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Weaving together the threads of professional communication

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ABSTRACT

In this editorial for the third issue of the Journal of Professional Communication, Editor-in-Chief Alex Sévigny discusses the massive shift underway from a culture based on print and rules to a more fluid and conversations oral culture. He also presents all of the articles contained in this issue and thanks those who have contributed to its publication.

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Professional communication is a field in rapid evolution. Never before have we seen such convergence between the four seemingly disparate fields of public relations, advertising, analytics and journalism. Social media is driving the traditional practice of public relations away from the old silos of the broadcast and print model toward a new world of networked conversation and knowledge sharing among stakeholder publics, both inside and outside organizations.

I began teaching communication studies in 2001, when I was hired out of my post-doctoral fellowship working on a Miqmaq dictionary to be the first professor in the new Communication Studies program at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. My first week at work was marked by the first great tragedy of the 21st Century, when the attacks of September 11th changed everything. Suddenly, the world seemed smaller and more interconnected. Cable news networks, cellphones and email gave us a sense of being there and participating in the events as they unfolded in New York City. This feeling became a part of everyday life with the advent of social media and ubiquitous mobile computing.

The technologies of communication have always had a big impact on our

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society, culture and business. The printing press ushered in a new age of knowledge sharing and standardization that culminated in the Industrial Revolution. Now social media, smartphones and tablet technologies are binding us into a tightly knit network that doesn't so much resemble an orderly grid, as it does the heaving surges and flows of communication in a town square packed with people, awaiting an event. If anything, social media have turned daily life into a can't-be-missed event, which captures the poetry of the everyday. We have all heard the complaint that "no one wants to know what you had for lunch" and yet we share this information on Twitter and Facebook and we are inspired by it, wanting to meet the challenge posed by knowledge of what another has done. Indeed, social media have begun to transform our culture, politics and economics.

Our world is no longer as it was. Our world is no longer as even I – with my 39 short years on this Earth – remember it to be. My father often speaks wistfully of a rural Northern Ontario world that is long gone and mostly forgotten. I never thought that I would be in his position – that the world I lived in was always vital and real and true – that it would persist and exist forever. It has not. The world I grew up in during the 1970s and 1980s is as remote to the digital natives of today as the world of my father's youth in the Northern bush camps was to me.

Truthfully, we are in the beginnings of a move from the print and broadcast model of newspapers, book publishers, terrestrial radios stations and broadcast television networks to an age of self-publishing and interpersonal sharing via social media. This change is a shift from a culture of gatekeepers, editors and experts to a culture of storytellers, rhetoric and persuasion. This means a move from understanding culture and business through the lens of mass communication theory toward thinking of mediated communication as a primarily interpersonal phenomenon.

While this might seem to many to be a largely academic distinction, having little bearing on the world of motion and action outside the university, in fact it is a phenomenally important distinction to begin to fathom. Mass communication privileged experts and gatekeepers. It had very high production values that demanded significant investment on the part of media companies to create content that was fit to print or broadcast. It was a world of hierarchy, rules and constraint. That world is rapidly disappearing and being replaced by a place where the human voice, the story and the village are of primary importance.

* This introduction is adapted from one of my blog posts (<http://alexsevigny.ca/?p=2524>).

We are morphing into a society shaped and organized by the tenets of oral culture – fluid, chatty, playful, emotional and mistrustful of expertise and authority. Its rhythms are in tune with the flow of conversation, rather than segregated by the categories and boxes of print and broadcast. It’s back to the future, really, since our culture before the printing press was certainly oral. The operative skills, identified half a century ago by Marshall McLuhan, are pattern matching and fit. Statistics and probability reign in this world, while rigid logic fades. It is a world of relative and local understanding, not universalism. It is world where people are motivated by principles rather than constrained by unenforceable rules.

The commentaries featured in this issue highlight both the diversity of the field and its trend to convergence. In *“Startups & communication strategies: Swinging for the fences”* Meghan Chayka and David Waslen discuss the importance of data to the sports performance measurement industry – demonstrating how media analysis can lead to exciting new business startups. They highlight the importance of communications measurement to understanding how audiences understand sports performance. In *“The role of communication in governance: Universities and (new) media,”* Melonie Fullick discusses how - in this age of open competition for students – public relations is gaining a new importance in the management of universities. She argues that universities need to put communications at the senior management table to succeed, in a time when a coordinated internal and external communications strategy is required by the networked world of digital communication that is upon us. In *“No problem with teaching? Maybe that’s your problem,”* Philip Savage stresses the importance of problem-based learning for the education and training of communications professionals. He asks the opinion of readers on this and requests others to communicate their experiences with problem-based learning both in the public and private sectors. Finally, in *“Ethical PR serves the public interest,”* Guy Versailles discusses the importance of ethics in the practice of public relations, comparing the codes of ethics of the Canadian Public Relations Society, the Public Relations Society of America and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (UK).

