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## Artificial intelligence is opening a new era for professional communication

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### ABSTRACT

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In this editorial for issue two of volume six of the Journal of Professional Communication, the author discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting period of sheltering in place and economic lockdown has demonstrated the how the rapid shift to working from home has highlighted the essential strategic value of communications management in an organizational context. The editorial also contains a summary of each article in this issue of JPC, as well as acknowledgement of peer reviewers and JPC staff.

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**W**e have always been told that the creative professions are immune to the impending tide of automation that has threatened to sweep across the economy. Indeed, in the 2000s, we saw the impact of self-serve banking and checkouts on staffing at financial institutions and grocery stores. In the 2010s, online translation services such as Google Translate and later DeepL, amongst others, transformed the way we do translation, keeping a promise that the founders of artificial intelligence had first made in the 1950s. Indeed, translators starting taking the output of neural machine translation systems and then “correct (“post-edit”) it to ensure that the translation will be communicatively successful in context” (Pym and Torres-Simón, 2020). This is a trend that will accelerate in that most literary and methodically creative of fields.

The effects of artificial intelligence and machine learning on translation is import for practitioners of public relations, marketing, journalism and the other fields of professional communication because what we do is quite similar to the

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craft of the translator. We make plans to communicate using different channels and media to have an effect on individuals and publics, with the hope of building relationships. Relationship-building used to be the most ineffable of labours, as we met with journalists, editors, producers and other media gatekeepers to build mutually beneficial and mostly mutually respectful relationships. The advent of social media changed everything, suddenly materializing the relationships that we used to only know as interpersonal and qualitative, invisible links made real only in our minds, our rolodexes and over lunch or coffee.

Yet those relationships, those materialized, were also rendered fundamentally abstract. As every citizen moved a portion of their life to social media, they had to build a representational identity and engage in a symbolic life that for most people was novel and alien. In the past, few people really had to deal with symbols in any serious way. Most people's lives had been thoroughly concrete and involved working with physical objects that existed in the worlds, such as hammers or pipes or chisels. The economist Robert Reich, described the roughly 30 percent of the population who worked with abstractions as "symbolic analysts," (Reich, 1992) and political scientists such as Christopher Lasch considered them "elites" (Lasch, 1995) who were separated from the working and middle classes because of the symbolic nature of their work. Suddenly everyone was a symbol analyst, having to construct a digital representation of themselves in words and pictures, and then transact in symbols to accomplish even the most basic elements of personal, social and economic life.

This trend was accelerated by the introduction of the iPhone in January, 2007, which took that imaginary, symbolic world and eventually made it a real part of almost every waking moment of almost everyone's life. In fact, psychologist Jean Twenge who quantitative studies of the impact of smartphones on our minds, claims that an entire generation, iGen, has been defined by the fact of being born in 1995, after the smartphone's introduction. She claims that this generation is qualitative different from its predecessors in many ways: social, psychological and relational (Twenge, 2017). Indeed, this was the first generation where everyone had to have a representational life alongside their physical one.

However, it is fairly uncontroversial to say that professions of communication largely ignored social and digital media, assigning it to the youngest person in the room, calling it a passing fad, or knowingly asserting to clients and colleagues that traditional mainstream media would remain the most prestigious venues in which to be mentioned, that the annals of national news-

papers and television news shows were still the documents of record of public communication and reputation building. As profession communicators, we were wrong to dismiss social and digital media, for many reasons. One only needs to look around a typical newsroom to see how journalism -- with some notable exceptions like the New York Times -- has failed to find a way to adapt its business model to stay solvent and relevant in the social media age. A quick look at the chaotic world of social media, rife with misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy, to see the wages of a publishing market that developed outside of that old, uneasy pact between journalists and public relations professionals that defined public and civic discourse until the advent of social media (Sévigny and Waxman, 2023).

