Challenges And Opportunities In The New Era Of Communication: Digitalization And Public Relations

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ABSTRACT

It has been inevitable for public relations to avoid the changes in the globalizing and technologically developing world and adapt to them. Communication underlies public relations. It is one of the professions that is most heavily influenced by all the developments in communication technologies. Thus, the profession had to adapt to new communication technologies, while digitalization gradually drove selected media and target publics to evolution accordingly. This study aims to trace the impact of digitalization in public relations as a profession in Turkey. To that end, a literature review in light of technological developments in communication and information technologies is conducted. Then, academicians from the field and practitioners, who currently work with public relations agencies, are interviewed. Snowball sampling was the selected qualitative method for the research design. The study concluded that the ways in which public relations activities are conducted differ significantly from a decade ago with the development of technological tools, university curricula must be updated in accordance with such developments, and new employment opportunities must be opened up to those, who do not only possess theoretical knowledge but also technological know-how. The study attempts to shed light on the changing trends in the profession from the eyes of both practitioners and academicians in the field as well as the problems that arise from digitalization alongside suggested solutions by practitioners. It is also hoped that this study paves the way for future studies, focusing on specific aspects of digitalization in public relations practices.

Keywords: Public relations, digitalization, media, publics

1. INTRODUCTION

Technological progress across the world has not been limited with tools, devices or machinery. Upon the creation of the virtual world called the internet, temporal and spatial boundaries have been lifted entirely. This new virtual world, much like the physical one, is a world with real persons and real institutions. Anyone, upon transferring physical public relations offices to online platforms, can use their computers or mobile devices to virtually discover the entire world 360°, shop online for all sorts of needs (groceries, clothes, pharmaceuticals and so on), and even witness everything that is going on around the world through social media posts, while chatting with a friend halfway around the world.

In terms of communication, public relations also had to keep up with the new and advanced communication technologies. Starting with the internet, social media initiated a transformation with which one cannot easily keep up. Globalization accelerated also with communication technologies, which was why it has not been easy to cope and keep up with the economic, political and social impact with it. On one hand, Web 2.0 turned into 3.0, and on the other, new concepts such as marketing 3.0, online public relations, online reputation management, electronic retail, internet advertisements, children of the electronic society, generation Z and new generation consumers arose with the influence of social media, while the first precondition of sustainability persisted – making policies that are in harmony with such changes (Kara, Özgen;2012).

Alongside communication tools, public relations practices and consumers' behaviors changed. Public relations became a new management process, where availability and communication 24/7 regardless of time and space were required. Geray states that on the contrary of face-to-face communication or media with single receivers, mass communication does not allow audiences to see or hear one another. Still, new media is defined as "systems that include mass viewers/listeners as individual users, allowing them to have access to content or applications from different time zones and in interaction" (Geray, 2003: 20). In today's world with its globalizing structure and elimination of borders, new institutions and brands are being added to the world market every day, accelerating competition and necessitating catching up with world trends and keeping up with innovations.

A new world and a new medium for all, online public relations brought along new features and new areas of activities. Accordingly, processes of certain changes and adaptations with regards to practitioners of the profession were required within the frameworks of both public relations and public relations practices. The main purpose of this

study is to compare the changing and articulating public relations practices with the traditional ones. Within the scope of changing media and generations, public relations is analyzed in terms of where it currently stands to set forth new insights about its future.

2. DIGITALIZATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

The notion 'digital' came into our lives in the 21st century. The word is defined by the Turkish Language Association as the provision of data on a screen. Oxford English Dictionary (OED), on the other hand, traces back the first uses of "digitalization" and "digitizing" to 1950s. According to OED, to digitize is "the process or action of digitizing" and "converting analog data (images, video or text) into digital forms." Digitalization, on the other hand, is the adoption or increased use of digital or computer technologies by an organization, industry or country (Brennen & Kreiss, 2014). According to the IT Dictionary of Gartner, one of the leading information technology consultancy firms in USA to specialize in research and analysis, "Digitalization is the process of switching from analog to digital forms" and "digitalization is to change a business model and use digital technologies to generate new opportunities of income and added value."

Having begun with the French Revolution in 1789, the innovative initiatives continued with the Industrial revolution. As Marshall McLuhan (1994) defined it in the 1960s, Information Age started.

Pursuant to technological advancements, the switch from industrial society to information society, makes up for yet another phase of the change in the history of humanity. The switch to information society has also accelerated the spread of "globalization" – a term that was gained around the same time of said switch. During and after this time, computers and internet became more available for use alongside other means of communication and transportation, bringing along myriad socio-cultural changes and economic developments.

