

Prospects and risks of digitalization in public relations research: mapping recurrent narratives of a debate in fragmentation (2010–2022)

Digitalization
narratives in
PR research

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Abstract

Purpose – The debate on digitalization in the public relations (PR) literature has fragmented considerably over the past decade because of its focus on upcoming media-technological innovations, required professional skills and management concepts. Yet the field has difficulties in developing an integrative perspective on the implications of digitalization as a broader socio-technological transformation with a balanced consideration of prospects and risks.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper proposes an integrative perspective that focuses more on the enduring imaginaries of how digitalization can transform society for better or worse. It traces the historical roots of five imaginaries of digitalization, which have already emerged over the past century yet have experienced a significant revival and popularization in the current debate. Based on these five imaginaries, the authors performed a narrative literature review of the digitalization debate in 10 leading PR journals from 2010 to 2022.

Findings – The five imaginaries allow for a systematization of the fragmented digitalization debate in the field, reconstructing recurrent narratives, prospects and risks.

Originality/value – The originality of this contribution lies in its reconstructive approach, tracing societal imaginaries of digitalization and their impact on the current disciplinary debate. This approach provides context for a balanced assessment of and engagement with upcoming, increasingly fragmented digital advancements in PR research and practice.

Keywords Digitalization, Imaginary, Literature review, Narrative, Public relations research

Paper type Literature review

The debate on digitalization in PR research has fragmented considerably over the past decade. This has occurred because the debate has had a strong emphasis on upcoming media-technological innovations (e.g. [Verčič et al., 2015](#)), required professional skills (e.g. [Bernhard and Russmann, 2023](#); [Lee and Meng, 2021](#)), and management concepts (e.g. [Brockhaus et al., 2022](#); [Dühring and Zeffass, 2021](#); [van Ruler, 2019](#)). This focus has allowed for PR research an adaptive response to the latest digital advancements, which is required for an applied academic discipline closely related to a professional field. Yet this focus also comes with difficulties in developing an integrative perspective on the implications of digitalization as an all-embracing societal transformative force. This integrative perspective, however, seems increasingly requested to contextualize ever-new, increasingly fragmented digital

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advancements and to assess disciplinary engagement with a balanced consideration of prospects and risks. The present paper proposes such an integrative perspective. This perspective comprehends digitalization not only in terms of the latest digital advancements, but it also places emphasis on underlying, more enduring imaginaries (e.g. [Flichy, 2007](#)) of how digitalization will transform society for better or worse.

The aim of the current paper is to map the central social imaginaries of digitalization and reconstruct how they shape the increasingly fragmented debate on digitalization in PR scholarship, specifically looking at the period from 2010 to 2022. Building on a shared proposition of media history and science and technology studies (STS), we comprehend digitalization as a transformative phenomenon that is equally shaped by technological progress (*digitization*) and the underlying imaginaries of how this progress gains societal impact (*digitalization*). Such imaginaries typically manifest in recurring narratives ([Balbi and Magaudda, 2018](#); [Plesner and Husted, 2020](#)), shaping public and academic debates.

PR research and practice can benefit from our exploration of this question. The suggested emphasis on enduring imaginaries of digitalization can support scholars and practitioners in achieving a more integrative perspective on digitalization in PR in three main ways: First, by facilitating contextualization of upcoming digital advancements; second, by providing a balanced focus on recurrent prospects and risks; third, by supporting our discipline to contribute more actively to the narrative shaping of digitalization imaginaries in the future.

The paper is structured as follows: We start with a brief reflection on the current digitalization debate in PR research. We then clarify our understanding of digitalization as a socio-technological transformative force and we trace the historical roots of five imaginaries of digitalization, their revival, and popularization in the current digitalization debate. Based on these five imaginaries, we conduct a narrative literature review that maps how they have been incorporated into scholarly work in 10 leading academic PR journals from 2010 to 2022. This helps trace and discuss the recurrent societal prospects and risks that each of these digitalization imaginaries implies from an integrative perspective.

Engagement with digitalization in PR research

Over the past few decades, in the field of PR research, digitalization has turned from a niche to a core topic (e.g. [Duhé, 2015](#)). However, this has also led to an increasing fragmentation of the debate. This fragmentation is driven by a strong emphasis on upcoming digital media technologies ([Verčič et al., 2015](#)), their implications for required professional skills ([Bernhard and Russmann, 2023](#); [Lee and Meng, 2021](#)), and the corresponding management concepts ([Brockhaus et al., 2022](#); [Dühring and Zeffass, 2021](#); [van Ruler, 2019](#)) in PR research. This fragmentation is also reflected in different PR paradigms. Dialogic PR scholarship, for example, has significantly expanded its initial focus on the World Wide Web to websites, blogs, social media, and digital platform environments more generally. This falls in line with an increasingly detailed consideration of enabling and constraining conditions of implementing communication principles including demanded skills, media affordances, and infrastructural design (e.g. [Kent and Taylor, 2021](#); [Valentini, 2015](#); [Wirtz and Zimbres, 2018](#)). Over the past decade, functional approaches in PR, too, have placed a strong emphasis on introducing digitalization-related concepts from the broader business and management debate to the discipline – such as agility, datafication, automation, or CommTech, to name but a few (e.g. [Brockhaus et al., 2022](#); [Dühring and Zeffass, 2021](#); [Wiesenberg et al., 2017](#)). The critical PR scholarship, in turn, has recently started to challenge this uptake of ever-new digital advancements and skills in PR scholarship. This stream of the literature has argued that PR research and practice alike predominantly adopt the role of a promotional “cheerleader” ([Bourne, 2019](#)) of new advancements. This affirmative approach is scrutinized as often suffering from historical and “moral blindness” ([Bachmann, 2019](#), for a related

argument, see [Holtzhausen, 2016](#)) regarding the disciplinary contribution to downsides of digitalization, for example, digital inequality and surveillance capitalism.

