# Digital public relations in the context of knowledge gap theory

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| Article Info | Abstract |
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| | *Globalization, technology-driven economic changes, and digital transformation hastened by the pandemic of the previous four years have shown the relevance of digital and conventional public relations. Due to the rapid development of technology and digitalization, which transforms society, this study examines how public relations experts can use digital technology to reduce the information gap in transferring public relations practices and methods. Descriptive analysis, one of the qualitative research methods, was used after a literature review on the information gap hypothesis of digital public relations. In-depth interviews were conducted and public relations experts answered the subject-specific research questions. Public relations, unlike conventional media tools, lowers the information gap owing to digitalization knowledge and abilities, according to studies.* |

## 1. Introduction

Communication is the basic structure of public relations. Communication is an indispensable element. With digital public relations tools, institutions can communicate with their relevant target audiences anytime. It can directly share its messages with its target audiences without a gatekeeper. Public relations activities carried out in the digital environment have provided significant facilities to those working in the field of public relations in conducting research, collecting and storing information about customers, media, competitors, and the sector they are in as soon as possible. In other words, it is possible to say that digital transformation reduces the psychological distance between the institution and its target audience (Karsak et al. 2018:8). Accordingly, it is very important to analyze and follow the approaches of the target audience, which are actively involved in digital platforms. Instant content is shared on social media and many platforms based on the internet infrastructure. Content and messages are shared by platform users around the world very quickly through social media, and it is almost impossible to keep up with and follow this speed of the target audience with traditional methods (Çataldaş & Özgen, 2021:5228).

The knowledge gap theory assumes that the mass media do not inform all segments of society equally. Among the most important reasons for this are education and the economy. The low level of education of certain segments of society may leave them in the background of well-educated individuals. Well-educated individuals, especially regarding information access, are more curious and conduct research. The economic situation generally contains this logic. If the economic status of individuals is high, it can be easier to access information. For example, With the development of technology, incredibly technological devices are coming to the market, and they are in great demand by society. Devices such as computers, phones, and tablets increasingly diversify daily. Those who cannot reach these devices cannot keep up with the rapid progress of the internet world and fall behind. This is an undeniable fact. The knowledge gap theory also emphasizes that the mass media are insufficient to inform society for

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these and many other reasons. Especially in continuing the research on the print media, with the development of the Internet and technology, the knowledge gap is included in the new media, and research is carried out. According to the various results of the studies, it would not be an accurate definition to say that the Internet clearly reduces or increases the knowledge gap. It takes time to catch up with technological development's speed and be effectively involved. During this time, research on the knowledge gap can be affected. While everything is progressing rapidly, society is affected by this speed, and accordingly, the information in the studies is updated. More research should be done to reach the masses, and studies on the field should be increased.

The rapid progress of the Internet and the technological world necessitates the field of public relations to keep up with this speed. Digitalized public relations is going through a critical period, especially with the target audience starting to play an active role on digital platforms. In this critical process, public relations specialists need to apply traditional public relations practices and new practices correctly in the digital environment and shape their strategies and tactics according to this new process to ensure continuity and not lose the target audience, which is one of the most important factors. In particular, these strategies and tactics should be implemented without causing a lack of information in society, and the knowledge gap should be reduced. In this study, digital public relations are examined within the framework of knowledge gap theory. Does digital public relations create a knowledge gap? By focusing on the question, suggestions are made about what public relations experts should do to reduce the knowledge gap. The primary purpose of the study is to emphasize that the digitalization of public relations with the development of technology over time and the development of the sphere of influence depending on the social transformation should act by taking into account the knowledge gap perspective while planning its actions to ensure the continuity of the institutions.

## 2. Knowledge gap hypothesis

The knowledge gap hypothesis was first discussed in the article titled "The Flow of Mass Media and Differential Growth in Information" by *Phillip Tichenor, George Donohue, and Clarice Olien from the University of Minnesota in 1970* (Bonfadelli, 2002:66-67). In Turkish sources, it is also called "knowledge *difference"* and "*knowledge aperture"* (Mutlu, 2012,48). The theory reveals that the mass media fail to inform all segments of society equally and increase the knowledge gap (Güz and Yanık, 2017:2). According to this hypothesis, with the increase of information through mass media, it has been concluded that the knowledge gap among society increases over time, according to the possibilities of accessing this information (Mutlu, 2012:48). There are gaps between the low and high socio-economic status groups in experiencing change. In transferring information to society through mass media, segments with high socio-economic status adopt this information faster than segments with low socio-economic status. Accordingly, there is a tendency to increase the gap between the two segments. Besides the mass media, various factors cause the knowledge gap to increase. These; include "*communication skills, amount of information stored, social contact, selective exposure, reception and retention of information, nature of the mass media system."* Factors such as the status of individuals, education, and environmental factors are essential in increasing the knowledge gap. The knowledge gap theory states that obtaining information about any subject in the media spreads faster among better-educated people than less-educated individuals over time. There should be a correlation between the less reflection of the information in the media and the knowledge gained on more reflected topics and education. As elements such as communication skills, existing knowledge, or social contact come into play and the heavy media flow continues, the gap increases (Tichenor et al., 1970: 159-163).

