, social media may well have promoted a professional identity crisis rather than a consolidation of the expert role.

Understanding the roles of the modern PR practitioner

Context	Purpose of research	Practitioners in a digital age	Findings
Sectorial competition, convergence and new knowledge requirements. Role of comms expert is more challenged than it has ever been	To study how comms consultants reconstruct their professional role and maintain legitimacy in relation to the changes initiated by social media	covers translating stakeholder demands, managing transparency, relations and reputation in a “complex and rapidly changing social media environment	19 qualitative interviews with practitioners in Denmark and Sweden in 11 different agencies.
Tendency in PR literature for practitioner roles to be static.	To consider the values, knowledge and relations attributed to a set of actors in a social construct.	Providing value for the client remains the key industry challenge for communication consultancy. Clients seen as both more knowledgeable and ever more demanding.	Job titles were: senior advisor, consultant, digital creator, digital strategist, social media advisor.
Role of communication practitioner is more challenged	To add to the body of knowledge regarding the communication consultancy.	Practitioners can seem to be “struggling” with new technology	Communication consultancy holds “an obscure, underdog position.”

than it has ever been	
Consideration must be given to what is a ‘professional’ role	“Jurisdictional” claims of professional expertise and value more difficult to establish
Role refers to a cluster of values, norms, behaviours and skills that are thought to belong together.	Evidence that the comms practitioners are appropriating skills and tactics that traditionally pertain to advertising.

Figure 3 Adapted from Von Platen (2016)

By using von Platen’s (2016) definition of a communications consultant as “a person engaged in the process of producing knowledge and giving advice to clients on issues concerning strategic advice”, this study will probe into areas of professional roles, expertise and attempts to frame the professional roles. Von Platen (2016) developed a conceptual framework based on role and professional theory. Mastery of new technologies emerged as a factor, along with convergence of roles as established domains of mastery or expertise are swept away. Terms of discussion therefore move rapidly from new technology as an operational task, and towards discussion of how expectations surrounding roles are framed in organisations, how groups and individuals gain, or occupational position within that process.

Von Platen’s (2016) study has set the context and framework for this inquiry. The use of role theory, the research questions and research methods have all been guided by this journal article which has been instrumental in setting out a course and a plan

of action. On the other hand, it is neither advisable nor possible to simply replicate von Platen's (2016) work in a different context. Therefore, this study draws on and contributes to that emerging strand of enquiry. It attends to the dynamics and details of changed working lives and offers an analysis of the subjective experiences of communications work, the practices, routines, behaviours and expectations that define it. From the critical discussion of sociological foundations, paradigms and contemporary issues and challenges of new technology the following research questions are proposed.

Research questions:

RQ 1: What are the practices that define contemporary communications work?

RQ 2: How are role-related changes being experienced among professional communicators?

RQ 3: How do workers sustain, create and reproduce their occupational practices in a competitive and changing environment?

METHODOLOGY

In this Methodology chapter, the researcher will provide a rationale for using qualitative research methods to address the three research questions that emerged from the study of literature. According to Brinkman and Kvale (2015) a seven-stage process of conducting research by interviews begins with thematising (the why of the research design), and leads on to matters of designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying and reporting the data. This chapter will show how by adapting von Platen's (2016) approach and using semi-structured interviews, it has been possible to explore, develop and update how public relations roles are conceptualised and practised. Alternative qualitative research methods such as observations and study of secondary documents will be critically discussed (Merriman 2002). However, this study will seek to meet the challenge set out by Weiss (1994, p. 121) in which interview data "regularly bring the ordinarily private into view." Deacon et al (1999) suggest that semi-structured interviews reject concerns of standardisation and control and are used to engender an open and revealing dialogue. Matters relating to interview transcription, reflexivity and analysis through coding will also be discussed. By the end of the chapter a robust case will be made for the undertaking of the research in this thesis. It will be shown how through data reduction and identification of key themes, that the researcher was able to develop a typology of roles that is relevant to practitioners working in a digital landscape.

Before directly addressing the research questions in this qualitative study, a critical discussion of methodology is required in order to set out the conceptual framework and establish the justification for the data collection (Bryman and Bell 2007; Stokes and Wall 2014). A common fault with social science research is an oversimplified emphasis on method at the expense of a deeper conceptualisation (Denscombe 2002). Methods are the outcome of a sound methodology and can only be outlined once relevant philosophical, ethical and strategical matters have been explored (Sayer 2010). The advantage of a methodological base is in bringing clarity to scholarly work but also in capturing the nuance and complexity of the area under consideration (Mason 2002). The purpose of this chapter is therefore to offer a

convincing and ethical rationale for the value of the inquiry and to explain why qualitative research has been chosen with semi-structured interviews gathering data from 15-20 communications practitioners in the North West of England.

One of the challenges facing the qualitative researcher is to establish one's own standards for the inquiry as there are no prescribed set of rules for qualitative interviewing (Brinkman and Kvale 2015). Here, the authors advise researchers to focus on the "why" of their and to think in depth at how data can be analysed, interpreted and reported after it has been collected.

Research philosophy

A natural starting point in methodology is to address what Della Porta and Keating (2008, p. 1) refer to as the "big questions", namely what we know and how we know it. These matters of epistemology are also placed alongside profound issues of ontology regarding the presence of social reality. Such "big questions" have exercised key thinkers from Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Marx, Durkheim, Comte, Popper and Kuhn (Walliman 2016). Knowledge can be gained by a search for truth. However, how can researchers establish the truth? As we shall discuss in more detail in other contexts, this outlook contrasts sharply with socially constructed and pragmatic theories of the truth (Ritchie *et al*, 2014). Philosophy's value in social sciences can therefore be seen in providing a foundation to study human concerns as well as tackling arguments about learning and challenging assumptions inherent in studies (Wortham 2014). Consciously or not, these assumptions are formed out of our world view or *Weltanschauung* (Stokes and Wall 2014).

According to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009), research has traditionally been conceived as the creation of true, objective knowledge, following a scientific method. This interpretation contrasts sharply with the interpretivist's world view and is fundamental to arguments over what constitutes true, objective knowledge. Given the bitter paradigm wars in social research, it can be helpful to first consider simple questions to guide one's study. Vanderstoep (2009) recommends a researcher asking at the outset who they want to study, how to study them and why the research should

be undertaken. Such basic questions identify epistemological and ontological aspects as well as encouraging researchers to consider where the study might take them. These questions are equally appropriate for quantitative or qualitative methods.

Throughout the later 19th Century and up to the present day, value-free objective research methodologies have been challenged by social researchers who claim that objective study is unrealistic given that a person's role in collecting data will be influenced by philosophical and societal factors that are not considered in the positivist tradition (Denscombe 2002). Positivism has increasingly been seen as a "slippery and emotive" term (Silverman 2011, p. 12). Its very use suggests a condemnation of scientific study methods in social research. Concerned that positivism is a concept that generates more heat than light, Sayer (2010, p. 4) prefers not to use the word at all. However, he does dismiss "methodological imperialism (sciencism)...and its obsession with regularities and hypothesis testing."

Entrenched positions risk distorting social research and Kratochwil (2008) warns against dogma shaping methodological approaches. Moreover, Hammersley (2008), himself a qualitative researcher, raises concerns of a crisis in interpretivist study in which there is insufficient rigour in data collection and inadequate effort given to defending and justifying the value of the work. This has resulted in qualitative work being overlooked by research funding bodies. Therefore, the risk is that "methodological anarchy" might shape qualitative study and render it irrelevant (Silverman 1998).

A researcher must not only recognise and understand competing paradigms – there is also a requirement to justify their own work in relation to one or more perspectives (Blaikie 2007). Having considered ontological and epistemological assumptions, Blaikie's (2007) interpretation of a continuum of social inquiry proved fruitful in this thesis. This enabled the researcher to position himself on a continuum from pure idealist, who assumes the external world is all appearances, to pure realist who believes phenomena exist independently of the activities of the human observer. For this study, the perspective idealist has been closest to that of the researcher with a focus on social constructionism.

Research approaches

Having considered the broad philosophical landscape in social science, this chapter will now move on to research approaches, considering inductive and deductive methods and the value of qualitative research in the study of public relations professionals in the North West of England. Deductive approaches are consistent with positivist traditions and involve collecting data to test an existing theory (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis 2009). This is done through objective, scientific processes in which quantitative data is collected from large samples to test hypotheses. In contrast, induction moves from data collection to theory in a bottom-up rather than a top down approach (Ritchie *et al*, 2014). Unlike deduction, induction is subjective with the researcher part of the process. In addition, qualitative data is collected using smaller sample sizes in which the intention is to gain a deeper understanding of social behaviour and context (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis 2009, p. 127). A third approach of abduction can also be considered as an alternative to deduction and induction. According to Hanson (1958, cited in Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009, p. 57) abduction is “the ability to see patterns, to reveal deep structures”. It recognises the limitations of both the deductive and inductive approaches and allows for a surprising single case to be extracted from an overarching pattern and examined in more detail.

The different requirements of positivists and interpretivists can be reconciled by the use of mixed methods in research design. A mixed method is one solution to ensure that data collection recognises the need for scientific rigour within the wider social context (Darlington and Scott 2002). The value of mixed methods is in reinforcing the authority of the conclusions drawn from the qualitative and quantitative studies (Bryman 2016). A typical example of this would be to collect quantitative data in a questionnaire and then use a form of qualitative interviewing to follow-up the responses in more detail, thus ensuring the depth and breadth of the inquiry (Hammersley 2008). Going further, a multi-phase design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007) offers researchers the opportunity to gather rich data that can provide deep insight in a research area as dynamic and fast moving as digital communication. However, mixed methods can bring their own complications and contradictions, not least the challenge of combining two methods in one paradigm in which contrasting

theoretical frameworks seek to answer the same research questions or hypotheses (Golafshani 2003; Della Porta and Keating 2008). Indeed, Bryman (2016) has referred to mixed methods as a “shotgun marriage” of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. In any case, simply using mixed methods does not achieve triangulation in research and this is only achievable when the same phenomenon is studied in different ways or from a different perspective (Daymon and Holloway 2002).

Barnham (2015) argues that quantitative research and qualitative research methods not only have their origins in contrasting paradigms and approaches, but also ask different questions. In this sense, the quantitative researcher will want to know answers to “what” questions whereas qualitative inquiry focuses on the “why” or “how”. Whatever the research approach undertaken, it will be important for the researcher to think of the underlying assumptions in the study and the complete nature of the problem that is being addressed. Even when collecting quantitative data, it is still important to conceptualise the variables or concepts in the work because as Onen (2016) points out, it is not possible to properly answer a question unless there is a common agreement on what those questions mean.

An important aim of this thesis is to capture elements of the lived experience and make visible the roles of the participants through establishing meaning rather than measuring frequency or amount. To explore social construction and to prioritise depth over quantity, a qualitative approach would appear the most appropriate method (O’Leary 2014). Moreover, a qualitative study can help researchers and participants to jointly establish meaning from social phenomena is understood as a shared product and attribution of meaning (Flick, Kardoff and Steinke 2004). However, the qualitative researcher has to avoid sloppy findings which are so distorted by bias as to be worthless Kvale (1994).

Ethics

As will be demonstrated in this section, all researchers need to evaluate a broad range of factors to ensure their study is ethically robust. Ethics can be defined as the process in which researchers and respondents are protected from possible harm (Stokes and Wall 2014). This can be understood in overlapping perspectives of

honesty, transparency and integrity as well as consent, confidentiality and courtesy (Walliman 2016, p. 82). Ensuring ethical standards are maintained can be complex and will involve researchers making judgements about their work and in some cases there may appear to be conflicting priorities. This is seen when a researcher must juggle the demands of being open and transparent in showing their methods with protecting the anonymity of the respondents (Denscombe 2002). Moreover, ethics need to be prioritised throughout the whole study when matters for consideration could include potential conflicts of interest, handling sensitive material and gaining access to research participants (Daymon and Holloway 2002). Researchers working in all methodologies will understand their ethics are bound up in their moral and political beliefs as they seek to gain approval and do the right things (Gomm 2008; Stokes and Wall 2014). Researchers therefore need to develop strong “ethical consciences” and may use reflexive practice and discussion to negotiate their way through ethical decisions (Webster *et al*, 2014). These negotiations will include deciding whom to accept as a sponsor, the extent to which the research can be revealed to the participants, how to ensure their confidentiality, the appropriateness of compensating them for their collaboration and avoiding manipulation of the findings (Della Porta and Keating 2008). It could be argued that whatever doubts might be raised about the methodological credibility of qualitative inquiry, strong and consistent ethical standards are non-negotiable.

Ethics can also be understood as the systematic study of rules governing right and wrong. They differ from morals in that they are an expectation of conduct whereas morals demonstrate whether they have been upheld (David and Sutton 2011).

Participants can expect to be protected from harm in research and this harm could be physical, emotional or legal (David and Sutton 2011). There are other ethical factors that need to be considered in this study which include only collecting the appropriate amount of data that is required for the study, fully informing the participants of their role in the study and protecting the findings when they are digitally stored on a computer. All research must also ensure that the data collected is accurate and that there is no plagiarism in the work. Further discussion of how the data will be protected in accordance with GDPR regulations will be outlined in the methods section of this chapter.

Ethics needs to include simple questions covering the aims and objectives of the research, its societal impact, whether there will be any losers as a result of the study and whether the methods have been mapped against an organisation's own standards and codes of practice covering industry and education (Walliman 2016). In the qualitative inquiry discussed in this thesis, the ethical standards of professional bodies such as the International Association of Business Communicators, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and the Public Relations Consultants Association have all been used to guide the research and to align the codes of the university with industry. More pertinently, formal ethical approval was given by UCLan's Research Ethics committee in November 2018 before the data was collected.

Research Methods

The Methodology chapter will now consider methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation. As stated elsewhere, qualitative research can enable rich data to emerge from inquiry (Gray 2014). Used effectively, interviews contribute to the study of what Saldaña (2016) refers to as the five R's of routines, roles, rules, rituals and relationships which are all integral to this thesis. However, to maximise the impact of the qualitative or unstructured data, it is essential for the researcher to demonstrate an approach that is methodical and disciplined. Qualitative research must therefore be transparent and available for audit (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In considering how best to conduct the semi-structured interviews, a range of research

methods texts have been studied to provide a rationale for the fieldwork. Of particular help has been Bauer and Gaskell's (2000) five-step approach to qualitative interviews which moves from preparation, sampling and selection, to conducting and transcribing interviews before preparing them for analysis and interpretation.

In utilising interviews to collect data, a researcher may choose to employ structured, semi-structured or unstructured formats. For this study, the chosen approach was a face-to-face setting in which a semi-structured interview schedule was prepared covering the main themes of digital media, organisational skill sets and changing trends in the industry which were developed from the work of von Platen (2016). Although the interview schedule provided an essential guide, the intention in this study was to enable respondents to develop their answers outside the confinements of a questionnaire (Payne and Payne 2004). A qualitative researcher will choose whether to collect data using observational methods or employ some form of interview. When exploring opinions, feelings and emotions about communication, an interview will be more appropriate (Denscombe 2017). Moreover, semi-structured interviews are advantageous for their flexibility for the researcher and the respondent (Payne and Payne 2004; Punch 2005; Denscombe 2017).