Hence, the debate on digitalization in PR research is strongly shaped by a focus on ever-new technological advancements and their impact on the immediate professional context. This focus is understandable, given the relatedness of PR research to a professional field. Yet this focus also has its shortcomings of limiting the current debate in PR to two sidelines of the broader digitalization debate ([Bloomberg, 2018](#); [Plesner and Husted, 2020](#)). The current focus on the latest digital advancements in PR research reflects the debate on *digitization*, which has its emphasis on the technological transformation of historically analog into digital data, design, and devices. In addition, PR research is responsive to the current debate on *digital transformation*, which primarily engages with the question of how digital innovation changes and disrupts the established business models and management routines.

What is, however, much less reflected is the broader sociological debate, which considers *digitalization* to be an all-embracing transformative force of society at large. We consider stronger engagement with this debate as crucial for two reasons. First, it allows PR research and practice for a better contextualization and balanced assessment of prospects and risks of upcoming, increasingly fragmented, digital advancements. Second, such an integrative perspective may also allow PR to more actively shape the broader digitalization debate in the future. For this purpose, in the following, we propose an approach for how to comprehend digitalization as an all-embracing socio-technological transformation.

Digitalization as socio-technological transformation

The origins of digital thinking and technology can be traced back to the nineteenth century ([Plesner and Husted, 2020](#)). However, technological advancements do not automatically lead to societal transformation. As the research in media history and STS have revealed (e.g. [Balbi and Magaudda, 2018](#); [Bory, 2020](#); [Curran et al., 2012](#); [Jasanoff and Kim, 2015](#)), the progress and diffusion of digital advancements equally depend on accompanying *imaginaries* ([Flichy, 2007](#); [Mager and Katzenbach, 2021](#); [Taylor, 2004](#)). Imaginaries present social assumptions and expectations of how digital technologies can transform social life. More specifically, sociotechnical imaginaries are technology-related visions of society's future; they typically emerge in line with the first technological intuitions, ideas, or prototypes. In their beginning, they only motivate single inventors or specialized communities of practice, often fading because of a lack of impact. Yet over time, imaginaries can experience a revival, diffuse into other fields, and gain popularity in public discourse. Importantly, in this process, sociotechnical imaginaries transcend the functional opportunities and constraints of a specific technological innovation. More fundamentally, they play out as utopian and dystopian visions of how society should or should not evolve ([Jasanoff and Kim, 2015](#); [Taylor, 2004](#)).

The inquiry of sociotechnical imaginaries provides a valuable analytical lens through which to explore the interplay of technological and social change in various areas of life ([Mager and Katzenbach, 2021](#)). In the present article, we apply this analytic lens to the central imaginaries of digitalization ([Balbi and Magaudda, 2018](#); [Bory, 2020](#)) to better understand recurrent prospects and risks of digitalization to PR from an integrative perspective.

The imaginaries of digitalization have a long historical tradition, yet they have experienced a massive, parallel revival and popularization in the digitalization debate of the past decade. Scholars have suggested narrative inquiry to study imaginaries and how they experience revival and become performative in the wake of technological advancements ([Flichy, 2007](#); [Plesner and Husted, 2020](#); [Taylor, 2004](#)). Narratives have a motivational ([Burke, 1969](#)) and time-structuring function ([Godart and White, 2010](#)). In this way, narratives represent a primary communicative source to articulate and diffuse imaginations of how

social life will and shall transform in line with technological advancements and with digital ICT in particular ([Dourish and Bell, 2011](#)).

Historical imaginaries of digitalization

Although the first ideas of digital thinking already emerged in the late nineteenth century, digital imaginaries with a broader impact on the societal debate only arose after Second World War. Based on the literature at the intersection of media history and STS (e.g. [Balbi and Magaudda, 2018](#); [Bory, 2020](#); [Curran et al., 2012](#); [Flichy, 2007](#); [Jasanoff and Kim, 2015](#); [Yar, 2014](#)), we have identified five, temporarily partly overlapping digitalization imaginaries in order of their first historical emergence.

Digitalization as cybernetics (ca. 1943–1975)

The imaginary of *digitalization as cybernetics* originated in the 1940s. Second World War had left its mark, revealing the atrocity of the totalitarian instrumentalization of bureaucracy. This spurred efforts to abstain from bureaucratic, centralized forms of governance and to seek more flexible and responsive alternatives ([August, 2022](#)). With the transdisciplinary field of cybernetics, a new *prospect of feedback-based, decentralized governance* emerged, reaching its peak in the 1950 and 1960s. The central expectation was to no longer depend on hierarchical goal definition and linear, long-range planning. Instead, cybernetics privileged heterarchical design and maximum responsiveness through circular feedback processes, facilitating flexible equilibria between social needs and supply of all sorts. In the 1970s, however, the appeal of the cybernetics imaginary declined as promoters of the rising neoliberal free market ideology started to scrutinize the *risks of cybernetics* as being a complex, overregulating variant of the planned economy ([Kline, 2015](#)).

