

Communication as a Profession in the Digital Era: Challenges and Opportunities

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Before We Start . .

First off, it's great to be back here at the University of Indonesia. Fun fact: I sat in those very seats a few years back, taking notes with *actual pens and paper*. Then a few years after I graduated, came the digital convergence era. Things change the game quite drastically. And now here I am talking about digital challenges in our professions as communicators in an era even beyond digital.

Let me start by quoting from someone I know in this very campus. Not sure if you're familiar with the name Prof Djajusman Tanudikusumah. He's the first Professor of Communications Studies from our University.

I had the honour of becoming an assistant in his Communication Philosophy class (*not sure why I was chosen. Either because I'm smart or because nobody is interested* 😊). However I remember one thing which he never fails to mention in his lecture:

"Communication as a profession, is no different from being a doctor or an engineer."

In other words what he kept telling us is, just as doctors heals people and engineers build, communicators have the power to shape opinions, bridge divides, and create solutions. A skilled communicator can bring awareness to social issues, create campaigns that inspire environmental change, or even shift public opinion with the right message. *Heck... communication can even put someone, sometimes a nobody, in the presidential chair.*

I'm no academician. So what I would do now is to start by sharing three stories about my journey in the world of communication. You can keep your pen, tablet or laptop. No theories, no textbook definitions —just three stories on what I've learned in this field throughout the years. Then I will take you through the challenges and future of communication as a profession in this so called digital era which I hope can spark discussions within you guys.

Along the way I will recommend some books to help spark your interest, just as my lecturers always did during my university days. They sure have all the cool books. I hope you will find mine too 😊

Let The Journey Begin

Story 1: Reading My Way into Communication – The Discovery Phase

I started my journey in communication with zero knowledge, just a vague idea of what the field might involve. Very vague. Theory was one thing, but practice? That was another world entirely. I struggled at first. Communication felt abstract and far removed from my everyday understanding. After all my background in high school is physics and maths.

But my journey took a turn thanks to young, open-minded lecturers as well as alumni who had real-world experience in the field. They always seemed enthusiastic about sharing insights and—this was the most memorable part for me—recommending books that offered alternative

perspectives to the theories taught by the senior lecturers back then. With all due respect to my amazing senior lecturers, having an alternative point of view was something that students could only dream of at the time. But having learned about the influence by different school of thought at the time, I think I understand why. Yet still, having an alternative is like a breath of fresh air.

Through these readings and discussions, I began to see communication studies as something beyond mere theoretical perspectives. Once again, theory is important. But having an alternative viewpoint is equally valuable; it's a complement to the knowledge I acquired. I became obsessed with reading various alternative references to deepen my understanding.

It was through these readings and discussions that I started to see communication as something more powerful than just speaking—it was about crafting stories, influencing ideas, and building connections.

- **Takeaway:** You may be coming in with little understanding, but be open to new ideas and embrace learning as a gradual process. Communication isn't just theory; it's something you grow into through exploration and practice. READ A LOT. Not just because it's part of an assignment, but to feed your curiosity.

- **Book To Spark Your Mind:**

***How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading.* Mortimer J.**

Adler & Charles Van Doren - After reading this book, I discovered a new perspective on reading any book. Give it a try.

Story 2: From Analog to Digital to AI – The Adaptation Phase

I started in the analog time, where cassette tapes and physical files were the norm. I remember in the newspaper editing and layout class we used scissors, papers, and glue.

Then when I entered the job world, I found myself in the middle of a shift to the digital world. Everything from the way we shared information to how we connected with others was transformed. Everyone was talking about “2.0 this”, “2.0 that”. Convergence this and that.

Just as I think I have quite mastered the digital tools, another huge wave arrived: Artificial Intelligence. The pace wasn't just fast—it was accelerating, and with each phase, I had to rethink how I approached communication. Staying relevant meant constantly learning and adapting.

- **Takeaway:** Change is inevitable in this field. Embrace it, and recognize that adaptability is your greatest asset. As you go from digital to AI and beyond, remember that each new phase offers fresh tools but also demands a willingness to evolve. Never --and I'm really serious about this--: Never romanticise the past as an excuse not to adapt to the future. I learned that the hard way 😊

- **Book To Spark Your Mind:**

Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI. Yuval Noah Harari. – The way he elaborates the development of information in a very comprehensive way is remarkable. To me this is an excellent gateway into the world of information and all its advancements.

Story 3: The Power of Storytelling in the Digital Era – The Mastery Phase

As technology accelerates and information floods our lives, it's easy to get lost in the noise. But if there's one thing I've learned, it's that storytelling is what makes you stand out from the crowd. Beyond all the fast-paced changes, storytelling remains the core of human connection. Later on I realized that I had learned this during my radio times but it wasn't

specifically called storytelling then. It's only when I switch career to Digital PR and Advertising and joined a big agency, then I started hearing people talking about storytelling. I was instantly hooked. Even more when I realized, hey this sounds familiar.