In settling on semi-structured interviews to address the research questions, this study sought to gather first-hand accounts from participants of their lived experiences in the workplace (King and Horrocks 2010). Foddy (1994) refers to co-creation of meaning in an interview setting and argued that respondents are influenced by a desire to give responses which meet the tacit requirements of the interviewer and that this can negatively impact the data. With verbal data never enabling researchers to establish true facts that speak for themselves, a more realistic aim is therefore to "improve our ability to collect data that are relevant to our purposes, can be properly interpreted and can be sensibly compared" (Foddy 1993, p. 192). Such principles helped in the critical reflection on the value of this thesis to help ensure that the meaning of the data was properly evaluated.

Ideally, this flexibility will be beneficial in collecting rich data that allows the researcher to gain insights into the lives and social contexts of the interviewees (Punch 2005). The value of the interview is apparent when participants feel able to demonstrate their expertise and offer deeper understanding that could not be

achieved through alternative research methods. On the other hand, the interview must be acknowledged as a socially constructed event in which matters of authenticity and bias are always open to question (Silverman 2014). Data is co-created, although the role of the interviewer is that of facilitator and confidante who will allow the respondent to talk meaningfully about their knowledge and experiences. In a supportive environment, researchers can discover hidden meanings in respondents' answers and provide additional information, help and guidance (Walsh 2001). The counter argument is that the "interviewer effect" in which the researcher provides the questions, manages the discussion and influences the time spent on each question may produce bias and contaminate the data (Davies 2010; Gray 2014; Denscombe 2017).

In determining exactly how to decide on the sample of interviews and how to gain access and approval, the research aims and objectives were considered. In particular, the summary of von Platen's (2016) journal article was instructive as she argued that new trends in social media were not a threat to communications practitioners per se but might give them the opportunity to demonstrate new levels of professionalism in their roles. These concluding thoughts proved invaluable in shaping the themes and questions for the qualitative interviews.

There is widespread consensus in qualitative research about the value of a schedule to guide the interview (Sapsford and Judd 2006; Bell and Waters 2018; Berg and Lune 2012). In a semi-structured interview, a schedule is prepared in advance and covers the range of topics to be covered and suggested questions. Within this framework it is important to allow for prompts, instructions and the consideration of unexpected responses that will require further discussion (Davies 2010). For this study, guidance was taken from Rowley (2012, cited in Gray 2014) who recommends the preparation of six to 12 questions. The questions for this study were written to achieve clarity and to ensure they were posed in the appropriate order (Bell and Waters 2018). As will be seen below, achieving rapport with the respondent is an important factor in interview preparation and this can be influenced by the tone and ordering of the questions (Sapsford and Jupp 2006).

Once the interview schedule was drafted, it was shown to a communications practitioner and the supervision team, together with required documents for ethical

approval. These documents included a cover letter and a participation information sheet as advocated by Curtis and Curtis (2011). Such materials are required, to ensure the robustness of the fieldwork and to reassure the respondents that data will be collected, analysed and interpreted responsibly. For this study, an interview protocol and consent to participate form were agreed and sent to all respondents in advance. The pro-forma recommended by Creswell (2017) were adapted. Suggestions, comments and recommendations were gathered at this stage and adjustments were made to the interview schedule and supporting resources. A pilot interview was then carried out with a respondent not included among the eventual 18 interviewees. Further amendments were made to the questions to ensure understanding.

These processes were essential precursors to the identification of the 15-20 respondents for this study. In opting for qualitative interviews, a form of purposive sampling in which respondents are targeted in a focused approach rather than being selected at random was required (Punch 2005; Davies 2010). However, Bauer and Gaskell (2000) reject the notion of sampling in qualitative research, insisting it carries associations with opinion polls and surveys and thus argues that “selecting” is more appropriate.

Using qualitative research to examine the role of activists Wolf (2019) used semi-structured interviews with 13 participants which ranged from 54 minutes to 120 minutes. A recommendation that interviews should last from 30 minutes to 60 minutes (King and Horrocks 2010; Goodwin 2019) also helped establish a rationale for this thesis. The main purpose in this study also reflected Wolf’s (2019) approach in not seeking a representative sample but instead collecting rich data which would then lead to data saturation by the time of the last interview. In understanding whether the amount of data is sufficient, Merriman et al (2002) recommend using the natural iterative processes for the researcher to understand if their findings are adequate and convincing. Further justification for the methods adopted in this thesis was found in the work of Willis (2019) who researched the role of leadership in public relations and conducted 15 semi-structured interviews and used reflexive practice to encourage fresh thinking and contemplate the emergence of new concepts. A total of 15 interviews has also been advocated by Brinkman and Kvale

(2015) and King and Horrocks (2010, p. 142) suggest that 18 – the number of interviews completed for this thesis – is “relatively large “.

Gaining access to participants

The objective of this study was to research communication practice in the North West of England, a region that is bounded by Cumbria in the North to Cheshire in the South and by Merseyside in the west to the eastern parts of Greater Manchester. By using social media searches and requests on professional networks on LinkedIn together with approaches to potential respondents at a Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) networking event, a list of potential respondents was prepared. Introductory emails were sent to in-house and agency communication practitioners outlining the nature of the work, together with a briefing from the supervisory team. Once expressions of interest were received, attempts were made to balance the gender mix of respondents and to further enhance the diversity of the research based on ethnicity. Following von Platen (2016), the intention was also to interview communication practitioners from different ages to get a wider interpretation of the impact of social media.

Interviews were conducted in the workplaces of the participants or in a social setting near the office. According to Davies (2010) the location of the interview is significant in influencing the persona of the interviewees. For this study, an office location was generally helpful in giving the interviewer a sharper perspective on the dynamics of the workplace and it also enhanced the reflective memos which are discussed below.

An important feature of the successful qualitative interview is the researcher’s ability to gain rapport with the respondent (Bauer and Gaskell 2000; Berg and Lune 2012; Denscombe 2017). The interviews were therefore planned to put the respondents at ease with ice-breaker questions that covered matters of fact such as how long they had worked at the organisation. Rapport is important throughout the interview, and particularly at the start, to build trust. The opening minutes of the interview are also important to enable the researcher to arrange appropriate seating arrangements and to test the acoustics and the recording equipment (Denscombe 2017). However, Payne and Payne (2004) suggest that building rapport is only appropriate in qualitative research as it could lead to bias with the interviewer influencing the process, albeit in a supportive fashion.

Each interview can be understood as a “joint venture” in which the discussion is a negotiation based on questioning, interpretation and clarification (Bauer and Gaskell 2000). The process cannot be described simply as a conversation as the researcher’s schedule and determining of what counts as relevant inevitably governs the dynamics of the event (Dingwall 1997). A successful interview can be imagined as an exchange in which the respondent allows the researcher an insight into their world (Patton 1987). In contrast, a common pitfall of all qualitative interviews is they can only determine what informants think or believe and not what they do (Denscombe 2017).

During interviews, the researcher considered impression management and Gray’s (2014) espousal of neutrality and simplicity in asking questions. This meant that jargon needed to be avoided, together with questions that could be confusing, ambiguous or leading. As will be seen below, this proved a greater challenge than was anticipated. For the researcher seeking to gain rich data, the manner in which the interview is conducted will inevitably determine the quality of the study.

Furthermore, qualitative researchers are also required to follow up or probe responses (Bell and Waters 2018). Such probing is vital in encouraging respondents to open up and to elaborate on information given or to provide clarification. However, the term “probe” itself could be problematic and Patton (1987) advises the less threatening “explore” as a term to use when setting supplementary questions.

[Analysing interview data](#)

Not only must the qualitative researcher be alert, professional and sensitive in asking questions and listening to the answers, they must also be thorough in recording the data and preparing it for analysis (Denscombe 2017). Transcribing of interviews is an established convention and each researcher may demonstrate subtly different approaches to the task (Boulton and Hammersley 2006). Before collecting the data, the researcher must determine whether to transcribe the broad themes and key responses or whether to present a verbatim account of the interview. In this study, verbatim transcriptions were preferred and prominent silences, laughter etc were included in the written documents, which are provided as appendix x. A verbatim transcript is valuable in providing a full account of what is said (Davies 2010). However, the transcription process itself is long and tedious (Walsh 2001; Payne and Payne 2014).

Interpreting the data enables the researcher to clarify and extend the meaning of the interviewees' statements (Brinkman and Kvale 2015). Making full transcriptions of data is an important step in this process although the authors claim that the transcriptions can be extensive rather than the verbatim examples provided for this thesis. Transcription serves to turn verbal data into written data, but this does not require a "tidying up" of the content (King and Horrocks 2010, p. 149). A key objective of the interpretation of the data is to unearth the "inner understandings" of what the participants do (Lofland and Hofland 1984, p. 84). To do this successfully, the researcher must also guard against self-serving interpretation. For this thesis, the researcher used reflective memos to challenge his own thoughts and to ensure that attention was paid to data that challenged accepted norms. This was achieved by actively looking out for data that might be considered "puzzling".

Transcribing data not only adds to the rigour of the qualitative approach, it is also the first step in the interviewer immersing themselves in the data before moving on to more formal analysis. It was also an essential step in enabling this researcher to present direct quotations from the participants which highlighted the richness of the data collected. In presenting excerpts of the data collected for the study, an important consideration was the relevance of the use of quotations. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) suggest that the selective use of quotations provides the reader with a clear sense of the content and some indication of the dynamics of the interview itself. Therefore, in presenting the quotations for this thesis, selection of key passages was guided by Brinkman and Kvale's (2015, pp. 313-315) preference for content that is the most revealing, contextualised and presented in a style appropriate for written rather than verbal communication.

This study was strongly influenced by the methods suggested by Saldaña (2016) who recommends using written analytic memos to record background information of the interviews and to pick up on any information not included in the transcript. The memos were written shortly after each interview while the experience was still fresh in the researcher's mind and the content discussed data segments that seemed significant during the interview along with reflections on the project and as a first step in identifying preliminary codes (Creswell 2017). A more immediate advantage of a memo or journal during the field work is in prompting ideas on how the researcher should pose questions in different or more effective ways for future

interviews (Gray 2014). Included in the memos are detailed descriptions of the process and reflections on the rapport, quality of the interview process and the private thoughts of the researcher.

Alongside the process of memo writing and reflection, data needs to be organised to be accessible but also to protect the anonymity of respondents. In managing the data collection for this study, guidance was taken from Davies and Smith (2010) who advise qualitative researchers to maintain an Excel spreadsheet of all the interviews that have been recorded. The document is password protected and also for care to be taken in the file name and the data to ensure they don't lead to accidental identification of the respondents. Back-up copies of the interview recordings were kept on a separate password-protected laptop and the intention is to destroy all the digital data once the requirements of the examiners have been achieved for this thesis.

[Analysis and interpretation of the findings](#)

It is now appropriate to consider matters of analysis and interpretation. A crucial first step is to read the data several times and reflect on the main themes to emerge (Payne and Payne 2004). At this stage the researcher considered errors or omissions in the work before moving on to consider what to code. This enables long passages of interview data to be categorised into a small number of categories (Brinkman and Kvale 2015).

A researcher will need to consider whether to adopt a priori or pre-chosen codes when analysing data or whether instead to code based on what emerges in the data (Punch 2005; Creswell and Poth 2018). This study was influenced by Saldaña's (2016, p. 17) preference to code "what rises to the surface".

Some of the general principles that governed the coding process are now discussed. In qualitative inquiry, there is no single accepted framework for coding and this can be an advantage or a disadvantage (Smith and Davies 2010). A broad objective was to use coding to turn data into findings (Patton 2012) and to do so in a rigorous and transparent method. Coding is an iterative process, assisted by computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software or CAQDAS (Gray 2014). For this study, NVivo 12 software was used to import transcripts and manage the data as well as presenting

word trees and word clouds to provide a visual interpretation of the data. However, it was also appreciated that “data fetishism” is no substitute for analysis which magnifies themes and brings meaning to the data (Richards 1999). Critics of CAQDAS say that its use can lead to “reductionist” research methods although its value can lie in “purposefully mining” data (Dingwall 1997, p 105).

An obvious challenge of interviewing is that this research method will produce a huge volume of data. The researcher must therefore strive to bring meaning to the fieldwork by the process of data reduction, which can then enable meaning to be interpreted. In itself, raw data has no meaning (Marshall and Rossman 2016) and coding is invaluable in bringing order to the corpus. According to Denscombe (2017), the way in which the coding is organised is based on the worldview of the researcher. Saldaña (2016) suggests that the very choice of using coding for the analysis and interpretation of data is connected to the perspective of the researcher. It is helpful for the researcher to consider how best they can accomplish the daunting task of editing the data to provide the reader with evidence through data extracts, word trees and assigned codes for pertinent sections of text (Denscombe 2017). Labelling of the data is the first stage in analysing the content of the transcripts and identifying themes, categories and patterns (Patton 1987).

Helpful guidance on the process of coding is provided by Boulton and Hammersley (2006, p. 251) who remark that the qualitative researcher needs to focus their enquiry as they are making sense of the data. Here, the expectation is to move from preliminary codes to categories and later themes. At all stages, the researcher must challenge their own work, and although quantitative assumptions may seem unhelpful, the rigour of the qualitative data analysis can be enhanced by considering the data’s “dependability, transferability and confirmability” (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

According to Saldaña, (2016 p. 3) a code can be a word or short phrase that “symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing...attribute for a portion of language based or visual data.” Coding can be understood in descriptive, topic or analytic terms (Richards and Moore 2007, cited in Davies and Smith 2010). Codes may be pre-designed or may emerge from the data. In choosing how to code

the data, the researcher will make value judgements although in vivo codes are one way of ensuring the respondents' voice is accurately captured (Saldaña 2016).

For this study, a process of "open coding" was adopted which required no a priori codes. This method enabled the codes to emerge from the data, free from any preconceptions from the researcher (Punch 2005). These codes flow from "common sense" knowledge that can later help form abstract concepts (Kelle 2000). This is known as "flat coding" and can also cover field notes, annotations and journal entries as well as interview transcripts (Durkin 1997). Such attempts to provide a systematic and methodical discipline to qualitative data analysis can be beneficial in showing the richness of the data (Silverman 2014). However, there are dangers in favouring data that appear more frequently in the corpus rather than highlighting the unexpected comments that provide new explanations and insights (Curtis and Curtis 2011).

After the analysis of the data, the challenge was to provide a rationale and to critically evaluate the significance of the data (Patton 1987). The process of interpretation includes consideration of alternative meanings and "troublesome data" that do not appear to fit conveniently into any categories or themes (Marshall and Rossman 2016). Such comments can be presented as interview extracts in this study, thereby enabling the reader to "hear" the respondent's voice (Denscombe 2017). Strong qualitative data must always strive to present concrete and vivid perspectives of the respondents' experiences and opinions, which enable the research questions to be thoroughly addressed (Laurie and Jensen 2016). Included in the appendices will be full transcripts of the 18 interviews that have been analysed for the study. These transcripts have been collected together in a separate PDF document Appendix x.

