We are in the middle of the digital revolution. This revolution has transformed the information and communication infrastructure of society and has spawned emerging themes and subjects of study. The term “new media” is a product of this development. “New media” is commonly used to refer to electronic forms of communication made possible through digital technology and connote interactivity and hyperactivity. With the “old media” being re-packaged into new media formats, and with the producers of old media also designing content for new media audiences, the distinction blurs and the dichotomy seems false (Mateo and Paragas, 2007).

The rhetoric surrounding new media has often embodied a claim that new media help to produce a more equal as well as a more liberated society. The big advantage is the ready access for all who want to speak, unmediated by the powerful interests that control the content of print media and the channels of broadcasting. You do not need to be rich and powerful to have a presence on the World Wide Web. However, the new media are no different from the old media in terms of the social stratification of ownership and access. It is the better-off that first acquire and then upgrade the technology and are always ahead of the poor. They are differentially empowered and, if anything, move further ahead. Social and information gaps widen rather than narrow and there emerges an “information underclass” as well as a social underclass. Much is made of the “digital divide” as a successor of the “information gap” that was once predicted as a result of the coming of the television (McQuail, 2005).

The following editorial in Monde Diplomatique (translated by Wilcox and Cameron, 2009) expresses concern about the global digital divide.
The internet became available to the public only a decade ago. In that short time, it has revolutionized political, economic, social, and cultural life to such an extent that we can now reasonably speak of the new internet world order in telecommunications. Nothing, is as it was before. For a large proportion of the world’s people the speed and reliability of computer networks has changed their manner of communication, study, shopping, news, entertainment, political organization, cultural life, and work. The growth of internet-based activities and e-mail has put the computer at the center of a network relayed via new generation of do-everything phones, that has transformed all areas of social activity.

But this remarkable transformation has largely been to the advantage of Western countries, already the beneficiaries of previous industrial revolutions. It is now exacerbating the digital gap between those who have an abundance of information technologies and the many more who would have none. Two figures give a sense of inequality: 80% of the world’s users of the Internet are drawn from only 20% of the world’s population. The digital gap does as much to accentuate and aggravate the north-south divide as the traditional inequality between rich and poor – 20% percent of the population of the rich countries own 80% of the world’s wealth. If nothing is done cyber technologies will leave the inhabitants of the least advanced countries outside, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where scarcely 1 percent of people have access, and those are mostly men.

Who is responsible for this digital divide? Should we be really concerned about the lack of Internet access in countries that have so many other basic infrastructure problems? Can the Internet be used as a development tool, offering developing countries a way to leapfrog in making progress toward filling basic needs? These are pressing questions that need to be addressed.
The evolution of the digital divide (information-rich elite and the information-poor masses) has been anticipated in the sixties when Fritz Machlup started writing about information societies. Fifty years ago, communication theorist Everett Rogers observed that “new ideas may tend to make the rich richer and the poor poorer.” People who adopt innovations are often more educated, enjoy higher status, are more exposed to mass media, and are more literate (Flor, 2009).

Katzman (1974) proposed that with the adoption of a new information and communications technology, people who already have high levels of information and ability will gain more than people with lower initial levels. On one hand, it raised the information level of all individuals and on the other hand, it widens the gap between the information rich and the information poor.

The concept of digital divide is not new in the Philippines. In 1986, Dr. Alexander Flor already made scholarly treatise on the information-rich and the information-poor. His PhD dissertation analyzed the two faces of the information age in a developing country. According to Flor, the problem with the advent of an information-rich class is the implied existence of an information poor class. The information-rich class increasingly determines the nature and quality of the information-poor’s life.

The rapid technological change has also given rise to concerns relating to the political, social, cultural, and psychological consequences of the new technologies. And while the new media destroy boundaries, they also reinforce those that already exist, and even create new ones. According to Mateo and Paragas (2007), the digital divide is the result of differential access to new technology, owing to socio-economics factors, language, and content. The digital divide if generally seen as yet another expression of the old issue between the “haves” and the “have nots.” More recently, this as also included the issue of who actually benefits from new technology. Thus, it also begs looking into the skills of those who have access and how these skills are being used (Mateo and Paragas, 2007).
Although the application of information technology (e.g. Internet, mobile phones, etc.) is often similar, their specific social and cultural impacts vary nationally, as these technologies are influenced by particular cultural traditions, power structures, and economic resources. Societies and information technologies engage dialogically, where each is shaped by the needs of the other. This, however, does not mean that societies will be determined by information technologies. For Pertierra (2007), the concept of digital divide or digital inequality is not only about the existence or nonexistence of infrastructure. The provision of the physical access is necessary but it is not sufficient. Digital inequality refers to the “real access,” which includes cognitive and cultural capital as well as technical resources. “Real Access” goes beyond infrastructure and refers to people’s actual possibilities to use technology to improve their lives (Warchauer, 2004, as cited in Pertierra, 2007). The technology itself does not ensure its equal and efficient use. Real access is ensured only when appropriate technologies are introduced in political, economic, and social environments conducive to people’s participation.