The concept of "information society" refers to, for some, the beginning of a more professionalized and relevant society with regards to the profession of public relations, and to the representation of more strict surveillance for individuals for others. While some mention the convenience of access to information, others focus on being exposed to manipulation, sensation and propaganda-based public relations practices (Webster, 2006:2). Daniel Bell highlights information as the fundamental factor in production to describe this new society, using the notion "post-industrial society." According to Bell, post-industrial society is based on producing information just like the industrial society was based on the production of goods (in Laughey, 2010:108-109). "Information is not a modernist, artistic, literary or scientific practice anymore; it is viewed as a commodity that is exchanged in national and international markets" (Laughey, 2010:103).

Media theoretician Marshall McLuhan uses the term "global village" to explain how technology and information quickly spread and how it shrinks the globe. His views on media that carries information as well as information per se such as the Web, smartphones, YouTube or Twitter, on the other hand, are still inspiring. McLuhan also uses the term "surfing" within the context of individuals that rapidly move information and contributed as such to the literature on media.

Studying the history of the internet, Johnny Ryan views internet technologies as the children of the industrial age. According to him, the use of steam, telegraphs, industrialized trade and world wars have all accelerated the pace of the world long before digital communication emerged. The changes brought along by the digital age removed the central points of the once centralized world order, which used to be based on control and hierarchy, creating a new structure with multiple points across networks. The political and cultural lives are restructured according to said network structure (Ryan, 2010). Manuel Castells also argues that such global transformation gave way to the emergence of the network society as information and communication technologies improved. According to Castells, the network society, which highlights information, is a new social structure, mobilized by information technologies, created in networks and spread throughout the entire globe. This structure reveals an interaction that is shaped via culture in addition to impacting relations of production, consumption and power (Castells, 2005:127).

The structure of network society also influenced social relationships, interpersonal relationships and new communication structures. In this context, social media, which is a notion in media brought along by the development of new communication technologies and the internet, is virtually a reflection of the network society on the internet.

It is still valid to argue that McLuhan's concept of Global Village preserves its importance today. The world has shrunk to almost the size of a village thanks to the virtual dimensions time and space gained. Furthermore, concepts such as information society and network society are important to understand the digital age too. Considering the sociologic and economic developments that arose as a result of the rapid developments that occurred in science and technology in the last two decades, it is observed that Toffer defines the information age as the third wave and the society that lives within information age as the information society (in Balay, 2004: 66).

On the other hand, Castells describes the society that lives intertwined with technology in the digital age as the network society. Castells lists the foundations of the network society as the acquisition of information, spread of the impact of new technologies, flexibility and the logic of generating networks (Dönmez & Sancar, 2008:4).

Each theoretician comes up with different names; still, the frameworks are fundamentally the same. A single digital concept refers to a brand-new society, generating a structure that encompasses an entire society with its own language, culture, economy and politics. In other words, the digital age reproduces itself.

The technological developments penetrate all areas of our life. Having emerged in late 2019, Covid-19 outbreak accelerated the spread of digital applications. Face to face communication is often replaced by those in virtual platforms. Many practices and activities in myriad fields have started to shift to digital platforms. In a study they conducted in 1998, Seitel cited British futurist Peter Cochrane, who estimated the direction in which the world is to move in the 21st century, by saying "if you are not online, you do not exist" (Seitel, 2001:298; Bhargava, 2010:1), underlining that the real-world existence of those do not matter as long as they are not present in the digital world. There is no doubt that in recent years the internet has developed more rapidly than all other communication channels and changes professions in a dynamic way.

The role of public relations started to change in recent years as well. It was stated in a 2003 report that public relations used to be perceived as a tactical means to influence media, whereas the abundance of communication settings, the need to communicate with multiple stakeholders and demands of corporate transparency put public relations at the very core of strategic management. Unveiling the potential of public relations and developing best practices requires the sector to become a part of the internet revolution. Today, public relations has become more than a mere necessity. Digital public relations practices represent a new opportunity for communication (Petrovici, 2014:80). Thanks to the internet, stakeholders can now easily communicate with each other about any organization. In addition to such conveniences, it is also likely to state that public relations practitioners have more duties, because they now have to develop strategies to cope with the increasing power of stakeholders on the Web (Van der Merwe et al., 2005:39-48; Petrovici, 2014:80). Digital public relations practices is the best way for public and private enterprises to communicate bilaterally with their stakeholders. Digital public relations is a new notion. Overall, three terms are observed to be used in public relations studies, including digital practices. These are web sites/web-based public relations, online public relations and internet-based public relations practices. There are various issues with such definitions. For example, approaching digital public relations as only "web site/web-based public relations" cannot help the concept move beyond web sites, which are merely digital platforms. While online public relations is an acceptable definition, it does not provide any hints as to why public relations practitioners are concerned with the internet. Finally, internet-based public relations practices highlights the internet too much by risking technological determinism concerning future developments (Huang et al., 2017:1366). Digital public relations and online public relations are conducted together. However, online public relations includes internet-based applications, while digital public relations utilizes all means that are turned to digital with the internet. Thus, digital public relations can be claimed to include public relations (Herbert, 2005:140). Both concepts are used in the literature, and it is more accurate in this sense to consider online public relations under digital public relations.