Digitalization as connectivity (ca. 1950–1980)

The imagination of *digitalization as connectivity* also emerged after Second World War. The US government discovered the key role of technoscience in global conflict and risk management. Accordingly, the government invested in various academic research projects working on the forerunners of today's internet (e.g. ARPANET). However, work on these projects also ignited the academic *prospect of open information exchange and collaboration* that could be afforded by digital technologies ([Balbi and Magaudda, 2018](#)). The idea of a global network infrastructure arose, allowing for the collection, interconnection, and storage of infinite amounts of information in an interdisciplinary manner to cooperate more productively and reach more robust research results on complex problems in a faster way ([Bory, 2020](#)). Over time, however, the initial connectivity imaginary lost its appeal. With the exponential growth of networked information available, the *risks of connectivity* and open collaboration, for example, lack of prioritization rules, information overload, participation, responsibility, and ownership conflicts became increasingly apparent ([Flichy, 2007](#)).

Digitalization as empowerment (ca. 1975–1990)

In the 1970s, ignited by the progressive spirit of counterculture ([Curran et al., 2012](#)) and the academic collaborative spirit of ARPANET ([Bory, 2020](#), see above), a new imaginary developed, one that emphasized the *prospect of social empowerment and community building* from digitalization. More concretely, this imaginary built on the social expectation that, by means of the networking potential of digital ICT, humans would be able to transcend classic social categories like origin, status, or milieu, instead moving toward more self-determined forms of social affiliation and collective will formation ([Fisher and Wright, 2001](#); [Yar, 2014](#)).

Digital technologies were envisioned as the enablers of virtual communities. This sublime political-emancipatory potential of digitalization (Flichy, 2007), however, was considered utopian over time, pointing to the potential *risks of digital community building* in terms of their relational superficiality and affective self-affirmation instead of social emancipation and empowerment (Fisher and Wright, 2001; Yar, 2014).

Digitalization as transhumanism (ca. 1980–1995)

In the early 1980s, a *transhumanistic imaginary* emerged. It built on the *prospect of a digital upgrade and optimization of human capabilities* through digital technology, which ultimately could even foster a transgression of boundaries between humans and machines (Flichy, 2007). The aim was to technologically transcend the personal limitations of body and mind, unleash the full potential, and, ultimately, discard mortality. Yet the idea of transhumanism also provoked critical and opposing views scrutinizing the *risks of transhumanism* in terms of hubris and the devaluation of human skills and dignity (Yar, 2014).

Digitalization as disruption (ca. 1993–2001)

The end of the Cold War at the beginning of the 1990s spread optimism, particularly regarding the future economic potential of the internet. Accordingly, the US government started heavy funding of the private tech sector. However, once this sector was profitable, it turned the tables and pushed back governmental intervention (Balbi and Magaudda, 2018). Alternatively, the *prospect of e-commerce* arose based on radical libertarianism, entrepreneurial spirit, and technological solutionism (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996; Nachtwey and Seidl, 2020). This prospect argued that only disruptive market players should survive and dominate the digital marketplace by providing radically innovative solutions to human needs, typically deduced from digitally extracted consumer data (Bory, 2020; Geiger, 2020). Yet, the imaginary of disruption, which was already starting to arise at the beginning of the twenty-first century, increasingly faced critique of unregulated venture-capitalism and power concentration (Curran et al., 2012; Yar, 2014). These perceived *risks of disruption*, at least in the interim, materialized with the crash of the dot-com bubble (Balbi and Magaudda, 2018).

Revival of the five imaginaries in the wake of the social web

With the rise of the social web in the second half of the 2000s, the above-mentioned imaginaries experienced a successive revival and popularization for two main reasons: first, the global advance of digital tech companies that had ideological roots in several of these imaginaries and, second, the free and intuitive access to digital ICT afforded mass user participation provided by these very companies (Balbi and Magaudda, 2018; Curran et al., 2012).

The first revivals concerned the imaginaries of *connectivity* and *empowerment* by promoting the collaboration, participation, and interaction of people around the world via free access to social media. Second, the imaginary of *disruption* reemerged, which romanticized big tech founders, such as Steve Jobs, as digital pioneers who revolutionized the world (Balbi and Magaudda, 2018). The massive economic success of these players and their businesses again increased the interest in their working logics, which revived the *cybernetics* imaginary under new labels, such as permanently beta or agility (Geiger, 2020; Neff and Stark, 2003). At the same time, the imaginary of *transhumanism* regained traction as a result of the latest advancements in the field of smart machines and artificial intelligence (Latzner, 2022).

Given their impact on the broader digitalization debate, we consider the five digitalization imaginaries and their specific prospects and risks as a promising analytic reference point to

achieve a systematic overview of the current, increasingly fragmented digitalization debate in PR research. To do so, we applied a narrative literature review.