Storytelling is the art of conveying a narrative or message in a compelling and engaging way, often to connect with an audience emotionally, inform, or inspire actions. It involves crafting a structured series of events or ideas, often centered around characters, conflicts, and resolutions, that resonate with listeners or readers. In a world driven by data and algorithms, a story is still the most powerful way to reach others on a human level.

In a world driven by data and algorithms, a story is still the most powerful way to reach others on a human level. It taught me that a well-told story builds trust, inspires action, and ultimately, brings a unique human touch that no technology can replicate. Not to forget, it potentially leave an unforgettable impression to our audience.

- **Takeaway:** In a world of endless information, your story is what sets you apart. Use it to connect, to inspire, and to bring humanity into your communication.
- **Book To Spark Your Mind:**

The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human and How to Tell Them Better. Will Storr - I have never found a book that covers storytelling as thoroughly as this one. It's also very easy to understand. Let this be your gateway into the world of storytelling.

What Are We Dealing With? - Challenges and opportunities

Here're The Challenges

1. Information Overload and Misinformation

Context: With the internet providing a flood of information daily, audiences are constantly bombarded with content. This makes it difficult for communication professionals—whether in journalism, public relations, or advertising—to ensure their messages stand out and are trusted.

Impact on Our Profession:

- Journalists face challenges in distinguishing verified facts from misinformation.
- PR specialists have to work harder to manage reputations in a climate where misinformation can quickly spiral, and advertisers struggle to get attention in an increasingly crowded digital space.

2. Privacy and Ethical Dilemmas

Context: With digital tools, it's easier than ever to gather data about consumers, readers, or target audiences, but this also raises concerns about privacy and ethical boundaries.

Impact on Our Profession:

- PR and advertising professionals must balance personalization with privacy, ensuring that they don't violate ethical standards or alienate their audiences.
- Journalists, must navigate the ethical implications of using personal data for investigative reporting.

3. Rapid Technological Change and Skill Gaps

Context: Technology in communication is evolving quickly, with AI, data analytics, and immersive media becoming integral. Professionals need to constantly update their skills to stay relevant.

Impact on Our Profession:

- PR, journalism, and advertising are all heavily impacted by the need to understand and utilize these technologies effectively.
- Journalist, for instance, are now expected to handle digital tools for research and storytelling, while advertisers use analytics to optimize campaigns in real-time.

But Challenges always comes with Opportunities

1. Enhanced Audience Engagement and Personalization

Context: Digital tools allow communication professionals to reach audiences with unprecedented precision, creating content that resonates with specific demographics.

Impact on Our Professions:

- In advertising, tailored campaigns can lead to higher engagement rates.
- PR specialists can foster closer relationships with key stakeholders through personalized communication
- Journalists can use data to understand their audience's interests better.

2. Real-Time Feedback and Adaptability

Context: With digital platforms, professionals receive instant feedback through comments, shares, and analytics, enabling quick adjustments to strategies and messaging.

Impact on Our Professions:

- Journalists can monitor audience reactions to tailor future stories
- Advertisers can optimize campaigns mid-flight
- PR professionals can adjust their strategies based on immediate public sentiment.

3. Global Reach and Collaborative Opportunities

Context: Digital communication tools have made it easier to reach and collaborate with global audiences and colleagues, expanding the scope and impact of communication efforts.

Impact on Our Professions:

- PR and advertising campaigns can now reach international markets seamlessly.
- Journalists have the tools to report stories that resonate globally, and interdisciplinary collaborations are more accessible than ever.

“I Want to Be Like Alvin Toffler:” What The Future Holds For Us

I still remember being introduced to Alvin Toffler’s book “The Third Wave.” He, by the way, was an outstanding futurist. At the time I never realized that such thing exist. A futurist? Is he a modern day version of Nostradamus? 😊

In The Third Wave, Toffler was among the first to introduce the so-called “Information age.” This is an age where technological advances brought a significant impact to the way information is processed and transmitted. Remember, he wrote Third Wave in 1980, way before the term “Information Age” even exist.

But no, I’m not going to quote Toffler here. His books are still available. Go read it.

Instead, I aspire to be like Toffler, to explore your future in communication through the lens of what is currently happening today. Perhaps me being a Star Trek and Star Wars fan might have an impact to how some of these “prediction” may sound like science fiction. But I encourage you to think about them as starting points for broader, more in-depth discussion into your future.

Here we go.

1. Newspapers to Online Journalism to AI-Assisted Reporting

Newspapers have evolved from print to digital, and the future may bring AI-driven journalism. Imagine journalists collaborating with AI for faster content generation, with AI handling research, fact-checking, and initial drafts. This would allow journalists to focus on complex analysis and storytelling, making news production both faster and more nuanced.