How would social media have been different had news media and public relations adapted better? That is a hypothetical question that I and many other practitioners and academics have debated often. Would the public interest have been better served had we been involved more seminally and foundationally? Very likely. For despite the reputation for self-interest that both professions have in many eyes, they have both been stubbornly committed to protecting the public interest, in their separate ways.

Artificial intelligence is an extension of the digital and social media revolution. However, it is an extension that will look like a hundred foot wave after a ripple in the water. While social media initiated everyone to representational and symbolic life, artificial intelligence will automate that life, allowing those most fundamental aspects of human cognition and feeling: storytelling and relationships to be built at scale by disembodied entities such as chatbots powered by large language models (LLMs), which fall under the category of generative AI. In 2023, we saw the popularization of LLMs, with the release of the astonishingly capable ChatGPT 3.5 and then 4. This was followed by hundreds of other artificial intelligence start-ups, each offering a simulation of a different aspect of human cognition and feeling.

The systems released to date are still quite primitive. They have little ability to plan and are really using brute force computation to solve for generating and understanding image, sound and text. Yann Le Cun, head of artificial intelligence at Meta and a professor at New York University has said that the current AI systems don't even have the awareness and intelligence of a dog or cat (Kharpal, 2023). However, as the computer and cognitive scientists who are designing artificial intelligence systems start to insert more context, rules and actual world knowledge, it is possible that the next generation of artificial intelligence will start to have the experiential knowledge that humans benefit from as we take in the world around us, through our five senses, day

and night, week after week, year after year.

The prospect of thinking machines that can simulate feelings is a daunting one, when one considers the damage that being collectively thrust into a representational and symbolic life has caused to our politics, sense of society, relationships and, indeed, our sense of self. Cyberbullying, online misinformation, deepfakes and other challenges that professional communicators have faced over the last ten years will be compounded and scaled exponentially, as artificial agents communicate for us, build relationships with us and amongst themselves.

It is imperative that professional communicators be part of the artificial intelligence revolution that will transform every aspect of our society, economy, culture and selves. Our commitment to the public interest, to open political and civic dialogue, and to spreading true, accurate information is necessary to hold the emerging AI giants, like OpenAI and Midjourney to account. It may seem like a daunting task, but since the technology is nascent and nobody really understands it yet, we are all neophytes. Those who adopt early and immerse themselves will benefit from a major first-mover advantage and profit immensely. As well, the first movers will have a foundational impact on how AI technology develops, how the industry self-regulates and how policy makers regulate it. As human communication and relationship experts, it is of primordial importance that professional communicators step into the ring and grab the generative AI bull by the horns. Our public, political and civic discourse depends on it.

## A new approach to JPC in this issue

As you may have noticed, JPC has been dormant for several years. This is a result of busy schedules, tumultuous events in the health of loved ones and the simple fact that the journal is largely staffed by volunteers. This year I am joined in editing JPC by Margaret (Peggy) Kulmala, a graduate of the McMaster University Master of Communications Management and a seasoned senior communications strategist with a background in the Canadian military as well as post-secondary education and now government. She has brought a new enthusiasm and excitement to editing the journal, which has put wind into our editorial sails.

After much discussion, we decided that we should move to a different editorial model for JPC - where we publish each article as they are approved, peer reviewed, accepted and edited. This way, there will be less pressure to

put together a full issue and manuscripts can be moved from submission to publication in a more timely fashion. We will try this experiment in 2024 and see how it works out. We are starting by publishing this editorial, as well as a first full peer-reviewed article by David Boggon, Nuha Wani, and Kiloran Metcalfe on “What makes a good medical referral?” We hope you enjoy JPC’s new publication rhythm and look forward to your submissions.

## Acknowledgements

Journal of Professional Communication is results of the work of many people who give their time and energy. The busy professionals—academics and practitioners—who serve as peer reviewers are at the heart of every successful issue. Their discerning and thoughtful comments improve every article that appears in the Journal. Serious thanks to Peggy Kulmala, who has joined me as associate editor of JPC, whose astute editing and keen design skills will continue to ensure that our journal remains a beautiful and readable publication.

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