One of the criticisms of the knowledge gap hypothesis is based on the insight into the knowledge that causes this gap. According to this approach, it is asked whether giving importance to the knowledge gap is reasonable rather than explaining useful and relevant information to certain social segments. It may be insignificant for people to lack knowledge on matters that do not really concern them as long as they have knowledge of matters that concern them. In addition, the receptive tendency of this theory has also caused criticism. This theory, which is based on the concept of concise and objective knowledge as a standard, ignores the formation of personal meanings and knowledge of individuals. Everyone in society tends to seek and access the information they need in their own time. They are motivated by the desire to seek information that they deem important to them without considering the issues that researchers and others treat for them. In this case, the knowledge gap in the studies covers the researchers' constructs. A general answer to these criticisms is that it is still a problem that certain people with more limited resources cannot obtain enough information about issues such as the economy and health (Mutlu, 2012:48).

The knowledge gap is particularly important in the media. The problem of not being able to use the media equally in accessing information by all segments of society leads to the emergence of a point of view that the

media reduces or increases the knowledge gap. Depending on the purpose of our research, since the knowledge gap in the field of digital public relations is discussed, we first aim to examine the knowledge gap and the media issue and then examine the public relations process. In this respect, the knowledge gap is examined within the framework of traditional media and new media, based on the progress of the media depending on information and technological developments.

## 2.1. Knowledge gap and traditional media

There are studies on the knowledge gap from the past to the present. Depending on the research, it has been determined that the knowledge gap increases from time to time, and sometimes it is closed. The important factor is how much information is exposed and how evenly it is distributed. Interest and motivation are among the critical factors of the knowledge gap. If there is an interest in existing knowledge and this interest is equally distributed in society, the gap in knowledge can be closed. Socioeconomic status is an important factor in the formation of the knowledge gap. However, the interest rate in politics also occurs depending on factors such as age. In addition to the attitude that the media generally closes the gap, the situations that increase the gap should not be ignored. Motivation is an important variable in reducing the knowledge gap. Therefore, motivation alone is not enough. At the same time, it is very important that the information is always accessible. Television is a universal communication tool in general, and it is possible to play an important role in the equal distribution of information due to being a media (Severin & Tankard, 2021:349). Even though there are a few studies that show that television increases the knowledge gap, it is generally concluded that it reduces the knowledge gap. Accordingly, there are studies that show that radio also creates a knowledge gap (Güz & Yanık, 2017:2). One of the main purposes of traditional media is to inform society. For this purpose, the knowledge gap that will occur in society should be taken into account, steps should be taken to close this gap, and action should be taken to reduce the knowledge gap by taking into account the interests and motivations in society.

## 2.2. Knowledge gap and new media

Besides traditional media, technological evolution has begun a new process for humanity. This new era is known as social media or new media (Güngör, 2013:367). "Internet; It makes a place for itself in many fields such as e-mail, intranet, extranet, online databases, and networks. The diversity of these areas is used as a tool in the communication of institutions with their target audiences. It makes itself felt as a single tool in some communication strategies (Özgen, 2010:85). This process, which started to develop with the use of the Internet, started a new virtual environment and communication process. At the same time, it provided new social areas for society. The new media has some features different from the existing KIA. Some of them are as follows (Güngör, 2013: 369-371);

*Interactionism*; Although the existing KIAs are generally unilateral, this process can be realized reciprocally with the new media. In other words, it has a two-way process. *Instant feature*; Depending on a mutual functioning process, the sending of messages and feedback occur at the same time and ensure more effective and efficient communication. *Individuality and massiveness*; While the existing mass media send their messages to the masses, social media can be used massively, as well as a communication environment where individual use is provided. *It does not require professionalism*; While professionalism is very important in media such as newspapers and television, anyone who is literate can use the new media. *spacelessness;* Anyone can communicate with anyone from anywhere. Especially with the presence of portable phones such as 3G and 4.5G, it has become possible to communicate more quickly. *Time excess;* Like spacelessness, everyone can send their message to the other party at any time, and the other party can receive it at any time. Although there is no change in terms of the basic principles that make up communication in the internet environment, there is a differentiation in terms of methods, and old methods are adapted according to the communication environment according to Today's conditions (Peltekoğlu and Askeroğlu, 2019: 1047).

New media has caused the interaction and differentiation of cultures and the acceleration and generalization of globalization stages over time. As a matter of fact, new media has a meaning as a new era with its causes and effects. However, it describes the social, technological, and cultural change, which is also referred to as "techno-culture." The concept of "new"; represents the dissemination of social developments through technology and beliefs that can be expressed as modern. The concept, which first appeared in Western societies, can be expressed as an ideological movement with new communication fields. Although the concept is basically defined as "digital" or "electronic" media, it should be emphasized that it is interactive media. A person, Internet, blog, etc., when he uses it, also uses the new media (Özgen, 2010:93).

A common point to be drawn from the definitions of new media is that with the evolution of information, new media is a technologically advanced system dependent on the Internet to function by creating an environment for media content in many forms (Udeze and Oka, 2013:200). In some studies on the new media and knowledge gap, it is stated that the knowledge gaps in the new media generally arise from the ability to use the Internet and computer, but it is also concluded that the Internet expands the knowledge gap rather than reducing it. There are studies on whether the Internet, as a very important mass communication tool, causes a knowledge gap. In the first research, it has been determined that the Internet increases the knowledge gap depending on the age factor, especially those who do not know and cannot use technology well. In research in recent years, data has been found that the Internet reduces the knowledge gap (Güz and Yanık, 2017:2).