In summary, this chapter has presented a thorough and critical discussion of methodological considerations. It has established the philosophical landscape for the research as well as outlying the ethical considerations facing the qualitative study. Justification for the data collection, presentation and analysis has been established. This chapter has built on the literature review, which positioned the research as a study that drew on the work of von Platen (2016) and others to consider challenges to public relations practice as a result of new digital technologies. The interview

findings which will be critically discussed in the next chapter were developed to answer those RQs which are presented below:

RQ 1: What are the practices that define contemporary communications work?

RQ 2: How are role-related changes being experienced among professional communicators?

RQ 3: How do workers sustain, create and reproduce their occupational practices in a competitive and changing environment?

FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from qualitative data that was collected from 18 semi-structured interviews conducted with communication practitioners between November 2018 and January 2019 in North West England. Findings will be described, explained and analysed. Appendices will offer extra interpretation of the data and will also demonstrate that the research was carried out with the twin considerations of upholding rigour and ethical standards. When the corpus is critically discussed in relation to the literature review above and when public relations roles are considered in depth, a new four-point typology will be suggested which offers the potential to make sense of role theories in the modern communication and marketing sector as well as providing a contribution to practice.

Once the methodological approach was agreed and approval granted by UCLan's Ethics committee, the researcher sought to emulate von Platen's (2016) methods by selecting a similar number of interviews, 19. For the purposes of this study, the researcher set a target of 15 to 20 interviews, eventually managing to include 18 in the fieldwork. Fifty-three potential participants, whose job titles were related to communications and marketing, were approached in person or via the professional network, LinkedIn. The researcher contacted only those practitioners who were working in North West England. One of the interviewees (Respondent E) divides his time between London and Preston. His inclusion was deemed appropriate and valuable because of his ability to compare practices in London with those in Lancashire. Twenty-three practitioners agreed in principle to take part in the research. One had to withdraw because of concern from his line manager about sharing sensitive data, even with a guarantee of anonymity, and in three other cases it was not possible to arrange a mutually convenient interview time. In one case (Interviewee L) a participant took part in a telephone interview but did not respond to an email request to submit a signed consent form. Even though the interview was transcribed, it was not considered as part of the corpus as the respondent seemed to have withdrawn from the research.

Before the interviews took place, the researcher confirmed logistical arrangements and emailed the respondents a consent form and a copy of the interview schedule (see Appendix i). This proved useful in establishing the ground rules for the study and in helping several of the interviewees frame their answers. Respondents were asked in the pre-amble to the interview if they were still happy to participate and for them to sign a consent form and supply basic demographic information for the analysis of data (see Appendices ii and iii). Once approval was given, the researcher informed the respondents that he would be recording the interview on a small audio device (a Kayowine digital recorder). A recording was also made on an LG mobile phone as back-up. All but one of the interviews was conducted face-to-face.

Interview M was done by telephone after serious traffic problems prevented the researcher from reaching the participant's place of work on Merseyside. Twelve of the interviews took place at the respondent's workplace, typically in a meeting room. Three of the interviews were in a café and two were at UCLan's Preston campus. In all cases, the researcher first asked where the respondents would prefer to meet for the interviews and then checked they were happy with the environment and setting for the research.

In total, the researcher recorded more than 12 and a half hours of interviews with the quickest taking 32 minutes, three seconds and the longest 62 minutes, eight seconds. The mean time for the length of the interviews was 41 minutes, 16 seconds. The gender balance was 11 female and seven male. This is broadly in line with the national gender mix in public relations with women making up 66% of the 83,000 communication practitioners in the UK (PRCA 2018). Sixteen of the respondents identified as White European, one of whom is a European currently seeking British citizenship. One of the respondents identified as mixed race and one as Black British. Unlike von Platen's (2016) study which focused only on agency practitioners, in this study 12 were working in-house, four for an agency and two were self-employed. At the start of each interview, all respondents were asked to state their job title. Fifteen different job titles were identified: senior press officer; digital engagement officer; marketing executive; senior marketing executive; senior digital marketing executive; PR and communications manager; digital marketing manager; marketing manager; marketing and communications manager; director of communications; head of public fundraising; account director; managing director

and founder; owner and founder (3). The 18 respondents had a combined total of 169 years' professional experience in communications and marketing roles ranging from one year (the most inexperienced) to 40 years in the case of a respondent near the end of his career. The mean number of years of experience for participants was eight. A table showing the respondents' sectors, job title and work location is shown below as Table 1..

Interview Respondents

Respondent	Sector	Job Title	Location	Years of experience in PR and comms
A	Business publication	Group editor	Preston	40
B	Health	Head of PR, marketing and communication	Blackpool	11
C	Housing	Director of Communications	Manchester	12
D	Charity	Head of public fundraising	Liverpool	7
E	B2B Technology	Head of PR and marketing	Preston/London	11
F	History, arts and culture	Digital engagement officer	Preston	2
G	Business training	Digital training director	Chorley	7
H	Construction supplies	Marketing manager	Preston	1
I	Social media agency	Director	Manchester	4
J	Education	Faculty marketing executive	Manchester	5
K	Events	Senior marketing executive	Manchester	8
L*	Leisure	Digital Marketing Executive	Preston	1
M	Procurement	Marketing and comms manager	Merseyside	10
N	Agency	Digital marketing manager	Preston	6

O	Agency	MD and founder	East Lancashire	17
P	Agency: food, drink and hospitality	Senior account manager	Blackpool	7
Q	Legal services	Senior digital marketing executive	Manchester	4
R	Consumer brands	Account director	Manchester	7
S	Aviation	Senior press officer	Manchester	9

Table 1 Source: CS research 2018-19 1

Fourteen different sectors were identified from the work undertaken by the respondents which were aviation; business-to-business technology; building supplies; charity; consumer brands; digital training; events and conferences; food, drink and hospitality; higher education; history, arts and culture; legal; NHS-related; procurement, and social housing. Seven of the interviews took place in Manchester, six were in Preston, one each in Blackpool, Chorley, East Lancashire and Liverpool, and one was done by telephone.

At the end of each interview, the researcher wrote an analytic memo in which he considered how the interview was conducted, challenges encountered and an impression of the organisation through interaction with reception staff, the participants' colleagues, the setting for the interview and how the questions were asked and answered. Seventeen additional analytic memos were written during the collection of fieldwork, based on Saldaña's (2016, pp. 46-47) pro-forma. The topics covered in these memos were reflections on the interactions with participants, early suggestions for code choices, and the participants' routines, rituals, roles and relationships. Memos were written within 24 hours of the interview and an example of one of the 35 prepared for this study is shown as Appendix iv.

On completion of the interviews, an audio file of the recording was retrieved and transferred on to the researcher's computer where it was played and an initial quick or surface transcript was prepared. This would typically be 1,000 words long and would enable the researcher to gain a flavour of the data and consider some initial themes, notable quotations and ideas for further exploration. An example of a quick transcription is shown as Appendix v. The next stage was for a full verbatim transcription of the interview to be prepared in which the questions and responses

were typed out (see Appendix vi to see one of the 18 verbatim transcripts. A full PDF of the entire corpus is available as a separate document - Appendix x). Once the transcripts were drafted, the researcher listened to a recording of the interview for a third time, comparing the transcript with what was heard on the recording. This allowed errors to be corrected and for the data to be improved. The process of transcribing was lengthy with an estimated 120 hours spent on this part of the data analysis alone.

The next stage involved all 18 transcripts and 35 analytic memos – about 130,000 words in total – being uploaded on to NVivo 12. This enabled the researcher to look across the whole corpus, identifying key themes and responses, some of which supported the comments of other respondents and others that were exceptions to the main data. Queries were run and word clouds of the data were prepared. However, some of the visualisations in NVivo 12’s “Explore” function offered little insight and therefore have not been included in the appendices. In order not to rely solely on the NVivo software, the researcher printed a hard copy of the full corpus, annotating the transcripts and making an initial list of codes. At first, 78 codes were identified. This was later reduced to 64 once the transcripts were formally coded to nodes in NVivo 12. A copy of the codebook that was prepared in NVivo is shown as Appendix viii and is discussed later in this chapter along with some observations and reservations about the codes that were selected.

An important aspect of the data collected was the platforms, training tools and software mentioned by the respondents as part of their day-to-day work. A full table showing this information is shown as Appendix ix). It should be noted that the researcher has included only those tools and platforms that were proactively mentioned by the respondents.

A semi-structured interview format enabled the researcher to probe and ask respondents to develop their answers. However, the pattern of the interview was structured around prompting replies that would directly answer the three research questions. The researcher provided guidance for the respondents during the interview by summarising what had been discussed, pointing out key themes and flagging penultimate and final questions. In all cases the interview began with general background information, a discussion of the respondents’ duties, channels and

platforms used, relationships with clients and colleagues, future and emerging trends and a final question of “any other business”. Several times, the “AOB question” yielded some rich data. This chapter will now look in detail at the participants’ comments in relation to the research questions.

Comparing job titles in the study with national trends

A helpful stage in the analysing of the data was to compare the job titles and roles of the participants in this study with those of other practitioners in the North West and beyond. An initial scan of 160 vacancies on Totaljobs.com and The Guardian was undertaken during September 2019 and then narrowed down to 20 advertisements from the North West and areas outside the North West, most prominently London and the South East. Traditional roles such as “Communications Officer” and “PR Manager” remain in common usage across all parts of the UK. There does appear to be a more diverse range of job titles in the North West with “Communications and Engagement Manager”, “Social Media and Blogger Outreach Executive”, and “Content and Outreach Specialist” listed. The reasons for this were not immediately clear and could be considered in further research.

Salaries for advertised jobs were specified in 70% of cases and the London wages were significantly higher than those in the North West, as might be expected. The mean for practitioners at account director level was £54,876. There were no comparable senior jobs advertised above manager level in the North West listings with the highest paid role £40,000 per annum for a “PR Manager”. The mean salary for practitioners working at senior communications officer or manager level was £34,932 outside the North West and £24,857 within it. Junior-level posts were advertised at a mean salary of £23,666 in London and the South East compared with £18,000 in the North West.

The tables below (Tables 2 and 3) summarise the key phrases and words used in the job advertisements across various levels

Person specifications

Expertise	Personal qualities
Contacts Knowledge of workings of government Knowledge of digital law Managerial skills Communication skills CRM expertise Creative writing skills Crisis management Agency experience An eye for detail Strategic thinker	People skills A 'jargon-buster' A 'digital native' An 'ideas person' Cultural and social knowledge Confidence Self-motivated Customer-focused "Able to link-up big picture with day-to-day" Articulate A "doer" Intelligent Articulate Multi-faceted Pro-active

Table 2 Sources: guardian.co.uk and totaljobs.com (September 2019)

Responsibilities

Technical and tactical	Managerial and strategic
Drafting written responses to issues "Horizon scanning" Preparing written briefings Participation in round table events Conducting research Website articles, blogs and social media updates Updating internal comms channels Editing newsletters Media monitoring Designing reports and infographics Preparing news stories, case studies, press releases and digital content Google Analytics and AdWords "News pitching"	Reporting to senior management/board Managing staff Running weekly team meetings Managing campaigns Social media strategy Brand identity Digital engagement Setting and hitting KPIs Developing influencer strategies Managing relationships with clients Managing new business proposals Stakeholder management Keeping up to date with industry trends

Routine administrative tasks (eg mailing lists, accounts etc) Supporting new business proposals	
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Table 3 Sources: guardian.co.uk and totaljobs.com (September 2019)

Study of the findings in relation to research questions

RQ 1: What are the practices that define contemporary communications work?

Among all 18 participants interviewed for this thesis there was a strong focus on digital and social channels, some of which have complemented traditional forms of marketing and communications such as press release writing and, media briefings, and some of which seem to have replaced what was often referred to as “old-school PR.” Respondent F, a millennial/Generation Z digital engagement officer working in the arts, contextualised the role of these newer channels:

“Digital runs across the business. It is not its own little siloed piece of work. It needs to run through everything like oxygen. The most boring thing or the most exciting thing can be promoted digitally, whatever it is. I think it is really important that you have a number of different voices contributing to the digital strategy.” (Respondent F, 2018).

Respondents A, B, E and O, stressed the importance of analogue communications. Respondent O referred to face-to-face or “belly-to-belly” marketing as being crucial in gaining trust from stakeholders. These four respondents – all of whom are male – were the strongest advocates of communication activities which call on traditional competencies such as a confident telephone manner and the ability to communicate face-to-face with clients and colleagues. What emerged here was an emphasis on practitioners grasping the purpose of the industry to add value for the business. Respondent I, a Mancunian digital entrepreneur in his early twenties, said:

“To understand social, it’s just understanding people. There’s a few nuances, a few best practices, a few key bits of information that will help across that. But it’s not rocket science. I can’t code. I couldn’t tell you the first thing about coding or HTML.” (Respondent I, 2018)

Several respondents remarked that organisations are still in the earliest stages of processing the step change of digital and social communication. One participant, Respondent R, also maintained a clear division between social and digital as two

distinct disciplines whereas other interviewees used the terms interchangeably. Such interpretations only seem to add to the confusion over current practices in contemporary communications work. This was acknowledged by Participant G, a self-employed trainer with two decades of experience in communication, who talked about phenomena of “digital dismissives” working in Lancashire SMEs. She remarked:

“I think the continuous worry for businesses, unless they have got a big marketing function within it and they have invested a lot of money into doing their own stuff, it (digital and social) will be the thing that knocks them off their guard.”

(Respondent G, 2018).

An added factor is the discrepancies in communication practices depending on regional and cultural factors. For instance, London’s ability to scale digital expertise leaves it well ahead of even Manchester, according to Respondent R, an account director with an international PR agency. Respondent B, a communications manager who joined an organisation related to the National Health Service after working in the private sector, said:

“I think really the public sector is probably 10 to 15 years behind the private sector. It is about adapting technology.” (Respondent B, 2018).

A number of respondents told how at the start of the decade with the emergence of mobile technology and smart phones, there was an experimental mood in their teams. That has now led to a more pragmatic approach.

“The starting point is not the channel. The starting point is what is the quantifiable benefit for our particular client? What is it that they are looking to achieve?”

(Respondent O, 2018)

“I don’t think we want to be on anywhere just for the sake of having a presence. I think it’s very important for us that we are relevant in those areas and that we are being of use to the kind of like people who would follow us on there, which is Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and a bit of Snapchat.” (Respondent S, 2019).

A key advantage of advances in digital and social communication has been an improvement in the ability to measure and evaluate public relations and communication work. This trend, welcomed by Respondent O, an agency founder

and ex-journalist, has long been seen as an Achilles heel in the industry and led to the establishment of common rules and guidelines in the Barcelona Principles (2010 and 2015). The framers of the Barcelona Principles will no doubt be relieved to read the comments from participants eschewing the discredited method of Advertising Value Equivalent which attempted to place a cash value on PR coverage based on advertising rates. However, it was notable that the use of AVE has endured longer than its critics would have liked. Respondent M, a marketing and communications manager in the procurement sector, said she wishes to address measurement and evaluation from the outcome:

“It’s that age-old problem of measurement. When you start looking at the stats in terms of what articles are getting picked up? Are things happening off the back of that? If someone’s contacting us, for example, we are trying to ask them: how do you want to be communicated with? Is it by email, is it online? Do you want someone to phone you? We are trying to gather data on how people want to engage with us. We are trying to measure and understand how they have contacted us.” (Respondent M, 2018).

