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Future of Communications and Public Relations (PR).
(Re)Imagining the Role, Function and Purpose of the
Communication Profession

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Abstract: Every crisis brings opportunities and challenges. In this special edition, the future of communications and PR in and beyond the context of the Covid-19 pandemic is being (re)imagined by scholars addressing the topic from theoretical, practical and educational perspectives. Following Thomas Kuhn's insight that paradigm shifts are often triggered by – epistemological and practical – crises, this special edition invites and encourages the exploration of alternatives to established ways of thinking, the challenging of established mindsets. In doing so, this edition addresses the future of public relations and communications from multiple perspectives: paradigmatic (metamodernism) and theoretical (astroturfing), organizational (newsrooms), competences vs. capabilities and educational (the heritage and challenges of neoliberalism) while also revisiting current premises including PR's role in deliberative democracies. In a time of seemingly growing

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polarization of perspectives, we need to get beyond dichotomies and toward integration and synthesis.

Keywords: public relations, future of public relations, PR, communications, persuasive communications

Futur de la communication et des Relations Publiques (RP). (Re) Imaginer le rôle, la fonction et l'objectif de la profession

Abstract : Chaque crise apporte des opportunités et des défis. Dans cette édition spéciale, l'avenir des communications et des relations publiques dans et au-delà du contexte de la pandémie de Covid-19 est (ré)imaginé par des universitaires abordant le sujet sous des angles théoriques, pratiques et éducatifs. Suivant l'idée de Thomas Kuhn selon laquelle les changements de paradigme sont souvent déclenchés par des crises – épistémologiques et pratiques –, cette édition spéciale invite et encourage l'exploration d'alternatives aux modes de pensée établis, la remise en cause des mentalités établies. Ce faisant, cette édition aborde l'avenir des relations publiques et de la communication sous plusieurs angles : paradigmatique (métamodernisme) et théorique (astroturfing), organisationnel (newsrooms), compétences vs capacités, et éducatif (l'héritage et les défis du néolibéralisme) tout en revisitant locaux, y compris le rôle des relations publiques dans les démocraties délibératives. À une époque de polarisation apparemment croissante des perspectives, nous devons dépasser les dichotomies et aller vers l'intégration et la synthèse.

Mots-clés : relations publiques, avenir des relations publiques, communications, communications persuasives

1. Interesting Times, Reflection Times

1.1. *The Premise of this Special Edition*

The Covid-19 pandemic has been dubbed the “golden hour for communicators” for a function that often fought for its seat at the table and continues to make efforts to demonstrate its contribution to organizational success. In the early days of the pandemic, many PR and communications departments and agencies adopted restrictive containment measures which have included, among others, suspension or closure of activities, furlough or layoffs. And while that happened, the need for communication services increased (ReportLinker, 2021). According to a BuzzFeed survey with 400 American and European agency practitioners, while budget cuts were reported by almost half of the respondents (49%) another fifth (21%) indicated increases in PR spending. There is an increase in the reported level of confidence in

the profession by communicators themselves, while the reductions in budgets including furlough and layoffs on the one hand and the increasing demand for communication services from reduced teams on the other resulted in an increase in reported stress and burnout (Buzzstream, 2020).

Not surprisingly, the conversation among professional fora has been focusing on mental health issues and future competencies with many of the communications conferences organized throughout the last year focusing either on navigating the abnormal (ICCO Summit) and the shift (IABC World Conference) or on areas of communications seemingly less important in the past such as internal communications and CSR. And while part of this interest is also reported by research aiming to provide professional benchmarks such as the Global Communication Monitor series with questions dedicated to the competences needed to navigate the future, several other topics of great concern emerge at this time including PR's continued struggle for professional legitimacy (Gregory, 2020), its social license (Marsh, 2021) and social influence (Valentini, 2021).

Yet concerns about both the role and the ethics of persuasive, organized communication are not new but rather the core of communications and PR research. Modernist scholars have often discussed the differences between technicians and managers, with a clear preference for the latter (Dozier, 1995; Toth et al., 1998;) while postmodernist and critical scholars invited reflections on the communications profession and its professionals role in democratic processes (Berger & Reber, 2006; Kent, 2013). These often exclusive representations have also been disputed by other scholars, where the discussion of role has been carried out in relationship with both process and output (Van Ruler, 2004), the quality of the advice (trusted advisor – Oldfield, 2017) or in relationship with impact, including propaganda and spin (Bakir et al., 2019; L'Etang, 2006; Moloney, 2006; Weaver et al., 2006). In the wake of the pandemic, a growing need for communication leadership beyond management has also been noted (Northouse 2019), with new and different approaches to address “wicked problems”, including from public communication functions (Grint 2020) emerging.

As a result, the pandemic has moved seemingly abstract and academic debates into the professional arena, a move also influenced by other current events, increased political partisanship and polarization, and movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #metoo which have brought to the fore the old questions of ethics, loyalties, societal impact, activism and purpose. The Global Alliance's 2021 Global PR and Communication Model has purpose at its very center, and industry leaders John O'Brien and David Gallagher see truth and authenticity as the cornerstones of the 'purposeful age' (O'Brien & Gallagher 2021). However, Covid-19 is also highlighting growing challenges arising from 'purpose-washing' (Winter & Germelmann 2020).

As the misinformation challenges surrounding Covid-19 (Pennycook et al., 2020) have become an infodemic alongside the health aspects of the pandemic (Cinelli et al., 2020; Cuan-Baltazar et al., 2020), communicators including Public Relations

practitioners have been called upon to address and mitigate the problem. In this context for instance the European Association of Communication Directors together with international professional and academic associations of public relations and communicators launched the “Statement on Communication of Covid-19 Pandemic calling for honest and effective communication” (EACD, 2021).