In general, there is a point of view that the media increase or decrease the knowledge gap. For this reason, there are criteria that the media should be aware of regarding the concept of the knowledge gap and consider when creating, presenting, or promoting content against society. In particular, the media, which has the power to set the agenda and change society's thoughts on the determined issues, needs to produce and distribute news content in a way that reaches every individual in society. Society should be able to access information without encountering a lack of information while researching the subject they are curious about. At the same time, the media should be objective and continue their work by considering ethical values. However, they should be aware of the knowledge gap. In addition, all institutions that aim or should aim for the social good should also focus on the knowledge gap with awareness. For institutions that take into account the expectations and demands of society, the aim is not only to make a profit or to act according to their interests but also to exhibit goodwill corporate behavior by ensuring the satisfaction of society. In this respect, they should inform, persuade, and motivate society in their work. Action should be taken to reduce the knowledge gap in society, and all disadvantages should be considered. Public relations plays a very important role in reducing the knowledge gap between the institution and its target audience. It not only ensures that the target audience is informed about the institution but also undertakes important duties in providing information to the institution about the target audience and providing mutual understanding by making suggestions about what can be done. In this respect, public relations should plan their actions and be aware of their responsibilities, such as providing motivation to reduce the knowledge gap.

Public relations has progressed at an incredible speed over the years depending on spatial and technological developments, and Today it is not only public relations in the traditional sense but also public relations in a digital sense. Public relations, which progresses rapidly and pursues it with every evolution of communication, is now transitioning to a new era. The rapid change and development of technology in Today's conditions and the fact that it continues to show has brought the necessity of living in the digital age process. Regardless of society, institution, or individual, it has become inevitable to act in a way that can keep up with this speed, not against this transformation. To adapt to this transformation that builds the future, not to be adversely affected by the system's sanctions, and to continue the process of existence in a healthy way, it accepts this process as public relations. It takes action with the awareness that it is necessary to achieve social good and that corporate behaviors should be handled correctly digitally. With digitalization and the transformation it brings, information is transferred to the digital environment, and progress is made to maintain the existence of public relations as a very effective process in gaining a new perspective.

## 3. Transformation from traditional public relations to digital public relations

In the 20th century, rapid developments in the field of technology and the introduction of social media, one of the outputs of digitalization, have brought significant changes and innovations in a wide area, from corporate companies to daily life. This process is called digitalization. Digitalization in public relations includes public relations practices realized digitally through new information and communication technologies. Public relations operating in the digital environment have provided advantages and conveniences between institutions and their target audience. Digital public relations has gone beyond the traditional understanding, has essentially removed the borders regarding both convergence and interaction, and advantages have been provided regarding materiality (Sönmez, 2020: 187). Digital Public Relations includes publishing online newsletters, benefiting from the power of journalism, or presenting information via the Internet to inform users about the services in an organization or the updates covering these services (Gifford, 2010:63). To understand the Digital Public Relations process, we need to examine the digital process well.

Digitization is transferring existing information with a technological device, computer, smartphone, etc. It can be expressed as moving it to digital media in a way that can be read through technological tools, edited with these technological devices, and used in business. Digitization in organizations should be considered as the stages' data

source, management approach, and digitization process. Accordingly, when organizations transfer information to this environment in the digitalization process, it creates a new perspective in producing goods and services by including the stages in the digital environment. This becomes a systematic form; institutional memory is created, and access to this process becomes more accessible. Therefore, in this process, organizations should develop digitalization strategies and tactics with the current situation analysis, inform everyone in the management from top to bottom about the digitalization process, and improve the digital skills of their employees (Üzmez and Büyükbeşe, 2021:123).

Digitization is the process of digitizing information. It concerns registration systems and, more and more, interaction methods. Digitization, on the other hand, makes use of digitized data and stages To reach the buyers and the preferences of the buyers by addressing the elements such as social media accounts, e-mail, marketing areas, and mobile applications of the customer in the registration systems, the consumption and collection of data from the familiar sources of demographic characteristics, operational information, historical interactions, and traditional recording methods. It is about making insight systems that describe technology that aims to support and improve the buyer experience by analyzing and developing. In digitization, a digital work environment is created by digitizing a particular area or business environment. Creating a digital work environment also means working separately from the workforce. Therefore, mobile devices and digital tools that make them mobile or operate more digitally are used. Digitization also goes beyond business. It means continuously adopting digital technologies in all possible social and humanitarian activities (Yankın, 2019:13).

Digitization provides significant advantages to organizations and managers in interpreting and distributing the existing data and outputs to facilitate access to information by putting technology at the center. Digital transformation, on the other hand, is defined as the ability of organizations to capture advantages related to their activities, to distinguish the competitive advantages that may arise, and to use these opportunities in organizational activities through digital technologies. It is essential to increase productivity, bring processes to a more effective and faster state, and manage problems that may occur. The digital transformation stage carries out the work to be done and the methods to be examined through digital technologies (Üzmez and Büyükbeşe, 2021:124).

