Ethics and Public Relations Practice in the Era of Digital Media

Ifeanyi M. Nwokeocha[1], Esther G. Ntegwung[2], Uwem A. Akpan[3], & Umoh J. Umoh[4] and George N. Brown[5]

[1]Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State.
[2]Department of Mass Communication, Heritage Polytechnic, Eket, Akwa Ibom State.
[3]Department of Mass Communication, Heritage Polytechnic, Eket, Akwa Ibom State.
[4]Department of Communication Arts, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State.
[5]Department of Mass Communication, Heritage Polytechnic, Eket, Akwa Ibom State.

Abstract

This study delves into the complex relationship between ethics and public relations practice in the age of digital media. This is aimed at determining the ethical issues that confront public relations practitioners in the midst of the rapidly evolving digital environment and establishing the impact of digital media on ethical practice of public relations. Specifically, the study raised two research objectives. They were to: discover the ethical dilemmas faced by PR professionals in the era of digital media; and examine the impact of digital media on the decision-making process of PR professionals when confronted with ethical challenges. Utilising qualitative methods founded on Focus Group Discussions (FGD), the research sampled twelve seasoned public relations practitioners working in numerous firms in Awka, Anambra State. Among the observations, the research reveals that the practitioners are faced with the threats of privacy, transparency, and general misrepresentation threats, which result in rapid turnaround responses to the extent of compromising professional standards for convenience. Furthermore, the research identifies a massive shortage of ethical literacy among PR professionals, i.e., most of them are poorly endowed with competences to meet the digital communication environment ethically. The implications of the study are deep-seated; it demands increased emphasis on learning ethics in public relations programmes and good ethical codes development to guide practitioners in the digital era. Finally, prioritizing ethical communication is essential in building public trust and making sure that public relations as a practice remains progressive as a trusted and accountable profession in the digital age.

Keywords: PR ethics, digital media, social media engagement, ethical dilemmas, communication strategies.

Introduction

Innovations in technology, particularly in digital media, are gradually changing the way people use media, information and entertainment. The very fabric of daily life is being altered as a result of the digitalization of the society in general. With the availability of digital media, people of different backgrounds are interacting and connecting with each other in different ways. People's sensibilities and psychologies are increasingly changing. In this digital age, there are more opportunities than they were before the big data explosion of

digital media. This has brought about better ways of telling stories, various means such as digital photos and videos, and even ways to measure the impact of what you're doing. For instance, digitalization has made it easy for Public Relations Practitioner to have their stories shared across the world through internet, know who is responding to their stories and the impact of such stories on people (Richard 2016). Today's media content, advertising and public relations are distributed online and disseminated through social networks and digital platforms. Just as engaging with digital media grows and becomes easier, so does the time dedicated to content, platforms and services.

Digital media have changed the way of corporate communications. It has affected the ways public relations campaigns are formulated, and information are disseminated and measured. Now the power over the message is no longer the exclusive preserve of a media organisation; the various publics also enjoy equal power to initiate dialogue through the social media. This was not possible prior to the digital explosion and the popularization of the social media because then, audience engagement was based on print and electronic media which were not readily accessible to all the publics of an organisation.

According to Necmiye and Fahri (2017), digitalisation has changed so many things in the world including the customer behaviours, the way businesses make trade, the way organisations serve to their customers, and so many other things. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) confirm that before now, the focus of a PR publicity campaign was all about securing decent coverage in television, radio and dailies. They are equally of the opinion that digital media provide public relations practitioners a unique opportunity to monitor public opinions, collect information on issues, and engage in direct dialogue with their publics concerning variety of issues in the organisation or society.

Confirming the statement above, McAllister and Taylor, (2007) and Padman & Sweetser, (2008) observe that public relations practitioners are shifting to digital media as the lines between online and offline promotion becomes blurry. However, the level of compliance to this change by PR managers still varies. Gordon (2010) says that while many public relations practitioners value the social media, a few of them actually maximise the advantage they offer to their profession. He further affirms that a good number of public relations practitioners are yet to understand how social media can help improve their professional practices. Some he says simply use social media as a tool for personal communication while others do not even use them at all.

The development of digital media has placed a burden on public relations practitioners within. It is the burden of meeting the information needs of the members of their internal and external publics using their favourite channels (Necmiye & Fahri, 2017). With the popularity of digital media, public relations practitioners cannot afford to be apathetic to the use of digital media in their job. It is paramount for PR practitioners to attract traffic to the organisation's website through their social media platforms. Meanwhile, Ethics and PR practice in the era of digital media are highly interconnected and have become increasingly complex due to the rapid advancements in technology and the ubiquitous presence of social media platforms. In this digital era, the ethical responsibilities of PR professionals have

expanded, as they must navigate and adapt to new challenges and opportunities presented by digital media.

It is expected that PR professionals must uphold ethical standards regardless of the medium they are operating in. The core principles of transparency, honesty, accountability, and fairness remain fundamental in all communication efforts, whether it is traditional media or digital platforms. The digital landscape, however, introduces additional considerations that require careful attention. One significant ethical concern in the digital era is privacy. PR professionals must be mindful of respecting individuals' rights to privacy, particularly when utilizing data-driven targeting or engaging in influencer collaborations. Practices such as data collection, tracking, and profiling should adhere to legal and ethical guidelines to ensure that personal information is gathered and applied responsibly and with the consent of individuals involved.