Digital public relations involves publishing online newsletters about the services offered by an organization or current topics about it, using the power of journalistic networks and spreading information to the public via the internet to inform audiences (Gifford, 2010:63). Since digital public relations is mediated by computers, public relations practitioners must possess knowledge on computers, their components and main functions. It is important for public relations practitioners to be computer literate. They must possess different means in their offices such as personal computers, laptops, digital phones, digital cameras, photography and video cameras, fax machines, e-mail addresses and internet connections. Moreover, they must be fluent in using e-mails, setting up websites and using digital cameras (Herbert, 2005:136-140). It should not be forgotten that selecting and using the right mass communication medium plays a prominent role in smoothly conveying the message to the target audience.

Using internet technologies for public relations activities is known as digital public relations. Digital public relations has various definitions. It is a practice that utilizes the internet as a means for promotion. Digital public relations is also viewed by some as the application of public relations functions in cyberspace (Kharisma & Kurniawan, 2018). As such, digital public relations uses digital media to communicate with publics to practice public relations activities (Laksamana, 2015; Kharisma & Kurniawan, 2018:14). Digital public relations is the management of communication between an organization and its publics via internet applications. Within the scope of this definition, internet applications refer to web sites, games and instant messaging services that process data via the internet and binary files such as texts, sounds, graphics, images and videos, and displays provided information (Huang et al., 2017:1366). It is also possible to call public relations practices that are conducted on digital platforms with new information and communication technologies, digital public relations. Digital public relations is the form of public relations in digital media (Sönmez, 2020:188).

In some ways, the foundations of public relations have not changed with the revolution in digital media. In many ways, it is possible to argue that practitioners copied methods of communication and pasted them on digital settings. This hinders the true potential and talents of digital public relations (Grunig, 2009:15-16). Even though practical means have changed for public relations with digital tools, they have not changed as much with respect to content.

The development of new information technologies, consequences of globalization, elimination of spatial and temporal limits and the emergence of a human-centric era influenced public relations to become a more strategic tool than merely providing consultancy services. Technological developments have revealed myriad conveniences to companies in reaching their publics, informing them and offering their services in addition to other opportunities such as monitoring publics, being able to respond instantly and quickly to their issues, observing their online behavior, interacting with them and being fast about it (Öztürk & Şardağı; 2019).

The advancing technology also enhanced the limits of public relations practices and shelved classic public relations activities. Such enhancements encouraged practitioners to work online and forced them to be involved with the digital transformation in the field. Digital public relations uses digital and social technologies to manage the directed impact of exposure of a company or an organization's awareness and understanding, reputation and brand through digital media.

Reflected onto public relations, technological developments paved the way for a new definition to come into the field. Public relations practices are now considered under "online reputation management" as well. Before stating the changes in these media, the concept of reputation shall be briefly covered. The word "reputation" is defined by Turkish Language Association as "respectability, reliability in paying debts." According to another definition, reputation is an organization's conversion of past behavior and positive input into valuable outputs and offer of such output to diverse groups of stakeholders (Fombrun, Gardber & Sever, 2000). In short, online reputation management is the total of impressions and influence a person, organization or brand or their products and services leave on individuals, i.e., publics. New communication technologies and internet-based practices are rather important with respect to the reputation of persons and organizations. The majority of consumers evaluate the services or products they purchase on social platforms, sharing both negative and positive experiences via the internet.

Online media or in other words, the virtual environment, provides many important opportunities and benefits for public relations practices. Thanks to social media applications, organizations can instantly communicate with their corresponding publics and can receive feedback, easily collect information on their competitors and other relevant topics, be present on a global scale media setting, send information to consumers and niche groups that are determined per public relations practices, relay images, video and text forms to news channels, conduct promotion marketing practices on virtual settings, archive and update documents easily and rapidly for references, deliver to employees virtual newsletters and surveys via intranets and communicate with them virtually, and carry out preset simultaneous cyberconferences for public relations practices (Kara & Özgen, 2012).

Mass media is the basis of public relations, which makes sure that digitalization cannot be independent from public relations. Accordingly, tools and new media that developed with digitalization directly influence public relations, while public relations itself enters into a process of adapting to digital revolution.