Summary of findings related to RQI contemporary communication practices

In analysing the respondents’ interview data, it was noticeable that traditional communication practices remain relevant despite the onward march of digital platforms. According to some respondents, change is inevitable and must be embraced by practitioners. However, other respondents raised concerns about digital deprivation or inadequate knowledge of channels. The data suggested that new forms of communication were helpful to professional practice, for instance with measurement and evaluation.

RQ 2: How have and how are role-related changes being experienced among professional communicators?

One of the advantages of interviewing practitioners with a diverse range of job titles and experience in the marketing and communications industry was it enabled the researcher to compare the perspectives of industry veterans and newcomers. In addition, a group of respondents in their early thirties, have worked through a digital shift which has led to organisations reducing print marketing and investing more in staffing for digital and social. This has covered activities ranging from social listening, in-bound marketing, thought leadership, blogging, video content and database management. Respondent C, a former council press officer who is now head of communications at a social housing provider, is unemotional about the changes he has experienced. He said:

“When are we going to stop calling roles digital communication and just call them communication? That is an interesting topic perhaps to discuss. I don’t know the answer to that obviously, but it has to happen at some point surely that we will stop separating digital and communications people and just call it communications because the primary function now of communications is going to be digital. We need to accept that.” (Respondent C, 2018).

Respondent N, a female marketing manager, who has only worked in digital and social roles for her Lancashire agency, has noted how her more senior colleagues have had to adjust their perspectives on the industry in recent years. Respondent N suggested that confused terminology and disagreement over roles and responsibilities required simplification and an overhaul.

“I think a lot of people will call it online PR and then traditional, offline PR. But I think it should all fall under one term of marketing. I don’t really think public relations or PR – I think it is a little of an archaic term now.” (Respondent N, 2018).

However, while video conferencing, has reduced the necessity of face-to-face meetings, practitioners of all ages extolled the virtues of personal contact. Respondent K, a Manchester-based marketing manager in the events sector, remarked that there would always be a role for traditional marketing:

“You can’t cut off and say we are only digital now because there is that personable element that we still need and it is a case of networking and things like that, that needs to be a bit more hands-on. But I do think in the past this company has been a little bit slow in moving forward and taking on new technology.” (Respondent K, 2018).

Traditional competencies of writing skills, identifying story opportunities and an ability to pitch creative ideas to clients are seen as a dying art. Some of the strongest comments in the corpus lamented a perceived decline in standards among less experienced communicators. For instance, Respondent A, who edits a business magazine, remarked:

“Young practitioners are very digital savvy and are very good at knowing the technical aspects, but their grammar is shocking. And you know, it is not unusual to receive a press release with typos in it. With the advent of spell check that should never happen.” (Respondent A, 2018).

Respondent O, a former journalist, has noticed a change in the ability of younger modern practitioners to deal with work pressures, including hitting deadlines. He compared his own experiences of the demands of working on news and sports desks in the 1990s with what is expected in a current-day agency. He said:

“One thing I have noticed is there is less resilience among the people we employ. What I mean by that is they get stress overload very quickly. Their self-view shifts. Whereas we came from a newspaper background where you were battered over the head every day with deadlines, constantly like, you were feeding this machine, I think most of the people I have employed over the years would crumble in a couple of weeks in that kind of environment.” (Respondent O, 2019).

This suggests that despite the decline in employment opportunities in regional newspapers, agencies and employers are still seeking recruits with journalistic skills of writing news copy and framing content to entertain and inform. However, Respondent E, warns that in his own company, integration with digital, social and marketing activities has taken its toll:

“The PR element has got a lot smaller and the thoroughbred PR person in me feels a bit sad about that. But you have to adapt or die essentially. If you stand still then you fall behind.” (Respondent E, 2018).

Summary of findings related to RQ2 changes in communication roles

There was clear evidence of integration of digital, traditional PR and marketing practice which has had a fundamental impact on the role of practitioners over the last decade. Participants identify pros and cons related to these emerging trends. Those at senior level with considerable experience in the field admire the adaptability of millennials and Generation Z employees to understand digital tools. However, there was a concern that digital skills are not always employed strategically and that younger practitioners are struggling to produce accurate written content to deadline. These are considered core skills, especially to practitioners who migrated from journalism to public relations.

RQ 3: How do workers sustain, create and reproduce their occupational practices in a competitive and changing environment?

The final research question sought to explore how practitioners are making sense of the changes in their industry related to their own competencies. A widespread opinion was that the industry is changing so rapidly that practitioners devote hours of paid and unpaid overtime into what is referred to as “upskilling”, an ugly term but one that has gained traction in the industry. In some cases, this “upskilling” is done for personal development and to assist practitioners with their next job move. But often, this is work voluntarily undertaken during morning commutes or in leisure time. In an industry which often bemoans the “over servicing” of clients, it is noticeable that practitioners are themselves “over servicing” their employers in search of new digital and social expertise. Respondent N devotes the equivalent of an additional working day to “upskilling.” Respondent H, who discussed personal development in the most detail of the participants, said she commits two hours a day travelling from her home in Manchester to Lancashire for “upskilling.”

“I am on websites such as Marketing Week. That helps as well. I have been trying...right now I have actually got a spread sheet at home where I have been looking at skills I need to develop.” (Respondent H, 2018).

Respondent Q, a digital marketing executive in the legal sector, acknowledged that her work was all-consuming – and that was a common feature among her contemporaries working in city centre Manchester.

“It is almost like you never sleep. So you are either always on emails or always on social so you know what’s going on.” (Respondent Q, 2019).

Eight of the respondents commented on the importance of professional bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) taking a leading role in advancing knowledge sharing in the digital and social space. Eight of the respondents said their organisations have formal training schemes in place to help with development of

knowledge in social and digital. In two cases, the practitioner carried out a formal training role among their colleagues. However, seven of the respondents spoke of the value of informal discussions about best practice in new communication technologies. This was coded as “Water Cooler Best Practice” by the researcher and includes contact with colleagues, peer groups, clients, agencies and even a spouse in one case.

There was some evidence among the comments of the seven Manchester-based respondents that being in a key strategic regional hub was beneficial for best practice and keeping up to date with emerging trends. At the time of this study, Manchester had a Google Digital Garage, based on King Street, which offered free training to members of the public and two of the respondents discussed the benefits of having access to this resource. Yet Respondent K, whose job also includes hosting events and conferences in the technology sector, suggested that even Mancunian practitioners head to London for formal training.

“There is a lot of networking opportunities and things like that. In terms of actual digital focus, it would be more like training courses and things. Obviously, for that there needs to be a budget... Training courses a lot of us have been on have either had to be remote because there isn't enough people to attend or have been in London. So all the social media ones, things like that, my colleague [names colleague] have to go to London for.” (Respondent K, 2018).

For Respondent R, an account director in Manchester, developing professional skills and expertise is an integral part of the role of the modern communicator and therefore demands high levels of dedication and passion. Remarking how her colleagues are highly motivated to attend networking events, she said there are often more volunteers than places available. Her company's strong contacts with tech giants and headquarters in London would also seem to give her and her colleagues an advantage over contemporaries at smaller agencies.

“I think it is important that you have a team that are passionate about those advancements and that they are constantly kept abreast of it themselves anyway. We are lucky that we have that here. So if anyone sees anything ‘Facebook's doing this’ or ‘Instagram's launched this’ we send each other emails all the time and links around that. We also do a company social digest every week which goes to our

clients and that's developed in London and then is sent out to the different regions as well.” (Respondent R, 2019).

Despite – or perhaps because of – the ever-changing nature of marketing and communications, several of the respondents spoke with genuine affection about their role and the industry. A number commented on the satisfaction they gained from developing sector expertise and providing strategic guidance to clients and colleagues. This was well-expressed by Respondent A, a 40-year industry veteran.

“I still think that the role of the communicator is one of the best jobs in the world whether it is digital or print and you know all my experience until the last couple of years has been in-house. A communicator, if they are doing their job correctly, is at the forefront of everything that is happening at a senior level at that company. You cannot get a better job than that.” (Respondent A, 2018).

Summary of discussion RQ3 sustaining occupational practice

If the first two research questions sought to uncover new directions in communication practice and the impact on roles, RQ3's intention was to find out how practitioners were able to learn new skills and practices to manage a changing landscape. A strong appetite for “upskilling” and developing new expertise was found in the transcripts. This was manifested in formal training programmes in-house and externally together with informal networks in which new skills and trends were communicated. This suggested a form of social capital was at work. In agencies this is a vital component of everyday work, but for employees taking a career break, there was a danger of confidence being lost as returning practitioners make sense of a role that is constantly changing.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS COMPARED WITH THE LITERATURE

Following the discussion of the fieldwork above, this section will now analyse the findings in relation to the literature that has influenced this inquiry. This section will also provide a rationale for the researcher’s four-point communication practitioner typology of “Business Strategist”; “Content Creator and Relationship Manager”; “Upskiller and Improver” and “Digital Engager.” This section will establish how the typologies emerged from analysis of the literature and the findings once they were coded and subject to data reduction. It will be shown how these roles contribute to the body of knowledge in a specialism that is undergoing change because of technological advances.

According to Saldaña, (2016, p. 276) a defining moment in the analysis of data is to move from topic to concept, in a stage he refers to as the “touch test”. In this study, the accumulation of 64 viable preliminary or first level codes (as shown in the codebook, Appendix viii) led to a further reduction of 22 categories or themes. The 22 categories in this study enhanced the conceptualisation process and gave clearer meaning to what the data was suggesting. The categories selected were the result of merging the codes and seeking to move from the practical to the abstract which is the essence of this form of social research (Hammersley 2008). The categories that were developed are shown below in four groupings:

Categories and Themes of the study

Grouping	Categories	Theme suggested
1	Planning; analytics; research; KPIs; objectives	“strategies”
2	Internal and external comms; thought leadership; blogs; ad content; ‘Old-school PR’; Media relations/social media relations	“doing”
3	Training; sharing best practice with colleagues and clients; using online materials such as webinars etc; trial and error (experimentation in comms work); using data to do things in a better way	“improvement”

4	Online communities; stakeholder meetings; briefings; networks (online and offline); CRM; client relationships	“engagement”
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Table 4 Source: CS research 2018-19 2

Identifying a new four-point typology framework

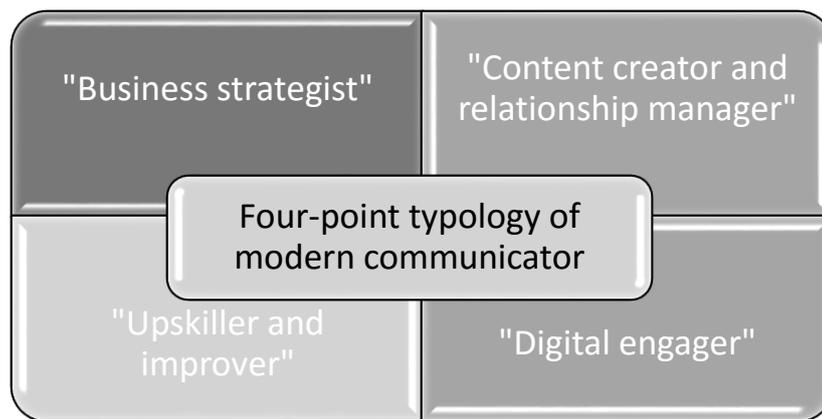


Figure 2 Source: CS research 2018-19

The data was studied in detail over a two-day period and the researcher used the themes identified above as a key step in data reduction. After thorough analysis of the data and the coding, a typology of roles was developed based on the themes (see Figure 2 above). This was perhaps not surprising given the significance of typologies in previous studies of PR roles. A typology can be understood as a description of types which have a common core in a particular set of cases and can be linked by name. Typologies are particularly helpful in “simplifying thought” (Walker 1985, pp. 174-175). The researcher was able to conceptualise his typology to provide meaning to the data and to help develop theory in this study. Although the data collected for this study came primarily from semi-structured interviews, an additional step was taken in which current PR roles in North West England and London were matched against the typology developed in this thesis. A detailed discussion of this exercise is discussed above in the Findings chapter. The researcher collected data from PR job vacancies and mapped these against the roles identified in this thesis.

It therefore seemed that the coding and the categories could also be compared with the “Value Communities” organisational structure of the Weber Shandwick agency in which the duties of communicators are divided into four workplace networks: client, community, content creation, analytics (measurement and evaluation) (Holmes Report 2018).

After a further reading of the entire corpus in which the researcher revisited respondent comments, annotations, analytic memos and the original codebook, it seemed that the project was ready to move on to an interpretive stage. To help with this important milestone, the researcher consulted the “ladder of inference” (Robinson and Lai 2006, cited by Grbich 2013, p. 308). This tool helps the researcher move through different ‘rungs of the ladder’ at the Findings stage through phases best described as select – describe – interpret – evaluate – theorise – conclude. Moreover, as the four groupings became ever more prominent, the data was enabling the researcher to bring coherence to the overall project and to tell an engaging story (Marshall and Rossman 2011). It became apparent through further consideration of analytic memos that the researcher was now able to conceptualise a four-point typology of roles. This was partly driven by previous influential PR research (Smith and Broom 1979) but also by Patton’s (1990) typology of teaching roles (Marshall and Rossman 2011, p. 217). Analyst-constructed typologies emerge through the experiences of the researcher which are grounded in the data but not necessarily used explicitly by the participants. In the case of Patton’s work the roles were given character profiles such as “traffic cop” “ostrich”, “complainer” “old-fashioned schoolmaster” and “referral agent”. These profiles seemed to bring dynamic meaning to the roles and they influenced this study’s preference for “Business Strategist”, “Content Creator and Relationship Manager”, “Upskiller and Improver” and “Digital Engager.”

Having proposed the new typology, it is important to understand that the four elements should not be considered in isolation. “Business strategist” suggests the higher-level work of a communications manager or director and might include recruitment, supervisory duties and winning new clients, in the case of agencies. However, the content creator/relationship manager element is bound to overlap with the strategist and also the engager. Of all the four elements, the most democratic would appear to be “Upskiller and Improver” as this covers all job roles and is both a

tactical and a strategic priority for organisations. Again, there is a cross-over with the other elements of the typology, particularly “Digital Engager.”

Other representations of the role of communication practitioners (Dozier 1984; Moss, Newman and Di Santo 2005) were integral to the back story of PR working practices. However, as their work pre-dates the emergence of digital and social it was particularly important to compare this study’s typology with similar research more recently undertaken. In this regard, the work of Fuller *et al* (2018) proved especially fruitful. Their research on “Identifying competence characteristics for excellent communication professionals” led to the development of the “SEEDS” profile for domains of competence in which the five elements are strategic, empathetic, decisive, sees patterns, and interrelationships (Fuller *et al* 2018, p. 245). These domains of competence might help to address some of the concerns over recruitment that were expressed in one form or another by Respondents A, C, E, I and O.

