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The dawn of a new golden age for media relations? How PR professionals interact with the mass media and use new collaboration practices

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ABSTRACT

The article reviews the status of media relations in Europe while it reflects the upcoming media shift from mass mediated communication to own produced and delivered content by strategic communicators. The literature review echoes the changing media landscape from the PR practitioner's point of view: Whereas the 20th century gave birth to different kind of media relations, the highly networked and fluid ways of content re-production, dissemination and therefore the co-construction of meaning became much more important for all kinds of organizations and their public relations practitioners as well as marketers. Referring to these new forms of mediatized content, the final section of the literature review introduces the concept of *strategic mediatization* as a new practice supplementing and/or replacing old media relations. Based on the theoretical ground stressed out in the literature review, an empirical study was carried out based on a quantitative survey among 2253 communication practitioners across Europe. The survey results emphasize a strong shift from the prevalence of mass media to owned media especially in Western and Northern Europe. However, the rising importance of new content practices is considered important in all European regions alike. Nevertheless, the study identifies large gaps between the considered importance and the usage of these new media relations practices.

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1. Introduction

Public relations have been intertwined with the mass media since its rise in the early twentieth century (Hallahan, 2010). Communication departments use mass media to monitor news and public opinion, source content for internal news services, evaluate media coverage, and cooperate to produce quality content or create topical platforms on the Internet. Today organizations explore new practices going beyond traditional media relations. They are paying for published content aimed at consumers (content marketing) (Pulizzi, 2012, 2014; Rowley, 2008) or for content appearing in the form and function of its host platforms (native advertising or embedded marketing, e.g. Facebook posts). Organizations also produce newsworthy content that promotes brands by using journalistic skills (brand journalism) (Brito, 2013; Bull, 2013; Hallahan, 2014; Macnamara, 2014a). This blurs boundaries between journalism, public relations, and advertising (Hallahan, 2014). As

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Macnamara (2014b) observed: “PR is developing new tactics and techniques at the same time as journalism is struggling to adapt in a digital networked world and these developments and evolving interconnections need to be examined” (p. XIII).

This paper explores media relations and widely discussed new practices in this field (i.e. content strategy, content marketing, native advertising, and brand journalism) as a part of public relations. It starts with a literature review in which it presents traditional concepts of interacting with the mass media and outlines the new concepts mentioned above. These are followed by the results of an empirical survey among public relations practitioners working in communication departments and agencies across Europe. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research and it proposes a new concept: “strategic mediatization.”

2. Literature review

2.1. Media relations in the 20th century

Traditional mass media such as newspapers, television, etc. have dominated the 20th century. The media system with its large-scale organizational complex was established as a social institution that produced and disseminated symbolic content and information to entire populations (Hirsch, 1977; pp. 27–28). It typically involved one-to-many communication with anonymous receivers through communication channels with a clear distinction between producers and receivers (Croteau & Hoynes, 2014; p. 287). For corporate actors traditional mass media have been the main channels for reaching customers, publics, and all other kinds of stakeholders. As communicative channels, media constitute and convey meaning. Hence, each type of media is geared to the actions of others and contributes to information, discursive practices, understanding, and persuasion. Therefore, communication channels not only have technical characteristics, but also societal potential (Couldry & Hepp, 2013). Depending on the society and the historical context, media are embedded and have been developed differently in various countries in Europe (Djankov, McLiesh, Nenova, & Shleifer, 2001; Kelly, Mazzoleni, & McQuail, 2004; Trappel, Meier, D’Haenens, Steemers, & Thomas, 2011).

While large-scale media enterprises as well as news organizations with editorial departments and editorial staff (differentiated by Tunstall, 1971) dominated the media system and therefore created the media agenda, *media relations* became a crucial part of public relations like mass media advertising did for marketing. Moreover, media legitimacy and the evaluating audience have traditionally played a leading role in public relations in general and media relations in particular (Bansal & Clelland, 2004; Fredriksson, Pallas, & Wehmeier, 2013; Pollock & Rindova, 2003; Yoon, 2005). According to Habermas (1989 [1962]), for a long time, public spheres were governed by mass media through processes of gatekeeping (White, 1950), media agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), framing (Entman, 1993), priming (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982), and agenda building (Rogers & Dearing, 1988), as well as agenda cutting (Wober & Gunter, 1988; see also Wober, 2001) or agenda melding (Ragas & Roberts, 2009). Public relations practice was dominated and often even equated with media relations—building relationships with journalists as well as editors and offering content that suits their needs and that might result in media coverage (Supa, 2014).