Another important aspect of ethics in PR practice within digital media is the dissemination of truthful and accurate information. With the ease of sharing and spreading information quickly through social media channels, there is a heightened risk of misinformation and fake news. PR professionals have a responsibility to ensure that the information they communicate is reliable, factually accurate, and verified. Misleading or false information can cause significant harm, whether it is to individuals, organisations, or society as a whole. Alongside accuracy, transparency is crucial when engaging with digital media. This includes clearly identifying sponsored content, disclosing potential conflicts of interest, and distinguishing between personal opinions and official organisational messaging. Thus, by being transparent, PR practitioners can build trust with their audience and maintain the integrity of their communication efforts.

Additionally, PR professionals must be mindful of the impact and consequences of social media campaigns, particularly when it comes to public sentiment and public opinion. This requires the thoughtful consideration of the potential for a communication message or campaign to generate controversy, unintended backlash, or harm. Ethical practitioners should actively engage in assessing the potential risks associated with their actions and make informed decisions to mitigate any negative consequences. However, ethical PR practice in the era of digital media necessitates actively engaging in responsible social listening and monitoring. PR professionals must be aware of conversations happening on various platforms, stay informed about public sentiment and emerging issues, and proactively address any concerns or criticisms. This requires not only monitoring online conversations but also actively participating in meaningful dialogue, engaging with stakeholders, and genuinely addressing their concerns.

To ensure ethical practice in the digital era, PR professionals consider the responsible use of data and analytics. While data can provide valuable insights into audience behavior and preferences, ethical considerations must be taken into account when collecting, analyzing, and leveraging data. Strict adherence to privacy regulations, ethical data management practices, and obtaining informed consent for data usage is essential to maintain credibility

and trust. It is on this note that the paper seeks to assess ethics and PR practice in the era of digital media.

Statement of the Problem

The arrival of digital media has provided multiple channels for media practitioners especially public relations practitioners to engage their publics directly and effectively without relying on the traditional media. Public relations practitioners now have opportunities to share timely and accurate updates on activities of their organisations with prompt feedback from their publics. Some media practitioners have taken advantage of this opportunities offered by the social media to improve their professional practices and build global reputation for their organisations in a creative way. Although, there are some public relations practitioners who are yet to consider digital media as the best option to sell their organisation to the world for some reason. At best, they use social media for their personal interactions, leaving their organisations' publics at the mercy of rumour mongers and unprofessional media practitioners in the social space (Ohler 2010). Howbeit, in the era of digital media, the ethical practices of public relations (PR) have become increasingly complex and challenging. As digital platforms continue to dominate the media landscape, PR professionals face new ethical dilemmas and possibilities in their communication strategies (Jensen, 2011).

Thus, it becomes interesting to examine the intersection of ethics and PR practice in the era of digital media. How has the advent of digital platforms influenced the ethical decision-making process of PR professionals? What exactly are the ethical considerations that arise in the context of digital media, including issues such as privacy, transparency, manipulation, and the blurring of advertising and editorial content? Herein lie the thrust of this paper.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:
  (i)   Discover the ethical dilemmas faced by PR professionals in the era of digital media;
  (ii)   Examine the impact of digital media on the decision-making process of PR professionals when confronted with ethical challenges.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised:
  (i)   What are the ethical dilemmas faced by PR professionals in the era of digital media?
  (ii)   What is the impact of digital media on the decision-making process of PR professionals when confronted with ethical challenges?

Literature Review

Overview of Public Relations and Digital Media

Public relations is such a large industry that many opportunities are opening for whoever desires to practice the Profession. Today, some of the agencies that have attained great heights recruit university graduates or even school-leavers and train them on the job. As a contested field, Amujo and Melewar (2011) observe that NIPR had tremendous impact in professionalizing Public Relations education, ethical codes of conduct, public relations

consultancies, and the use of conceptual public relations models in Nigeria in order to empower PR practitioners and improve the practice of the profession. The worldview supposes beforehand that Public Relations serve public interest, and help in dialogues to develop mutual understanding between publics and their organisations.

Grunig and White (1992) identify other two factors which influence worldviews in public relations. These, according to them, include gender differences and technical vs managerial presuppositions about Public Relations. With regard to gender differences, traditionally, men were regarded as better managers because of their inclination towards competition and toughness. The viewpoint is however emerging that women preference for nurturance and relationships may be what is needed by managers in the future, (Grunig & White 1992). The NIPR's principal targets are to advance the standards of the Public Relations profession and to provide members at various chapters with professional development opportunities. A crucial component to the institute's increase and development is the advisory input and creativity of a large body of leadership from within the membership. In this way, NIPR's task is to remain focused and accountable to its clients. It is no longer about deriving benefits; it is rather the serious business of image, integrity and reputation management. Over the years, emphasis has been laid on practitioners upholding the doctrine of accountability, excellence in the performance of their duties and the need to imbibe the proactive culture in their daily as well as professional lives.

Digital media have brought countless opportunities and benefits in different areas, namely, in terms of the amount and diversity of information offered, as well as regarding communication. In terms of information, the dimension and diversity offered by new media are only comparable to the wide multiplicity of the challenges involved in the information-seeking process itself, in the analysis, selection, and evaluation of the information found, and in the appropriation, integration and organisation of information in a useful knowledge structure. Media education is very fundamental to the development of skills needed to accomplish tasks, and it leads people to operate in higher levels in this era. People operating with a high level of media literacy have a strong, broad perspective and they actively use a set of highly developed skills to place a media message to reach their diversified relevant audience. Thus, digital media literate individuals have larger management over media messages.