2. Radio Broadcasting to Podcasts to AI-Generated Personalized Radio

As a radio person, I don't believe audio will fade away. Podcasts are the current evolution, but the next step could be AI-curated stations that offer real-time, personalized broadcasts based on individual tastes, moods, or schedules. Imagine tuning in to a "station" that automatically knows what type of content fits your morning versus your evening, adapting in real-time to keep things fresh and relevant. It's like having a personal radio announcer in sync with your preferences, and only you.

3. Traditional PR to Digital PR to Real-Time AI Reputation Management

PR has moved from traditional media placements to digital PR using social media and influencer partnerships. Looking ahead, we may see AI-driven reputation management, where AI systems monitor and predict public sentiment in real-time, automatically responding to crises and tailoring strategies across channels, ensuring brands can respond instantly and effectively.

4. Print Advertising to Targeted Digital Ads to Hyper-Personalized Predictive Ads

Advertising has shifted from print to digital ads targeted by demographics and behavior. In the future, hyper-personalized predictive ads could leverage AI to assess emotional states and biometrics, delivering ads uniquely resonant with each person, at just the right moment for impact.

5. Billboards to Programmatic Digital Displays to Smart, Interactive Advertising Spaces

Billboards evolved into digital displays that change based on traffic conditions. Future ad spaces could be smart and interactive, using facial recognition to adapt content for individual passersby, merging physical and digital ad experiences seamlessly.

6. Press Releases to Social Media Statements to AI-Curated Micro-Content

Press releases have evolved to direct social media engagement. The future could see brands using AI to create micro-content—short videos, personalized messages, and immersive experiences across platforms, allowing direct and authentic interaction with audiences.

Now ask yourself, where do you fit in?

At The End of The Day, It's All About Creativity

Technology will continue to change, and the tools supporting it will keep evolving. However, the key to staying relevant in communication is: creativity.

Creativity is the ability to generate new ideas, solutions, or ways of thinking that are original, valuable, and often unexpected. It involves connecting different concepts, breaking traditional patterns, and seeing possibilities beyond the obvious. Creativity is not limited to the arts; it applies across all fields -from science and technology to business and everyday life.

In this digital time, algorithms can predict trends, and AI can analyze data at the blink of an (human) eye. But creativity is uniquely human. It's not something you can learn solely from textbooks or theories.

Creativity grows through experience, exploring perspectives different from your own, and viewing the world through a fresh and unique point of view. The ability to bring new ideas, interpret stories in unique ways, and reach human emotions will be our defining traits as humans.

So, as you enter this profession, remember this:

“The future of communication is bright and full of possibilities. But what will truly shape our future is ourselves, you, your creativity, your vision, and your humanity.”

Books to spark your creativity:

- **"Make Good Art" by Neil Gaiman** – Based on Gaiman’s famous commencement speech at The University of Arts in Philadelphia, this book is an inspiring call to create, embrace failure, and take risks.
- **"Steal Like an Artist" by Austin Kleon** – Simplifies the concept of creativity, encouraging us to gather inspiration from everywhere, remix ideas, and find your unique voice.
- **"Think Like a Freak" by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner** – By the authors of *Freakonomics*, this book explores creative problem-solving by looking at the world through a unique lens. It’s about how creativity can apply to non-artistic fields, like economics and social issues.

Start Investing, NOW!

Lastly, let me leave you with this thought: Communication, both as a career and a science, is an ever-shifting universe!

So you better start investing, NOW!

- **Read a lot.** *Not only for the sake of assignments and aiming at good grades*
- **Master Artificial Intelligence.** *Not the other way around*
- **Master Storytelling.** *Learn from the great storytellers of all era and media*
- **Boost your creativity.** *It’s what makes you human*

- **Start developing your network, *not only followers***

Now, after listening to my story, as you begin stepping into this perhaps unfamiliar world, stop and take a brief moment to think: where will you be in 10 years, and what will your work be? Hopefully, you have some vision of it. Don't be afraid to step forward, stay consistent, and let life carve out the path for you.

I personally am not a fan of the term "go with the flow." Well in a way it's true. But if you chose to go with the flow, at least learn to swim or find out how to steer your raft. ☺

One important lesson I learned from my time in college: keep asking questions and don't be afraid of sounding stupid. Why? Because we are! Seriously! This isn't a joke. We all start at point zero -many call it being stupid- to become knowledgeable, don't we?

As a matter of fact, you should be more concerned if no questions arise in your mind whatsoever. It could either mean you're really brilliant, or maybe . . .

. . oh well, you know what I mean ☺

Thank you and best of luck to you all.

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