It would not be correct to explain digital transformation through only a few technologies. However, on the other hand, it should be noted that a new era has started with the impact of technologies such as "2.0, mobile, broadband internet, cloud computing, digital media, big data, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, internet of things and 3D printers ". Using digital technologies, first of all, analog records were processed in the digital field (automation), and all stages were transferred to digital media (e-service). "At this point, all corporate assets and stakeholder relations are redefined in the digital environment (digital transformation)" (Yankın, 2019:13).

With the digital transformation process, rapid developments are observed in many areas. It is essential to follow the innovations to keep up with the times and stay caught up. Public relations is a field that must adapt to this rapid development. In particular, the fact that communication is an indispensable element shows that the discipline of public relations should always be open to development and should determine strategies and tactics for this. Every communication development also concerns public relations and shapes public relations tools and methods. For this purpose, with the continuation of the traditional meaning of public relations over time, it has started to turn to digital. While the widespread use of digital communication enables the addition of digital methods to public relations strategies, it also allows the integration of existing processes into the digital environment (Peltekoğlu and Askeroğlu, 2019: 1048). Digital public relations, expressed as the realization of the Internet and digital communication tools on public relations applications, has become important in establishing communication with the target audience. Considering the spread rate, area, and level of influence of digital platforms, it emerges as an area that should be managed by public relations (Şirzad and Turancı, 2019:423). Public relations, which has evolved towards digitalization, has expanded beyond the traditional understanding, and its responsibilities have increased. In this regard, depending on the social interest and motivation, it should be aware of the knowledge gap in the digital transformation process and act to reduce it.

With the emergence and efficient use of digital public relations methods, it is impossible to say that traditional public relations practices have disappeared. On the contrary, using these two application areas is important. At the end of the last century, when the intense competition environment was quite effective, public relations became very important for institutions and required public relations strategies and tactics. In addition, digital public relations have become mandatory with the developments that exist with globalization, the products that will revolutionize the Internet and information technologies, and all the new developments that follow. This situation reveals that public relations experts should be considered and given more importance by institutions. The necessity of

employing professionals in this field is an indisputable fact. Although professional computer technology is not generally required in digital public relations, good use of the website and social areas is among the basic skills. Depending on this situation, when the employee profile in the sector is examined, features for a specific field, such as SEO knowledge and Photoshop knowledge, are requested in the advertisements announced to the candidates who will do social media-related jobs. A much more general profile is drawn when we look at those who work in traditional public relations. Therefore, digital public relations have created a unique employee profile compared to formal public relations (Mert, 2018:726).

## 4. Methodology

*Ethics committee approval,* all responsibility belongs to the researchers. All parties were involved in the research of their own free will. The ethical approval document of this study is based on the permission document dated 14.08.2023 from Huawei Turkey, desiBel Agency, and TÜRKONFED officials.

### 4.1. Purpose of the research

The research aims to examine the concept of digital public relations within the scope of the knowledge gap hypothesis by considering the reasons, positive aspects, and disadvantages, if any, of the transformation process from traditional public relations to digital public relations, depending on the development of information and communication technologies. In the study, what public relations experts do depending on the transformation in the rapidly advancing digital world, their solutions against problems, etc topics such as In this direction, the study was detailed by interviewing digital public relations experts. It was aimed to create an important resource for future studies and to raise awareness on the subject. An in-depth research was conducted on the problem of the study by focusing on questions such as: *"Does digital public relations create a knowledge gap? Does Digital Public Relations cause social transformation? Can Traditional PR be effective in Digital PR?"*

### 4.2. Hypotheses and method of the research

Digital public relations experts determined the universe of this research. As a result of the literature review, one public relations expert in the field of Institution, Agency, and NGO was determined as the sample, adhering to the studies on digital public relations. In this study, descriptive analysis, one of the qualitative research types, was used. At the same time, in-depth interviews were conducted in the research section. The answers obtained through in-depth interviews were conveyed within the framework of descriptive analysis, adhering to the purpose of the research. The research questions were determined by the subject, and the answers of the public relations experts were received within the framework of the determined sample.

In this context, to determine what public relations experts do to transform the public relations discipline and reduce the knowledge gap in the digitalization process, questions were prepared per the research literature study. Over these questions, an in-depth interview was held with Huawei Turkey's Senior Corporate Communications Manager, the desiBel Agency Senior Director, and the TÜRKONFED (Turkish Enterprise and Business Confederation) Deputy Director.

1. How would you define the knowledge gap concept regarding your position?

2. How has digitalization transformed public relations? How to do digital public relations in new media?

3. Do you think digital public relations have the power to create social transformation?

4. Does digital public relations create a knowledge gap?

5. What are the knowledge gap needs of the converted target audience?

6. What are your PR activities to reduce the knowledge gap?

This study aims to contribute to the definition of digital public relations based on social transformation within the framework of the knowledge gap hypothesis.

H1. Internet reduces the knowledge gap.

H2. Different from traditional media tools, it is assumed that it reduces the knowledge gap because it depends on some knowledge and skills in the digitalization process of public relations.

