Recently, Senator Chris Murphy wrote an op-ed on loneliness in America. He describes that despite being connected to more people than ever before we are more alone and feeling it in recent years. Murphy explains that he feels that the reliance on technology has increased the individual experience and that our connections to the local community are diminished (2022).

In this "new normal" post-pandemic, I reflected on Murphy's ideas and while he proposes to raise awareness of the issue and propose some policies of support to tackle loneliness these ideas resonated as a mother, a human being, and as a member of profession that relies on both technology and connection to others.

Our field is currently dominated by conversations about ChatGPT and the future of Artificial Intelligence, public relations has regularly embraced these new opportunities to use tools to gain influence and advantage (Larkin, 2023). Increasingly, public relations strategies have been used to increase happiness both personally and professionally (Rando-Cueto, et al., 2022). While the use of technology can be isolating I believe it can also foster growth, opportunity and dialogue. In turn, this can connect those that feeling isolated to find others to share and merge interests. Surprisingly, I am not usually this optimistic, but scholars have argued for years that technology helps public relations merge their relational and rhetorical identities (and that sharing content can build relationships (Valentini, 2015).

As demonstrated by this issues' article by Moore, Pritchard, and Filak, technology can provide some comfort to those facing immense grief and isolation. Through their study of social media mourners and their recommendations for practice, they outline a framework to help navigate loss and tragedy through technology and social media networks.

Since the start of the pandemic, it feels that many days are still surrounded by suffering and allowing organizations to talk about grief and how we build connections online may help many navigating those circumstances. The authors push organizations to evaluate their actions and "to develop a clear rationale for its participation in specific social media mourning efforts, as opposed to a merely offering blanket "thoughts and prayers" when a hashtag associated with grief reaches a critical mass of users" (p.26). People are most in need during a crisis and the

quality emotional support rather than simple acknowledgement is pertinent to relationship maintenance, a core function of public relations.

Public relations practitioners have historically been asked (Bowen, 2008) to be the ethical counselor, are we also to be the conduit in acknowledging and allowing stakeholders to process their emotions? Further, while the field embraces the humanistic side of organizations and the publics we serve, I am also struck by the continuation of silos and separation between the interest areas of the profession. New technology and our world face continuous challenges, public relations practitioners and scholars should quilt together their initiatives to push the profession to its highest standards and apply lessons learned across the continuum of sectors.

This is precisely what Chase Spears asks in his article in this issue about how well the dimensions of military public affairs fit the concept of a profession. He argues that as we cope with a loss of trust in traditional institutions such as government and media (Edelman, 2022) it is inherent that professional communicators rebuild that trust in the profession together. We can use their respective roles and skills to reinforce the identity of what it means to be a profession of connected parties working similarly towards their goals whether it be for client or country. This idea of connection helps to negate the isolation that can occur for those working in specific industries or sectors that feel atypical to the agency or corporate model of public relations.

I continue to be impressed by the new horizons and application of public relations both in practice and scholarship. I see the opportunity for technology to help build connections and even rebuild the foundation of the social fabric that Murphy says is at risk of being lost, especially for those interested in using public relations in the managing of emotions online and for building skills in a unified why.

"Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, n.d.). If we heed that call, then connections are the foundation of what we do. It means that technology can be used as a tool to raise awareness of issues, of voices, and of ideas which can reconnect people away from feelings of loneliness. The dark side of isolation and the negative impact of technology will

persist, but our field should help to mitigate this epidemic. I believe the scholarship in this issue expresses just that.

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Hilary Fussell Sisco, Ph.D., APR
Editor-in-Chief

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