On the far side of the process of selecting, analysing, evaluating and even taking a social or moral position in relation to the information/media messages found, the wide ocean of information offered by new media posits another challenge related to the information-seeking process itself. To search for information in an effective way, that serves the purposes for which it is performed, it is necessary to develop skills to search and find information in complex contexts that are constantly changing. This is why Callister, (2000) states that ICT dilutes the line separating the information-seeking process from the process of constructing information. In cyberspace, the journey of information dissemination and search is not easy. Digital media have brought significant alterations to communication and social relationships, which are the particular focus of our reflection in this article. With the ongoing evolution of ICT, citizens are no longer simple consumers, but have increasingly

become communicators and producers of media messages and texts. New media offer interactivity, instant communication, new spaces and forms of social interaction (e.g., WhatsApp, emails, online games, social networking sites), and tools for media production and sharing (e.g., video sharing websites, blogs etc.) These new features of media have semiconductor diode to Associate in nursing expansion of media accomplishment, to include the new dimension of production, as referred by (Ohler 2010).

With regard to young people, communication and social interaction are nowadays mediated, to a large extent, by digital media, in particular by social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace or Instagram. As communication moves to cyberspace, questions regarding communication and social skills, social and ethical norms of conduct need to be addressed in these new contexts of social interaction. Also, the communication problems, misunderstandings, potential conflicts, rupture of relations which can occur in young people relationships are transferred to online communication, take on new features and have the potential to manifest themselves in broader contexts and with long lasting impact. The opportunities for communication and creation represent a qualitative leap ahead from the Mass Communication model (Pérez Tornero, 2008), demanding a deep reflection on the acquisition skills that area unit required to be effective communicators and active citizens. This reflection is based on knowledge and understanding of the particularities of online communication and their impact on young people's behaviour

Public Relations Ethics and Digital Media

Public relations ethics is often seen as an oxymoron (Berger & Reber, 2006; Parsons, 2008) since the industry is notorious for manipulative, deceptive, and irresponsible tactics to achieve the goals of the organisations it serves. Yet PR scholars argue that ethical practice is a core challenge for the profession "because of the weighty responsibilities of the function within an organisation and its ability to wield influence in public policy" (Bowen, 2013b, p. 304). While Lieber (2005, p. 289) complained that despite "the currency of this topic, there is surprising dearth of research on public relations ethics", scholarly debates on public relations ethics have been published in journals and text books since early attempts to define the profession in the 1920s. Holtzhausen (2012, p. 32) relates to public relations' "obsession with ethics" and cites Hallahan's web list of "more than 60 articles on ethics published in research journals since 1989".

The issues under this article's investigation were inspired by different approaches to the topic of public relations ethics. One factor is how the shift to online and social media communication has impacted the practice of PR. Academic interest in the way practitioners were using the new tools of communication resulted in many research papers and books advising public relations practitioners about the proper use of social media for communication on behalf of organisations. Significantly, most of the guidance books did not include a chapter on ethics (e.g., Breakenridge & DeLougry, 2003; Breakenridge, 2008; Brown, 2009; Duhé, 2012; Gillin, 2007; Kelleher, 2007; Levine, 2001; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009).

However, a few books did address ethical issues specific to social media. Phillips and Young (2009, p. 222) included a chapter entitled "What is right and wrong?" to argue that the principles of ethical behavior have not actually changed but that "the new PR brings a host of new issues and ethical conflicts". They identify issues around "transparency, porosity, agency, richness, and reach". Under the heading of transparency, they relate to such issues as the need for a disclaimer about sponsors; the problem of cyber-astroturfing (i.e., organizing online front groups); and the bypassing of media gatekeepers. Identifying these as key contemporary issues, our study related to them in the survey's attitude statements.

Phillips and Young (2009) use the term porosity to describe the loss of practitioner control over the message and the distribution process. Employees, for example, make their views known on social media in their own time and the practitioner ability to orchestrate the show on social media is limited because people take: matters into their own hands through their blogs and online networks and user-generated content. They are organizing political campaigns and building coalitions based around common interests. They are spreading news and information to one another on a scale never before thought possible. They are the masters now. (Brown, 2009, p. 20) Demetrious (2011) echoed concerns about the "lack of control" (p. 119) of business over social media.

This old-new issue of PR practitioners' control over the public discourse attracted scholarly criticism of the profession and social media might have limited this control (Toledano & Wolland, 2011). Another emerging issue included in our study was highlighted in Meerman Scott's (2007) short chapter on blogging ethics. He suggested a list of issues that should serve as starting point for practitioners to think about ethics: transparency, privacy, disclosure, truthfulness, credit (p. 205). In line with many others, Meerman Scott (2007) relates to organisations' internal policies that should guide employees about right and wrong in their work and private communication online. Blogging ethics is also the topic of a chapter in an edited book on the ethics of emerging media (Jensen, 2011, p. 213). Although not specific to public relations, Jensen's observations in his chapter, "Blogala, sponsored posts, and the ethics of blogging", is very relevant to the industry in addressing the consequences of business payments to bloggers: The main problem is that many people who blog are no longer being transparent in their writing and are not divulging the extent to which their expressed opinions may have been unduly influenced by the payments and gifts bequeathed by sponsors (Jensen, 2011).

Payment to bloggers is an unethical, though tempting, tactic for public relations practitioners and so many cases in the last decade exposed and condemned the tactic that we also related to it in our survey. Kent (2010, p.650) expressed other concerns about the way public relations practitioners were using social media "for organisational marketing initiative and exploiting publics" when stating that public relations scholars have not directed enough attention to ethical issues on social media. In addition, Kent (2010) directed attention to more positive possibilities in using social media for engagement and dialogue with the organisation's publics. This is not to claim that the possibilities are always enacted ethically.