Media relations is a complex process involving an organization’s media relations strategy, media relations professionals, journalists, editors, and media enterprises (Supa, 2014). Zoch and Molleda (2006) proposed a model of media relations focussing mainly on the organizational process of creating media relations programs or campaigns. They view media relations as a strategic function of public relations without taking into account the mass media system and its influence on strategic media relations. The intereffication model by Bentele and Nothhaft (2008), on the other hand, describes the relationship between the mass media system and public relations on three different levels of individual professionals, organizations, and complementary systems within. Both approaches can be combined to gain a broader understanding of the interactions between media relations and the mass media.

Zoch and Molleda (2006) proposed that media relations try to shape the media agenda using framing (Entman, 1993), information subsidies, and agenda building (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). Bentele and Nothhaft (2008) show how public relations adapt itself to expectations and routines of journalism in various dimensions. These involves object-related (e.g. selection, placement and presentation of news), temporal (timing of news), and psychosocial (psychic preconditions, organizational frameworks and routines) dimensions (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008; p. 36). Moreover, they demonstrate that journalists, news organizations, and the media system also adapt themselves to public relations practice.

With the advent of new technologies, e.g. social media and new forms of reaching stakeholders directly, traditional media relations are challenged to adapt to new concepts (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008). Only a few studies have specifically investigated how social media and new technologies shaped the relationship between journalists and media relations practitioners as well as the process of media relations (Macnamara, 2014b; Supa, 2014). Apart from the concepts mentioned in the introduction, the concept of “media catching” became popular through online platforms such as HARO (Help a Reporter Out), “a phenomenon that public relations practitioners must adapt to and become familiar with to engage journalists” (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010, p. 258). HARO is an online platform that allows people with expertise or interests in any field to help journalists by adding valuable content to their research. This new concept built on crowd sourcing is a reference point for how new technologies change traditional media relations. Emerging technologies such as online press rooms (Callison, 2003; González-Herrero & Ruiz de Valbuena, 2006), social media newsrooms (Zerfass & Schramm, 2014), the Facebook initiative “Instant Articles” (Constine, 2015), specific apps for targeting journalists, etc. will continue shaping

Table 1
 Different roles for media relations.

Role	Inbound/Outbound	Main function	Usage of (mass) media
Journalist in residence	Inbound & Outbound	Preparing content for internal and external news and information	Content source and information/news distributor
Organization gatekeeper/boundary spanner	Inbound & Outbound	Central contact point, communication manager	Monitoring, evaluating, control
Trusted source	Inbound & Outbound	Issue information, interact with senior journalists, counseling and advising, two-way flow with media	Joint production and interrelation, influence the media agenda
Publicist	Outbound	Promotion, production, content, generate publicity	Influence gatekeepers, the media agenda and stakeholders, spread information
Spin doctor	Outbound	Persuasion, lobbying, and partisanship	Influence gatekeepers, the media agenda and stakeholders

Note. Systematisation based on Macnamara, 2014b; pp. 189–192 (expanded).

media relations—“noteworthy that relatively few researchers are examining media relations on its own as a strategic function of public relations” (Supa, 2014; p. 7).

Therefore, the process of creating media relations programs and campaigns as well as roles will change due to the advent of new forms of media, and changes within media organizations and the media system, as well as on the micro level. Macnamara (2014b) Macnamara (2014b, pp. 189–192) developed a taxonomy of public relations roles and their relationships with the media based on the developments stated above. He does not consider media relations only as relationships with journalists, but all relationships that public relations professionals have with the media (listed in Table 1).

According to the typology stated above, organizations use mass media for supporting internal processes (inbound) and for reaching the public sphere (outbound). Typical interactions with the mass media for inbound reasons include: sourcing content for internal news services; monitoring news and public opinion; and evaluating media coverage of the organization, its products or services. Key outbound practices are: spreading information about the organization, its products or services; influencing gatekeepers, the media agenda, and stakeholders; and jointly producing quality content and/or creating topical platforms. This gives rise to the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the main reasons for organizations today to interact with the mass media?

RQ 2: How intensively do organizations interact with the mass media today?

RQ 3: How important are paid interactions with the mass media compared to unpaid interactions with mass media in the future?