Despite the ubiquity of new media technology such as the Internet, a huge digital divide exists across the globe, which poses strategic problem if communication resources are devoted exclusively or predominantly to new media channels. Key publics may be missed altogether. Caveats aside, the Internet is the most intriguing of the new technologies that are changing mass communication in general. And providing public relations practice with innovative tools. Other new media technologies have revolutionized the management of public relations. As a communications scholar doing public relations, I ask myself: What role can you envision for public relations professional as part of the solution to the digital divide?

Wilcox and Cameron (2009) list the pros and cons of new media in public relations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Mass Media</th>
<th>New Media</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographically constrained: Local or regional targets</td>
<td>Distance insensitive: Topic, need, or interest targeting worldwide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical: Series of gatekeepers/</td>
<td>Flattened: One to many and many to one</td>
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<tr>
<td>editors</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Unidirectional: One-way dissemination</strong></td>
<td>Interactive: Feedback, discussions, debate and response to requests by persons or machine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space constraints: Limited pages and airtime</strong></td>
<td>Fewer space/time constraints: Large, layered capacity for information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional communicators: highly trained to professional standards</strong></td>
<td>Nonprofessional: Anyone with limited training or professional values may participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High access costs: Startup and production costs prohibitive</strong></td>
<td>Low access costs: More affordable, but expensive computer programming talent required initially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General interest: Large audiences and broad coverage</strong></td>
<td>Customized: Narrowcasts, even individually tailored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Linearity of content: News hierarchy</strong></td>
<td>Nonlinearity of content: Hypertext links enable nonlinear navigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feedback: Slow, effortful, and limited</strong></td>
<td>Feedback: E-mail and online chat are immediate and easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ad-driven: Big audiences and revenue</strong></td>
<td>Diverse funding sources: Varied but limited revenue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institution-bound: Corporate ownership</strong></td>
<td>Decentralized: Grassroots efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fixed format: Predictable in format, time and place</strong></td>
<td>Flexible format: Emerging but fluid formats; multimedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>News, values, journalistic standards: Conventional</strong></td>
<td>Formative standards: Currently obscure</td>
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**The Internet and Public Relations**

The Internet gives public relations practitioners a multi-faceted form of worldwide communication, primarily involving message exchange by email, information delivery
and persuasion through the Web, and extensive access to audiences for strategic research opportunities.

Based on my experience with the banking industry, the following are the primary uses of the Internet by public relations professionals:

- **E-mail distribution.** E-mail includes messages to individuals; newsletters to staff members; transmission of news releases, photos and pitch letters to media officers; and dispatch and receipt of copy between the bank and clients, including fully formatted documents using software such as Adobe Acrobat.

- **Web sites.** These sites provide a way for organizations to tell Internet users what they do, to publicize projects, and to advocate policies.

- **Blogs, Moblogs, and Vlogs.** The terms *blog* is contraction of two words, *Web* and *log*. A blog is regularly updated online diary that also features links to news items and stories in the web. The individual running the site is a blogger, which cynics say now includes virtually everyone. Blogs serve as an excellent forum for public discourse about an issue such as investing the stock market. *Moblogging* using the cell phones with cameras is the latest rage. One of the latest developments in the online forum is *video logs or vlogs*.

- **RSS – Really Simple Syndication.** RSS is a Web-based process of searching and gathering news and information that then fed to the user’s computer or wireless device such as a cell phone. Corporate communicators increasingly look to RSS as a customized source that enables them to reduce irrelevant media pitches and many recommend that any good public relations person will set up an RSS feed to put releases and stories out there for the corporate communicator’s RSS reader to find.

Banking institutions increasingly set-up Web sites to serve informational needs of both clients and business journalists, especially during a crisis or a breaking news situation. Bank’s websites offers answers to any question – any question at all. Local banks distribute product information over their Web sites.
As I reflect on the importance of the Internet, I told myself that I should keep in mind the following facts about the Internet

- Its reach is worldwide. A message intended for local or regional use may draw reactions, good or bad, from unexpected places.
- The content of the Internet is virtually uncontrolled. Anyone can say or show anything without passing it through “gatekeepers,” the editors and producers who approve the material that reaches the public through traditional media channels. Traditional media gatekeepers have lost their power in today’s print-and-click world.
- Issue tracking, a major component of professional public relations management, can be more thorough using the Internet and far more immediate. By monitoring the Internet, practitioners can keep track of what competitors, opponents and the clients are saying. Thus informed, practitioners can better shape their own tactics and message as well as respond in real time to forestall erroneous or unbalanced stories from gaining momentum without corrections.