[New perspectives on the troublesome PR label](#)

It can be seen from the earlier discussions of rival schools of thought in public relations and communication that there remain fundamental questions of not just what PR does but what it is (Bourne 2013). There is also a continuing dispute within the industry over whether the term public relations is appropriate in the 21st Century. To practitioners such as Respondent N, who called the PR term “archaic”, it may seem like a relic from an age when the practitioner’s duties were dominated by media relations. However, even in 2019, it appears that the top three tasks performed would be familiar to communicators from any era. According to the CIPR’s UK-wide Eighth State of PR survey (CIPR 2017) these are content creation (81% of those surveyed); media relations (73%) and strategic planning (69%). However, in the study undertaken in North West England it was apparent that PR practitioners were involved in Facebook ad campaigns for instance. The term “PR” seems less helpful than more versatile terminology such as “paid/owned media” and “earned/shared media.” These terms are relevant to online and offline communications and come with none of the ideological baggage of spin and lack of transparency.

For 30 years the four models of public relations envisaged by Grunig and Hunt (1984) has been the dominant tool to conceptualise the work of the communicator. In this, a systems-influenced concept, the objective is to move to two-way symmetrical communication. However, what emerged from the fieldwork was the difficulty in achieving this almost utopian vision in a modern world of social media and digital communication that was hard to conceive in the 1980s. Many of the North West respondents commented on how quickly communication moves in a digital and social age and keeping track of it was a huge undertaking. Respondent S, a press officer in the aviation sector, said that messages were spread more quickly on social media than in internal communications. He gave the example of a terminal evacuation being reported on social media and being followed up by journalists before his operational colleagues had been able to phone the press office. Referring specifically to Grunig and Hunt's work, Respondent B suggested that two-way communications was unworkable in some cases and gave the example of YouTube comments. Respondent B said he had to disable the comments to a video he had uploaded because to monitor and respond to them would make his work impossible.

[Flexible Response Times of the modern communicator](#)

Judging by the respondents' comments, there is widespread agreement with von Platen's (2016) focus on roles as norms, behaviours and skills. Respondent O suggested that clients were "agnostic" about what these roles entailed provided the outcomes were positive. Respondent O also commented that the practitioner had to be very flexible to answer what he called the "Can-you-just-questions". These are unexpected, ad hoc requests from clients which demand an immediate and positive response from the consultant, even if the detail of that response had not been worked out. Respondents C and E bemoaned occasionally passive behaviour among junior communicators. Both discussed examples where they were seeking greater creative input from their teams. There was a common complaint that practitioners needed to be more pro-active and to seek opportunities to make a business case for the role of communication. Respondent C, a director working in-house in Manchester, said that internal communications campaigns could have a demonstrable impact and Respondent E, a director in a B2B agency, feared that the creativity was too often being driven by senior figures who then told their junior colleagues what to do. This

suggests that the perception of PR being a technical function is partly down to practitioners' lack of confidence in using digital or traditional channels strategically. However, Respondents H and Q's responses showed a different perspective in which two female "digital native" practitioners – one working for a law firm and one for a small business supplies company – were able to use their skill sets to demonstrate the value of communications work and thereby gain influence within their organisations.

Gender and upskilling

Turning to gender, public relations has long faced criticism that there is insufficient equality of opportunity (Aldoory 2005). In the UK, the industry has a pay gap – in which there are more female practitioners but their median earnings are about £7,000 less than male practitioners (CIPR 2017 and PRCA 2018). Gender emerged as a key theme in interviews with three of the respondents, D, G and P. Respondent D, a young mother based in Liverpool, welcomed digital technology in helping her work from home and look after her daughter. However, Respondents G and P highlighted the concern that female practitioners might struggle to remain “up-skilled” after taking career breaks. This is a result of the breakneck speed of innovation, meaning that a role can change quickly and fundamentally. The PR and communications industry must be sensitive to the issue of gender and enable young mothers who return to work the opportunity to re-establish themselves in the organisation. Given some of the concerns expressed over recruitment and finding new people with desired skills sets, this would seem to make sound business sense as well as being a vital element of the ethical, modern business environment.

Symmetry and speed in the use of digital communication

Questions of encroachment were raised in the literature review (Edwards 2006). This, however, did not appear to be a live issue among the 18 interviewees. In fact, Respondent S, a senior press officer, remarked on how well his team worked with colleagues in the Marketing function. Respondent F spoke out against “siloes” working, a view that was shared elsewhere with emphasis on collaboration and “joining the dots”. Respondents spoke of how WhatsApp and even Twitter were being used internally. It was notable that of all the channels, tools and platforms mentioned by the respondents, LinkedIn was consistently seen as the most effective. A full list of the tools mentioned in the corpus is presented (see appendix ix).

Digital natives, immigrants and the concept of ‘digital deprivation’

In discussing the use of digital and social communication, perceptions seem to differ depending on age and background. Respondents A and O, who have a combined total of 70 years’ experience in communication and journalism at separate organisations, both remarked how “digital natives” had an instinctive feel for the technology. They countered this by saying that technical expertise was not always supported by an understanding of how the technology could enhance the business. Respondents F, H, I and J were matter of fact in their comments on social and digital. There was common agreement among “digital natives” that attitude rather than age was most significant in demonstrating competence with technology. Respondent F remarked how her 60-year-old female colleague was very accomplished in the use of social media and was able to identify engaging content that would interest core stakeholders.

However, Respondent G warned of the trend of “digital dismissives” working in SMEs in the North West opting out of social and digital technology. Respondent G, who works in a training role, fears this could get worse and have a detrimental effect on business in the region. She remarked that too many assumptions were made by managers about digital competencies and that in modern organisations employees might be able to perform routine tasks using digital tools without grasping the deeper significance. This suggests that Helsper’s (2017) relative digital deprivation concept could become an increasingly important area to consider in the coming years.

After perceiving years of digital utopia, particularly during the early years of smart phones (Navarro, Moreno and Zerfass 2018), practitioners now see digital and social usage moving into a new era. Respondent C was excited at the prospect of data and insight heralding a new age of the “ethical evaluator.” This means that discredited measurement methods such as Advertising Value Equivalent can finally be laid to rest. Artificial Intelligence and automation also offer the practitioner a greater opportunity to demonstrate their purpose and creative powers as well as enabling businesses to make better decisions on what to say and how to say it (Waddington 2018; Phillips 2018).

Such opportunities have to be balanced by the demands brought about by digital and social innovation which have undoubtedly transformed the industry and have forced the modern communicator to be brighter, smarter, quicker and better able to multi-task across a range of platforms. Simply keeping up with the digital and social advances of the “savvy consumers” and stakeholders in the here and now is demanding, let alone looking ahead to emerging trends. However, all respondents agreed that the underpinning qualities of listening, trust, authenticity, tone of voice and respect will be demanded from communicators whatever the technological shifts in the future.

This section of the chapter has specifically addressed the research questions and demonstrated how the qualitative interviews have produced rich data. Attention will now turn to the role of the researcher in undertaking this fieldwork.

According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) the qualitative interview is an artificial process in which impression management must be recognised when analysing the data collected. Questions will inevitably arise over how much value one can gain from a relatively brief encounter with a practitioner at a moment in time. Throughout this study, the researcher has sought to include reflexivity at every turn in order to solve problems, provide direction and ensure rigour. At this stage in the thesis, thoughts must turn to arguments put forward and conclusions drawn from the process. Advocating a “validity of interpretation”, Mason (2002, p. 176) suggests the qualitative researcher must strive to advance claims that are “sensitive, appropriately nuanced and valid”. It is now appropriate, therefore, that the researcher adopts a more introspective tone to consider his own involvement in the fieldwork undertaken.

A qualitative researcher must be realistic in the aims of their study and in the quest to capture the “lived experience.” Seeking to achieve such lofty goals may prove impossible as the researcher tries in vain to fully grasp complexity in social construction (Hammersley 2008). Therefore, the wise researcher will not claim to represent reality in their data. Instead, they will seek to answer a specific set of questions about a phenomenon which will contribute to the body of knowledge in a particular specialism.

The study in question *The Agile Practitioner? Changing Roles of PR and Communication Consultants in North West England* has been framed in an interpretivist tradition and the preference to conduct the research using qualitative methods is consistent with the author's 30-year working career as a journalist, communications specialist and academic. For some researchers, the process of interviewing may seem daunting, but in this case it is a familiar activity albeit one that the researcher has less experience of in an academic setting. Ensuring a structure for reflection at the start of the project was felt to be important as it would give the researcher an opportunity to take stock as the project developed. Once the research proposal was accepted in late 2017, the author continued to make regular entries in a black log book. This was a valuable place to jot ideas, fears, complaints and frustrations in a more informal way than by producing analytic memos. The researcher noted several pinch points in 2018, most notably when the methodology materials became unwieldy and attention needed to be given to draft chapters.

Of principal concern was the researcher's desire to reconcile the need to "de-centre" and become an "off-stage facilitator" with an acceptance that no study can ever truly start with a clean state (Grbich 2013). Rather than attempt to carry out the unobtainable "perfect research" the author preferred to think through all aspects of the study and followed Marshall and Rossman's (2011) advice to use the process of writing to think, clarify, reflect, decide and act. A variety of sensory prompts proved helpful. As well as making notes on texts on a Word document, the researcher used sketches, mind maps, post-it notes and scribbled musings during daily train commutes to capture ideas. Recording the interviews on a digital recorder was invaluable not only to analyse the fieldwork but to help the researcher become immersed in the data. This is because audio has long been a preferred learning style for the researcher. In addition, videos on YouTube and formal training on Lynda.com enabled the researcher to gain a working knowledge of NVivo 12 software which he was using for the first time. In this respect, the researcher's experiences echo those of the respondents who have to devote additional efforts outside working hours to listen to podcasts and read materials related to innovations in social and digital.

Before collecting data, the researcher considered what would be the characteristics of “good data?” This brought to mind Marshall and Rossman’s (2011) perspective that qualitative research ought to be sound, credible and trustworthy. This ensured that much effort went into collecting data that could be analysed and interpreted and that the fieldwork was carried out ethically and appropriately. In the Findings, attention was given to the painstaking process of transcribing 12 and a half hours of interview data. However, before reaching that stage, the challenges of gaining access, getting to the interview, conducting it and recording it also proved time-consuming. One of the less understood realities of collecting data in urban settings relates to the time it takes to travel to and from meetings.

Before each interview, the researcher emailed a copy of the interview schedule, a consent form and brief demographic details to respondents. In all cases, the interviews were cordial and business-like. However, it was only in the final minutes of the 17th and penultimate interview that the data started to “fit into place” in the mind of the researcher.

Listening to the recordings of the interviews was both valuable and also somewhat humbling. The recordings revealed a number of verbal tics of the researcher and one of the early analytic memos entitled “Get to the point” showed personal impatience at long-winded questions. Several of the respondents asked for a question to be repeated and Respondent C light-heartedly said: “I am going to have to pick you up on plain English, Chris.” This suggests that in future research the author can consider how best to make questions simpler and clearer. Over-used phrases and the occasional loaded questions also need to be avoided in future research. However, Kvale (1994) argues for the value of the odd loaded question in providing quality to a study. Probing questions were important in this semi-structured inquiry and the researcher also used prompts to give the respondent guidance on how the interview was progressing, how many questions remained, etc. However, the ‘interviewer effect’ generally leads to the researcher deciding when it is appropriate to probe a point or ask for more information. In some cases, such as with Respondents C, E, O and R, the respondent was confident enough to enforce key points they wanted to make. In the case of Respondent R, this had a crucial impact on the data and the emergence of the typology.

In all qualitative research, the purpose is to engage in theoretical abstraction and data reduction (Hammersley 2008). The concluding section of this thesis will now summarise the research, discuss its implications, limitations and propose some future directions of study in this fast-evolving area.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to analyse critically the dynamics and details of changing working lives of communication practitioners. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher intended to tease out subjective experiences of communications work and the practices, routines, behaviours and expectations that define it. The value has been in studying professional roles and the levels of expertise and attempts to frame those professional roles. When preparing a proposal, the researcher suggested that the established accounts of practitioner roles seemed outdated and there was not so much a gap in the knowledge but a need to keep pace with rapidly changing industry practices.

The concluding passages of a study of this nature offer the researcher the final opportunity to reflect on the value of the work, its contribution to theory and practice and the limitations of the inquiry, together with suggestions for future research.

As discussed above, the language of research is charged with assumptions and terms such as validity, reliability and generalisability which may be more suited to studies in a positivist tradition. The standards of transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba 1985) seem more appropriate in judging the value of research based on semi-structured interviews with communication practitioners in North West England. Moreover, in weighing up the appropriateness of the typology of “Business Strategist”, “Content Creator and Relationship Manager”, “Upskiller and Improver” and “Digital Engager” suggested in this study, it is also useful to refer to the “refutability principle” (Stokes and Wall 2014). By doing this, the researcher can put aside any remaining assumptions and represent their findings openly and critically for a final time.

Having prepared detailed literature review and methodology chapters, the researcher was able to approach the fieldwork with confidence and to collect sufficient rich data on which to describe phenomena and make conclusions. It could be argued that this study has offered some contribution to theory. Data abstraction during the analysis has enabled the researcher to propose a typology that addresses the complexity of

modern communications practice which is governed by technological change. In addition, the research has added to the body of knowledge of how roles are perceived in communications, regardless of whether these roles are technical or strategic. A further case can be made that the research also offers a practical guide for practitioners. The voice of the practitioners is clear and is interpreted in the Findings in this applied study. This work offers a potentially rewarding “state of the trade” summary for communication practitioners.

The data suggests that digital technology has had some involvement in broadening the skillsets of practitioners. What is more debatable is whether this has also led to a deepening of knowledge. Experienced public relations practitioners lamented the dilution of some traditional communication skills and in some cases the respondents suggested that “old school” PR might appear moribund to Generation Z.

A further difficulty for public relations is that the new opportunities for the profession to demonstrate its strategic importance (Grunig 2009) have not been realised in a digital age. Indeed, the digital age has only raised further questions of what public relations is and whether the PR term itself ought to be laid to rest. Given the growing integration of marketing and communication roles and the fact that practitioners in PR roles are now involved in buying Facebook ads and branded content, it seems that the PESO model which covers paid, earned, owned and shared media (Dietrich 2014) is gaining in relevance. In this framework, what is most important is not the role of the practitioner but their skills in working across paid, earned, shared and owned media.

The research confirmed Manchester’s role as a regional centre for public relations expertise in an area with a highly motivated workforce which is prepared to invest considerable time in developing skills across digital channels. Respondent R commented on how her agency colleagues are so motivated to attend training and workshops that they need to be done on rotation. However, as Respondent K said, it appears that opportunities for new skills development and professional training are not as great as might be expected. Hence, the tendency of her colleagues to travel to London to plug such gaps.

It can be concluded that public relations and communication is always influenced by the wider economic environment which is why the emphasis on public sector roles

was prominent in the responses. Practices in the North West might be different when in-house given some of the restrictions under which practitioners work (see Respondent B). In agencies, while enthusiasm for upskilling is just as strong in the North West as in the South East, opportunities are greater and wages are higher given the size of the profession and living costs in London. It could, therefore, be argued that there is a risk of a “centre and periphery” dynamic at work in the public relations field in which London strengthens its position by attracting digital talent from the provinces.