2.2. New concepts of content creation and delivery

Media organizations are specialized in researching, creating, packaging, distributing, and (if they are businesses) selling content. Altmeppen (2015) differentiates between *traditional media enterprises* (broadcasts, TV, newspapers, movies, etc.) and *hybrid media enterprises* (online and social media, providing no content but platforms), which overlap more and more. He adds *transaction media enterprises* (content, commerce, connection, context = 4C), which are closely interrelated with the other two types and represented by Amazon. They step into the field of traditional media as they perform activities related to the selection, presentation, and distribution of content (Bao & Chang, 2014). This creates new relationships between content producers, distributors, and audiences (Papathanassopoulos, 2011). Different types of media organizations and their services complement each other (Constine, 2015). For example, *The New York Times*, *National Geographic*, BILD, BBC News, and others collaborate with Facebook and offer “Instant Articles.” Professional content is now produced by many different organizations and departments within organizations.

As a consequence, managing content and developing new content strategies has emerged as a persistent challenge for journalists, public relations practitioners, and marketing communication people alike (Abel & Bailie, 2014; Andersen, 2014a, 2014b; Bailie & Urbina, 2013; Hallahan, 2014; Macnamara, 2014a, 2014b; Rockley & Cooper, 2012; Schrock, 2015). *Content management* (CM) tries to integrate organizational and user-generated content as well as all content produced in an organization (Andersen, 2014a). Hence, she defines *content strategy* as “a systematic plan that describes how content will be created, managed, and delivered. A content strategy maps all aspects of an organization’s move to CM, from defining business goals and accounting for an organization’s content to developing a company-wide strategy for producing, evaluating, governing, and publishing that content” (Andersen, 2014a; p. 6). Technological developments open the way for the next generation of content – highly engineered, modular, and adaptable as well as portable – which is called *intelligent content* (Andersen, 2014a, 2014b; Rockley & Cooper, 2012; Rockley, 2010). That new type of content unites all organizational areas as well as user-generated content. Content strategies try to pool all types of relevant content created in-house and externally.

Table 2
 Popular content practices.

Concept	Definition
Content strategy	Systematic plan to create, deliver, and govern content across different platforms to reach defined audiences.
Brand journalism	Produce newsworthy content that promotes brands by using journalistic skills.
Native advertising	Online advertising that matches the form and function of the platform on which it appears.
Content marketing	Create and distribute all kinds of relevant content to attract and engage customers.

Even though scholars from public relations (Hallahan, 2014; Macnamara, 2014a, 2014b), marketing communication (Didner, 2015; Scott, 2013, 2011; Wouters & de Pelsmacker, 2011; de Pelsmacker & Neijens, 2012), and content management (Andersen, 2014a, 2014b; Batova & Clark, 2015; Clark, 2007; Hart-Davidson, 2010; Rockley & Cooper, 2012) concentrate on describing these phenomena, it is important to note the absence of published research on content strategy, content marketing, and other concepts such as brand journalism and native advertising (see Table 2). Both Macnamara (2014b) and Hallahan (2014) provide an overview of different instruments used for content strategies, which are responsible for blurring the boundaries between editorial media content, advertising, and publicity/media relations particularly visible in transaction media enterprises (Altmeyden, 2015; Macnamara, 2014b; p. 210). However, they do not link this arising phenomenon to content strategy. That is why Hallahan (2014) argues that most of these “emerging trends” (Hallahan, 2014; p. 406) fit somewhere between advertising, marketing communications, and media relations. Content strategy, on the other hand, emphasizes that these practices are located transversely to these areas.

While communication professionals have always been involved with content in different ways, the professional dealing with content strategy is considered a new practice (Abel & Bailie, 2014; Bailie & Urbina, 2013). Content strategy practitioners “develop and implement a roadmap for creating highly portable and adaptable structured content and delivering that content to multiple channels in multiple formats for varied audiences and purposes” (Andersen, 2014a; p. 7). This pervades all areas of communication that produce content. As content marketing provides useful information as well as entertainment to engage customers, and promote online click-throughs and return visits, it needs to be studied itself (Hallahan, 2014). Referring to journalists in residence, corporate publishing, and corporate journalism, brand journalism is an evolution of the previous concepts: “Hiring professional journalists and experienced media producers to craft brand stories” (Hallahan, 2014; p. 392). The same is also true for native advertising referring to forms of product placement or hoary advertorials: “Paying to embed sponsored messages within editorial or entertainment content of online publishers” (Hallahan, 2014).