Methodology

Our narrative literature review aims to identify, compare, and trace the development of digitalization imaginaries in leading PR journals from 2010 to 2022. In this time frame, we assume a revival of all five digitalization imaginaries and a period when many related keywords started to gain traction in academic discourse.

To identify the most appropriate journals for our research, we started with a pretest and conducted a selective search of the *Web of Science* database for initial search terms related to digitalization and PR. We identified 10 international journals with an explicit focus on PR or a related field of applied professional communication and comprehensive engagement with topics related to digitalization. Hence, we considered these 10 international journals to be the most relevant for our study, yet we extended our dataset with additional key articles and chapters from more general communications journals and selected handbooks (see footnote [1]). Based on our pretest, we determined the following search terms – as a word stem, a standalone word, or a part of a longer compound word – in the title, keywords, or abstract as being suitable and comprehensive to analyze journal articles published between 2010 and 2022: *digital**, *digitization*, *artificial intelligence*, *AI*, *algorithm**, *new media*, *online*, *social media*, *big data*, *ICT*, *datafication*, and *web**. Following our research interest, the search terms have followed a comprehensive understanding of digitalization, and they do not focus on specific digital applications or platforms.

In the first step, using the journal publishers' specific website search engines, we have limited our analysis to title, keywords, and abstract, assuming that the essential information of the articles can be adequately analyzed (Lock and Ludolph, 2020). Book reviews and short commentary articles were not considered. Because the number of selected articles ($n = 1018$) in the first run turned out to be very high, we reviewed the sample according to disciplinary fit (*Does the article relate to PR?*), thematic fit (*Does the article engage with digitalization in depth?*), and narrativity (*Does the article contain narrative elements and structure?*). The narrative analysis, which is described in the next section, allowed us to identify 129 articles [1] that provided a clear narrative engaging with digitalization in PR.

Narrative analysis according to Greimas

The selected articles were analyzed regarding the specificity at which a particular digitalization imaginary mirrored in the narrative structure. For the narrative interpretation, we applied the narrative scheme of Greimas (1988), which is well established in communication-focused organization and management studies (e.g. Cooren, 2000; Cooren and Fairhurst, 2004). The scheme builds on four phases constitutive of any narrative: a *manipulation phase*, wherein an action is initiated; a *competence phase*, in which the necessary knowhow is acquired; a *performance phase* as the main plot of executing actions; and a *sanction phase*, in which a critical evaluation takes place. In this sense, the scheme explains what motivates agency and change in different phases, and it grants comparability and typification of distinct narratives (Cooren, 2000; Cooren and Fairhurst, 2004). Notably, articles can contain one, several, or all four narrative phases, depending on their research agenda and scope. One phase typically unfolds over at least several sentences, sometimes even entire sections or articles. To explain the application of the analytic scheme, we provide some examples of how we identified and assigned particular narrative phases in our data:

- (1) *Manipulation phase*: The sections addressing this phase typically contain a call for awareness of and stronger engagement with a particular digitalization phenomenon, either in terms of a future imperative, opportunity, or constraint.
- (2) *Competence phase*: This phase is assigned to address necessary background knowledge and expertise required to comprehend and master a particular digital phenomenon.
- (3) *Performance phase*: Sections reflecting this phase contain elaborations on how to implement and apply acquired knowledge, with particular emphasis on practical virtues, enablers, and obstacles.
- (4) *Sanction phase*: The focus of this phase lies in accompanying or retrospective critical assessments. This can concern both instrumental and ethical assessment, hence providing a concluding extrapolation of prospects and risks.

Findings: digitalization narratives in PR research

Overall, the number of articles containing at least one of the four phases of our five digitalization narratives increased over the years (see [Figure 1](#)). Although this was evidently also influenced by our search term selection, the results suggest that the digitalization debate gained traction in the field of PR research. Furthermore, it is remarkable that one journal consistently reflected several digitalization narratives over time: *Public Relations Review* (see methodology).

Each of the analyzed 129 articles contributed to at least one of the five digitalization narratives, some also to several, resulting in an increasing number of combined narratives that blended the phases, prospects, and risks of different narratives. For space reasons, we cannot discuss these combinations and cite all 129 articles analyzed. Instead, in the following, we focus on unfolding the basic structure of the five core narratives according to their four phases and illustrate them with quotes from selected, particularly characteristic and articles (see [Table 1](#)).