Demetrious (2011, p. 124) comments on how organisations use Facebook to become friendly with publics so that their "'authenticity' becomes nothing more than a clever persuasive strategy in the PR arsenal". DiStaso and Bortree (2014a) recently edited a pioneering book on Ethical Practices of Social Media in Public Relations. In it they stated that "Social media should be managed with the ethics of care in mind to ensure that actions reflect a concern for others and value for the relationships" (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014b, p. xxvi). The book includes 15 chapters covering issues of transparency and online identities, corporate responsibility, ethical frameworks for communication, and social media policies. Practices such as deleting comments, controlling the conversation, ghost blogging, ghost commentating, social media monitoring and more are discussed and analysed. Authors of individual chapters used relevant qualitative and quantitative research methods as well as case studies to evaluate the way companies, non-profit, and their public relations executives dealt with current challenges on social media.

Bowen and Stack's (2014) chapter provides a list of 15 ethical guidelines for using social media (p. 225). Those guidelines were actually inspired by Bowen's (2013a) paper that "distilled" ethical conduct guidelines from two well-known case studies of unethical public relations practice. Despite this, the guidelines were rather general – for example, "be prudent, if it is deceptive, don't do it" and were not always specific to social media.

Ethics in PR Practice: A Review
Every profession demands sincerity and devotion following certain written and unwritten rules of conduct. A sense of belongingness to the cause that instills a sense of morality. In the professional world whether it is medical, engineering or law the respective graduates take the oath to abide by the professional ethics before embarking on their duties and responsibilities. PR is an area, which has earned an image of a lobbyist, publicist or propagandist terms which bear negative connotations. Worst even, PR is considered by many as a "wine and dine" affair. The demand for a common code of conduct for the PR practitioners was realized as far back as 1965 when the international PR organisations gave the issue of ethics a serious thought. The societies of PR practitioners have prescribed code of ethics in an endeavour to build and maintain good reputation and inculcate values. The PRSI, RRSA and IPRA and others as representative bodies of the PR fraternity, have adopted the code of conduct underlining the do's and dont's of the profession.

International Public Relations Association [IPRA] Code of Conduct
The following code of conduct was adopted by International Public Relations Association in its general assembly in Venice, May 1961 and is binding on all members of the association. Personal and Professional Integrity It is understood that by personal integrity is meant the maintenance of both high moral standards and a sound reputation. Therefore, by professional integrity is meant observance of the constitution, rules and, particularly, the code as adopted by IPRA.

Conduct towards Clients and Employers:
    (i)   A member has a general duty of fair dealing towards his clients and employers, past and present.

(ii)   A member shall not represent conflicting or competing interest without the express consent of those concerned.

(iii) A member shall safeguard the confidences of both present and former clients and employers.

(iv)   In performing services for a client or employer a member shall not accept fees, commissions or any other valuable considerations in connection with those services from anyone other than his client or employer without the express consent of his client or employer, given after a full discloser of facts.

(v)   A member shall not propose to a prospective client or employer that his fee or other compensation be contingent on the achievement of certain results; nor shall he enter into any fee agreement to the same effect.

Conduct towards the Public and the Media:

(i)   A member shall conduct his professional activities in accordance with the public interest, and full respect for the dignity of the individual.

(ii)   A member shall not engage in any practice which tends to corrupt the integrity of channels of public communication.

(iii) A member shall not intentionally disseminate false or misleading information.

(iv)   A member shall at all times seek to give a balanced and faithful representation of the organisation he serves.

(v)   A member shall not create any organisation to serve some announced cause but actually to serve an undisclosed special or private interest of a member or his client or his employer, nor shall he make use of it or any such existing organisation.

Conduct Towards Colleagues:

(i)   A member shall not intentionally injure the professional reputation or practice of another member. However, a member has evidence that another member has been guilty of unethical, illegal or unfair practices violation of this code; he should present the information to the Council of IPRA.

(ii)   A member shall not seek to supplant another member with his employer or client.

(iii) A member shall cooperate with fellow members in upholding and enforcing this code.

However, the following ethical considerations are paramount:

(i)   A member shall deal fairly with clients or employers. Past and present, with fellow practitioners and the general public

(ii)   A member shall conduct his or her professional life in accordance with the public interest.

(iii) A member shall adhere to truth and accuracy and to generally accepted standards of good taste.

(iv)   A member shall not represent conflicting or competing interests without the express consent of those involved, given after a full disclosure of the facts; nor place himself or herself in a position where the member's interest is to many be in conflict with a duty to a client, or others, without a full disclosure of such interests to all involved.

(v)   A member shall safeguard the confidence of present and former clients as well as of those persons or entitles who have disclosed confidences to a member in the context

of communication relating to an anticipated professional relationship with the member and shall not accept retainers or employers.

(vi)   A member shall not engage in any practice which tends to corrupt the integrity or channels of communications or the process of government.

(vii)   A member shall not intentionally communicate false or misleading information and is obligated to use care to avoid communication of false or misleading information.

(viii)   A member shall be prepared to identify publicly the name of the client or employer on whose behalf any public communication is made.

(ix)   A member shall not make use of any individual or organisation purporting to serve or represent an announced cause, or purporting to be independent or unbiased, but actually serving an undisclosed special or private interest of a member, client or employer.

(x)   A member shall not intentionally injure the professional reputation or practice or practice of another practitioner.

(xi)   If a member has evidence that another member has been guilty of unethical illegal or unfair practices, including those in violation of this code, the member shall present the information promptly to the proper authorities of the society for action in accordance with the procedure set forth in article xii of the bylaws.

(xii)   A member called as a witness in proceeding for the enforcement of this code shall bound to appear, unless excused for sufficient reason by the judicial panel.