Public relations became more prominent in line with progressing technologies and changing global dynamics. It acquired a more powerful position on both national and international platforms with stronger strategic importance at the same time. As a communication discipline, public relations is substantially affected by developments in information and communication technologies. Considering the world of the internet today with respect to public relations, publics appear to elude traditional media channels and find a place for themselves in digital or social networks Interaction increased as a result, providing some convenience in reaching the right publics. In addition, digitalization created new and dynamic channels for sales of goods, establishing groups, increasing web site traffic and raising awareness for different issues. The bilateral aspect of social media helps to establish, sustain and manage relationships (Alexander, 2016:9).

As the internet and social media especially began to be used as public relations tools, the communication dimension of organizations and publics began to change their shapes too. A two-way communication is possible between publics and organizations rather than a one-way version. Moreover, internet and social media help in many fields such as to inform publics about current events, provide information to media, collect information on publics, reinforce corporate identity, manage crises and strengthen reputation.

The aim of digital public relations corresponds with those of traditional public relations at its core. Recent studies show that an increasing number of public relations practitioners utilize different internet applications such as web sites and social network services to communicate with their stakeholders (Guillory & Sundar, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2010; Huang et al., 2017). For example, a study conducted with 283 public relations practitioners reported that an average respondent uses 5.98 different social media forms such as blogs, social networks and so on (Eyrich et al., 2008; Huang et al., 2017). Results of empirical studies also reveal that internet-based practices such as web sites and

social media are not only additional ways for practitioners to use to inform their publics, but they also facilitate direct interaction and sustaining of appropriate relations with publics (Capriotti & Kuklinski, 2012; Huang et al., 2017) .

3. THE IMPACT OF DIGITALIZATION OF PUBLICS AND MEDIA

The right to acquire information is one that is offered to citizens by governments to ensure convenience, transparency and accessibility. Advanced technology and networks facilitate such wishes of individuals in terms of having access to information. Simultaneous and two-way interaction of organizations support the fundamental practice of public relations, which is especially important in public institutions: to inform and come to a mutual understanding. Having accelerated with globalization, transformation in socio-economic and cultural areas also impact concepts and values in public administration. Thanks to such transformations, societies now demand more effective, quality and fast services, which is why the rapid changes in information technologies require similar changes in public administration too (DPT, 2007).

An effective way to find quick solutions, public relations practices are very efficient in quickly responding to citizen demands, requests and complaints, especially in public institutions, as well as in forming public opinion. The emergence of developing technologies and internet-based applications now allow citizens to easily reach varying public units. An information society for everyone is aimed with the e-Europe+ initiative in Turkey from education to health, smart transportation and e-commerce (T.C. Başbakanlık, 2002:57).

The main purpose of application such as e-devlet (e-state), CİMER (Presidential Center of Communication), BİMER (Prime Ministry's Center of Communication) and e-Nabız (e-pulse) is to help citizens conduct all transactions at official and private organizations quickly and easily. Used for acquiring information, filing demands, requests or complaints for official authorities and health purposes, these applications are offered in product forms to the public. These internet-based technological products facilitate the lives of consumers, preventing crowds and lost hours waiting in queues at public institutions.

Red tape in traditional government endeavors used to lengthen standardized, compartmentalized and discrete service hours, while increasing costs. Thanks to e-devlet (e-state) application, keeping up with developing information and communication technologies is possible and current expenditures are reduced with cost-cutting practices in addition to reduced decision-making processes (İnce, 2001:11).

Public developments that came along with digitalization did not only facilitate people's acquisition and access to information, but also ensured that citizens have a say in administrative matters too. Much like a consumer, citizens can voice their issues and requests on different levels of the state and can even receive feedback. The most significant examples of public relations practices in public, digital applications also illustrate to citizens principles of honesty and transparency.

Regardless of time space, millions of individuals can simultaneously connect to social networks and interact with each other. All sorts of content offered on such networks are both produced and consumed by individuals. Such social networks, much like our daily lives, present the opportunity of sharing information and interaction with others.

Another advantage of social media is observed to be influencers in online communities as the new stakeholders of this new equation. Alikılıç (2011:14-15) argues that the spreader of the public relations message in traditional media is still important, but social media influences millions of people online. Establishing online communities, these people actually refer to the millions, who are influenced by online conversations in online relationships. In other words, online communities can also be called new influencers. Positioned as new stakeholders, online influencing shall also mean to review traditional public relations strategies and tactics. These new stakeholders can often influence each other via word-of-mouth marketing. Referencing customer-oriented marketing, social media, forums, blogs, discussion rooms and chatrooms, consumers' e-mails to each other and social networks are all included in the field of word-of-mouth marketing (Mangold & Faulds, 2009:357-358).