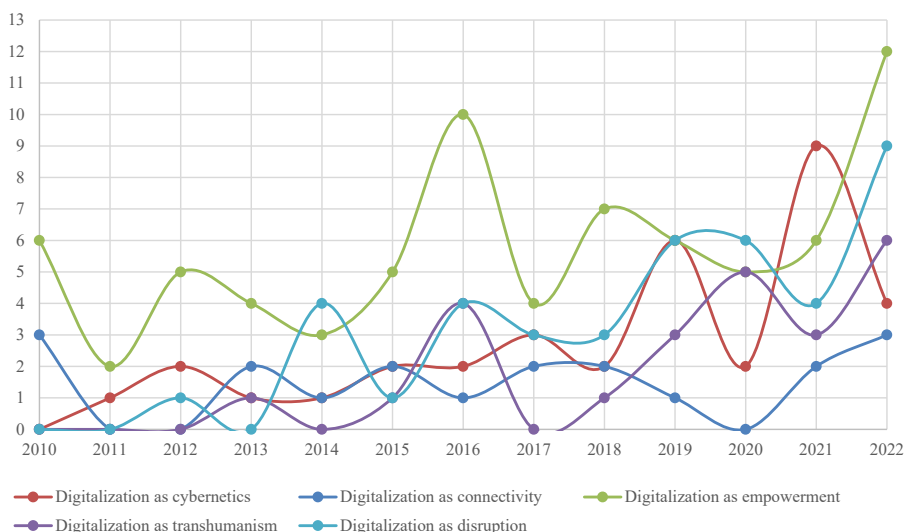


Figure 1.
Digitalization
narratives in PR
research from 2010
to 2022

Source(s): Created by the authors

Phases Narratives	Manipulation	Competence	Performance	Sanction
	Call for engagement with ...	Acquisition of expertise in ...	Implementation and application of ...	Prospects vs risks extrapolated as ...
Digitalization as cybernetics	... digital feedback potential vs loss of control	... harmonizing ideals of responsivity and control	... agile mindset and methods	... increased flexibility vs acceleration and overcomplexity
Digitalization as connectivity	... digital exchange and collaboration potential	... network thinking in information curation and management	... standardized information and knowledge sharing	... increased collaboration vs participation frustration and fatigue
Digitalization as empowerment	... digital emancipatory potential	... dialogic principles and infrastructural design	... political stance in terms of pro-public dialogue and activism	... defending social empowerment vs individualization and polarization
Digitalization as transhumanism	... digital potential to transcend man-machine-dualism	... functional integration of nonhuman agency	... workflows delegated to and enhanced by digital agents	... optimization vs displacement by nonhuman agency
Digitalization as disruption	... digital potential as business game changer	... venturesome, transformative digital mindset	... data-driven processes and infrastructure	... facilitation of business transformation vs henchman to surveillance capitalism

Table 1. Greimas' narrative scheme as applied to the five digitalization narratives in PR research

Source(s): Created by the authors

The digitalization as cybernetics narrative in PR

- (1) *Manipulation phase:* Until 2015, the precursors of the cybernetics narrative (e.g. [Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012](#); [Theunissen, 2015](#)) already call for stronger engagement with the feedback potential of digital media yet scrutinize that professionals “still cling to control and use social media as a mere distribution channel” ([Theunissen, 2015](#), p. 8). There is rising awareness of the dilemma of increased feedback opportunities for the sake of a loss of established managerial control.
- (2) *Competence phase:* From 2015 onwards, a solution to this dilemma emerges with an explicit revival of cybernetic thinking in PR ([van Ruler, 2015](#)). This thinking promotes overcoming rather than regaining an established understanding of managerial control ([Just and Gulbrandsen, 2016](#)). Such an understanding, it is argued, can no longer be maintained in “complex, unpredictable, dynamic, and constantly changing environments – today described as VUCA world” ([Dühring and Zerfass, 2021](#), p. 94). This insight calls for new expertise on how to harmonize seemingly competing ideals of responsivity and control by “flexible and iterative planning methods, in which coping with change is a natural part” ([van Ruler, 2015](#), p. 189, see also [van Ruler, 2019](#); [Wiencierz and Röttger, 2019](#)).

- (3) *Performance phase*: Implementing an agile mindset and methods are identified as central practical virtues to manage the unexpected in times of constant innovation and risk. Applying this virtue, allows organizations to become significantly more flexible, faster and responsive by establishing new ways of planning (design thinking, scrum) [and] organizing (self-organizing teams, collaboration, flatter hierarchies) (Dühring and Zeffass, 2021, p. 93).
- (4) *Sanction phase*: Up until this point, the assessment of the cybernetics narrative in PR research is mostly affirmative, mainly reflected in the prospect of increased professional flexibility. However, on the operative level, risks inherent to cybernetic thinking find first consideration. Scholars acknowledge that flexible feedback responsivity inevitably implies an acceleration of planning processes (Zimand-Sheiner and Lahav, 2022) and growing structural complexity: “Agility [...] creates complexities and new problems of its own. In agile organizations, everything is connected. You cannot turn one screw without affecting a number of others.” (Dühring and Zeffass, 2021, p. 108)

