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The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the essential value of public relations

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ABSTRACT

In this editorial for issue one 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 essential importance of effective and strategic public relations for government and all manner of organizations in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. 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 rapid spread of COVID-19 meant many sudden and spectacular changes to how people around the world live and do business. Economies were largely shutdown, with the exception of the delivery of essential services. The results of the pandemic lockdown were a shock to the economy and our social lives. Almost every office was emptied and workers informed that they would be working from home for an indefinite period of time. Parliaments were suspended and then settled into various hybrid formats. Indeed, almost overnight, COVID-19 brought about a shift in how our society functions. The crisis highlighted the essential role of public relations and communications management to assist governments, organizations, influencers and journalists in providing the public with up-to-date information about the pandemic and its impacts.

Employers succeeded by quickly implementing internal communication strategies to keep remote workplaces effective and cohesive. Some organizations, such as Canada's Shopify, announced that working from home would become their default, accelerating an existing trend toward telework. These cases

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will make fascinating studies as we seek to understand and learn from the role of communications in rapid change management scenarios.

Government leaders, both in political offices and public service bureaux, distinguished themselves by their ability to empathize with their constituents, providing reassurance that appropriate action was being taken and essential economic supports implemented. In Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spoke with authority and empathy in daily updates from his residence while the Liberal government rolled out a range of programs to support individuals, businesses, not-for-profits and governments at every level.

Canada's public health officers took on a newly significant role in the public eye. British Columbia's provincial health officer Dr. Bonnie Henry delivered authoritative, understandable and pragmatic communications during the pandemic. She inspired trust by demonstrating empathy for people's struggles and suffering during the lockdown, while clearly explaining the importance of good pandemic behaviours such as frequent hand washing and maintaining physical distance. Her approach showed that sound health policy and guidance is most successful when it is communicated effectively.

Public-facing brands varied in their responses to the pandemic, communicating mostly through email, digital advertising and traditional media placements. Heart-warming messages expressing solidarity with the public tried to connect, but quickly developed a clichéd feeling, following a formula of canned empathy and congratulations for essential workers that became repetitive. Others chose to give too many updates with too little substance, which likely led audiences to tune them out. More successful campaigns shone by opening their virtual shop doors to reveal how their leadership and workers were living and working through the pandemic.

Some brands built relationships with stakeholders and clients by providing contextually appropriate examples of people who were coping well with the pandemic. Simons, a Montréal-based retailer, hit the mark by suggesting at-home activities and then showcasing client experiences in inviting, warm and reassuring emails. A different, but successful approach adopted by some sought to show how a brand was adding value to the fight against COVID-19 by contributing to the well-being of their communities. This underlined the power of corporate social responsibility, when communicated effectively.

Indeed, suddenly everyone was at home, receiving messages almost exclusively through three channels: traditional media—a Léger (2020) survey showed 56% of respondents trusting television as a source of information; emails and texts with friends and organizations; and social media interactions. This was compounded by the fact that people were being more intentional

about their consumption of communications, especially social media. Rather than the usual pattern of consulting their social channels during commutes and breaks, now people were *choosing* to look at social. This meant fewer visits to social sites, but likely more attention paid during those visits.

Anecdotally, I noted a drop in volume of sharing of newsmedia articles over social channels monitored through projects of our MCM Research Lab at McMaster University. Although further study is required to know for certain, it could be that people were actually reading the pieces, instead of mindlessly sharing a post linking to a news article because it had an attractive headline and appeared in one's feed at the right time.

The pandemic highlighted the strategic importance of professional communicators, whose job it is to maintain and enhance relationships between a brand and its publics. As well, the pandemic underlined the pressures communicators face during a crisis. It is psychologically taxing to produce effective and creative public relations strategies while monitoring and responding to the constant flow of messages of suffering in their organizations' various channels. These are key items for future research, as we try to understand the role and impact of communications during this pandemic.

We must salute the professional communicators who have worked so hard and contributed so much during this period of prolonged crisis. Your hard and essential work has kept us informed, lifted our moods, highlighted the importance of our relationships and, often, given us something to look forward to when the lockdowns will be lifted and life returns to normal. A heartfelt thank you.

Articles in this issue

In her research article, "*The stakeholder-communication continuum: An alternate approach to internal and external communications*," Rita Chen examines empirically the stakeholder-communications continuum. Her data-driven results (survey, in-depth interviews, content analysis) will be of interest to academics and practitioners in the fields of university and not-for-profit advancement, stakeholder communications and public relations.

In her research article, "*Reputation and social capital: A hammer for the glass ceiling*," Kristine Leadbetter describes a case study in which she examined the DeGroote Womens Professional Network, at DeGroote School of Business at McMaster University. Her article ends with useful tools and a model for creating an effective women's professional network for your organization.

Aislinn Mosher, in her research article, *“Healthy discourse: How Canadian physicians use Twitter to communicate in healthcare,”* examines how doctors use twitter to communicate about health care. He study replicates an American study with some very interesting divergences.

Guy Versailles, reprises, in English, a provocative piece *“Public relations and journalism,”* that he wrote in his French-langague book about public relations, published by the Presses de l’université du Québec. In it, he discusses the history of both professions, and their symbiotic relationship, with a focus on the evolution of journalism in the current social media moment.

The peer reviewed section of this issue finishes with an award-winning case study from Christine Szustaczek, Peter Kikkert, Christian Knudsen and Jennifer Deighton, *“Sheridan@50: A creative history for a creative campus.”*

This issue contains a thoughtful book review by Martin Waxman, *“The mathematical corporation: Where machine intelligence and human ingenuity achieve the impossible,”* which discusses the potential of artificial intelligence for public relations. Finally, the issue concludes with practical paper written by myself in collaboration with Tristan Lamonica of the University of Ottawa offering *“10 tips for strategic public relations during the COVID-19 pandemic.”*

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

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