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The pandemic has demonstrated the core value of communications management

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ABSTRACT

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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The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated many changes that were already underway in our economy, society and culture. The pandemic was a crucible in which many trends and ideas that had already begun to gather steam were accelerated and brought to front-of-mind. Indeed it was during the pandemic that three things became very clear. First, that remote work was not only feasible, but preferable in many, if not most cases; second, that the future is in technology; and third, that we live in an unequal society that is divided along many complex lines. It is my belief that all three of these things present an opportunity for public relations and communications management.

Being thrown into a work-from-home situation first produced chaos and significant anxiety for many organizations. Questions concerning productivity, motivation and team-building became top-of-mind. Some organizations in the technology sector already had significant experience with the management of remote teams, so they expanded upon a knowledge base that they already possessed. Others got serious about investing in remote work technologies, which

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opened new possibilities for accountability and levelled many playing fields. For example, tall people no longer had the advantage of their imposing height and size and some people with disabilities found that there were fewer limitations on their participation in workplace culture. Introverts rejoiced at the transactional nature of online meetings, which dispensed with the painful pre- and post-meeting chit chat of in-person meetings. The organizations that succeeded best in this environment developed strong internal communications systems and processes to keep employees engaged in workplace culture and information flowing between disparate teams. This was an opportunity for many organizational communication teams to grow in strategic value for organizations, since almost all communication within the organization would be technologically-mediated, which meant that all communication would be trackable and thus require a plan or at least some management.

All was not rosy, however. The new reality of sending workers home revealed significant inequalities in our economy and society. Essential workers in the caring professions, service workers and factory workers could not work from home. Many of the people holding these jobs were already in working in precarious positions and the pandemic exposed them to physical dangers as well as the ongoing challenges of low wages and uncertain work. As well, working from home was revealed to have a greater impact women than men, who often carry the primary responsibility of caring for children, the sick and the elderly. Many women juggled working from home while simultaneously providing care and support. With many children completing schooling remotely, parenting roles expanded to include online learning support.

Technology was an enabler of both the good and the less ideal aspects of working from home. Video conferencing and collaboration software enabled us to work nimbly together like never before. At the same time, the technology allowed employers to surveil people and created stress for workers that prefer in-person environments. However, the march toward distributed work, e-commerce and individual cultural experiences (*viz.* the rise of home theatre and the death of the blockbuster film) was a trend that had begun its inexorable advance decades earlier, with the advent of high speed internet and ever-faster and ever-tinier processors. The rise of cybercurrencies, the internet of things and artificial intelligence as major factors in how we organize our finances, services and interactions has meant that technology is transforming every aspect and facet of our society and culture. Today's newborns will find it completely normal to

be served by either a human or robot in most of their transactions. In fact, they will likely have AI tutors, assistants and possibly managers guiding them as they navigate their way through a life that is spent in world where reality streams fluidly through real landscapes augmented by the virtual or virtual landscapes augmented by the real. In fact, almost all of the market value growth during the pandemic in the communications industry writ large was generated by tech companies such as Apple, Facebook and Google. Indeed, tech has accounted for most of the surprising growth in stock market indices during the pandemic, while traditional industries languish, stagnate and sometimes disappear.

All of this poses a significant opportunity for the professional communicator. There is a great need for communicators to help organizations succeed at managing the flows of information internally and externally to build remote workplace cultures that are functional, pleasant and motivating. No employee is better placed in an organization than the person monitoring and planning communication to flag inequalities and workers who are experiencing undue stress. Effective communication will create channels and spaces for constructive conversations about barriers to participation, advancement and productivity.

Communicators should be at the heart of the purchasing, roll-out and management of the technologies that organizations use to enable remote work and interfaces with stakeholders and other key publics. Whether it is understanding how remote work can be optimized or the brand-appropriate construction of vocabularies and communications styles for chatbots, communicators should be at the heart of the endeavour. When it is time to construct augmented reality or to use AI to construct predictive models of employee or consumer behaviour, communicators should be there from the beginning shaping the tools to match the highest standards in dialogical, two-way, ethical communication. This type of communication builds positive relationships, reputations that generate market value and ensure that environment, social responsibility and ethical governance are always considered.

I have often heard it said that the communications is the ethical conscience and heart of the organization. The pandemic has shown us the many different ways in which this is true. It is incumbent upon us as communicators to step up to enable positive remote work, greater equality and fairness in the workplace and the humane and ethical organizational use of technology.

Articles in this issue

In her research article, *"The Columbo method – A legacy of antipotency and rhetorical inquiry to redirect resistance,"* Christyne Berzsenyi examines how the method used by Columbo in the television series of the same name can be applied in various professional communication contexts.

Shannon Gallagher, in her research article, *"Influencer logic: How influencers relations works,"* lays out her theory of influencer relations for professional practice. Her detailed examination of this emerging area of practice is a thorough and thoughtful work of research. Gallagher's article will be useful to practitioners and academics alike.

Donna Lindell, in her research article, *"Brands vs. babies: Paid content and authenticity in Canadian mommy blogs,"* examines the role that mommy bloggers play as cultural intermediaries. She provides an overview of the regulatory frameworks, which currently do not require disclosure of commercial relationships. She then does a qualitative content analysis which uses determinants of authenticity as a measure of a blogger's ability to maintain her audience with a personal narrative.

Peter Macdonald and Philip Savage, in their research article, *"Prose and cons of scholarly articles: How readability tests expose poor knowledge mobilization in academic publications,"* present a thoughtful analysis of readability in humanities and social science scholarly papers. The authors' work is one of the first applications of readability outside of the STEM field, where is a significant consideration for reasons of effective knowledge translation.

The peer reviewed section of this issue finishes with a practical paper from Michèle Newton, *"Leveraging corporate philanthropy and community partnerships to maximize earned media."* Her paper is full of valuable examples from her Canadian practice.

This issue contains a thoughtful book review by Mary Taws, *"A history lesson on the future of cities,"* Anthony M. Townsend's *Smart cities: Big data, civic hackers, and the quest for a new utopia.* She suggests that Townsend's book contains rich and timely wisdom for professional communicators seeking to integrate data science into their practice. Finally, the issue concludes with a practical paper written by myself in collaboration with Tristan Lamonica of the University of Ottawa offering *"10 tips for managing stress as a social media communicator."*

As always, all articles except this editorial, the book review and the practical paper have undergone strict double-blind peer review.