Digitalization as connectivity narrative in PR

- (1) *Manipulation phase*: The connectivity narrative, which often emerges in combination with the empowerment narrative (e.g. Robson and James, 2013; Taylor and Kent, 2010), places particular emphasis on raising awareness of the collaborative potential of digital ICT for PR. More concretely, this potential is identified in enhanced information exchange, networking, and cooperation between PR “practitioners and academics” (Taylor and Kent, 2010), communication professionals and experts of other disciplines (e.g. IT or marketing), and, more recently, between communication professionals and the general workforce organized in locally distanced, virtual teams (Yoon and Zhu, 2022).
- (2) *Competence phase*: To leverage this potential, advanced knowledge in distributed digital information storage, curation, and management, as well as the availability of up-to-date collaborative tools, are presented as crucial for future PR (e.g. Hajtnik *et al.*, 2015; Yoon and Zhu, 2022). In line with the original connectivity imaginary, these requirements are usually accompanied by network-inspired metaphors of collaboration, for example, a “transactive memory system (TMS) – a collective cognitive map of who knows what and who does what” (Yoon and Zhu, 2022, p. 236).
- (3) *Performance phase*: However, also in line with the original connectivity imaginary, implementing networked collaboration and applying knowledge sharing in everyday PR practice is considered challenging, particularly when it comes to joint decision-making, process standardization, and regulation: “Key challenges [...] are primarily rapid technological development, the problem of how to select records for long-term preservation, legal obstacles, missing standards and, finally, the re-use of online and social media content” (Hajtnik *et al.*, 2015, pp. 265–266).
- (4) *Sanction phase*: The general assessment of the connectivity narrative is rather skeptical for a long time. Given the above-mentioned challenges of implementation, neither PR professionals nor employees are considered sufficiently engaged to actively and continuously participate in digital collaboration processes: “Yet, more often than not, these internal digital platforms fail to live up to their potential. Most employees in most organizations seldom use these platforms, resulting in little to no impact on collaboration, employee morale, knowledge management [...]” (e.g. Cardon *et al.*, 2019, p. 2). Only recently, possibly triggered by enforced digital work because of

the COVID-19 pandemic, have we been able to observe a slight revival of the prospect of digitally enhanced collaboration and knowledge sharing with a particular focus on internal social media (Laitinen and Sivunen, 2021; Madsen and Schmeltz, 2022).

Digitalization as empowerment narrative in PR

- (1) *Manipulation phase:* Throughout the entire period of investigation, the empowerment narrative presents the digitalization narrative with the greatest continuity in PR research (see Figure 1). This is also the case because of its traction in influential dialogic and communitarian PR scholarship (e.g. Kent, 2013; Kent and Taylor, 2016; Valentini *et al.*, 2012; Wirtz and Zimbres, 2018). From its very beginning, this line of scholarship shares high hopes of unleashing the emancipatory potential of the digital sphere as a space allowing for genuine dialogic engagement, relationship, and community building.
- (2) *Competence phase:* To seize this emancipatory potential, early publications predominantly underscore the importance of ethical principles of dialogic and community engagement that can guide the professionalization of digital PR: “Relationships are built on [...], trust, mutuality, propinquity, empathy, and interaction (i.e., dialogue). Engaging citizens (or publics) is one of the centrale roles of leaders in a democracy” (Kent, 2013, p. 343). More recent publications additionally problematize the current design logic of digital platforms, emphasizing future expertise in PR on how to conceptualize “a new architecture of social media capable of facilitating public discussions around social issues [...].” (e.g. Kent and Taylor, 2021, p. 2).
- (3) *Performance phase:* Implementing these demanding dialogical and design expertise in practice requires a determined political stance from practitioners, which becomes even more pronounced over the years (e.g. Ciszek, 2016; Valentini *et al.*, 2012). It is argued that, in their daily practice, PR professionals must go beyond mere facilitation of digital dialogue and community building toward pro-public activism (e.g. Holtzhausen, 2016). This also implies the scrutiny and opposition of platform logics that negatively “affect the dynamics of interpersonal relations and communications. Distorted uses, or abuses, can lead to a sense of alienation, a loss of sociality, an overall distrust of others” (e.g. Valentini, 2015, pp. 172–173).
- (4) *Sanction phase:* Accordingly, the general assessment of the empowerment narrative in PR scholarship is much more ambiguous today than in its early euphoric days. From 2015 onwards, scholars recognize that they not only must promote, but also vindicate, the original prospect of social empowerment in the digital sphere against current aberrations (e.g. Shoai, 2021; Sen, 2022); this implies fighting the current risks of individualization and polarization and giving voice to diversity and minorities in the digital sphere (e.g. Bourne and Edwards, 2021). This engagement is regarded as vital to preventing future PR from turning into “a morally indifferent practice of persuasion, attempting to manage – that is, limit the freedom of – relevant individuals” (Bachmann, 2019, p. 327).

Digitalization as transhumanism narrative in PR

- (1) *Manipulation phase:* The narrative of digitalization as transhumanism has not received recognition in PR scholarship before 2013. Yet in the following years, it becomes a prominent point of reference, often in combination with other narratives. In

line with the original transhumanism imaginary, the key potential of digitalization is identified in the possibility of transcending the established dualisms between human and nonhuman agency and to “explore the ways in which technologies and humans [...] work together in ‘symbiotic agency’” (Just and Rasmussen, 2019, p. 26) or “socio-material assemblages” (e.g. Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016).