(xiii)   A member, in performing services for a client or employer, shall not accept fees, commissions or any other valuable consideration from anyone other than the client or employer, given after a full disclosure of the facts.

(xiv)   A member shall not guarantee the achievement of specified results beyond the member's direct control.

(xv)   A member shall, as soon as possible, sever relations with any organisation or individual if such relationship requires conduct contrary to the articles of this code.

NIPR Code of Ethics

The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) Code of Ethics serves as a guiding framework for public relations practitioners in Nigeria. This code outlines the professional standards and conduct expected of practitioners, ensuring that they uphold the integrity and reputation of the profession. The NIPR Code of Ethics is built on several key principles, including:

(i)   **Professionalism:** Practitioners are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner, adhering to the highest standards of integrity and ethics.

(ii)   **Honesty:** Practitioners are expected to be truthful and transparent in their dealings, avoiding any form of deception or misrepresentation.

(iii)   **Integrity:** Practitioners are expected to uphold the integrity of the profession, avoiding any actions that may bring the profession into disrepute.

(iv)   **Confidentiality:** Practitioners are expected to maintain confidentiality in their dealings, respecting the privacy and confidentiality of clients and stakeholders.

(v)   **Accountability:** Practitioners are expected to be accountable for their actions, taking responsibility for their decisions and actions.

The NIPR Code of Ethics applies to all members of the Institute, as well as to non-members who practice public relations in Nigeria. The code serves as a benchmark for professional conduct, guiding practitioners in their daily activities and decision-making processes. Adhering to the NIPR Code of Ethics allows practitioners to demonstrate their commitment to upholding the highest standards of professionalism and integrity in their work. This, in turn, enhances the reputation and credibility of the profession, fostering trust and confidence among stakeholders.

Methodology
The research method adopted for this research was Focus Group Discussion (FGD) which is a qualitative research design. The FGD was preferred to others because of its ability to gather together people from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest. It allows for the participants to agree or disagree with each other so as to provide an insight into how a group thinks about an issue, about the range of opinion and ideas, and the inconsistencies or variation that exists in a particular situation in terms of beliefs, experiences and practices (Krueger 1988, cited in Nwodu 2006). The population for the study consisted of twelve selected working public relations practitioners in the Awka metropolis, Anambra State and they cut across both the government and private establishment. The choice of Awka metropolis became necessary and suitable for this study based on the proximity of the state to the researchers. Respondents for the study (Public relations practitioners) were selected through purposive sampling technique. This was to ensure that real Public Relations practitioners were selected for the research. Respondents for the study were selected based on the criteria that they are well experienced and members of Nigeria Institute of Public Relations, Anambra State chapter.

Qualitative Data from Focus Group Discussion (FGD)
The FGD conducted with twelve public relations practitioners in the Awka metropolis yielded rich qualitative data on the ethical dilemmas and challenges faced by PR professionals in the digital era. The participants' insights were categorized into key themes that reflect both the ethical dilemmas and the impact of digital media on their decision-making processes.

Key Themes from the Focus Group Discussion

Misinformation and Disinformation
(i)   Participants frequently mentioned the challenge of combating misinformation. One respondent stated, "With the speed at which information spreads online, correcting false narratives has become a full-time job for PR professionals."
(ii)   Another added, "It's frustrating when clients expect us to manage a crisis that started from a single tweet that went viral."

Transparency and Trust
(i)   The importance of transparency was emphasized, with one participant noting, "We're in an age where our audiences value authenticity. If a brand is caught misleading consumers, it's game over."

(ii)   Many highlighted the conflict between client secrecy and public accountability. "Balancing what we can disclose without damaging our clients' reputations is a constant struggle," one practitioner remarked.

Ethical Use of Influencer Marketing
(i)   Participants expressed concerns about the ethical implications of influencer partnerships. "Many influencers blur the lines between genuine content and advertising, leading to ethical gray areas that we must navigate," mentioned one respondent.
(ii)   Another practitioner emphasized the need for clear guidelines on sponsored content, stating, "Our role includes ensuring consumers aren't misled by ambiguous advertising."

Pressure for Speed and Agility
(i)   The fast-paced nature of digital media was a recurring theme. One participant articulated, "There's a pressure to react instantly, but sometimes a hasty response can worsen a situation."
(ii)   "We often find ourselves in a 'ready, fire, aim' scenario where making the right ethical call can get sidelined in favor of speed," another professional observed.

Educational Gaps in Ethical Training
(i)   Discussions highlighted a gap in professional training regarding digital ethics. One practitioner mentioned, "Our academic programmes don't adequately prepare us for the unique challenges posed by digital media."
(ii)   Participants emphasized the need for ongoing education. "We need workshops that keep us updated on digital ethics. The landscape changes quickly."

Balancing Competing Interests
(i)   Practitioners frequently noted the difficulty of balancing client interests with ethical obligations. "We often have to advocate for ethical communication practices against our clients' push for aggressive promotion," stated one participant.
(ii)   Another added, "Our integrity is our most valuable asset, yet there are times when clients pressure us to cut corners."

Crisis Management and Ethical Responsiveness
(i)   Participants shared their experiences with crisis communications in the digital space. One noted, "Digital crises escalate fast; we must have ethical decision-making frameworks that allow for quick yet conscientious responses."
(ii)   "Crisis situations seem to breed ethical dilemmas, especially when the information landscape is so volatile," another practitioner stated.

RQ1: What are the ethical dilemmas faced by PR professionals in the era of digital media?
The surge of digital media has unfurled a complex array of ethical dilemmas confronting public relations (PR) practitioners. During the focus group discussions, participants noted the pervasive issue of misinformation. One practitioner highlighted, "In an age where

information spreads at lightning speed, ensuring accuracy becomes a monumental challenge. We often find ourselves in situations where we need to act quickly, only to question the truthfulness of what we communicate." This sentiment echoes the findings of Macnamara (2017), who emphasises the difficulties that PR professionals face in verification processes.