Posts of social media influencers are primarily based on their experiences. Their prestige is also in direct proportion with the authenticity of their experiences. Social media presence of respected influencers catch the attention of marketing and public relations practitioners, who are looking for alternative ways to reach target groups. As a field of influence, the ecosystem of social media has user experience at its centers. Such experiences are enhanced as marketing specialists integrate their marketing communication strategies to traditional media and social media. Practitioners hence need more people and more community platforms to create the experience, influence and draw attention to the influence (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011:265-266). The third-party role social media influencers provide to organizations as leverage is their ability to persuade publics. Freberg et al. (2011:90) state that certain technologies are developed to monitor and indicate the relationship of social media influencers and brands or institutions due to the former's persuasive power.

4. RESEARCH

Within the scope of the study, agency managers and employees from public relations agencies in İzmir, the third largest metropolitan of the country, were interviewed. Additionally, academicians, tenured at universities that provide public relations courses in İzmir were interviewed. Respondents were asked semi-structured interviews concerning their opinions on the digital transformation in public relations. Interviews were carried out vis-à-vis with academicians from Ege University, Katip Çelebi University, Izmir Ekonomi University, Yaşar University and Kavram Vocational School of Advanced Studies and Şiir Agency, BİA Agency, Yarkent Media Agency, Dev Agency and GONET Agency, including agency managers and employees. The interviews took place between May 13th and June 19th, 2022.

A total of 10 respondents were interviewed within the scope of the study. Out of the ten respondents, 6 are female and 4 are male. An overall look at the demographics of respondents shows that the youngest respondent is 28 and the oldest is 56, while the average age is 43.4. Additionally, four respondents hold degrees in public relations/public relations and publicity, two in journalism, two in radio, television and cinema, one in advertising and one in business economics and industrial relations. The industries in which respondents work display many differences – education, health, industry, beauty, construction, pharmaceuticals, furniture, food, digital marketing, tourism, hotel management, NGOs, restaurants, agriculture and trade can be found in respondents' areas of professional endeavors.

Analyses of respondents' answers to the questions as they were asked within the scope of the interviews can be collected under two themes. The first theme is public relations and digitalization, and the second theme concerns the problems and suggested solutions by professionals in the field during said digitalization process. To that end, subthemes of the study aim to answer the following questions:

✓ How can you express, as a professional in the field, public relations and digitalization?

✓ What are some campaign applications in public relations?

✓ What kind of changes occurred in public relations in recent years?

✓ What are some problems that are experienced in the field during digitalization?

✓ What are some solutions you may suggest for the problems in the field during digitalization?

5. FINDINGS

5.1. Expression of Public Relations and Digitalization

Data from the interviews regarding public relations and digitalization underline both positive and negative statements. It can be inferred from the responses that media, as a field, is undergoing myriad changes with social media gaining more importance, while brands become more visible on the internet and social media:

> *Digitalization is not only the digital render of a message, poster, video or visual or putting it on a digital platform. The digital life has its own dynamics. We are talking about a wide range that includes consumers' lifestyles and media consumption." (Respondent 7)*

> *"Digitalization is inevitable now in all media in the communication sense. You will probably see it in communication history courses. Television was a huge change. It was printing before that or newspapers. Our profession is undergoing a rapid transformation and it is affected by many developments. Not all of them are necessarily positive unfortunately." (Respondent 10)*

> *"Information spreads throughout the world. This is quite problematic for public relations. Specialists have a hard time, because they must be alert at all times to prevent it. They must use social media very well, monitor it closely and know their consumers, experiences and target group profiles very well. It is particularly important to stand out among the information bombardment." (Respondent 4)*

> *"What digitalization means for public relations is to highlight the organization's events and activities and hence brand recognition on social media platforms and search engines like Google. To that end, digital technologies and digital communication infrastructures must be used by experts in the field."(Respondent 3)*

Listed among the positive aspects of the process, digitalization allows easier Access to target groups and publics. This way, individuals can directly be involved in communicative endeavors and find common ground with like-minded others:

> *"Before digitalization, public relations was extremely limited. I can see it now. There was no way for people to reach us unless we reached them first. Now it is definitely easier and ways to do it gradually grow. If your audience likes what you do, they even form their own circles. This way, promotion activities become more convenient." (Respondent 1)*

"Digitalization highlights the dynamism of public relations. It shows you that you have to be on top of news, new technologies and new formations. Some things become easier, while some things do not. Without limitations of time and space, it becomes easier to reach a target group anytime anywhere." (Respondent 4)

"When we established AA, internet was a relatively new concept and now we cannot even imagine a world without it. Traditional and digital are intertwined, but digital is more important. We used to call people and ask them to check their e-mails when we wanted to communicate. Now, you cannot do anything without computers or smartphones. So digital is everywhere. It reports everything. There are logs that work with or without the internet. We now conduct Zoom meetings and even events." (Respondent 6)