And as communicators start questioning more earnestly the challenge of persuasive, organized communication and multi-stakeholder engagement (Edwards, 2021), one cannot but wonder how the future of public relations will look like, how scholars and practitioners imagine it, where scholars and practitioners see the emerging or remaining challenges and what solutions, if at all, they envisage.

Of course, questions about the future of public relations or new models, theoretical and paradigmatic proposals are not new either. Van Ruler and Vercic (2005) proposed their “reflective communication management” approach promising to address the forgotten societal responsibilities of PR. Gregory and Willis’s (2013) four by four model of strategic public relations acknowledges PR’s operation in a multi-stakeholder environment as well as its different operational and influence arenas and Ciszek (2018) discusses queering PR and the new directions in theory and research for public relations scholarship that this approach would inspire. Others, like Adi (2019) and Gregory and Fawkes (2019) focus on competences and capabilities that practitioners themselves and the profession as a whole should focus on in the future.

Yet every (major) disruption, such as this current pandemic, should be a reason to revisit and reflect on both past scenarios of the future as well as think of new ones. As Thomas Kuhn reminds us, crises clarify the “range of alternatives available to the man who seeks to end a crisis by proposing one or another reform” (1996, p.xii). Which is why this edition is dedicated to exploring the future of public relations, its role, its function, its purpose calling upon contributors to reflect and imagine the future. In doing so, this edition features different regions, different theoretical traditions and, of course, visions of practice, theory, education or a mix thereof.

2. The Current Edition

Irma Meyer’s article proposes a novel paradigmatic approach to public relations: metamodernism. Potentially frustrating for modern and postmodern scholars alike for its refusal to firmly choose one or the other, metamodernism recognizes their merits, and challenges them at the same time. In doing so it offers researchers an innovative approach and practitioners a vision that accommodates uncertainty and complexity.

To provide further context to Meyer’s points, Marques et al.’s article reviews the classical and conventional thinking around PR grounded in the critical tradition of Habermas and the concept of the deliberative public sphere. In doing so it revisits Lee Edwards’ (2016) approach to politics and organizations and reflects on the tensions that emerge from PR’s intervention in democratic processes guided by deliberative procedures.

From that theory-led angle, this special edition moves on to **current and future practice**, including organization of PR. In this context Macnamara's challenge of disciplinary siloes and normative theories comes through the analysis of internal and external communication of three companies operating in three different countries. In Macnamara's view, integration and innovation are some of ways forward and thus recognition of past and present and invitation of different perspectives.

Seidenglanz' article focuses on PR organization and makes the case for newsroom-like structures in PR arguing that such agile organizations with flat hierarchies and high internal autonomy are better equipped to address current organizational, both internal and external demands. However, to be successful, Seidenglanz argues, the newsroom needs to have the benefit of a PR unit with high authority and access, that doesn't focus solely on internal or external stakeholder communication but rather focuses on both operating within clear rules and procedures.

Following organization, the article by Lits focuses on the tactics of astroturfing challenging the current binary approaches and proposing a contingency inspired evaluation. In discussing three examples, the European Responsible Energy Citizen Coalition, the Tea Party in the US, and Momentum in the UK, Lits argues that astroturfing as a tactic has been adopted more widely than currently reported. In doing so, the author suggests that there is a level of hybridity of motivation, objectives and funding that raises questions about the authenticity of the activity itself and about the position of the communication practitioners themselves as agents of manipulation. This necessary disambiguation, Lits proposes, is the key to a fairer practice.

From the perspective of theory and practice, the remaining articles in this special edition discuss practice and education: Beneke et al. and their discussion of the Global Alliance Capability Framework (GACF) applications and understanding in South Africa, followed by Vujnovic and Krueckeberg's critique of the neoliberal school of PR education in the US. While Beneke et al.'s study suggests that awareness, reflection and thus adoption of the GACF is limited among both practitioners and academics in South Africa, it points out the need for further collaboration and integration between the two fields. The parameters of this collaboration however should dismiss the focus on service to the business and economy alone, Vujnovic and Krueckeberg argue. In doing so, "public relations education must undergo a paradigmatic shift away from vocational training and toward a more comprehensive liberal arts education". The current 'culture war' climate, not least in the US and in the UK, illustrates a challenge for educators where perhaps the metamodern idea of oscillation between extremes proposed by Meyer can provide useful guidance.

3. Integration, Innovation within both the Known and the Unknown

Any discussion about the future tells perhaps a lot more about the present and those imagining it than about their projections. And for the practice of public relations and communications, discussions about the future, like the ones we had here, are in fact an indicator of the recurring and long-lasting challenges with which the

profession and its practitioners are faced. Therefore, these imagination exercises and debates are necessary and they have to be repeated.

For now, this special edition is a reminder that integration and innovation are necessary and that thinking and researching in siloes is counterproductive. This special edition is also a reminder that academia and practice need to support each other rather than work against each other and it confirms that concerns for PR's contribution to democracy and society are re-emerging. Finally, perhaps what this edition also manages to achieve, is to recognize the scholarship and thinking that has brought us here inviting one and all to try new perspectives. Albert Einstein is purported to have said that "we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." As we imagine the challenges of our present and immediate future, we ought to allow ourselves and others to imagine alternatives to established ways of thinking, and encourage the challenging of established mindsets.

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