The shift to digital and mobile communication over the last two decades has again reopened discussions about technological determinism. Further research will consider whether new and emerging channels will be used strategically or whether the technology will lead the usage and lead to an emphasis on tactical application.

Within the “upskilling” discussions it is important to acknowledge that greater sharing of knowledge and expertise can be mutually beneficial for organisations and practitioners. The employer enjoys the fruits of greater professionalism and the practitioner is offered more opportunity for promotion or a move to a more senior role elsewhere. In some case, particularly in agencies, there is a clearly established culture of information sharing and bringing the digital experts to the workplace. According to Respondent G, improving digital proficiency can be implemented across all types of organisation, but the concerns of “digital dismissives” must also be addressed.

It seems that “upskilling” is therefore a joint enterprise between employers who invest in training and employees who might use CPD programmes with the CIPR and PRCA to refresh their knowledge. In all cases, incentives for learning need to be made clear and enlightened employers who invest in developing their employees’ skillsets could find that this enhances their recruitment and retention.

It must be accepted that this study also has its limitations. The sample is relatively small and it covers only a small population of the PR industry in the North West region, let alone the UK. The respondents were selected from a narrow field – the researcher’s professional profile. The data was also collected by one interviewer and it is interesting to ponder what the results might have been had another researcher been able to ask the same questions and compare their replies with those shown in

this study. A further way in which the research might have been improved is if observation could have been undertaken as well as interviews. Spending time in communication offices, studying the work of practitioners and using interviews to clarify these observations, could potentially result in rich and original data.

A more ambitious option would be to develop a multi-phase design using mixed quantitative and qualitative methods which would incorporate convergent, explanatory, exploratory and embedded designs (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007). Multi-phase design would have the benefit of being flexible and iterative and would enable research to identify shifts in the usage of digital communication over several years. However, the value of the data that could potentially be gathered would need to be balanced against the demands of funding and research time inherent in multi-phase design.

One of the main criticisms of the world view of the normative schools of public relations is they are too deterministic and too insular. A reader of this study might wonder if both these lines of criticism could also be made here. Whatever the value of typologies, they fail to include the pieces that don't "fit" in research studies and as the typology was based on one geographical area, it would need to be tested in a national or even international setting before further assumptions could be made regarding its value to the public relations specialism.

A further matter for consideration is the impact of organizational ecology (Trist 1977) in which narrow matters of internal bureaucracy and work planning are given secondary status compared with the wider environment. This move from transactional to contextual relationships has proved difficult for managers to reconcile. However, it seems that a perspective based around organisational ecology is helpful in enabling communication strategists to better understand complexity and uncertainty.

In summary, this inquiry has achieved its core aim of providing an interpretive analysis of communication practice and the changing nature of roles in the industry at a level appropriate to Master's study. With artificial intelligence and automation about to increase in influence, history may show that the changes we have experienced in the last two decades will be seen to be minimal in comparison with future transformational technologies.

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APPENDICES

Appendix i Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

Thesis: The Agile Practitioner? Changing Functions of PR and Communication Consultants in North West England

Interviews with communication practitioners in North West England 2018-19

Introduction

The participant will be informed about the research project and its aims and objectives as well as the benefits to the participants. Interviewees will be informed that the data provided will be confidential and anonymised and not revealed to anyone outside the research team and it will not be possible to identify individuals in any reports.

Permission will be asked to record the interview and take notes. The participant will be asked to sign a consent form and they will be provided with a Participation Information Sheet outlining details of the project. Interviewees will be told that the interview will take about 45 minutes.

General background

This is the building rapport stage. The respondent will be asked to give some background on their career, specialisation in communications etc. They will be asked to summarise their use of digital technologies

What are the practices that define contemporary communications work?

- Discuss strategical and tactical work
- Discuss the role of technology in enabling this work
- Define the principal roles of the communicator

How have subjects experienced role-related change in their careers, in relation to the introduction of digital technologies?

- Compare and contrast
- Analogue and digital
- Changes experienced
- Observations on how those changes have impacted on colleagues

How are differences in occupational practice experienced?

- Overall impact
- Relationship with colleagues

- Relationship with clients

How do workers sustain, create and reproduce their occupational practices in a competed and changing environment?

- Professional practice and career development
- Peer networks
- “Up skilling”

Closing comments/additional information

- Additional information
- Any future trends that might be considered that we have not discussed until now?

Thank the participant for taking part and recap on the next steps – ie transcription, analysis, interpretation, write-up



Participant Consent Form

Title of project: *The Agile Practitioner? Changing Functions of PR and Communication Consultants in North West England*

Name of Researcher: Chris Shaw

Name of organisation: University of Central Lancashire

Matter to be addressed	✓ Yes	X No
I have understood the Participation information sheet provided		
I agree to the interview being audio-recorded		
I would like to receive a copy of the transcribed interview		
I understand I can withdraw from the interview at any time without explanation		
I agree to take part in the research as described in the Participant Information Sheet		

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

If you would like any further information about the research, please contact Chris Shaw, Senior Lecturer, Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise, University of

Central Lancashire, Room GR 326 Greenbank Building, Preston, Lancashire, UK.
Tel: 01772 894745. Email CShaw3@uclan.ac.uk

Copies: one copy for the participant and one copy for the researcher

Appendix iii About You Questions

About You Questions

'About you' questions ask people to provide some basic information about themselves, such as their gender, age and ethnicity.

Are you:			
Male	Female	Other	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

How old are you? (Tick ✓ one box only)						
Under 18	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 and over
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

How would you describe your ethnic origin? (Tick ✓ one box only)

- | | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Asian or Asian British | Black or Black British | Mixed | White | Other ethnic group (including Chinese) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> |

The question below is the full set of ethnic categories taken from the 2011 census. The amount of space you have available on your questionnaire will influence which question you choose to use. The important thing is that your data is comparable to the census.

How would you describe your ethnic origin?

(Tick ✓ one box only)

- | | |
|--|--|
| White | Asian or Asian British |
| English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British <input type="checkbox"/> | Indian <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Irish <input type="checkbox"/> | Pakistani <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Gypsy or Irish Traveller <input type="checkbox"/> | Bangladeshi <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Any other White background (Please write in) <input type="checkbox"/> | Chinese <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="text"/> | |
| Mixed/multiple ethnic groups | Black/African/Caribbean Black British |
| White and Black Caribbean <input type="checkbox"/> | Caribbean <input type="checkbox"/> |
| White and Black African <input type="checkbox"/> | African <input type="checkbox"/> |
| White and Asian <input type="checkbox"/> | Any other Black background (Please write in) <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Any other Mixed background (Please write in) <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="text"/> | Other ethnic group |
| | Arab <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Any other ethnic background (Please write in) <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | <input type="text"/> |

Do you consider yourself to be a disabled person?

(Tick ✓ one box only)

Yes

No

Appendix iv Example of an Analytic Memo

INTERVIEW M – THE ONE INTERVIEW DONE OVER THE PHONE

Interview M had to be jettisoned when I got stuck in traffic on the way to Prescott. Instead I agreed to do the interview by phone a week later.

This interview took place immediately after the ill-fated Interview L. It was recorded using the mobile phone and digital recorder.

I felt that the telephone interview did in some way work against the quality of the interview because it wasn't possible to read body language etc.

The data itself was fine and covered the respondent's career in social housing, procurement etc.

The main thing I took from this was the concept of "engagement" which went right through the interview.

It was also interesting that the respondent had a clear ambition to prove herself and to demonstrate she was able to work in an agency, that she could handle the pace.

I wondered whether it might be more difficult to transcribe this interview because it was conducted over the phone. In fact, it was fine and the data has added to my overall understanding. Overall, a success despite the setback first time around.

Appendix v Example of a Quick Transcription

Interview O Quick transcription

Interview conducted Jan 10 2019 Rawtenstall 1100 at the agency offices

Introductory

I am the MD and founder. We have been going for 17 years. Lots of change. Today digital accounts for a “huge chunk” – everything from video, to blogger outreach to social media management.

Also traditional PR and comms. Digital is enormous. It is what we all do. It is the world we live in.

Main channels – LinkedIn (increasingly) Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. 15-25 going for Instagram. Facebook is uncool to admit to using it although everyone has an account. We use YouTube as well. We have video content created. A myriad of bloggers we reach out to.

The starting point is not the channel. It is the quantifiable benefit. What is the client trying to achieve? UCLan growing its footprint in Burnley. Perception of Burnley is negative. Working on trying to change that.

Audience of young people won't read regional media – it is the social channels. Content to be accessed by mobile/digital devices.

Another client – the bias might be towards trade media. Print is dying off.

Adapting to all of this – digital – not an overnight shockwave. It has been a steady trickle. Relatively simple to assimilate the different areas we need. It makes the job enjoyable. We have the chance to dabble and make it work. The fundamentals haven't changed.

The shift to digital has made it easier to do evaluation. AVE was seen as the only way of doing it. The rise of digital has made it easier to measure impact.

Clients are not bothered about a story of seeing their name in the papers. It is whether there is a difference. More enquiries? More impact. Now there are proper ways of measuring this. Respondent also says that AVE never had much currency.

More specific than Google Analytics. Looked at the example of fostering. The measure was were there more enquiries. They got 12 new enquiries which was equivalent to what they would get in a year.

The end point used to be the coverage. But coverage/smotherage.

At Bae Systems taking a complex business and making it easy to understand. There the measurement is in the hands of the client. But there are ways of finding the impact.

People concentrate on the bells and whistles but it is about redefining our industry.

Digital settling down. It's just what we do. But the pace of change is growing exponentially. The pace of change will have shifted. That pace will have developed quickly.

Look at Apple – value halved. Decline of behemoths. AI will be the next. Already pitched some ideas. A little out of reach at the moment unless you have deep pockets but it is going to become more popular.

Launched a new website 12 months ago. But it is already out of date. It doesn't reflect who we are now.

Pace of change and the world out there is changing rapidly. The world is shifting. Millennials are the bigger part of the workforce.

It varies from client to client, but largely they are agnostic about the channel. Sometimes they get excited by the next trend. But they are more interested in outcomes – more enquiries, more leads, more sales.

The agency is expected to be pro-active and knowledgeable.

Sometimes there is a small window – eg the PLC wanting to do more with LinkedIn.

LinkedIn keeps cropping up and the questions is why the increase in significance. It is inter-generational. A useful tool. Good for targeting customers B2B. Also good post GDPR. You can't buy an email list now. You have to be a bit smart. LinkedIn has the scale and the ubiquity.

You can't imagine something else ousting out.

We are looking at trying to connect with particular contacts – eg engineering in the water treatment industry. It becomes easier to define what a good contact would be.

Face-to-face – it changes with the generations. Gen X and Baby Boomers say you can't beat “belly to belly” marketing. The world has changed.

Having a practitioner/client fit. Tough for Gen Xers to get down with the kids. More credence to have the Gen Zers doing this.

Gamwer 150,000 – posting about playing a video game. This is something a Gen Zer would know. Also the milkshake bar.

You can see situations where you have a relationship with clients you have never met. We buy stuff off Amazon, but we have never met someone who works for Amazon. Some clients are traditional and require the face to face.

This is the sustaining question and keeping up to date with what is going on.

The practitioner has to be interested in their job and their career (and be prepared to invest time and effort into it). “Instagram's changed its setting.” Then they might say that could be an opportunity or a threat. But they will be looking to apply it to their role, they career.

A client might come along with a “can you just?” question. We say yes and then figure out later how we can do it.

We have introduced in-house webinars. Individuals will be sent invites that will be useful and individuals will watch. Also there is a mini-masterclass internally. PRCA training and best practice.

Also the Google training (Digital Garage in Manchester).

At an agency, you have the chance to shapeshift.

Final question

Last year there was a focus on Big Data and who controls it. Governments and legislature are having a lot more interest in Facebook eg. That will be interesting to see how it plays out. People are gradually becoming aware of the data matters.

For the respondent it is all about social media for professional rather than personal. It is about facilitating and setting direction that way.

Some technologies fizzle out. They create a solution that nobody needed. Change is happening much faster all the time. Futurologists

Stress overload among young people. Battered over the head with newspaper deadlines. "Most people I have employed with crumble with that level of stress."

The paper is going. The train is arriving at the station.

We use a tool 15 5 Continuous Performance Management Software.

Appendix vi – Example of a Verbatim Transcript

Interview S

Verbatim transcription – interview conducted January 21 2019

CS: Can we just start off by you telling me about your role and how maybe, you and your colleagues use digital and social channels.

Respondent S: I am senior press officer at [names organisation]. So there is a small team of about four of us in terms of the PR side and then we have the social media team that sits within the corporate affairs team as well. And we have three members of staff looking solely at social media. So in terms of my role, it's predominantly press and media relations with wider communications projects as well on the side of that. In terms of social media and digital I kind of work with the social media team to suggest content ideas and also to promote the various bits that we are doing as an airport. We are working with airlines, stuff that we do with retail, operational messages and things like that. So over the last few years, the team's grown. It is something the airport sees as really valuable and certainly a way forward. Going forward, it's a continuing area of investment that we are looking at making. I think in terms of media, we have our own media centre now and so as well as doing standard press releases and things like that for media, we also do kind of stories that we know wouldn't necessarily be picked up by media but we're keen to get out there and get our positioning out there so we use that media centre as our own platform, treating us as a publisher in our own right.

CS: OK.

Respondent S: And then we use that centre plus our social media to push those stories out. So for example, when we are doing pieces around the government's aviation strategy, it's quite dry and not necessarily of interest to all media in its current stage in terms of where the government's consultation is at. However, we are keen that our messaging is out there. It's a chance for us to promote as well. Again, we just use our own website to publish those blogs and things like that from our leaders in the business.

CS: Now of all the respondents I have spoken to, I would imagine you are involved with the most diverse groups of stakeholders cos sometime being here feels you are in a city or a town isn't it? So do you find digital helps that in terms of trying to communicate with airlines, retail, security and police and taxi drivers and all the various groups?

Respondent S: Definitely. So we know in particular, in terms of a crisis, our social media channels are absolutely crucial. Whenever...for example, snow last year, when that hit, the community relies as much on the social media updates as they do on kind of operational messages that are being sent out as well. And funnily enough we have just launched in the last month a new community app because previously, because of the diverse nature of the stakeholders, communications went to different people from different departments, so it has been centralised as one app that anyone

on site can get access to, be that retailers, be that the handling agents, the airlines, be it our staff and NATS (air traffic control) and things like that. They all have access to this app that provides updates basically on everything from kind of like the operational updates to on-time performance to retail offers. So it has been centralised into one search place that you can use and you can subscribe to different alerts and things like that. For example, the conference call I have just been on in terms of the snow updates there we are advising people to check the app for the latest updates because that will be where they are pushed to first as opposed to kind of the old text messages and things like that or emails that used to go around. So very much the focus is on making the best use of the digital assets that we have.

CS: Now you mentioned before about an investment by the airport in terms of digital and social. Is that investment in terms of having staff here monitoring the platforms all of the time?