On the other hand, negative influences of digitalization on public relations, as they were stated by respondents, include aggressive discourse on digital platforms, negative impressions regarding organizations and lack of legal actions from this perspective:

"There are no regulations, which is more important than aggressiveness in IT. The law is not enough. National patterns are not proportionate with the internet. There is discrepancy there, as well as in relations." (Respondent 5)

"One of the biggest issues is the rapid spread of lies or fake news about an organization. They can directly reach target groups. You probably heard the term post-truth. So, reputation management becomes even harder." (Respondent 4)

"The communication on the internet is definitely aggressive." (Respondent 5)

5.2. Campaign Applications In Public Relations

Data regarding public relations and digitalization also include public relations campaigns. In this sense, many of the respondents mentioned the need for academic education to be more suitable for everyday practices. It has also been stated that academic literature shall be closely followed, programs shall be taught, and theoretical knowledge shall be supported with practical know-how:

We must prepare students for professional lives with university education because there is inconsistency in qualities. That may not be the sole purpose of universities; they should be able to criticize and investigate. That would be the best practice since we do not want students to be carbon copies of seniors in the field. So, digitalization must be included in curricula, while preserving traditional aspects. A combination would work best." (Respondent 7)

"Things are so fast nowadays. We are trying to find a balance between theory and practice. I think vocational schools are just as important as universities, but that's not what we do. At the university, theory must be taught; naturally, it does not go by as fast." (Respondent 10)

"We now have digital marketing courses, linguistic media planning and so on. I once asked an instructor to teach social media management and applications they might need for it or Group Design courses. Graphic design courses often include fundamentals, but what can these students use for our digital campaigns in practice?" (Respondent 2)

Respondents also stated that they simultaneously conduct public relations campaigns with digital media surveys on various platforms to increase visibility, generate brand value and become more prominent with social responsibility projects:

"We used to do surveys for competitive analyses and now we have online surveys. It is larger scale, and we can compare everything." (Respondent 9)

"The concept of opinion leader also changed. We used to think about columnists, who were educated and earnest experts people would listen to. Now, anyone with a camera can become one. You never know who is here to stay. We are moved by emotions rather than reality. That is a huge risk." (Respondent 4)

"I have been in this business for over twenty years. For about the last five years, a return to the right way started – call it normal if you will. Communicative elements gained importance again." (Respondent 5)

"Sometimes it is necessary to suggest social responsibility projects. We have to ensure justice – you cannot live peacefully in this unjust income distribution, even when you are the richest person in the world." (Respondent 8)

With respect to digital media surveys, respondents underlined the need for the accurate selection of digital channel, low costs of said channel and different evaluations for all digital platforms:

"Changes in the digitalization aspect of public relations campaigns naturally include the strategic and right selection of digital channels." (Respondent 3)

> *"Social media allows easy and low-cost access to target groups. Market processes also become more efficient and brief this way. Cost, budgeting, positive transformation… You can also choose locations for audiences. Assets you have change substantially in campaign management."* (Respondent 3)

> *"A different, complicated and changing algorithm can be seen in evaluation. We use different reporting methods for conventional assessments and different ones for digital."* (Respondent 6)

Respondents mentioned that internet-based campaigns require data mining, which also highlights the need for digital literacy:

> *"I think first and foremost it must be said that data mining is of great importance."* (Respondent 6)

> *"Digital literacy is so important. Cognition, literacy or media literacy too. Not only communication faculties, but all departments must teach it. Maybe even elementary schools too."* (Respondent 4)

> *"More people and more importantly, the people we want to reach, are reached in shorter time."* (Respondent 9)

5.3. Changes In Public Relations With Digitalization

Findings from the responses regarding changes in public relations mainly include the way in which business is conducted, selected media and the changes in used instruments:

> *"Segmentation for target audiences are changed as per digital too. When it comes to audience analysis, we determine the group and then segment in two sections for both digital and traditional."* (Respondent 2)

> *"My students always say they do not watch television, but they watch series or Survivor. So, they do consume television content. We must empathize and understand the types of channels and messages that are suitable for our publics."* (Respondent 7)

> *"Digital communication platforms allow organizations to reach their publics without any intermediaries, offering the opportunity for direct interaction and dialogue."* (Respondent 9)

> *"In the beginning, advertisers were scared because they did not know much about it. You know what your client wants, so you know what you should say or how you have to say it. It is just the channel that changed. What you used to do on newspaper, radio or television, you do the same on the internet."* (Respondent 5)

> *"Tools we use are divided into two – traditional and digital. Five years ago, we thought only 30% would come from digital, but that is not the case anymore. Two years ago, we would assign 40-50% of media budget to traditional, whereas now 70% goes to digital."* (Respondent 2)

> *"We never had an in-house videographer. Now we have someone for social media, storytelling and production."* (Respondent 8)

Within the scope of the changes in public relations, some respondents stated that client expectations are now more important and positive impressions must be left on digital platforms, while some stated that strategic applications must highlight projects, while media relations and communication change, become brands by themselves and create new opportunities for employment:

> *"Trust towards the brand is ensured via public relations. We now use the internet to establish trust, leave positive impressions, practice strategically and manage reputation."* (Respondent 9).