- (2) *Competence phase*: The meaningful integration of nonhuman agency is presented as a crucial expertise of the future PR profession (e.g. Collister, 2015; Galloway and Swiatek, 2018; Just and Rasmussen, 2019). This implies developing an understanding of the different functions of these new digital technologies, such as (chat)bots (e.g. Men et al., 2022), algorithms (e.g. Collister, 2015), or artificial intelligence (e.g. Prahl and Goh, 2021), along with their potential impact on the profession: “The advent of AI now means that humanoid-like technologies can operate for extended periods without human intervention, making their own decisions and acting independently” (Galloway and Swiatek, 2018, p. 738).
- (3) *Performance phase*: Delegation to nonhuman agency in everyday practice is expected to enhance strategic decision-making and relationship management by simultaneously making it more convenient and more efficient (e.g. Knebel and Seele, 2019; Men et al., 2022; Santa Soriano and Torres Valdés, 2021): “AI with its self-learning capabilities offers PR professionals a tool not only to harness insights from this massive data but also a system to respond autonomously to tweets, queries, grievances, posts and other messages on the social media” (Panda et al., 2019, p. 197).
- (4) *Sanction phase*: Functional approaches tend to emphasize the prospect of professional relief and optimization inherent to the transhumanistic imaginary (Galloway and Swiatek, 2018; Knebel and Seele, 2019) and argue that AI will do “mundane work like creating media lists, scheduling meetings, and sending follow-up emails and, in turn, save the valuable time of PR professionals” (Panda et al., 2019, p. 197). Critical readings, in turn, address concerns of being replaced by nonhuman agency in central communication decisions. This raises urgent ethical questions of biased decision-making (e.g. Collister, 2015; Syvänen and Valentini, 2020): “How can biases be prevented in chatbot learning? Is it ethical to try to replace humans with chatbots, particularly when the decision tasks are highly sensitive?” (Syvänen and Valentini, 2020, p. 351) These biases can have far-reaching societal consequences, considering the rapid implementation of AI technologies in various areas of professional communication (Prahl and Goh, 2021).

Digitalization as disruption narrative in PR

- (1) *Manipulation phase*: The disruption narrative gains traction in PR scholarship from 2012 onwards, highlighting the game-changing impact of new digital technologies on future business success, which can be defined in terms of corporate influence and revenue. Conversely, “companies unable to successfully navigate these disruptive changes face serious consequences, including a decline or worse” (Ragas and Ragas, 2021, p. 80). As one thing is clear, “the new wave of [...] technology is predicted to disrupt many essential industries, including PR” (Panda et al., 2019, p. 208).
- (2) *Competence phase*: Given this game-changer frame, missing out is not an option. This also holds true for the discipline of PR: “We feel that public relations, as a field, too often seeks cautious, incremental change when faced with new developments and pressures rather than pursuing true innovation” (Coombs and Holladay, 2018, p. 383). If PR does not take advantage and catch up, it will be replaced by other disciplines,

such as IT or marketing (e.g. [Coombs and Holladay, 2018](#); [Ragas and Ragas, 2021](#); [Wiesenberg et al., 2017](#)): “to stay relevant in the current digital landscape, PR experts must acclimate and increase their [digital] knowledge and skills” ([Zimand-Sheiner and Lahav, 2022](#), p. 6). Specifically, digital disruption would require a venturesome, future-oriented mindset that is ready to constantly transform and develop to keep pace with swiftly changing IT and media environments ([Lee and Meng, 2021](#)).

- (3) *Performance phase*: Behavioral user data are consistently identified as key to disruptive business models. Accordingly, the implementation and application of datafication and automation ([Wiesenberg et al., 2017](#)) and, most recently, CommTech (in an analogy to digital marketing’s MarTech) in all relevant communication activities and infrastructure, is presented as essential for PR to meaningfully contribute to future corporate success ([Brockhaus et al., 2022](#)).
- (4) *Sanction phase*: Although the prospect of PR as a future facilitator of digital business transformation is pronounced, there is also a skeptical assessment. Although some scholars doubt whether the disciplinary profile of PR is sufficiently equipped for such a transformation at the moment (e.g. [Lee and Meng, 2021](#)), others explicitly address the ethical risks of following the disruption narrative (e.g. [Jackson et al., 2022](#)). Aware of the roots of disruptive thinking in Silicon Valley and its leading tech companies, scholars point to democratically highly problematic consequences of contemporary digital surveillance capitalism. Accordingly, this critical reading also scrutinizes whether digital PR’s “strategic objective is to position the latest neoliberal disruption as inevitable and ‘common-sense’ and consequently a ‘public good’” ([Bourne, 2019](#), p. 113; see also [White and Boatwright, 2020](#)).

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of the present article was to provide an integrative perspective on the increasingly fragmented digitalization debate in PR scholarship, with a balanced focus on prospects and risks. Therefore, we have suggested shifting the current emphasis from the latest technological advancements, skills, and management concepts in PR scholarship to more enduring imaginaries of digitalization envisioned as all-embracing socio-technological transformation. We have identified five historically established and recently revived imaginaries of digitalization from media history and STS. Subsequently, we have systematized the current digitalization debate in leading PR journals from 2010 to 2022, here using narratives reproducing these imaginaries. This narrative literature review of 129 articles allows us to better understand how the five imaginaries – digitalization as cybernetics, as connectivity, as empowerment, as transhumanism, and as disruption – implicitly shape the debate on digitalization in PR scholarship, along with how their explication allows for identification of recurrent prospects and risks. In this way, our research provides a complementary perspective to the ongoing, increasingly fragmented digitalization debate in our field. Concretely, we identify three main contributions to PR research and practice that will be unfolded in the next paragraphs: contextualization of upcoming digital advancements; comprehensive assessment based on recurrent prospects and risks; and active narrative shaping of digitalization imaginaries.