Based on these descriptive insights and in the absence of empirical data, the following research questions can be formulated:

RQ 4: How important are mass media compared to owned media for strategic communication in the future?

RQ 5: How prevalent are partnerships between organizations and mass media on different levels (strategic partnerships, joint content productions)?

RQ 6: Which concepts of content creation and delivery are regarded as important by communication professionals and which are used by organizations today (content marketing, content strategy, native advertising, brand journalism)?

RQ 7: Are there significant differences across countries in Europe?

2.3. The concept of strategic mediatization

Changes in media and organizations have already been noted for changing relations between the traditional communication disciplines in organizations: advertising, business communication, corporate communication, management communication, marketing communication, organizational communication, public relations, technical communication, and political communication are subsumed into a new paradigm of strategic communication (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). Hence, one main question arises from the literature review above: With a new position for public relations, what happens with its media relations practice?

The concept of *strategic mediatization* blurs what used to be constitutive borders between advertising (paid publicity) and media relations (earned publicity), mass media, and other noncore media organizations, who are creating content either as sources or multipliers. One should even consider consequences for some concepts that are constitutive of modernity, such as the difference between what is private and what is public, what is happening to the public sphere, and in that context, what public relations is and what it could be like in fuzzy public/private spaces. Strategic mediatization refers explicitly to the idea of mediatization as “a concept used to analyze critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other” (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; p. 197, italics in original).

Instead of viewing mediatization only from an institutional perspective with its inherent logic, the constitutive model of communication focuses on the co-construction of meaning:

“[...] how the media are and can be used to shape social and cultural realities. Thus, instead of only viewing media as channels of communication and audiences as the receivers of messages, strategic communicators needs to consider how meaning is shaped in the interaction process involving stakeholders and the media practitioners use and how stakeholders interpret and recreate media content in the process.” (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015; pp. 8–9).

All these fundamental changes analyzed in the literature review above in relation to the concept of mediatization and strategic communication brought us to the concept of strategic mediatization. In the following chapter, this concept will be empirically tested in the European context.

3. Empirical study

The research is based on a quantitative survey among communication practitioners in Europe that has been conducted annually for several years. The European Communication Monitor (ECM) 2015 included a special section about mass media trends and emerging practices, which covered three questions derived from the literature review above. Personal invitations were sent throughout Europe via e-mail, based on the largest database of the profession on the continent.¹ Moreover, national branch associations and networks were asked to invite respondents too. The questionnaire was available online in English for four weeks in March 2015.

A pretest was held with 51 practitioners in 18 European countries. All advice had been taken into consideration and accordingly worked into the final survey. In total, 2391 respondents completed the questionnaire in full. For the analysis, 2253 were used excluding respondents who were not practitioners, such as scholars and students. Almost 59% of the respondents were female ($n = 1329$), and 41% were male ($n = 924$). The majority of the respondents had more than 10 years of experience (62.3%, $n = 1404$), followed by a group with 6–10 years of experience (23.3%, $n = 526$), and one with less than 5 years of experience (14.3%, $n = 323$). The largest group of respondents worked as communication consultants (28.9%, $n = 652$). Others worked in communication departments of joint stock companies (25.0%, $n = 564$), private companies (17.5%, $n = 394$), governmental organizations (17.4%, $n = 393$), and nonprofit organizations (11.1%, $n = 250$). Respondents came from 41 European countries: from Southern Europe (30.1%, $n = 678$, from countries like Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia), Western Europe (28.6%, $n = 645$, from countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and France), Northern Europe (24.9%, $n = 561$, from countries like Norway, the United Kingdom, and Latvia), and Eastern Europe (16.4%, $n = 369$, from countries like Romania, Ukraine, and Poland).²

To assess significant differences the data are analyzed with SPSS, Version 22, using Pearson's chi-square (χ^2), independent samples *T*-tests and one-way ANOVA with post hoc Scheffé, depending on the variable.

This survey concentrates on public relations and corporate communications practitioners. Only 16.7% ($n = 374$) of the respondents consider themselves to be in the field of marketing, branding, or consumer communication. Therefore, this survey provides a picture from the standpoint of public relations practitioners.

4. Findings

The findings of this study emphasize the shift from the prevalence of mass media to owned media. Mass media lose more importance in Western and Northern Europe than in Eastern and Southern Europe. However, the rising importance of new content practices is considered important in all European regions alike. Nevertheless, the study identifies large gaps between the considered importance and the usage of these new media relations practices.