## 5. Findings

High-status segments of society have more information than lower segments. Education is a significant factor in this regard. As the level of education increases, the rate of understanding and use of the mass media by each individual in society increases. While public relations play a vital role in traditional media, it reduces the knowledge gap in the process of reaching and approving the target audience on behalf of institutions, agencies, and NGOs, with its rapid adaptation to the process of digitalization and keeping up with the globalizing world as digital public relations. The knowledge gap theory is a critical theory to consider. The public relations discipline must study by considering the knowledge gap. For this purpose, having sufficient knowledge about the knowledge gap will guide them to follow a more accurate and reliable way in public relations activities. The experts define the knowledge gap interviewed in-depth as follows;

Huawei Turkey – Senior Corporate Communications Manager; "*Our task is to disseminate the institution's message in certain areas to the stakeholders it addresses. It is possible to disseminate knowledge in different ways. The press is one of them, but social media is now more prominent with digitalization. From an institutional point of view, it aims to prevent the gap from increasing by further strengthening the knowledge gap problem by conducting studies to close the knowledge gap or to create accurate and reliable content for all stakeholders.*"

desiBel Agency – Senior Director; "*Today, accessing information is faster than before. However, there is a disinformation environment created by the fact that information can be accessed through too many channels. This situation causes different individuals or groups to have erroneous or incomplete information. In terms of communication, this process of having incomplete and erroneous information, especially on sectoral or social issues, can lead to difficult or long-lasting results.*"

TÜRKONFED - Deputy Director; "*The civil society perspective is a perspective that comes into play in areas where the public and private sectors, generally called two main institutions, are insufficient. When we consider the knowledge gap theory to evaluate it in this context (digital transformation), the digital tools developed by the private sector are the processes completed by non-governmental organizations where the public, that is, the state, is insufficient.*"

In order not to cause an increase in the knowledge gap in the digital environment, public relations specialists should first examine and adapt to technological developments, monitor the involvement of the target audience in this process, and collect and analyze data accordingly. During the evaluation process, it should determine how the target audience handles digital public relations practices by asking some questions, completing the deficiencies, and maintaining the ethical belief in the traditional public relations process by providing accurate information to the internal and external target audience.

Digital public relations requires harmonizing and adapting traditional public relations practices to digital to keep up with a new era and keep up with its speed. In the online environment, where primarily one-way communication is dominant, a two-way communication system has been adopted over time, and the target audience has been included in the system, causing an important social transformation. The way digital transformation transforms public relations;

Huawei Turkey - Senior Corporate Communications Manager; "*Public relations should go the way we call convergence Today. It should not be considered separately as before. In the past, public relations and marketing departments in institutions were separate, and as digitalization began, a digital department was established at a different point in the organizational chart. This situation should not be considered separately. Communication should be considered a 360-degree holistic and gathered under a single department. After the message reaches that department, it will be much more efficient if it is separated according to the audience and disseminated through the right channels. In fact, the knowledge gap not only for the external target audience but also within the internal target audience will thus be reduced. This is a much more efficient and ideal way. When they are separate, it isn't easy to achieve harmony. While there are good aspects of digital transformation, such as being practical and reaching thousands of people with a click, on the other hand, since the depth of the content decreases, even the basic elements of the subject come to the user with incomplete information and a message this time in that speed and practicality. A balance has to be struck here.*"

desiBel Agency- Senior Director; "*This transformation occurs naturally with the transformation of media channels at some point. The influence of printed publications and televisions until the early 2000s decreased gradually, especially as the effectiveness of web news portals increased from 2008 onwards. In the next stage, shorter content has set its sights on web portals with very large content in both visual and written media. New media has*

*actually turned into a dynamic definition of exactly this transformation. Public relations also has to keep up with this transformation. Public relations professionals, who connect their expertise to a single medium, will definitely feel lacking in the needs of the new era and will reflect this to the institutions they work for.*"

TÜRKONFED - Deputy Director; "*The fastest spreading tool among the mass media is the Internet and the platforms used in the digital world. The fact that the Internet has reached 50 million users, has developed in a short period of 5 years, and cannot be controlled has started to bring risks. The biggest of these risks is the inability to confirm the accuracy of the information, especially the individuals over the age of 35 who have lagged behind the Internet transformation, unable to establish a healthy connection between the digital world and the real world. Digital public relations in new media should be planned and implemented in a way that proceeds independently of the real-life identities of digital citizenship and digital identity. Decisions should be taken in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and implemented sensitively to all goals.*"

The change created by information and communication technologies day by day creates new communication environments in public relations and communication practices in general. In the digital age, digitalized communication has led to significant transformations in every sense. The public relations process, among these areas, is also being digitized and transformed. With the developments in the Internet and digital communication technology, traditional public relations have largely been replaced by digital public relations. Along with digitalization, communication strategies, styles, and methods have also changed. Those who carry out public relations activities have increasingly grasped the importance of the online stakeholder mass in social media and social media channels; blogs, online video environments, forums, and social networks have actually become important tools for many people to have their voices heard as consumers. Thus, social media has started to take an important place in the public relations strategies of organizations because of the rapid spread of messages published on social media to large masses and the creation of an environment of discussion among these masses. In this context, digitalized public relations is also used in museums, downloadable applications, virtual reality technologies, corporate websites, artificial intelligence applications, systems, and fields such as sponsorship, crisis management, corporate reputation management, marketing, and politics. Public relations, which has such a wide scope of application, also has important duties in creating social transformation with the digitalization process.