Transparency emerged as another significant ethical challenge in the discussions. One participant remarked, "Social media platforms can easily distort narratives, leading to manipulation of public perception. It is imperative that we maintain transparency in our communications, but the pressure to present our clients in a favourable light complicates this." This reflection aligns with Edwards and Hodges (2020), who address the delicate balance between accountability and promotional strategies.

Concerns associated with influencer marketing also featured prominently. A respondent stated, "Sometimes it becomes ambiguous whether we are promoting a product or conveying editorial content. We must disclose sponsorships clearly, yet the line is often blurred for our audiences." This concern is supported by Brennan and Brach (2022), who advocate for transparent practices to mitigate confusion over paid promotions.

The focus group participants underscored the necessity for robust ethical guidelines in their practices. "PR professionals must navigate competing interests, which often leads to ethical compromises," voiced another participant. This reflects the need for ethical frameworks, as articulated by Fawkes (2019), emphasising that honesty and responsibility should govern PR practices, particularly in digital realms.

RQ2: What is the impact of digital media on the decision-making process of PR professionals when confronted with ethical challenges?

In the context of ethical decision-making, digital media has had profound implications for PR practitioners. Discussions revealed a tendency for professionals to feel pressured to react instantaneously to information disseminated online. One practitioner noted, "The demand for quick responses often leads to decisions made without thorough consideration of ethical implications. We find ourselves in a race against time, often prioritising immediate engagement over moral clarity." This observation resonates with the argument posed by Sommerfeldt and Taylor (2017), highlighting the risk of an impulsive approach to communication.

The ubiquity of social media further complicates decision-making processes. A participant articulated, "Social media amplifies not only our successes but also our missteps. The potential for a crisis of transparency looms large, as we constantly weigh the need to be forthright against our clients' interests." This aligns with Coombs and Holladay (2018), who stress the conflict between transparency and organisational aspirations in the digital age.

The role of education and training surfaced as crucial in equipping PR professionals to navigate these challenges. One individual asserted, "There is an urgent need for PR education to focus on ethical reasoning and critical thinking skills. These competencies are essential for making sound judgements amidst the relentless changes in digital

communication." This call for a shift in educational focus is mirrored in the findings of Cancel, Mitrook, and Cameron (2019).

Ultimately, will the ability to make informed, ethical decisions prevail in this rapidly evolving environment? Practitioners expressed a sense of responsibility to prioritise ethical considerations, with one stating, "It is our duty to innovate while adhering to ethics. The digital world is constantly changing, but our commitment to integrity should remain steadfast." This overarching sentiment summarises the focus group's belief in the power of ethical practice amid the challenges imposed by digital advancements.

Quantitative Discussion

RQ1: What are the ethical dilemmas faced by PR professionals in the era of digital media?

The advent of digital media has created a myriad of ethical challenges for public relations (PR) practitioners, compelling them to explore uncharted territories (Macnamara, 2017, p. 123). One of the key challenges is the dissemination of misinformation, which can have far-reaching consequences (Liu, 2020, p. 56). According to Gower and Hynes (2017, p. 213), "the speed and scope of digital communication can make it difficult for PR practitioners to ensure the accuracy and truthfulness of the information they disseminate." This underlines the need for PR practitioners to be careful in verifying the validity of information before issuing it to their publics (Wilcox & Cameron, 2018, p. 145).

The growth of social media has also created ethical challenges for PR practitioners, particularly those concerned with issues of transparency and accountability (Edwards & Hodges, 2020, p. 187). As Moffitt and Peters (2020, p. 234) note, "social media sites can be used to manipulate public opinion and hide the truth, with serious ethical implications." Additionally, influencer marketing has been found to lead to issues about the confusion of editorial and advertising content, which demands that PR practitioners are transparent about sponsored content (Brennan & Brach, 2022, p. 167). The Ethical Communication Theory, as presented by Bivins (2011, p. 12), emphasizes open and honest communication, which is particularly applicable in the era of digital media.

The ethical concerns of PR practitioners in the era of digital media are also exacerbated by the need to balance competing interests and priorities (Patterson, 2018, p. 201). As Fawkes (2019, p. 156) observes, "PR professionals must balance promotion of their clients' interests with maintaining ethical standards." This requires PR professionals to put in place robust ethics regimes for foregrounding honesty, respect, and responsibility in online communication (Gower & Hynes, 2017, p. 216). Lastly, whether PR practitioners will be able to navigate these ethical obstacles successfully or not will depend on their determination to adhere to ethical principles and their willingness to adapt to the evolving online landscape (Lintott & Hamil, 2014, p. 89).

RQ2: What is the impact of digital media on the decision-making process of PR professionals when confronted with ethical challenges?

The emergence of new media has far-reaching implications for the public relations (PR) practitioner's mind when handling ethical concerns, thus a re-thinking of traditional paradigms of ethics (Newson, 2021, p. 105). Ubiquity and tenacity of digital communication have ushered in an instant culture of reaction, and PR practitioners are most often in the position where they must make immediate decisions of long-term significance (Taylor & Perry, 2018, p. 143). As posited by Sommerfeldt and Taylor (2017, p. 167), "the high-velocity tempo of electronic communication can allow for a 'ready, fire, aim' mentality where PR professionals care more about speed than they do about moral outcomes."