4.1. Interaction with the mass media (RQ 1 & RQ 2)

The surveyed public relations practitioners interact with the mass media most often for inbound reasons, i.e. to monitor news and public opinion ($M = 4.09$) (see Table 3). That is particularly relevant for joint-stock companies ($M = 4.24$) and agencies ($M = 4.19$). The most frequent interaction with the mass media for outbound reasons is to spread information about the organization, its products, or services ($M = 3.94$). However, when evaluating media coverage of the organization, its products or services follow closely ($M = 3.89$). Compared to these, PR professionals use mass media less frequently to influence gatekeepers, the media agenda, and stakeholders ($M = 3.62$). Sourcing content for internal news services ($M = 3.12$) and jointly producing quality content and/or creating topical platforms ($M = 3.03$) are used least for mass media interactions.

The results emphasize inbound reasons as the main reasons for organizations interacting with the mass media, i.e. mass media monitoring and evaluation of media coverage. This is especially true for joint-stock companies Private companies, governmental and nonprofit organizations interact primarily with mass media to spread information about their organization, its products, or services, which describes traditional outbound-oriented media relations.

¹ The European Association of Communication Directors (EACD) provided the main database of more than 30,000 addresses in 50 countries on the European continent.

² In this survey, the universe of European countries is based on the official country list of the European Union (<http://europa.eu/about-eu/countries/>) available in 2014. Countries are assigned to regions according to the official classification of the United Nations Statistics Division (2013), with the exception of Turkey, Kosovo, and Cyprus, which were assigned to Southern Europe.

Table 3

Reasons for interacting with mass media today.

My organization (or our service providers) uses mass media and their products to . . .	All organizations <i>M</i>	Joint stock companies <i>M</i>	Private companies <i>M</i>	Governmental organizations <i>M</i>	Nonprofit organizations <i>M</i>	Consultancies & agencies <i>M</i>	ANOVA (<i>F</i> =)
Monitor news and public opinion**	4.09	4.24	3.86	4.03	3.94	4.19	10.567
Spread information about the organization, its products, or services**	3.94	4.04	3.97	4.06	4.02	3.74	8.676
Evaluate media coverage of the organization, its products, or services**	3.89	4.09	3.82	3.78	3.98	3.78	7.095
Influence gatekeepers, the media agenda, and stakeholders**	3.62	3.76	3.47	3.38	3.69	3.71	9.447
Source content for internal news services*	3.12	3.17	3.07	2.95	3.14	3.21	3.185
Jointly produce quality content and/or create topical platforms**	3.03	3.03	3.03	2.77	2.85	3.25	11.971

Notes. $n = 2237$ public relations practitioners in Europe. Q: "Why does your organization interact with the mass media? (Agencies/consultants: Think of your own organization, not of your clients)". 5-point Likert scale ranking from 1 = "Never" to 5 = "Always".

* Significant differences (ANOVA/Scheffé post hoc test, $p \leq 0.05$).

** Highly significant differences (ANOVA/Scheffé post hoc test, $p \leq 0.01$).

Table 4

Importance of mass media for strategic communication.

	Lose importance (scale 1–2)	Neutral (scale 3)	Gain importance (scale 4–5)	<i>M</i>
Using owned media for shaping public opinion	22.1%	27.6%	50.3%	3.38
Using mass media for shaping public opinion	26.0%	37.0%	37.0%	3.20
Paid interactions with mass media	36.1%	31.3%	32.6%	2.96
Unpaid interactions with mass media	13.8%	29.1%	57.1%	3.58
Strategic partnerships with mass media	12.8%	25.9%	61.3%	3.66

Notes. $n_{min} = 2232$ public relations practitioners in Europe. Q: "The mass media industry and journalism face dramatic challenges, which might change the way organizations interact with them. Please rate the relative importance of those activities for strategic communication within the next three years". 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "Lose a lot of importance" to 5 = "Gain a lot of importance". Percentages based on scale points 4 and 5.

4.2. Paid, unpaid interactions or strategic partnerships with mass media (RQ 3, RQ 5)

For the surveyed public relations practitioners, unpaid interactions with the mass media are much more important for the future of strategic communication than paid interactions: only 32.6% perceive that paid interactions with the mass media will gain importance within the next three years. In contrast, 57.1% opined that unpaid interactions with mass media will become more important. Nevertheless, significant differences (considered scale points 4–5, chi-square test, $p \leq 0.05$, Cramér's $V = 0.058$) between the types of organization for the item "paid interactions with mass media" demonstrate that private companies (36.4%) and professionals working in agencies (38.4%) perceive paid interactions as more important for strategic communication within the next three years than others.