Respondent. Yes. When I first started about three and a half years ago, the social media sat within marketing which was different. So when I first started in PR, I worked for an airline and at that time social media for the airport sat with the press office team because I think it was seen very much...it's a comms tool but also reputationally it needed to be managed by that same team and kind of like have a handle on what the airport should and shouldn't be saying really. So it sat with them. Over the years that team changed and it actually went to marketing. But what happened before I was here was basically all customer queries were being ignored and it was just one big sales channel where there was no listening or engagement, it was just here's an offer, here's an offer, here's an offer. So the levels of engagement on the channel were really poor and the feedback on there and the comments were terrible. So not long after I started and our new head of external affairs at the time joined, a decision was made it was going to come in-house. Originally, it was outsourced to an agency and then basically we hired two apprentices and they kind of came on board. The hours extended in terms of kind of how it was covered and then over time the business has really seen its value. We are keen as a team that they understand the value it delivers. So each week we are delivering reports that showcase 'this is the amount of engagement, this is the type of content we are doing.' Any revenue that is being driven off the back of social media, any kind of engagement around certain posts to prove what it's worth. And over that time as a function within the business, we have managed to grow it to two apprentices to now one permanent post plus two apprentices plus an extra back-up we have got which means we have extended the opening hours because it used to be very much nine till six which obviously as an airport is not ideal. It needs to be from early in the morning. So now it is open from six in the morning to ten at night and it is managed within our team. We have managed to get funding from parts of the business to help grow the team as well because they see the value it is serving. So ops and customer services and marketing have all agreed to chip in to the budget to help grow the social media team. And I know our leadership team are always keeping an eye on what it going on. You will certainly find we are getting emails from kind of the CEO and COO and ops director saying 'seen this, this is great' so it shows they are

keeping an eye on it. And they are also coming back saying ‘why wasn’t that responded to?’ So it is something the whole business is really switched on to.

CS: So, really now, the work of comms is very transparent, isn’t it? Internally as well as externally?

Respondent: Definitely. I think we have to justify our existence in a way. And it’s important again that... I suppose what we do with social media as a PR team, the PR function and the public affairs function, each week we do reports that go into our senior leadership team to say this is the work that we are doing, this is the work that is coming up, this is how it has benefited the business. It is making sure all of the different areas of the business really see the value in what we are doing. With our aviation development team who we work quite closely with to see how we can assist in terms of driving group development. So we have worked particularly over the past few years we have worked really closely with them on things like the China launch, Beijing flights. Driving that interest in China to keep that drumbeat of communications going. So that people really get the fact that we have got these flights to China, you need to use them otherwise if you don’t use them you lose them, basically. The same in terms of creating that drumbeat is what we have been doing recently for India which launched that at the end of last year as well.

CS: Great. So you have obviously seen quite a significant change in the role in the time you have been in the industry then, you have mentioned some of the real positives of digital and social. Do you see any drawbacks in terms of how it’s spread and how it’s become more...?

Respondent S: Yeah. In a crisis it can be great and it can also be a nightmare because messages can spread like wildfire and before you’ve had chance as a team to get a handle on it, it’s already out there. So for example, last week there was just a partial evacuation in a certain area of the airport. Within less than a minute that had gone everywhere. Our phones were off the hook with media who picking up on these stories before our opps team have even had the chance to pick up the phone to us and actually say to us: ‘it’s all right, it’s a false fire alarm and don’t worry, the passengers will be back in in 15 minutes.’ But, like I said, when it snowed, for example, the level of updates we were able to provide using social media channels, the feedback we got from passengers was overwhelmingly positive that day because we were able to provide better updates than what they were getting on the ground from their own airline and handling agents and things like that because in a crisis we go over and sit in our incident management centre so we become part of the operational team. Comms sits within that function, they want us to be there so we can drive those comms messages out.

CS: Yeah.

Respondent S: I think it has great benefits, it also has drawbacks. I think, like I said, media pick up on a lot of social media stuff and a lot of our time is spent, kind of following up on stuff that wouldn’t necessarily have been a story a few years ago but because everyone feels they have a right to vent on social media and they do it in that moment when they’re angry it generates a lot more news stories on the back of

that. So we spend a lot of time responding to that which I think a few years ago we wouldn't have been dealing with. So yeah.

CS: I am really interested in when you said that the apprentices came in and it was almost like a new approach because they...this form of communications has been there before but you said it was very much a sales...?

Respondent S: Yeah.

CS: So you now bring it in to become far more of a communications and two-way presumably?

Respondent S: Yeah.

CS: How difficult was it to get that tone of voice right? To move away from the ten percent off to a proper engagement?

Respondent S: I think I mean we, as a press team, had an idea of how we wanted to the tone of voice. It's funny, the old press office was set up so it had information and a bit of northern banter and I think that was very much how we wanted it to be. At the end of the day holidays are supposed to be a fun thing and people are going away it's an exciting time. I think we wanted to continue that feeling. We worked with an external agency to create, effectively, a set of guidelines for tone of voice because the apprentices at the time...[Names apprentice] she's 21 and it was her first job. The youngest apprentice worked with her and left after the first year because we could only keep one, he was 17 at the time. They were really young, so they needed that kind of guidelines so they could follow up on it. So it's definitely been important and we have tweaked it as we have gone along as well. I think in terms of the content and everything we do, as we have grown the team it has allowed us to go out and do more things in the terminal a lot more using the different ways as well. Originally as well it was just Facebook and Twitter and then we brought in Instagram, done stuff on Snapchat. So we have developed the tools that we have available to us as well. And again because a couple of them are still doing this apprenticeship it's useful because they are going and having these lessons on a weekly basis and they are bringing back information in terms of what are the latest developments and how can we implement those? Are they relevant to us? Do we think we would have a big enough following? Can we do anything on those channels? Because I don't think we want to be on anywhere just for the sake of having a presence. I think it's very important for us that we are relevant in those areas and that we are being of use to the kind of like people who would follow us on there, which is Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and a bit of Snapchat.

CS: Is Twitter the primary one, would you say?

Respondent S: I think in terms of putting content out I would say Twitter and Facebook are probably level. In terms of customer engagement, I would say predominantly Twitter.

CS: Right, OK. So you mentioned before about a very big project you are involved in. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Respondent S: Yes. So the airport's spending £1bn on basically on re-developing [states project]. The first element of that will open this year with the rest following on. It has been a huge undertaking. It was announced the week before I started here and then it was basically a year or so of planning permissions and things like that. And then from July 17 was when building work started inside. So it has been a really exciting project to work on and from a comms perspective it has been a really interesting one to be involved with because of the amount of stakeholders on it. There is a communications steering group set up. So as well as our team (the project) have their own comms team. There are three people in their comms team and each week I meet with them plus internal comms plus the two biggest contractors as well who are working on it. We have our comms meeting once a week. Funnily enough, (the project team) has been swallowed up and is moving across and is reporting to our corporate affairs director. So in terms of the work we've got to do, I lead on the external relations side. That's all the press bit but also social media that we have got someone who looks after customer focused communications. Then we have got someone who looks after the business communications. That's more the different stakeholders on site – airlines and handling agents – because there are lots of changes in terms of 'well, you can't walk that way now' and the car parks have changed and operating procedures have changed and the airfield has changed. There's a lot of comms in terms of technical stuff that has gone out and there is a head of stakeholder engagement for the project as well. But we work really closely and we have one big comms plan that we are all aligned to because we all know what's going out where, to who and when and that it all fits and we are all signing off the same hymn sheet and it has been really exciting to work on really.

CS: Now I am thinking back a long time, but there always used to be a perception that the digital and social channels were great if you work in an office role, but it's more difficult if you are out in an operational field, so maybe different types of communication are required, depending on your job at the airport. Is that still a factor or have things moved on now with mobile devices etc?

Respondent S: A lot has obviously changed with mobile devices. I think our internal comms team has set up pages on Facebook so they can use that. They take news from us as a press office and they put that on there and then they also put on any internal notices, staff offers and things like that on the Facebook channel. Again I think we have encouraged a lot of people to use this new app so about 8,000 people have downloaded the app in the last month or so. There are 25,000 people who work on site so it is only a third but it is getting there.

CS: Significant numbers?

Respondent S: Yeah. So a lot of people are using that to get their news. I think our internal comms team works hard as does the B2B Comms people to keep people updated on the project. A lot of it is going out to different sites around the airport, staff bulletins and briefings and things like that and making sure they are aware so in some ways with those remote workers who don't have access to email even there are different bulletins that will go out from our internal comms team in that way. If they don't have access to that it is those traditional ways of you have got to get out there

and you have to communicate. There is a lot of work with the team leaders across the business to make sure the information is being disseminated and they have got that to hand so they can do their job and feel engaged as well in the project.

CS: So it sounds like old-school face-to-face PR?

Respondent S: Yeah, there is still a lot of briefings that are going on so because it is 12 weeks to the opening, we had our last comms meeting at the end of last week and the internal comms guys were saying ‘right we are going to have to do about 20 to 30 different briefings between now and April when it opens. We are looking at can we do staff tours with different people? They feel like they are coming on the journey as well because it’s a huge moment – the biggest investment the airport has ever made in its infrastructure. It’s no secret, we have had a difficult couple of years in terms of we have continued to grow but the infrastructure hasn’t necessarily coped with that. And it’s the staff – particularly the frontline staff – who bear the brunt of the disgruntled travellers.

CS: Yeah.

Respondent S: So it’s taking them on that journey so they can feel proud about working at the airport still and they can see ‘you know what, it is tough but we can see a better day is coming.’

CS: Short-term pain for long-term gain. Maybe we can then move on [names respondent] to talk about the development of knowledge and when you said before about the apprentices bringing the information back from their...do they have weekly training?

Respondent S: It is weekly or fortnightly sessions when they go to the [names training provider] in the city centre.

CS: Ok.

Respondent S: Who they do the apprentice scheme with. So [names apprentice] did a 12-month course and she kind of like graduated and got the permanent job and we have got [names the apprentices] who are on 18-month extended apprenticeships. *Discussion of the possibility of making the role(s) permanent.* It’s more an investment by the business that actually we are keeping them after they have gone through these apprenticeships because we are seeing the value of them. But they go out and when they come back we have weekly meetings and they are tasked with telling us what’s happening, what can we do, come up with some ideas and things like that. Myself and the press office manager kind of act as a sounding board in terms of ‘right we can make that work. This is who you need to go and speak to.’ Things like that. Yeah it’s quite interesting learning from what they are doing and different things. It has changed since we started working.

CS: Yeah and I suppose if you like they are the Gen Z’s now (laughs).

Respondent S: They are all under 25. It is interesting and they have got different takes on things. What we think might be a good idea, they are quite happy to go ‘I don’t think that will work anymore.’ Or this is kind of like the level of engagement.

Again, it's understanding what is happening on our channels. We will do demographic reports in terms of the followings on each of our channels and then what is the right channel for those different things. So we sometimes find that polls work better on Facebook or on Twitter and they are not as popular and things like that. So it is understanding that and who is going to be responding at what time. They do a lot of work behind the scenes in terms of analysing that so we know we are putting out content at the right times.

CS: I am interested in Manchester. I know you are a bit further out from the city centre than other respondents but you still have the Manchester community, if you like, to share some of the knowledge. Do you think that's advantageous? There is a lot of digital and social going on in Manchester. You know, the economy is growing, there are more agencies, more people involved in this. Do you think that's advantageous if you are based in Manchester?

Respondent S: Definitely, and there is a lot of knowledge sharing within the community. So you will always see different events going on by different agencies and the CIPR and PRCA and things like that in terms of events. So again we will keep an eye on those and if we feel there is anything that is relevant or we think we will particularly benefit from we will always try and *get along* to them. So definitely and I think there is a lot of time you can speak to people across these agencies and gain ideas. I think we are in a lucky position in terms of the airport. It's quite highly regarded by other professionals so they are willing to talk to you about different ideas and stuff like that so it's welcoming. We kind of like have meetings as well with different transport operators. So we are involved in comms discussions with the likes of TFGM, First Trans-Pennine Express, things like that. So there is lots of knowledge sharing there. Events, like the awards dos and things like that, you always get the chance to catch up and find out what's going on with them.

CS: I have been asking the respondents if they see any future trends, anything that's in the pipeline. Is there anything emerging that you can see as being significant in this area?

Respondent S: I think from our side I know in the next kind of year or two, our big focus is treating ourselves as our own publisher. So you don't have to go direct to the press. Because we find that we have got such a sizeable audience on our social media channels that it is bigger than the numbers who pick up, for instance, the Manchester Evening News, or one of the national newspapers. So it's getting into the mindsight that what wasn't necessarily a story from a press release, we can turn something around, for example, on our own platforms now and use those and I think it is making use of more video content and things like that. Similar to what I suppose newspapers have done, almost like doing TV reporting from the scenes and things like that is actually doing it ourselves and not being afraid to do it like that. Not thinking newspaper first and I think that's probably the biggest area we will be focusing on over the next 12 to 18 months. We have started in many ways in terms of the updates we have provided. We've found that actually if we put certain things on social channels and the blog that they get picked up by media anyway.

CS: Ok, yeah.

Respondent S: So effectively we are getting lots of bites of the cherry. It works well for us.

CS: I am interested to know where we are at overall because I think it was about 2004 people started talking about Web 2.0. We have gone through various phrases. There are lots of things that have happened. Certain channels have risen and fallen. There has been a lot of talk about that things are moving more quickly than they have ever done before. How do you see it, having gone through quite a few of the years leading up to now? Where do you think we are at the moment in terms of digital and social?

Respondent S: It's quite an interesting time really cos there is obviously a bit of backlash as well in terms of some of the channels. So you look at Facebook and the different changes they have made to the algorithms and things like that and we have found sometimes you do have to invest in paid social so we will do that around certain campaigns and things like that if there is the budget available. They will continue to grow because I think people rely on them now for information. In particular, Twitter. You see that in terms of breaking news. I don't think there's a platform, at the moment anyway, that can compete with how quickly news comes out via Twitter. It's changed a lot. When I first started PR it was more about promotion. And I think then there was a bit of a change when I moved to the job before this one. There was more around building that social community and the engagement. I think there is a lot of interest around content. I suppose in my last agency we hired someone specifically in the role of content strategy manager and I think that is quite an interesting take. It is not just coming up with a funny gif or meme and things like that, it is actually the strategy behind that and how does that fit with the brand you are working on? I suppose that comes back to that point I was talking about earlier in terms of the channels have to be relevant for us and we need to be putting out content that is relevant to people who are on those channels. And so we do have kind of a social media strategy that we work on. In the same way we have a PR strategy and a public affairs strategy. There has been a bit of a backlash around Facebook, but I think predominantly it's what customers use and I think more and more actually what we've seen is that when the channels came back to us and we started using them more frequently and taking part in conversations with customers and also helping with customer queries and things like that it has actually taken calls away from our call centre. And so, like I said, people see it as the first stop. If they don't want to phone an 0800 number and press seven different options when they know 'oh, I'll just tweet them'. They expect a response and I think that's why we work hard with the operational to make sure we can get responses as quickly as possible because if we can alleviate the pressure off the call centre then it helps them in terms of doing the other jobs that they have to do as well.