Public relations professionals are interested in all changes that impact social life. It is not possible for a sector, line of business, or branch of science not to change because, in fact, people change fundamentally. Simply put, our consumption habits are changing, the channels we use in terms of communication are changing, and in this case, it is not possible for public relations not to change. The dominance of social media with digitalization is changing the channels. Therefore, the tools used by public relations have also changed. In this case, it has become a normal situation for society to change.

Huawei Turkey - Senior Corporate Communications Manager; "*It changes according to the country in social change and the country's situation. For example, When we examine Slovenia as a country with a much smaller population, where there is a lot of digitalization in internet use and where many things can be easily applied, some things can be transformed and changed more easily with a public relations campaign about the environment. In such countries, transformation can be achieved with digital public relations campaigns on some social issues. By using digital tools to minimize plastic consumption, it is possible to transform society with films, short videos, and some encouraging campaigns. On the other hand, when we consider countries with much larger populations, it is not impossible to implement such campaigns. Still, it seems much more difficult to achieve short-term results regarding transformation.*"

desiBel Agency - Senior Director; "*Digital public relations is directly proportional to breathing the air of digital media. Recently in Turkey, In many areas such as elections, travel events, economic fluctuations, political changes, and anti-violent reactions, it can be seen how large an impact digital channels can create. From this point of view, it is not impossible for society to make a transformation from this digitalization process with the increasing communication opportunities. However, on the one hand, we need to understand Turkey's digital demographic structure well. We have had to strike a balance when comparing metropolitan areas with smaller settlements with more limited opportunities. However, in a few years, digital information will become more widespread and one of the main tools of social transformation.*"

TÜRKONFED- Deputy Director; "*The most effective tool in forming the information society is the Internet. The rapid spread of the Internet has also created a new society (new concepts such as the digital world and digital citizenship). With this rapid spread, a new culture has begun to emerge. These cultures formed in the digital world are examined under three headings Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, and Digital Hybrids. When these three concepts are examined, it is noticed how much the generation gap has shortened in the digital world.*"

It is constantly in pursuit of change to achieve successful works in the field of public relations, which develops and progresses rapidly over time. In this case, an important question is whether digital public relations create a knowledge gap.

Huawei Turkey - Senior Corporate Communications Manager; "*While digital public relations has the power and capacity to close the knowledge gap, there is also the possibility of creating new gaps. The person reaches the information but reaches the one according to his/her consumption habits, and thus, he/she is not aware of the developments on the other hand. In addition, in the last period, one has been exposed to so many messages in a day that this time the person may prefer to close himself to all messages. Since there is an intense flow of messages from morning to evening, the person willingly closes himself to information. This situation causes a knowledge gap because the individual who does not want to be exposed to the excessive message bombardment in Today's world refuses to receive the information they need.*"

desiBel Agency- Senior Director; "*Today, it is seen that digital possibilities and, accordingly, digital communication are quite ahead of conventional communication tools. In this respect, we cannot talk about a knowledge gap.*"

TÜRKONFED - Deputy Director; "*As in real life, due to the lack of equality of opportunity in the digital world, the knowledge gap is increasing in rural areas or in less developed regions. Civil society also intervenes here and tries to include the private sector and public institutions in this process by producing projects to ensure equality of opportunity in education and rights.*"

The expectations and needs of society diversify over time, and individuals who are more conscious expect more, depending on the speed of information and technological development. Digital public relations, on the other hand, needs to incorporate new tools to keep up with this speed. Through these new tools, it makes it possible to establish communication between the institution and its target audience, regardless of time and place. It is important to determine these needs with digital public relations and to prepare strategies on this basis.

Huawei Turkey - Senior Corporate Communications Manager; "*It is possible to fill the knowledge gap needs of the target audience by transferring the information knitted with more personalized details. Since the interests of the transformed target audience also change, the topics are different in the young generation, and communication professionals need to create content accordingly. With a corporate film, you can present the basic information of the institution you represent to your target audience with beautiful music and a Davidic voice. Still, now that there are thousands of such works, the converted target audience is looking for another detail. Details that no one would think of should be taken into account. For example, Is there a pad in your office? Can cats and dogs roam the office? Such details are considered important. In order not to create an ordinary perception in the minds, it is necessary to reveal an impressive element both in terms of message and visually.*"

desiBel Agency - Senior Director; "*Focusing on a single point, trying to obtain information from only one source is among the important elements that can create a knowledge gap in this transformation. It is important to prioritize diversity in every aspect of life. Reaching information from a wider window with a more inclusive perspective, not the opinions of a single opinion, a single channel, or a single opinion leader, makes it possible to reduce this gap. With the same perspective, communication experts should support this versatile information flow and enable the converted audience to reach richer content.*"

TÜRKONFED- Deputy Director; "*First of all, the lack of adequate internet infrastructure and equal opportunity in accessing information, the inability to understand the concepts of digital literacy and digital transformation, the inability of the public to train digital transformation personnel, the failure to establish and provide the infrastructure that can adapt to digital transformation of administrators and teachers in institutions affiliated to the Ministry of National Education. It is necessary to improve the factors such as the fact that the correct information cannot be confirmed and information pollution cannot be prevented.*"

The Internet has brought a different dimension to the knowledge gap in mass media. The fact that the gap between the knowledge gap and the research on traditional media is not closed clearly is important in terms of knowledge gap research with the emergence of the Internet. Although the Internet does not completely close the gap between the knowledge gap, it makes it possible for information to spread widely and reach most of society. Especially with digitalization and social media platforms, people access information among various options. This brings about a reduction in the gap. In Today's conditions, the incredible development of technology, the digitalization process of almost most things, everyone from a certain social segment to individuals in the whole universe can reach any place they want at any time and can access information not only within their own country and

abroad, but also on an international scale within seconds. In this case, institutions have a great responsibility. It is almost impossible for an institution not to consider keeping up with the new age to be sustainable. In this regard, institutions should implement effective PR activities to reduce the knowledge gap.