Although those surveyed perceive that strategic partnerships with the mass media will become much more important within the next three years for strategic communication (61.3%), producing quality content and/or creating topical platforms together with mass media will perhaps become more important when interacting with the mass media (see Table 3).

4.3. Future importance of mass and owned media for strategic communication (RQ 4)

After asking the European communication practitioners about their perception of mass media or owned media in relation to shaping the public opinion, only 37.0% perceive that mass media will gain importance for shaping the public opinion (scale points 4 and 5), compared to 50.3% for owned media (see Table 4). As those working in agencies often have a deeper insight into new developments, it is extremely interesting to compare the view of them to the overall results ($n_{min} = 647$): on the one hand, only 33.4% of the agency respondents perceive that mass media will gain importance for shaping public opinion. In contrast, 29.7% believe that mass media will lose importance. On the other hand, 53.2% rate owned media for shaping public opinion as becoming more important in the next three years for strategic communication. Only 18.4% perceive that owned media will lose importance.

Table 5
 Importance of concepts for creating and delivering content.

	Joint-stock companies	Private companies	Governmental organizations	Nonprofit organizations	Consultancies & agencies	Overall	ANOVA (F=)
Content strategy**	4.48	4.46	4.25	4.56	4.62	4.49	14.572
Content marketing**	4.36	4.46	4.00	4.37	4.44	4.34	18.124
Brand journalism**	3.89	3.87	3.69	3.78	4.04	3.88	7.233
Native advertising**	3.60	3.53	3.21	3.47	3.59	3.50	7.701

Notes. n_{min} = 2210 PR professionals. Q: “To what extent are the following concepts and practices important for the future of strategic communication in general?” 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “Not at all important” to 5 = “Extremely important”. Mean values.

** Highly significant differences for all items (ANOVA/Scheffé post hoc test, $p \leq 0.01$).

Table 6
 Usage of concepts for creating and delivering content.

	Joint-stock companies	Private companies	Governmental organizations	Nonprofit organizations	Consultancies & agencies	Overall	Cramér's V
Content strategy**	59.8%	63.2%	51.7%	65.6%	65.3%	61.2%	0.101
Content marketing**	55.1%	52.0%	51.9%	66.8%	65.3%	58.3%	0.126
Brand journalism**	36.9%	40.4%	38.4%	38.0%	46.5%	40.7%	0.079
Native advertising*	37.6%	38.1%	28.5%	31.2%	33.4%	34.2%	0.074

Notes. n_{min} = 2210 public relations practitioners in Europe. Q: “. . . And what is used or offered by your organization?”

* Significant differences (chi-square test, $p \leq 0.05$).

** Highly significant differences (chi-square test, $p \leq 0.01$).

Table 7
 Importance of mass media for strategic communication across Europe.

	Northern Europe M	Western Europe M	Southern Europe M	Eastern Europe M
Using mass media for shaping public opinion**	3.08	3.09	3.30	3.42

Notes. n = 2244 public relations practitioners in Europe. Q: “The mass media industry and journalism face dramatic challenges, which might change the way organizations interact with them. Please rate the relative importance of those activities for strategic communication within the next three years”. 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “Lose a lot of importance” to 5 = “Gain a lot of importance”.

** Highly significant differences (ANOVA/Scheffé post hoc test, $p \leq 0.01$, $F = 12.535$) between Northern/Western Europe and Southern/Eastern Europe.

4.4. Importance and usage of concepts for creating and delivering content (RQ 6)

Even though 93.0% of the addressed public relations practitioners consider content strategy important for the future of strategic communication in general (scale point 4–5, $M = 4.49$), only one in two (58.3%) stated that their organization already uses an implemented content strategy. A similar picture emerges when asking for brand journalism and content marketing (see Tables 5 and 6). Finally, native advertising as a practice is used by 34.2% and considered important (scale point 4–5) by 55.0% ($M = 3.50$).

Moreover, the study identified significant differences between all types of organization for all items for the considered importance (see Table 5). It is noteworthy that for nonprofit organizations content strategies are most important and more than two thirds (66.8%, Cramer's $V = 0.126$) use a content strategy as well as content marketing (65.6%, Cramer's $V = 0.101$) (see Table 6). Even though companies consider in particular content strategy as well as content marketing as important for the future of strategic communication, only half of them use these in practice.