CS: Yeah. Now just a couple of final points and one that we touched on before we started the interview, that is convergence. There is certainly a feeling among a number of the respondents that the traditional lines between PR and marketing have become so blurred now that you have just got to think of it as being one big industry with different specialisms within it which overlap and are very much based on what you are trying to achieve in terms of the project, or the client or whoever. Is that something you've found or do you think there is still specific functions here?

Respondent S: I think here there are still specific functions. We work incredibly closely with the marketing team. They sit just the other side from our desks. We meet with them on a near daily basis and we are forever going between desks because we work really closely on all the campaigns. I think they still hold the budget (laughs). If you compare budget pots it would be ridiculous. But they ultimately work...I mean here it is split up so the aviation marketing team and then there is a separate marketing division within our digital division which sits completely separate from [names company] now. That is part of [discusses structure].

CS: Oh yeah.

Respondent S: That's a development I haven't really touched on but we have set up a digital division [names digital division]. It sits completely separately. They set it up so it functions like a digital agency in Manchester. So for example, it's no uniform as such. It is dress down every day and there are sofas, coffee machines, there's a gym. Those kind of perks you would expect from a city centre digital agency. And they look after specific areas so they look after lounge marketing, they look after car park marketing which are seen as group functions as opposed to just the airport. It's funny. They have hired a number of different roles over the last couple of years that blur the boundary between where we work already. So for example they have hired an influencer marketing manager which has always been kind of in our remit. So we work with bloggers and kind of people on social media. So that's kind of changed. I think in terms of aviation marketing which is kind of the bread and butter of what we do, it's separate but we work very closely and we are fully aware of everything that's going on within each other's business areas. And I think over the last few years there is a lot more alignment to what we do so it's a lot more strategically planned whereby if they're doing something and we see it and go 'hold on we are going to be talking to that group of stakeholders there' and things like that. So the aviation marketing function at the moment their big focus is out of catchment area, so focusing on kind of like Leeds and Birmingham, Newcastle, Cumbria.

CS: Oh yeah.

Respondent S: Rather than actually the North West of England because we figure predominantly you are going to fly from Manchester anyway because it is the biggest airport, more routes and everything like that. It's picking those passengers from those outlying areas. So we are doing a lot of work with that. So, for example, our public affairs team are doing an awful lot of working going and seeing business leaders in Yorkshire and Birmingham and things like that to get them on board and find out what they need from the airport, and how particularly functioning around the Northern Powerhouse and rail and things like that. So we have done a lot of aligned activity with Marketing with events and things like that. We will piggy back on each other in terms of 'right, they are holding an event for that week, we'll get our stakeholders to go to that event.' So there's a lot more joined-up thinking.

Interview ends 35.11

Appendix vii – Example of an interview coded using NVivo

Interview full transcript Interview E

CS: Thanks for agreeing to participate. We are obviously going to be discussing digital communications. And if we could just start off by telling me a little bit about your role.

Respondent E: Sure

CS: About how you're involved in digital communications yourself.

Respondent E: OK. So my role is to head up a PR and Marketing search teams plural. Predominantly, I am involved in the PR element or business unit. So it's involved in the kind of strategic planning of campaigns, the execution in terms of the agreed deliverables with the client. Negotiating with the client, but also new business as well in terms of doing our own PR, our own marketing and our own sales and developing sales collateral as well. There is an operational side of things that is involved with overall admin and management of the team, but predominantly it's client-facing work and almost board level, certainly director level, discussions with the clients about how the campaign is going. How to improve it. How to make it better or to carry on doing what we are doing.

CS: Now with some organisations dealing with digital communications, digital communications is part of the overall picture, but with you I think it is the picture isn't it?

Respondent E: Absolutely, yeah. Absolutely everything we do with our PR campaigns is with the goal of driving visitors to our clients' websites. Historically, we did a kind of traditional PR which was engaging with journalists, securing coverage, but with the development of the internet and certainly with the development of analytic software and website content management systems our goals now are to deliver PR campaigns which are focused at specific vertical sectors. We work in business to business so we target specific business sectors and verticals with an idea to place an article or a blog or a press release and the ultimate goal is to have a link in there, in the story, which drives the reader back to our client's website. That could be on a dedicated landing page on a client's website and therefore we measure the impact on that landing page or it's to a specific product page. We also do social media as well and use analytic software to track referrals from different platforms whether it is a LinkedIn profile or a page on LinkedIn or even LinkedIn Groups which are good for communicating business messages because you have a targeted audience and you can filter based on the administration of that group who's involved and you get a better pool of people who are targeted to your buyer personas as it were. And then Twitter, but Twitter more for amplification of messages, but still it is a driver of traffic and interest. And we use Twitter almost as a validation point. A lot of businesses and prospects, when you go through your checklist of is this business a real business, you look at certain things. OK, they've got a good website. They might have some information on the website. Do they have social media profiles? How many employees are on LinkedIn etc, etc. Twitter is just one kind of tick in a box as it were. Do they have a Twitter profile? Is it recent? What is it saying? Is it all about them? Is it a mixture of news and their own promotional content? These are all what we would say are judgement criteria to the validity of a

Appendix viii Codebook

Nodes 64 viable codes that have been identified in the corpus

Name	Description	Files	References
Blessing and curse of social and digital	Good and bad.	7	8
“Digital dismissive”	Disillusioned or unable to access social and digital and therefore dismiss it.	3	3
“Predominantly press”	The press officer role	1	1
Water-cooler best practice	Learning through informal discussions in the workplace.	7	9
Adaptability	The "agile practitioner".	4	4
Always on	No time to switch off	4	5
Amplification	Used extensively by one respondent. Could "Head of Amplification" become a job role?	1	1
Authenticity and transparency	Honest, clear and open	9	11
Big Data		2	2
Business growth	Through all channels	2	2
Career break	Such as maternity leave and the impact on gaining and updating knowledge	3	3
Continuous improvement and change	A quality demonstrated as a matter of course	12	18
Coverage	Outputs	4	5
Culture of the digital agency	Working practices, dress codes. How "we" do things in an agency	3	3

Name	Description	Files	References
De-mystifying	Making the complex simple	4	4
Digital at the heart of everything	As opposed to a bolt-on	8	10
Digital hubs of excellence	Where expertise is clustered - eg in Manchester, London, Leeds	5	5
Digital hubs of excellence (see 'Engager')	Little value in this code	1	1
Distinction between PR, digital and social	How the functions are conceptualised in the organisation – and by the employee	5	6
Emerging trends	What they are and what they mean to the business - good and bad.	9	12
Engagement	As a quality. There is likely to be overlap with other codes	15	31
Face-to-face comms	Communication activities which include personal meetings with stakeholders. Referred to as "belly-to-belly marketing" by one respondent	11	14
Formal training	Formal training in relation to social, digital, using new software etc,	8	12
Fresh thinking and creativity	Qualities practitioners can bring to their job - internally and externally.	5	6
General relationship building	What comms is all about	0	0
Global issues	New business. Working with overseas partners. International challenges.	2	2
Inform and educate	The guiding philosophy of comms	2	2
Integration and alignment	Coming together, joined-up	3	4
Internal comms	Platforms, channels	8	15

Name	Description	Files	References
Issues of trolling and online bullying	Ugly side of social	2	2
Knowledge absorption	Learning by being aware of what is around you.	1	1
Legislation and regulation	Regulatory matters which affect the industry. GDPR was mentioned.	7	8
Limitation of traditional comms	"The press release is dead."	11	14
Managing Continuous change	Being an agent of change and dealing with its consequences strategically. See adaptability	6	12
Managing relationships with clients and colleagues	Overlap with the code in the green zone	12	23
Measurement and evaluation	Measure what matters. Make decisions from what you find out.	14	26
Mobile devices	Have had a huge impact on the comms role	5	5
Networking	Online and offline	8	9
Old-fashioned clients and colleagues	Resistance to change or concern at what the change could lead to.	4	6
Online materials	Such as webinars etc	6	6
Organisation as publisher	Organisation does not have to go through a gatekeeper	1	1
Organisation restricts access	And managing the challenges this causes eg no YouTube access in the NHS.	1	1
Paid media	"Pay to play".	3	3
Passionate practitioner	"Passion" will be demanded. Especially if you work in an agency	8	9

Name	Description	Files	References
Practitioner 'homework'	Keeping up to date on what's going on outside the day job.	6	13
Practitioner as internal trainer	More formal than the water-cooler approach	2	2
Professional bodies	Eg CIPR and PRCA and their role in informing practitioners about changes in the industry	8	8
Professional practice	What the comms practitioner is doing to be professional	12	21
Quality and quantity balance	Is more necessarily better?	2	2
Recruitment	Particularly employees with digital and social skill sets	2	3
Resilience	Quality of being able to deal with pressures and demands of modern comms work	1	1
Savvy consumers	Who know more, expect more, demand more.	1	1
Sectoral expertise	Knowing the job,	5	6
Skill-sets	How good are practitioners at doing the doing?	10	20
Social media backlash	Closing Facebook accounts, for instance.	1	1
Tech giants reach out	The big agencies have open access to Facebook and Twitter because their clients spend so much in paid media.	1	1
Thought leadership	Leveraging expertise	1	1
Two-way communications	Desired comms with stakeholders	2	3
Unpredictability	Social and digital makes the comms role more unpredictable than ever.	0	0

Name	Description	Files	References
Using social to win Business	Through digital and social channels	6	11
Value of data	Using data to manage relationships, work plans, setting objectives etc.	3	3
Value of traditional comms	Old-school PR. Press releases, press kits etc.	13	28
Video	Its significance and why its significance might be growing.	6	10
What practitioners use	The tools, the platforms, channels	9	12
What's social and digital for	And how does it contribute to genuine business growth	17	44
Where do social and digital 'sit'	And how this impacts the business	5	7

Appendix ix A table of platforms, tools and technologies mentioned by the respondents

Example	Use	URL	Comments
LinkedIn	Thought leadership, client relations, new business development, recruitment	https://www.linkedin.com/mynetwork/	Consistently mentioned as a valuable platform for communicators
Twitter		https://twitter.com/login?lang=en-gb	Still important to a number of respondents, particularly in in-house roles.
Facebook Ads	Paid media	https://www.facebook.com/business	In one case the respondent said how Facebook worked with the agency and client to advise on the best way to leverage a campaign.
Facebook Crisis Response Centre	Mentioned as being particularly important during the Manchester Arena terrorism attacks	https://www.facebook.com/help/141874516227	
Facebook Workplace	Internal comms	https://work.facebook.com/company_creation/	Considered as being a user-friendly intranet. Employees who already use Facebook at home might be prepared to engage with it at work
Facebook Fundraisers	Fundraising	https://www.facebook.com/fundraisers	Has had significant impact on charity sector
Facebook Live	Live streaming of events	https://live.fb.com/	Popular with agencies and

			brands, especially when there is a launch
WhatsApp	Used for informal internal comms or for contacting media and clients	https://www.whatsapp.com/	
Passle	Blog-related software	https://home.passle.net/	One of the respondents mentioned this extensively in her interview
Sharepoint	Intranets	https://support.office.com/en-us/article/what-is-sharepoint-97b915e6-651b-43b2-827d-fb25777f446f	
Microsoft Teams	Collaboration	https://products.office.com/en-us/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software	
Instagram	Vital platform for agencies	https://www.instagram.com/?hl=en	Perception is that it is “cooler than Facebook” for Gen Z.
Justgiving	Provides marketing information for practitioners in the charity sector	https://www.justgiving.com/	
Skype	Video chat and voice calls	https://www.skype.com/en/	Is a time and money saver for consultants who need to keep in contact with clients.
Webinars	Important in terms of upskilling	See range of WARC webinars	
Snapchat	Multi-media messaging app	https://www.snapchat.com/l/en-gb/	Popular for practitioners who need to reach Gen Z.
Hubspot	Software products and analytics. Also free guidance, blogs etc	https://offers.hubspot.com/	Mentioned by two respondents. An essential source for one respondent.

Marketo	Marketing Automation software	marketo.com	Mentioned by one of the respondents when discussing lead generation
Pardot	B2B Marketing Automation	https://www.pardot.com/	Powered by Salesforce and mentioned by one of the respondents
Microsoft Dynamics	CRM software	https://dynamics.microsoft.com/	Mentioned by one of the respondents who was emphasising the importance of understanding CRM
Zoho	CRM software	https://www.zoho.eu	Mentioned by one respondent who said this was the sort of software that clients might use.
Salesforce	Cloud-based	https://www.salesforce.com/	Owns Pardot
Brandwatch	Social media monitoring software	https://www.brandwatch.com/	Mentioned by one of the Manchester-based respondents
Marketing Week	Business magazine and website	https://www.marketingweek.com/	Used for trends case studies and “upskilling”
Wordpress	Open-source content management system	https://wordpress.com	Mentioned by at least one respondent on creating websites
Pinterest	Social media web and application company	https://www.pinterest.co.uk/	Mixed views on Pinterest with one respondent emphasising its potential and one more sceptical. “What does it do that Instagram can’t?” seems to be the question

YouTube	Videos	http://www.youtube.com	Convenient way of uploading and sharing content. But access might be restricted, especially in the public sector
Slack	A cloud-based set of proprietary team collaboration tools and services.	http://www.slack.com	Regularly used by one respondent
Yammer	Enterprise social networking service used for private communication	https://support.office.com/en-us/article/sign-in-to-yammer-	
Email			Seems to be still important for e-mail marketing
Intranets	Internal comms		Three respondents doubted the value of intranets in the organisations
Future Learn	Digital Education Platform	https://www.futurelearn.com	Owned by the Open University and mentioned by one respondent as being helpful in communicating what can be done with digital.
GO-on	Government digital inclusion service	https://gds.blog.gov.uk/tag/go-on-uk/	Mentioned by one of the respondents whose role is digital training
Codecademy	Free coding classes	https://www.codecademy.com/	
Comms Hero	Networking events	https://commshero.com/HOME/index.html	Mentioned by one respondent as a beneficial

			way of networking and sharing best practice in peer groups.
Google Big Brain	AI team	https://ai.google/research/teams/brain	Mentioned by one respondent as a way to keep in touch with emerging trends
Google Squared	Digital training	http://www.wearesquared.com	
Final Cut Pro	Video editing software	https://www.apple.com/uk/final-cut-pro/	Important tool for one of the respondents whose work includes lots of technical implementation
Photoshop	Picture editing software	https://www.adobe.com/uk/products/photoshop .	
Facetime	FaceTime is a proprietary videotelephony product developed by Apple Inc	https://support.apple.com/en-gb/HT204380	Use for communicating with colleagues and clients who are out of the office
Weibo	Chinese microblogging site	http://www.weibo.com	
The Drum	News for the marketing and media industries	https://www.thedrum.com/	To keep up to date with industry news
Campaign Monitor	Campaign Monitor	https://www.campaignmonitor.com	
Evernote	Mobile app for note taking and organising tasks	https://evernote.com/	Used for gathering notes and documents related to good practice
Sprout social	Social media management software	https://sproutsocial.com/	Mentioned by one respondent
Trello	Web-based project management software (free)	https://trello.com/en-GB	
Kantar	Research, data, insight	https://www.kantar.com/	

Appendix x

Full transcripts of interview data – supplied as a separate document