Huawei Turkey - Senior Corporate Communications Manager; "*The company's newsworthy and community-related content is regularly shared on its social media accounts and various digital channels.*"

desiBel Agency - Senior Director; "*Firstly, by diversifying the communication tools, communication projects are presented in different channels. A versatile communication strategy is implemented not only through conventional media but also through video channels, mini blogs, and social media channels. With different approaches such as physical activities, competitions, reference points, and opinion leaders that will attract the attention of society, special projects, social responsibility studies, and information, we are working on ensuring that our messages reach the target in the most accurate way.*"

TÜRKONFED - Deputy Director; "*It is very important for print, visual, and digital media to work in this area. As an institution, these projects are conveyed to the target audience by producing reports and projects that affect public policies. It is aimed to create social change with projects that spread to all segments of society. It is important to ensure social change through face-to-face, online, and digital platforms to develop ideas and realize projects that will ensure social integration by establishing public, private sector, and international collaborations.*"

*5.1. Evaluation of the research*

When we look at the research findings, it is seen that institutions give importance to the issue of the knowledge gap and take it seriously in their studies. Especially thanks to technological developments, the process of reaching, disseminating, and interpreting information whenever the target audience wants, regardless of time and place, has made it a priority for public relations experts to act more carefully and take action. According to the findings obtained, revealing a research result on what public relations strategies can be to reduce the knowledge gap is important both according to the purpose of the research and the findings obtained, as well as the importance of the knowledge gap for future studies and public relations practices and its importance in the field of digital public relations. It will be a model to highlight.

With the digital transformation, the Internet has become almost the most important tool for public relations. Institutions need social media managers to control and manage the content and information flow on the Internet. Online communication is less reliable than face-to-face communication. Accordingly, public relations professionals strive to make online communication reliable. Unless the message's source is known, the relationship to be established gives less trust. Online communication suits both parties if the user knows the message's source. It will be easier for the user to verify this information and accept the message if the source of trust is established strongly and the information supply is provided. At the same time, the presentation of the sent message is also a part of trust. How the information is presented to the user is equally important. Users; expect messages to be sent in a way that the messages themselves can understand. In ensuring trust, It is very important to carefully review the processes regarding who researched the message, with whom it was shared, with what methods it was used, what reliability stages it went through, and how users would believe in the accuracy of the messages. It is necessary to determine which message and which information is better understood. Public relations resources are used online Today. Public relations practitioners, on the other hand, should use the new media to manage the process faster and better at less cost. In this process, they should be especially concerned about the principle of confidentiality (Özgen, 2010).

Digitalizing public relations with new communication technologies has provided significant benefits to companies. One of the most important developments with digitalization is the disappearance of the distance between institutions and their target audience and the expansion of the boundaries of communication. Here, it is important for public relations specialists to use digital technology efficiently to represent institutions and to carry public relations practices to the digital environment, to reduce the knowledge gap between the institution and its target audience. When the digitalization process is looked at in the context of the target audience, it can be said that the development of digital technologies, it affects the consumption habits and actions of people. As the stakeholders adapt to this new technology in their daily lives, they do many transactions on digital platforms and therefore spend a lot of time in this environment. It is now necessary to communicate with internal and external target audiences on digital platforms in public relations practices. Due to the emergence of new communication tools and methods, especially with the Internet, it became necessary for the target audience to be included in this environment, while public relations specialists had to develop their individual digital skills, while they had to follow communication technologies closely (Peltekoğlu, 2022:293).

The concept of the target audience in the traditional sense has not lost its meaning in the digital environment but has transformed. In general, the target audience is individuals who are interested in and can be affected by the products or outputs of the organization. With digitalization, the target audience has the power to change the outputs of the institution. Because on the digital platform, the individual can instantly express his thoughts, organize, or take a tougher attitude. In other words, the expectations of the target audience have increased, and they have realized their power. Therefore, public relations strategies should be compatible with digital environments, and appropriate strategies should be determined according to the digital target audience. To manage digital transformation correctly in the public relations process, there must be an important preparation process in the background of that world to dominate the digital world, to catch up with the functioning of that world, and to have public relations expertise that can manage the problems that may arise, that is, prevent digital crises. (Özgen, 2019:23-26). Public relations specialists should be prepared for the crises that may occur in the digital environment, as well as developing strategies and tactics for pre-crisis and post-crisis with proactive approaches in traditional public relations practices. Analyzing and planning by considering all factors, digital public relations strategies should be implemented to reduce the knowledge gap.