> *"Media relations have changed and transformed significantly. Since this is an especially important concept in public relations since its beginning, its current status is so different for us. Maybe you just get critical as you age and whatever happens eventually happens. Ultimately, the most important consequence is the media relations."* (Respondent 10)

> *"People who succeed on online platforms or are admired are often imitated, which is a technique that can theoretically reach billions of people online. So, false things can also be duplicated and spread. Education used to be in the hands of the elite and maybe one percent received a quality education. Now, I think people are uncomfortable with the visibility of it all. The common misconception nowadays is that being uneducated has no disadvantages."* (Respondent 5)

> *"Experience and know-how mattered in the past, but they are not enough on their own anymore. We look up to youth because technology is harder to understand for older ages. Yes, there must be senior employees with experience, but there also must be new people, who can synthesize it with knowledge. On one hand, there is experience and knowledge and on the other, youth. Young people find novelties, apply them or make them."* (Respondent 1)

Moreover, some respondents mentioned the need to produce new information by following up on current events, the importance of reputation management, the opportunity digitalization brought along to get to know new individuals and the easier use and assessment of data through the changes in the industry:

"We oversee all components of reputation management online." (Respondent 9)

"You always have to be up to date. Even when you are working in-house, you cannot know what is going on around the world without looking at Twitter or Spotify. That is not the world in which we live anymore." (Respondent 10)

"You always have to produce unique content or new information. Consumers want it; they are used to it. You have to feed them. If you offer the same thing twice, they will search for something new. Serious conglomerates are even considering what they can do on TikTok. Those who succeed on TikTok can leave others behind." (Respondent 1)

"We can analyze data very well on digital. It is so important and valuable. We can find all information when we plan campaigns and in the end, we can evaluate in the same way. We always seek this – on digital platforms, in social media design, practices, studies, applications… knowing data and making food use of it is something we achieved now, I believe." (Respondent 6)

5.4. Problems Arising From Digitalization

Data acquired from respondents' opinions on the problems arising from digitalization in public relations focus largely on the difficulty of following up on technological advancements, the need to plan for digital platforms separately, the rapid changes in technology and the lack of use of some digital programs:

"We used to be a member of interactive F-4E EU. There was a similar problem there like Turkey. The main mission of EU was on adding digital marketing budgets to annual budgets of large-scale corporations. When I was setting up a website, other firms were not able to view it because there was no internet connection and they communicated via mails. They did not even have computers. We used to take our desktops there and they only saw their websites once a year when we showed them. It was around 1999-2000, when websites were only for prestige purposes." (Respondent 5)

"We have to plan digital in itself. Your audience on Facebook and Instagram are completely different – so much so that you have to plan separately. We used to look at different criteria for such calculations and now we do it based on how much we would spend on digital." (Respondent 2)

"The disadvantage for university graduates is that if your university is behind, so will you be. There are many undergraduates, who do not know how to use programs after 4 years. GPAs used to mean so much, but unless you want to become an academician, they do not mean anything. What you can do is more important." (Respondent 1)

Other challenges arising from digitalization are also listed by respondents as the lack of media literacy, lack of double-checking information, using emojis to express emotions and the declining humanitarian values:

"It is only the tools that changed. But now, the risk of communication is higher, which is a problem. Otherwise, communication itself did not change. You use the same communicative words, but images are on the forefront. That is how you express yourself because people stopped reading. That is one of the risks. They believe what they see and almost nobody is media literate. Specifically, not in the digital sense. Just like us, I am a digital immigrant, not a digital native." (Respondent 4)

"Their interpersonal communication skills are based on emojis via social media. I always say it during my classes – leave aside emojis, express yourself via facial gestures and mimics." (Respondent 4)

"I do not actually like this, maybe it is because of my personality. Maybe it is because I am a digital immigrant. Maybe it will be more common after I die and it will be a whole new world, but I feel like we are losing the warmth or our humane interests or love. Someone shares an obituary and another clicks on like. What is that, I mean I just can't wrap my mind around it. Instead of posting your condolences, you just click on a like. To me, this is preposterous and meaningless." (Respondent 4)

"Texts are longer on traditional media. That is what we plan for. We were giving that message. Three paragraphs on traditional media are reduced to one in social media. Since I produce content, I do not have any problems in it. Give me a sentence and I can write a whole page for you. It is usually the headline that attracts more clicks, so we mostly think about that part and channel the content accordingly." (Respondent 8)