4.5. Differences across europe (RQ 7)

Different historic, cultural, economic, and political developments across Europe produced different mass media systems in different nations. Mass media are more or less established as societal institutions, and budgets for owned media may range from small to big. Comparing the relative importance between the usage of mass media and owned media for shaping public opinion in different European regions, the study reveals highly significant differences between Northern and Western Europe compared to Southern and Eastern Europe (see Table 7).

A similar discovery has been made for the item why organizations or their service provider use mass media and their products to jointly produce quality content and/or create topical platforms. Comparing the 20 countries with the most participants (at least 50), Romania ($M = 3.46$) and Ukraine ($M = 3.47$), as well as Turkey ($M = 3.66$), Croatia ($M = 3.30$), Italy ($M = 3.22$), and Slovenia ($M = 3.20$) differ widely from the Northern European countries, e.g. Norway ($M = 2.39$), Sweden ($M = 2.42$), and Denmark ($M = 2.58$) (highly significant differences (ANOVA/Scheffé post hoc test, $p \leq 0.01$, $F = 7.698$). Significant differences between these 20 countries have also been found for the future importance of strategic partnerships with mass media (ANOVA/Scheffé post hoc test, $p \leq 0.05$, $F = 5.095$). For Romanian ($M = 3.99$), Spanish ($M = 3.94$), Ukrainian ($M = 3.85$), Austrian ($M = 3.80$), and Croatian ($M = 3.79$) practitioners this is perceived as much more important than in Sweden ($M = 3.21$), Switzerland ($M = 3.23$), or Norway ($M = 3.24$).

Comparing the 20 countries regarding the future importance of content marketing for strategic communication, the Romanians ($M = 4.63$), Ukrainians ($M = 4.54$), Turkish ($M = 4.53$), and Irish ($M = 4.53$) surveyed perceive it as much more important than practitioners from other countries, e.g. Norway ($M = 3.77$), Slovenia ($M = 4.06$), France ($M = 4.12$), Austria ($M = 4.14$), or Switzerland ($M = 4.16$) (ANOVA/Scheffé post hoc test, $p \leq 0.01$, $F = 4.169$, $STD = 0.20$). Moreover, native advertising is perceived as extremely important for the future of strategic communication in Romania ($M = 4.16$) and Portugal ($M = 3.94$), in contrast to France ($M = 2.96$) and Switzerland ($M = 3.02$) (ANOVA/Scheffé post hoc test, $p \leq 0.01$, $F = 6.915$, $STD = 0.30$).

Content marketing is widely used in the United Kingdom (72.6%) as well as Finland (76.1%), compared to Slovenia (47.1%) and Croatia (46.4%) (highly significant differences, chi-square test, $p \leq 0.01$, Cramér's $V = 0.152$). Furthermore, significant differences were also found for the usage of content strategy as well as brand journalism: 68.1% of those surveyed from the UK already use a content strategy, in contrast to (again) Slovenia (46.1%) and Croatia (45.5%) (significant differences, chi-square test, $p \leq 0.05$, Cramér's $V = 0.133$). Finally, brand journalism is used significantly differently in European countries: 57.1% of Danish, 47.9% of Dutch, and 45.9% of British organizations use this practice, compared to 28.6% of the Swiss and 28.8% of the Irish organizations (significant differences, chi-square test, $p \leq 0.05$, Cramér's $V = 0.130$).

5. Discussion

Public relations has double connections with the traditional mass media. On the one hand, mass media are social institutions monitoring the behavior of organizations and their (ab)uses of power (in whatever form: cultural, economic, or political). In that sense, they are the Fourth Estate (next to the original state legislative, executive, and judicial powers). They must be observed and respected. The results of our study clearly illustrate that this is how large, joint-stock companies treat them. On the other hand, the traditional mass media are like organizations' cost-efficient surrogates for interpersonal communication with large audiences (markets and publics): they are intermediaries between organizations and their stakeholders, they may be said to be extensions of organizations' own communication systems. As advertisers see it, traditional mass media bring and sell their audiences to organizations, but in that process they also perform a role of gatekeepers, performing agenda setting, framing, and priming, and agenda building, cutting, and melding. As massive and cost efficient communicative surrogates for interpersonal communication, traditional mass media are organizations with their own cultures and structures. When developments in information and communication technology (ICT) substantially altered, i.e. lowered the costs of media creation, production, and distribution, it was only a matter of time before organizations started bypassing traditional media organizations by interacting directly with their stakeholders (markets and publics). While non-profit organizations with the least resources are at the forefront of this trend, there can be no doubt that media relations is entering a new phase of its development. For the twentieth century we can say that it was monocultural in terms of its reliance on the traditional mass media trio (press, radio, and television), while in the twenty-first century we can see an emergence of multicultural forms of media organization (paid, earner, social, owned, mobile, wearable. . .).