In addition to its multiple benefits, the Internet also offers some challenges.

- Increasingly, search engines are prioritizing search results based on fee payments from companies and organization, biasing research results. This clearly widens the digital divide.
- Although the Internet allows many voices to be heard, increasing diversity of opinions in the public forum of ideas, there is still a fairly high skill level required to set a functional Web site. Web development for marginalized groups such as those representing workers or the less powerful in society remains a challenge.
- Controversial security problems and legal questions of copyright infringement, libel, invasion or privacy, and pornography remain unsolved.
- Cyber heckling. The use of embarrassing information from Facebook pages or creation of bogus Facebook entries are only two of the ways hecklers get at the opposition. No less that the UP President Emerlinda Roman actually experienced
having a bogus Facebook account. False Wikipedia entries have temporarily besmirched the reputation of companies.

- Malicious and irritating practices nag at online users. The Internet offers many opportunities for spammers to clutter e-mail channels with bogus or dubious offers. Unsolicited advertising on the Web adds to this clutter, making the messages sent by public relations professionals less effective.

New media technologies are increasingly taking a major role in the communication revolution. The interconnectivities of mobile telephony, desktops, radio, television and print are producing new communication structures with often unpredictable consequences. But it is certain that the new media will bring about important social changes at distinct level of social structures. Hopefully, the new media may assist in the gathering and dissemination of alternative information sources, creating virtual public spaces where citizens can debate on vital issues and organize appropriate action.

The advent of globalization led local public relations practitioner to use new media technologies which have long been used by the first world countries. They have no choice. The backbone of the banking industry is information and communication technology. Technologies previously enjoyed only by their western counterparts are now also enjoyed by the local banks, thanks to globalization.

Although one cannot deny the existence of digital divide, one cannot also deny the fact that these new technologies have tried to narrow the divergence. The universal banks have implemented interactive facilities which enable even the smallest retail investors to access their accounts online and to know more about the financial markets by accessing the website of their banks.

Who is responsible for this digital divide then? This would very difficult to answer. Discussing it will involve discussing the history of poverty and inequality. As previously noted, the digital divide is generally seen as another expression for the old issue between the “haves” and the “have nots.” However, inasmuch as the information-rich or the
technocrats have more in life, they should take the initiative to address the gap. For whom much is given, much is expected in return. One concrete act is to donate personal computers to rural elementary schools so that the students can have an idea of these new media technologies. The government can train extension workers not just to deliver agricultural and home technologies but also information technology as well. University students can do affirmative actions by educating the rural folks in the use of computer-mediated communication technologies.

Should we really be concerned about the lack of internet access in countries that have so many other basic infrastructure problems? Yes. The lack of internet access means that people are actually missing half of their lives. For example, in the Philippines, rural folks can take online courses ranging from barangay administration and entrepreneurship to the more advanced graduate courses. Internet access means that the marginalized sector can also access UP education through distance learning. In addition, with the increasing number of Overseas Filipino Workers, Internet access becomes imperative in order to maintain family bonding time albeit long distance.

Can the Internet be used as a development tool? Yes, the Internet can be used to leapfrog forward in making progress toward filling basic needs. The Internet can be a tool in developing rural education, health and extension delivery, as well as in development governance. In a country where most schools lack a well developed library, the Internet can be rich source of materials in any topic.

The last and most important question is: As public relations practitioner based in a universal bank, how can I help solve the problem of digital divide? As a sort of advocacy, we conduct briefings with employees of our corporate accounts and with non-government organization on the availability of technologies that can help them in one way or another. We try to debunk the myth that these technologies are available only to high net worth clients. In order to further develop the capital market and enable the retail clients enjoy the investment expertise previously enjoyed only be the rich clients, we have offered unit investment trust funds wherein retail investor can invest for a minimum amount of
P10,000. With the Easy Investment Plan, the investor can contribute P1,000 every month until he reaches the minimum P10,000. The individual investor is given access to his investment account via internet banking. Although these are just little solutions, they are nonetheless part of the solution.

Investing in new media technologies for the benefit of the grass roots communities will involve huge capital outlay. The present administration has already committed to the development of information and communication technology to spur economic development. The plan looks promising. As for the implementation aspect, that’s another story.

References