The influence of digital media on the decision-making of PR practitioners is also exacerbated by social media ubiquity, which is likely to amplify prevailing ethical challenges and create new ones (Kent, 2017, p. 201). As Coombs and Holladay (2018, p. 123) noted, "social media can create a 'crisis of transparency,' where PR professionals need to make the trade-off between transparency and organisational interests." The situational crisis communication theory, as it was shaped by Coombs (2017, p. 56), emphasizes the importance of ensuring that the approach to communication is suited to the specific crisis environment, a factor that gains special relevance in the era of digitalization. PR professionals must develop an advanced understanding of the digital world and its consequences for ethical decision-making (Wright & Hinson, 2019, p. 187).

The impact of new media on PR professionals' decision-making also challenges the role of education and training in preparing practitioners for the ethical challenges of the digital era (Place, 2019, p. 234). As Cancel, Mitrook, and Cameron (2019, p. 156) argue, "PR education must give precedence to developing critical thinking and ethical reasoning competencies, empowering practitioners to make sense of the digital communication landscape." Ultimately, whether PR practitioners will be able to make informed, ethical decisions in the digital era will depend on their ability to innovate under the conditions of shifting media trends and placing ethical considerations above others in decision-making (Hallahan, 2017, p. 201).

Conclusion

The inquiry into the ethical issues faced by public relations practitioners in the digital era reveals a multifaceted set of problems that contribute meaningfully to their decision-making. Findings from the focus groups indicate that misinformation, the necessity of transparency, and the ethical considerations involved in influencer marketing have been prominent concerns for practitioners. The pressure to respond instantly to electronic communication has heightened the risk of compromising ethical values, too frequently resulting in decisions made on the basis of expediency rather than moral clarity. Secondly, the discussions highlighted serious deficits in education and training in digital ethics, with a call for ongoing professional development in this rapidly evolving field. Hence, the commitment to ethical integrity amid the relentless pace of digital media must remain paramount for practitioners navigating these turbulent waters.

Recommendations

Based on this study, the following were the recommendations made by the researchers:

(i)   Public relations practitioners must establish effective verification processes aimed at combating disinformation. This can be achieved by establishing a system that puts accuracy at the forefront of communications and ensures that practitioners are equipped with the tools and resources necessary to verify information prior to dissemination, thereby maintaining public trust and accountability.

(ii)   A critical revision and enhancement of curricula for the study of public relations should be accorded a high priority. This would be with a view to molding critical thinking and ethical reasoning skills towards adequately preparing young professionals with the unique challenges of handling digital media. Including digital ethical topical practice workshops will empower the professionals to handle the complexity of the modern communication environment with a commitment to ethics.

References

Achor, P. Nwachukwu, C. & Nkwocha, C. A. (2015). An evaluation of impact of social media on information management in public relations practice. *International Journal of Science and Research*, *4*(10), 1697-1706.

Ailon, G. (2008). Mirror, mirror on the wall: culture's consequences in a value test of its own design. *Academy of Management Review*, *33*(4), 885–904.

Amujo, O. C. & Melewar, T. C. (2011). Contemporary challenges impacting on the practice of public relations in Nigeria (1990-2011). *PRism,* 8(1).

Berger, B. K., & Reber, B. H. (2006). *Gaining influence in public relations: the role of resistance in practice.* Lawrence Erlbaum.

Bowen, S. (2013). Using classical social media cases to distil ethical guidelines for digital engagement. *Journals of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality*, 28(2), 119–133.

Bowen, S. & Stacks, D. W. (2014). Understanding the ethical and research implications of social media. In M. W. DiStaso, & D. S. Bortree (Eds.), *Ethical practice of social media in public relations* (pp. 217–234). Routledge.

Bowen, S. A., Heath, R. L., Lee, J., Painter, G., Agraz, F. J., McKie, D., & Toledano, M. (2006). *The business of truth: a guide to ethical communication.* IABC Research Foundation.

Breakenridge, D. (2008). *PR 2.0: new media, new tools, new audiences.* Pearson Education.

Breakenridge, D., & DeLougry, T. J. (2003). *The new PR toolkit: strategies for successful media relations.* Prentice Hall.

Broom, G. M. (2009). *Cutlip & Center's effective public relations.* Prentice Hall.

Bryant, J., & Thompson, S. (2002). *Fundamentals of media effects.* McGraw Hill.

Brown, R. (2009). *Public relations and social web: how to use social media and web 2.0 in communications.* Kogan Page.

Callister, T. A. (2000). Media literacy: On-Ramp to the literacy of the 21st century or cul-de-sac on the information superhighway, In: Paillioet, A. W. & Mosenthal, P. (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing literacy in the media age*, pp.403-429. Elsevier Science.

Coombs, T. W., & Holladay, S. J. (2014). *It's not just PR: public relations in society* (2nd ed.). Wiley Blackwell.

Curtin, P. A., & Gaither, T. K. (2007). *International public relations: negotiating culture, identity, and power.* Sage.

Daymon, C. & Holloway I. (2012). *Qualitative research in public relations and marketing communications.* Routledge.

Demetrious, K. (2011). Bubble wrap: social media, public relations, culture and society. In L. Edwards, & C. E. M. Hodges (Eds.), *Public relations, society, and culture: theoretical and empirical explorations* (pp. 118–132). Routledge.

DiStaso, M. W., & Bortree, D. S. (2014). Preface: social media is lost without a social compass. In M. W. DiStaso, & D. S. Bortree (Eds.), *Ethical practice of social media in public relations* (pp. xxv–xxxi). Routledge.

DiStaso, M. W., & Bortree, D. S. (Eds.) (2014). *Ethical practice of social media in public relations.* Routledge.