First, according to our conceptual elaborations, technological advancements are typically accompanied by broader societal imaginaries. Hence, the five imaginaries identified in our contribution can facilitate the classification and assessment of upcoming digital advancements and trends in PR. For example, the current hype around ChatGPT and related AI-powered language models can be classified as the latest revival of the transhumanism imaginary, which comes with the challenge of searching for meaningful

ways to integrate human and nonhuman agency. Related classification and assessments may apply to revivals of the cybernetic and interconnectivity imaginary in the wake of upcoming digitally enhanced networked organization and process design approaches; to the revival of the empowerment imaginary in the wake of upcoming digitally enhanced forms of user deliberation; or, finally, to the revival of the disruption imaginary in the wake of the declaration of the next digital business revolution. Assessing the latest digital advancements as revivals of more enduring societal imaginaries may also create stronger awareness that not all upcoming digital advancements are compatible. As our study has shown, some imaginaries have experienced a revival in combination because of commensurable historical roots and guiding values (e.g. cybernetic and connectivity, connectivity and empowerment, transhumanism and disruption). However, other imaginaries have turned out to be incommensurable and competing (e.g. empowerment and disruption). This reflection can inform PR research and practice that the latest digital advancements and trends do not simply add up in terms of linear progress, but also produce new ideological fault lines and corresponding instrumental and ethical challenges to PR.

This leads us to the second contribution. The five imaginaries not only allow for advanced reflection on instrumental and ethical prospects and risks of digital advancements adhering to different imaginaries, but they also contribute to a better assessment of the recurrent prospects and risks of each digitalization imaginary *per se*: *digitalization as cybernetics* indeed supports reflections in PR research and practice on alternatives to established concepts of centralized governance and long-range planning, as currently emphasized by agile PR scholarship and consultancy. However, it equally makes our field aware of the accompanying risks of process acceleration and structural (over)complexity. *Digitalization as connectivity*, in turn, indeed contributes to reflections on alternatives to the established logics of specialized knowledge production in PR research and practice. Yet digitally enhanced, interdisciplinary collaboration also implies the risk of decision and standardization conflicts. *Digitalization as empowerment*, indeed, holds rich potential for reflection on how digitalization can support public emancipation in PR. Yet it also makes us aware that unleashing this potential requires compliance with demanding normative principles and a fundamental redesign of the current digital media infrastructure. *Digitalization as transhumanism* can support the professional optimization of the PR profession. Yet delegation to nonhuman agency also comes with the risk of increased displacement by potentially biased technology. Finally, *digitalization as disruption* can sharpen the discipline's focus on future business advantages, yet not without the risk of contributory negligence to data-based surveillance. Our systematization, hence, aims at making PR scholarship and practice aware of the genuine instrumental and ethical ambiguities of digitalization imaginaries by providing an integrative perspective on recurrent prospects and risks.

This leads to the final contribution of our paper. Explicating the impact of digitalization imaginaries on our discipline invites PR scholarship and professionals to also shape these imaginaries more actively in the future. This recommendation implies a necessary shift in perspective: from an applied discipline adapting to the latest advancement to an active cocreator of future digitalization narratives. PR is not in the worst position for such a shift: There is established disciplinary knowledge on how to cocreate and shape narratives in desired ways, and there is a strategically helpful position at the interface of the organizational and public sphere and professional and academic sphere, respectively, to accomplish the impactful dissemination of these narratives. Such a shift may not only allow one to overcome the current fragmentation of the debate on digitalization in PR, but it may also empower PR – both research and practice – to become an active change agent in the broader digitalization debate.

Our study has empirical limitations. We are aware that our sampling focus on journal articles may have biased our narrative analysis to a certain extent. From a narrative

perspective, journal articles present a very specific sort of text that follows a highly formalized structure within limited space. Furthermore, another selection of search terms, for example, with a stronger focus on specific application areas of digital PR, may have revealed other, more practice-based narratives. Yet because our primary analytic focus was on creating awareness of how to envision digitalization as a social transformative force in our field, we consider the abstraction level of our search term selection justified. Finally, as in all interpretative methods, other authors may have distinguished digitalization narratives differently (Balbi and Magaudda, 2018). Yet we have put efforts into making historical emergence and specific prospects and risks of the narratives described here intersubjectively comprehensible.

Besides extending our narrative analysis to other academic texts besides articles, we consider future research on the impact of digitalization narratives on the PR profession promising. In this context, a longitudinal analysis of the professional debate based on industry magazines or interviews with corporate and agency experts present an interesting way to move forward. This could substantially complement our findings by identifying if the digitalization debate in the PR profession reveals similarities to our research or if imaginaries and narratives play out differently. Such future research efforts may further support PR to live up to our initial plea: to overcome the current role as adopter of ever-new digital advancements toward a more considerate and active position aware of recurrent prospects and risks of digitalization.

Notes

1. (n = 129): *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* (10), *International Journal of Business Communication* (3), *International Journal of Strategic Communication* (13), *Journal of Communication Management* (17), *Journal of Public Relations Research* (7), *Management Communication Quarterly* (3), *Public Relations Inquiry* (7), *PRism* (5), *PR Journal* (2), *Public Relations Review* (39), as well as reference articles and book chapters (23).

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