5.5. Suggested Solutions For Problems Arising From Digitalization

The majority of respondents stated that specialists in the field must be prepared for the changes in communication language and ways of doing business. In this context, educators in the field should be able to adjust their educational strategies accordingly. It has also been said by respondents that social media is a virtual world and understanding that it is not real is important:

> *"The education I provide and the one I received are different of course. But unless you know conventional media, you cannot grasp digital media. I try to convey the medium and communication at its core because today's Instagram will be something else tomorrow. But the core of it will never change." (Respondent 7)*

> *"We actually have to constantly monitor what is going on around the world and keep up with novelties due to our line of work." (Respondent 9)*

> *"Communication is conducted over values these days. It instantly becomes good, which is also true. Now, there are also opportunities via e-commerce." (Respondent 10)*

> *"They have to like to do research and move fast. There are no work hours anymore such as 9 to 5. If necessary, they will work at night. It used to be called exploiting. Hours must be flexible as long as the work itself is fair. You have to make up for the overtime. On the other hand, employee skills have changed." (Respondent 1)*

> *"The education we provide for our students change every day. But traditional components underlie it, nonetheless. Can you even imagine a marketing practitioner, who does not know the product, pricing, promotion or distribution? The marketing mix must be known at the foundation." (Respondent 3)*

> *"It is a virtual world, not the real one. Friendships there are different, you share things, you like things, people tell you that you are pretty... You can only evaluate it once you communicate face-to-face. That is what I try to highlight." (Respondent 4)*

Respondents also listed some solutions for the aforementioned issues. These suggested solutions include the need for students to learn from specialists in the field, professional support and employing young people. In addition, some respondents pointed out the importance of gaining consumer insight:

> *"When you only cover the theory, students have a hard time imagining. We have a solution for it. We invite practitioners to our classes so that students can learn by example and experience." (Respondent 2)*

> *"It is easier for an agency or organization and even freelancers to come up with a project now. Yet everything is harder with more competition. Still, we have our own stages. You do not have to have millions following you; unless you seek professional help, you cannot excel." (Respondent 1)*

> *"Even people who do not exist on digital platforms consume it. Everybody now knows that you cannot excel on digital without knowing conventional. That is how people must solve the differences in messages. And at its very core, this has to do with possessing the insight concerning the audience." (Respondent 7)*

> *"We saw it with the wildfires in country. Everyone wanted to help by planting trees or providing aid. Social media instantly informs people and is highly influential. It reinforces perception about many things – whether it is wildfires or children suffering from leukemia. Especially Gen Z is more sensitive about it. They think about what you do and what is the benefit for the society. When I search for two companies, I can see what they have done and what they failed to do. And that is what we recommend to companies. We use both social media and conventional media as we manage their public relations activities to that end." (Respondent 8)*

6. CONCLUSION

Consequent to the interviews conducted within the scope of this study, it was found that the shared opinion was that digitalization heavily influences public relations. Much like other professional areas, technological developments changed the way in which traditional public relations is perceived. Internet-based applications became more important, while audiences and selected media have also changed. The influence of social media on people drove practitioners and users towards this new direction.

As a result, digital public relations cannot be considered independently from humans and communication tools since it has communication at its core. Therefore, when they change, public relations must adapt. Respondents also stated that digitalization is inevitable for public relations. They also agreed that the profession itself cannot be viewed without considering technological developments.

Removing concepts of time and space, digital media ensures that public relations activities are at all places at all times. Thanks to such saving activities, new media offers the opportunity to reach larger groups of people in noticeably short periods of time.

Reaching targeted publics quickly and easily is naturally a great opportunity for public relations activities. Especially thanks to interactive media, communicating with publics and learning about their expectations, requests and feedback rapidly, is of advantage for organizations. It simultaneously means getting to know the publics. Specific information such as demographics, social structures, cultural features and psychographics can be easily found out. This way, organizations can seize the opportunity to pinpoint public relations activities. Excellent digital public relations activities would also be shared by digital media users. This means that public relations activities for one target group would be relayed by them for yet another group.

An environment, where everybody has a say, naturally brings about certain challenges. In the digital media environment, where there are no spatial or temporal limits, competition has become universal. Large numbers of message are shared by multiple numbers of institutions and enterprises. They are attempting to convey their own messages to different target publics. This way, it might be challenging to reach a particular group. In such fierce competition, aggressive communication styles may emerge, rendering yesterday's practices suddenly antiquated.

This environment is also incredibly open for crises. One of the disadvantages of fast communication is the emergence of a crisis that may be fatal for organizations, which may simply arise from instant conveyance of a message. Thus, public relations practitioners must work around the clock to prevent crisis settings, which shall be managed in proactive ways.

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