Duhé, S. (2012). *New media and public relations* (2nd ed.). Peter Lang.

Freitag, A. R., & Quesinberry Stokes, A. (2009). *Global public relations: spanning borders, spanning cultures.* Routledge.

Gillin, P. (2007). *The new influencers: a market guide to the new social media.* Quill Driver Books.

Gordon, R. J. (2010). Okun's Law and productivity innovations. *American Economic Review, 100*(2), 11-15.

Grunig, J. E., & White, J. (1992). The effect of worldviews on public relations theory and practice. In J. E. Grunig (Ed.), *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (31-64).

Grunig, L. A., Grunig, J. E., & Dozier, D. (2002). *Excellent public relations and effective organisations: A study of communication management in three countries.* Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: international differences in work related values.* Sage.

Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organisations: software of the mind: intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Holtzhausen, D. R. (2000). Postmodern values in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 12*(1), 93–114.

Holtzhausen, D. R. (2012). *Public relations as activism: postmodern approaches to theory and practice.* Routledge.

Jensen, R. (2011). Blogala, sponsored posts, and the ethics of blogging. In B. E. Drushel, & K. German (Eds.), *The ethics of emerging media: information, social norms, and new media technologies* (pp. 213–229). Continuum.

Kaplan, A. M. & Haenlein, M. (2010) Users of the world, unite the challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons, 53*, 59-68.

Katz, E. (2006). *Rediscovering Gabriel Tarde. Political Communication.* Scholarly Commons. http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/270 23 (3), 263-270.

Kelleher, T. (2007). *Public relations online: lasting concepts for changing media.* Sage.

Kent, M. L. (2010). Directions in social media for professionals and scholars. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of public relations* (pp. 643–656). Sage.

L'Etang, J. (2004). Public relations in Britain: a history of professional practice in the 20th century. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Levine, M. (2001). *Guerrilla P.R. wired.* McGraw-Hill.

Lieber, P. S. (2005). Ethical considerations of public relations practitioners: an empirical analysis of the TARES test. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring questions of media morality, 20*(4), 288–304.

MacMillian. Neill, M. S., & Drumwright, M. E. (2012). PR professionals as organisational conscience. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality*, 27(4), 220–234.

McAllister, S. & Taylor, M. (2007). Community college web sites as tools for fostering dialogue. 9. Public Relations Review, *Academic Publishing Company*, 33, 230-232.

Meerman Scott, D. (2007). *The new rules of marketing & PR.* John Wiley & Sons.

Nakata, C. (2009). Going beyond Hofstede: why we need to and how. In C. Nakata (Ed.), *Beyond Hofstede: culture frameworks for global marketing and management* (pp. 3–15). Palgrave.

Necmiye, I. G. & Fahri A. (2017). Effectiveness of digital public relations tools on various customer segments. *Journal of Management, Marketing and Logistics*, 4(3).

Nwodu, L. C. (2006). *Research in communication and other behavioural sciences: Principles, methods and issues.* RhyceKerex Publishers.

Ohler, I. (2010). *Classroom application of technology leadership in education technology digital media.* Crowin Press.

Padman, M. L. & Sweeter, K.D. (2008). PR practitioners' use of social media tools and communication technology. *Public Relations Review*, 34, 412-414.

Parsons, P. J. (2008). *Ethics in public relations: a guide to best practice.* Kogan Page CIPR.

Phillips, D., & Young, P. (2009). *Online public relations* (2nd ed.). Kogan Page CIPR.

Reddi, C. V. (2014). *Effective public relations and media strategy.* PHI Learning Private Limited.

Seedy, C. S. (2011). *Social media for change: a case study of social media use in 2011 Egyptian revolution* [American University master's theses]. Retrieved from american.edu/soc/communication/upload/Caroline-Sheedy.pdf

Solis, B., & Breakenridge, D. (2009). *Putting the public back into public relations.* Pearson Education.

Sriramesh, K. (2004). *Public relations in Asia: An anthology.* Thomson Learning.

Sriramesh, K. (2009). The missing link: multiculturalism and public relations education. In K. Sriramesh, & D. Verciˇ cˇ (Eds.), *The global public relations handbook: theory, research, and practice* (rev. ed., pp. 907–924). Routledge.

Sriramesh, K. (2010). Globalization and public relations. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of public relations* (pp. 691–707). Sage.

Sriramesh, K., & Verciˇc, ˇD. (2009). *The global public relations handbook: theory, research and practice.* Routledge.

Sriramesh, K., & Verciˇ c, ˇ D. (Eds.) (2003). *The global public relations handbook: theory, research and practice.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Toledano, M., & McKie, D. (2013). Public relations and nation building: influencing Israel Abingdon. Routledge: UK.

Transparency International (2014). *Index.* https://www.transparency.org/cpi2014/infographic/global

Toledano, M., & Wolland, L. (2011). Ethics 2.0: social media implications for professional communicators. *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics*, 8(3–4), 43–52.

Tornero, J. M. (2007). Current trends and approaches to media literacy in Europe. *European Commission.*

Van Ruler, B., & Verciˇ c, ˇ D. (Eds.). (2004). *Public relations and communication management in Europe: a nation-by-nation introduction to public relations theory and practice.* Mouton de Gruyter.

Vásquez, I., & Stumberger, ˇT. (2012). An index of freedom in the world. In F. McMahon (Ed.), *Towards a worldwide index of human freedom* (pp. 55–106). Fraser Institute.

Wakefield, R. I. (2010). Why culture is still essential in discussion about global public relations. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of public relations* (pp. 659–670). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

World Press Freedom Index (2014). *Reporters Without Borders.*