The strong shift from outbound to inbound (see Table 3, RQ1 and RQ2) emphasizes the new role media enterprises play in the highly mediatized western society—willingly or unwillingly, they have become partner of organizations and their strategic mediatization. European PR practitioners perceive that strategic partnerships with the mass media will become much more important within the next three years. That is especially true for co-produced content, be it topical platforms or classical advertisement (see Table 3, RQ3 and RQ5). Using strategic mediatization as a powerful approach to manage all type of content – starting from evaluating and listening tools to content strategies, production and delivering that content directly to all kind of stakeholders – gives rise to an unbalanced shift of power between noncore media organizations and traditional mass media organizations (see Tables 5 and 6, RQ6). Through this direct co-construction with all kind of stakeholder, the new type of mediatized organizations are able to influence the 'cultural map' of the content prosumer—"a map showing the various cultural repertoires and symbolic resources available to differently placed subgroups [. . .] (Morley, 1992; p. 283)." While there is no obvious replacement for mass media as societal institutions for the creation of the public sphere and control of abuses of economic and political power, changes in mass media as organizations are changing what used to be a traditional partner of many public relations practitioners in media relations exercises—the journalist. Some public relations scholars fear that a new relative balance between journalism and public relations stimulates organizations as sources to exhibit "hegemonic tendencies" (in the language of the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci; c.f. Macnamara, 2014b; p. 217). New content management strategies are conceived as manipulative (Andersen, 2014b; p. 116) and for that reason some public relations scholars distance themselves from the practice (e.g. Hallahan, 2014). Contrary to these academics, practitioners in our study seem not only to be comfortable with new media relations practices, they see them as opportunities.

European practitioners working in strategic communication in agencies and communication departments value the future importance of owned media in contrast to mass media (see Table 4). Mass media still play an important role. However, communication strategists herald the dawn of a new golden media age with relations to the rising stars of the new media economy—the *transaction media enterprises* (Altmeyden, 2015). The media transition phase is also a media relations transition phase. While the classical media enterprises decrease and transaction media enterprises raise in power, the classical media relationships will change too. *Nota bene*: the study reveals highly significant differences between Northern and Western Europe compared to Southern and Eastern Europe (see Table 7). The empirical data remind us 'of the presence of the Digital Divide which determines how "networked" a society is, which depends on the level on economic developments—poverty,

literacy, and other cultural factors.’ (Vercic & Tkalac Vercic, 2015, p. 262; see also Castells & Himanen, 2014; Castells, 2007; van Dijk, 2012).

6. Limitations

The study gives an insight into the future of media relations and new types of mediated organizational practices. However, the majority of respondents work as PR professionals and not in marketing or advertising. For a fuller assessment of the upcoming changes, inclusion of journalist and all relevant stakeholders (audiences, consumers and prosumers...) will be needed.

7. Future research

There is a clear need for further research and two areas critically need more insight. One concerns changes in mass media as both institutions and as organizations—what are the consequences of these changes for public relations and in particular its media relations practice? When even the most prestigious traditional mass media accepts native advertising, brand journalism, and content marketing, what is the role of journalism in this new media ecosystem? Who besides journalists are now the new partners for media relations practitioners? Moreover, what are the new rules of the media relations game?

The other research question needing more public relations research is the mediatization of corporations and all types of organizations (Ihlen & Pallas, 2014). What is the role of public relations practitioners in the mediatization of (noncore media) organizations? What will be the organizational and what will be the societal/institutional consequences of a mediated organizational society for the mass media organizations? What will the mediatization of all organizations mean for the relative power of mass media as a societal institution?

Future research should not only analyze but also conceptualize what needs to be newly perceived as relevant and important. The world, media, and organizations are changing, and so is media relations. This new world can mean the end of the old media relations practice, but it can also mean the dawn of a new golden age of new media relations: strategic mediatization.

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