In *“Évaluation et excellence en relations publiques : étude du cas de la Régie de la santé Acadie-Bathurst (RSAB)”* Marc Angers proposes an analytical model for evaluating public relations campaigns using the R.A.C.E. methodology. He uses the case of the Régie de santé Acadie-Bathurst in which he oversaw

development and implementation of a public relations strategy, the need for which was triggered by public perception of long wait times in hospital emergency rooms and long distances required to access health care. The author develops a series of analytical tools for evaluating this campaign by combining different theoretical approaches with the *Excellence Model for Public Relations Practice* developed by the James and Larissa Grunig.

In "Go local or keep the international desk? The evolving role of local reporting in international coverage," Mark Burgess poses a series of interesting questions about the importance of authenticity in local news reporting. Can a reporter from Canada capture the reality of a situation in an international location with a culture markedly different from that of Canada? Is it more authentic for a newspaper to rely on local reporters to capture the cultural and political nuances quickly in the rapidly evolving context of a theatre of war, for example? Burgess examines these questions through a series of interviews with many leading Canadian journalists who share personal insights, anecdotes and philosophical perspectives. The paper also includes a discussion of the impact of the philosophy of perspectivism on the debate surrounding the use of local reporters or the international desk.

Stephanie Yates and Marie-Andrée Caron in "*La communication comme vecteur de l'acceptabilité sociale des grands projets*," discuss, how large projects have become increasingly dependant upon securing and maintaining public support. They begin by examining how although in the 1970s it was common practice in Québec to take a top-down approach to public relations, in modern public relations efforts, it is necessary to co-construct a relationship incrementally with many periodic checks. Yates and Caron propose an analytical model based on stakeholder expectations on the assumption that a greater relational legitimacy is achieved by constant evaluation and re-evaluation of stakeholder expectations, both within and outside of the organization.

This issue also contains two practical papers. The first, "*Rethinking the R.A.C.E. model for a social media world*," from Diane Bégin and Katie Charbonneau proposes a new interpretation of the race model in light of how social media has changed the landscape of communications practice, forcing strategy to always be "in beta." They propose a model based on the 'agile manifesto,' a development methodology from the software industry that encourages continuous changes in strategy based on a constantly evolving context.

The second practical paper, "*Trust, conversation and creativity: Designing an intentional culture of success*," by Denise O'Connor and Virginia Jones, discusses a model for building an intentional culture of creativity and resilience in organizations, large and small.

in organizations, large and small. They identify four elements of an organizational conversation: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality and apply these to the building of better relations to find 'the sweet spot' for creativity and innovation that they charge is inherent in relationships.

Reputation and its management have become a central concern of organizations in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. For many senior executives, this is can be very challenging. This issue offers readers three books reviews, all of which explore different aspects of reputation analysis and reputation management. Phyllis Bennett evaluates *Strategic Reputation Management: Toward a Company of Good* by Pekka Aula and Saku Mantere. Anne-Marie Males examines *Creating Corporate Reputations: Identity, Image, and Performance* by Graeme Dowling and Christine Szustaczek examines *The Alignment Factor: Leveraging the Power of Total Stakeholder Support* by Cees van Riel.

I invite you to peruse this latest issue of JPC. I hope that you are inspired by the thoughtful commentaries, insightful research articles, useful practical papers and critical book reviews it contains. This issue would not have been possible without the help of many peer reviewers, whose anonymous efforts, given freely, are essential to the production of a scholarly journal with a limited budget. Goodwill is at the heart of community and there is certainly much goodwill in the international community of professional communicators. Dr. Suzanne Crosta, the former Dean of Humanities at McMaster University, has been a cornerstone supporter of our journal. Her kind, generous and foresightful support has enabled this journal to function and thrive. She was a superb dean for our faculty and will be greatly missed by the the JPC team. She is going back to her internationally acclaimed work as a teacher and researcher in the field of African and Caribbean literatures - that field's gain is certainly our loss. I would be remiss if I did not thank our Assistant Editor, Shelagh Hartford, who graduated from the Communication Studies program at McMaster University in spring of 2012 but who continues in her role, making the journal's language tight and its graphic design elegant and accessible. Finally, a word of sincere thanks to our team of associate editors and our editorial advisory board - without their work and support, there would be no JPC.