## 6. Conclusion

Public relations have witnessed many different interpretations throughout history according to the management characteristics and social formations of societies. Public relations, which has become more and more important in the state sector and especially in the private sector as a result of the increasing competition conditions and changing society in recent years, is seen as the activities of regulating the relations of any organization with the masses opposite to the organizations, public groups, and employees, on the other hand, it is the control desires of the employees or the managed. It is a method that allows management to respond. Accordingly, in recent years, the Internet has developed faster than all other communication channels and has changed life and professions dynamically. Public relations practices are one of the professions that have been significantly affected by this online evolution. Public relations activities, which are called online public relations, digital public relations, and web-based public relations, basically using internet-based technologies, have become more common with the Internet.

With the development of information and communication technologies, concepts and applications in the field of communication are changing and progressing very rapidly, as in every field. This comprehensive and rapid transformation in the digitalizing world has led to the emergence of concepts such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, industry 4.0, and society 5.0. This transformation in the digital world has also led to the emergence of new communication environments in public relations practices. The change created by information and communication technologies day by day has created new communication environments in public relations and communication practices in general. In the digital age, digitalized communication has led to significant transformations in every sense. The public relations process, among these areas, is also being digitized and transformed. With the developments in the Internet and digital communication technology, traditional public relations have been replaced by digital public relations. Along with digitalization, communication strategies, styles, and methods have also changed.

The knowledge gap is seen in the field of public relations, as in every field. Especially with the digitalization process, people's access to information can increase the knowledge gap. However, the Internet and information technologies are rapidly accepted and adopted by society. With the adaptation to this rapid transformation over time, it is obvious that there will be a significant decrease in the knowledge gap. The important point is distributing information equally to all segments of society. Here, not only the state but also institutions, agencies, and NGOs need to act quickly and carry out their work focused not only on certain segments of society but also on all segments. In this way, it is possible to reduce the knowledge gap in every aspect.

Digital transformation is an important issue for the discipline of public relations that needs to be studied persistently and in-depth. Each work should proceed by leaving a question for the next work, and an ideal digital transformation process should be produced in terms of both theory and practice. On the other hand, the unstoppable speed of technology and the increasing use of concepts such as Metaverse in our daily lives will reshape the concept of public relations in the near future. With the continued rise of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), metaverses are entering the Internet. It is estimated that 85 million users will experience AR or VR at least once a month in the near future. Although Metaverse is not exactly what science fiction portrays, it will continue to produce unimaginable values in terms of public relations as a new computing platform. Considering all these, the public relations discipline should adopt innovation and act without allowing the knowledge gap to occur. It should take into account the expectations of society by determining its strategy and tactics through these innovations and should continue its progress by being aware of social transformation.

As a result, the development of technology day by day expands the usage areas of digital tools. Although the tools used by communication disciplines are endless, they need to quickly add these digital tools to the tools they use. The most important issue of public relations is that they do not use these digital tools effectively to implement their strategies. While artificial intelligence contains a system smarter than all memories and renews itself rapidly, public relations must constantly renew itself and act within the framework of this innovation while implementing its strategies in such an unstoppable development system. With the rapid use of these digital tools in the field of public relations, they will reduce the knowledge gap. While the knowledge gap makes itself felt in every field, the public relations discipline should serve to reduce the knowledge gap by creating an accurate and reliable information source with its strategies and tactics. Ensuring equal opportunity is important for reducing the knowledge gap. When this equality of opportunity cannot be achieved in the discipline of public relations, the gap in knowledge increases. In this respect, public relations practitioners should find a way to keep up with the speed of technological developments and quickly apply these digital tools in the field.

With the tools used in digital public relations applications, institutions will have the opportunity to interact and interact with their target audience and stakeholders, thereby reducing the knowledge gap. It is not possible to completely separate the traditional and digital public relations tools, which are intertwined and should be used together according to the strategy and tactics in accordance with the target audience. Therefore, digital environments are used by public relations practitioners in research, planning, communication, and evaluation processes, as well as in areas such as social responsibility, crisis management, sponsorship, image management, organizational communication, advertising, and marketing. Digital public relations should play an active role in closing the knowledge gap with the target audience by using all these tools in harmony.

Digital public relations, conducted by institutions, agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), mitigate the information gap by effectively reaching the intended audience and facilitating interactive communication channels. To prevent a knowledge gap, it is imperative for public relations professionals to prioritize staying abreast of technology advancements and maintaining an open mindset toward innovations. Consequently, it is imperative to gather, examine, and assess data. The study demonstrates that public relations professionals must be able to adjust to the process of digitization to mitigate the information disparity for both their internal and external target audiences. The internet exhibits high speed in retrieving information, although it is susceptible to disseminating polluted information. In contrast to conventional media, this breakthrough has significant importance regarding information accessibility. The facilitation of widespread information distribution enables the potential reduction of information disparity. It is imperative for institutions, agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) alike to transition their public relations efforts to the digital realm. This shift is crucial in bridging the information divide and closing the gap between these entities and their target audience.

"Digital Public Relations in the Context of Knowledge Gap Theory" refers to the application of digital tools and strategies in the field of public relations, specifically in relation to the Knowledge Gap Theory. The Knowledge Gap Theory suggests that as information is disseminated, there is a gap between individuals with different levels of knowledge or information on a particular subject. In digital public relations, this theory can be applied to understand how digital platforms and technologies can bridge the knowledge gap and effectively communicate with various audiences. Digital PR professionals can leverage digital channels such as websites, social media, blogs, online forums, and email marketing to disseminate information and engage with their target audiences.

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