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Public relations or public relationships?

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A R T I C L E I N F O	**A B S T R A C T**
Article Type: Editorial	This editorial for issue 2, volume 4 of the Journal of Professional Communication discusses the importance of the concept of relationships in the practice of public relations and communications management. The rise of the internet and social media has launched a new era of publishing by individuals who share information and messages amongst their social networks. In this new world, publication has become a relational act instead of a broadcasting act. It is argued that an organizaton and its publics share a state of being together instead of experiencing one another in a strictly transactional relationship. The articles in the current issue of the Journal of Professional Communication are also discussed and presented.

The profession of public relations and communications management has experienced extraordinary growth in reputation and importance in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors over the last decade. Much of this growth has been due to the seismic shift in corporate, public, and private culture that digital communications and social media have brought. Communications have become more immediate, direct, and dialogical. Brands have become conversations and marketing has largely merged with—or, some would argue, become a part of—communications.

This growth has created enormous employment opportunities at both ends of job spectrum: tens of thousands of new entry-level positions as well as significant growth in senior executive communications positions above the traditional director level. The strategic importance of public relations, while always present, has become obvious to many members of the c-suite.

Much ink has been spilt debating the reasons for this growth. Even more thought has been devoted to defining and "professionalizing" or "formalizing"

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the field. Through my work with the Canadian Public Relations Society and the McMaster-Syracuse Master of Communications Management program, I have observed the evolution of the profession over the last ten years. One of the main themes that have emerged from these many conversations has been the concept of relationships sitting at the core of public relations and communications management practice.

Dan Tisch, in a thought-provoking *Marketing Magazine* article, argues: "As consumers, citizens and stakeholders, we have lost trust in corporations, governments, leaders and institutions, just as we have gained global publishing power on our computers and smartphones" (Tisch, 2015).

I believe he's right. Now, as we leave the industrial age behind, I believe we are entering a new era of communication. The Gutenberg press isolated people by compartmentalizing knowledge into pages and book full of text that could be annotated but not changed. The internet has has the opposite effect; long-distance communication is no longer limited to writing, and the simplest smartphone allows even the most naïve user to mash up videos and photos, text and audio, and send them to their friends in real time.

In many ways, the isolating qualities of writing on paper are being replaced by the connectivity of the internet and the smartphone. These devices bring a feeling of immediacy and orality back to our communications, allowing us to live within the happy murmur of conversation for as much of the day as we wish. This new, connected, conversational reality has encouraged people to become more social, with instant access to friends being the norm. To adapt to this emerging reality, organizations in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors must change the way they engage with publics. Gone are the days of a reliable mass communications market which could deliver predictable, coherent audiences. Rather, we have video streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu, giving consumers the choice of when and in what order to view content, free of advertising. Newspapers, led by Montréal's *La Presse*, are going digital, completely replacing their print editions with free tablet-focused webpages that have been optimized for touch screens. Their advertising is dynamic and interactive, and it seems to work.

If organizations want to build the same awareness that broadcast advertising used to achieve, they need to get people to pay attention. Most often, this means engaging them in a conversation and providing them insights into the experience delivered by their brand. To engage people in conversation, they must build a relationship with them—relationships that are built on trust. The profession of public relations and communications management is devoted to building trust and relationships, which places it at the centre of the emerging

era of relational publishing and information sharing.

What is the difference between relations and relationships? A relationship is a state of being, but "relations" is a more nebulous concept. It's a characterization of the link between two people or between an organization and a public. In the old broadcast age of experts crafting one-to-many communications, we could consider the link between an organization and its publics as an abstract object. However, in the emerging information age of connectivity and conversation, it is the *state of being* in which an organization and people are connected. A state of being implies an experience of time spent together, unmarred by distance and calculation.

While public relations in a broadcast age could be thought of as the abstract "relations," the interactive age of information demands an active, engaging relationship. Perhaps it is time to rethink our profession's name; from public "relations" to "public relationships and communications management."

Articles in this issue

Strategy is a major theme of public relations and communications management education, research, and professional advocacy. In his commentary, entrepreneur, manager, and university instructor Mark Stewart describes his take on strategy and its importance in our professional lives as well as for organizations. He emphasizes the importance of strategy for professional communicators and describes some strategic decision-making tools. Keeping on the theme of strategy and communications, Terry Flynn, APR, FCPRS conducts the second in a sequence of peer-reviewed interviews he is conducting for JPC—a wide-ranging and thought-provoking conversation with Stephen Waddington, CIPR, entrepreneur, executive, and former president of United Kingdom's Chartered Institute for Public Relations. Continuing with the theme of strategy, we have the transcript version of Toni Chaltas's speech to the McMaster-Syracuse Master of Communications Management summer gala 2015 in which she discusses her professional journey as a woman in political staff and the agency world.

We have a diverse set of five research articles in this issue. Of course, each research article has been subjected to strict peer review by two reviewers. In "Visualizing communication patterns among expert and novice counselors," Livia D'Andrea, Colin Hodgen, and Margaret Heaton present a method for visually studying professional communication patterns using color text portraits of each conversation. They discuss the advantages of graphics over

traditional statistical presentation. César García discusses the definitional problems of public relations in his fascinating article, "Is the field of corporate communications trying to kidnap public relations?" Dustin Manley brings us into the realm of personality and professional communication in his article, "Personality and positive psychology in social media and post-secondary education." In "Journalism students' profile and their perceptions of journalism education in Brazil: A comparative analysis of local and national scenarios," Fabio Pereira, Dione Moura, Karoline Marques Pires, and Ana Paula explore the evolving world of student perceptions of journalism education in Brazil. Finally, in "Preparing for the coming storm: Exploring interactions between corporate values and crisis management," Matt Tidwell explores the perceptions of senior-level corporate executives on whether companies integrate corporate values in crisis planning.

Acknowledgements

References

Tisch, D. (2015). The elevation of public relations: From content to relationships. *Marketing Magazine*. Retrieved from http://www.marketingmag.ca/brands/the-elevation-of-public-relations-from-content-to-relationships-column-151136