

A world in crisis: the role of public relations

In his 1992 book, American Political Scientist Francis Fukuyama confidently declared that the fall of the Berlin Wall had signaled “the end of history” as western values of liberal democracy, free markets and open society had triumphed and therefore would henceforth be adopted by the rest of the world. What an illusion! Less than 20 years into the twenty-first century, the list of countries one does not associate with a liberal democratic system has been growing as does their apparent influence over global affairs (China, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Turkey, the Philippines, etc.). Even the USA, considered the leader of globalism in the twentieth century, appears to have embraced protectionism and economic nationalism typified by Donald Trump’s successful 2016 presidential campaign under the slogan “America first.”

A combination of political and technological creative destruction appears to be making societies progressively less open with individuals voluntarily ceding control over their privacy either to governments (such as tech giants Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google) or government agencies. And they are doing this to levels that George Orwell, the author of dystopian novel *1984*, had not imagined! A combination of all these factors makes it appear as if the world is in a permanent crisis. Trust in authorities and institutions continues to fall while organizations appear to be making optimistic promises of their commitment, engagement, and even enthusiasm. Social media have created “echo chambers” that have polarized societies and encouraged a few “shrill” voices to supersede the silent majority. All of these developments prompted us to induce attendees at BledCom 2018 to respond to the question: What is going on with this “world in crisis”? Further, given that public relations has always been involved with sense-making and reflection, relationship management and storytelling, we wanted attendees to reflect on the role that public relations has played in the present VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) state of affairs?

Whereas public relations can help solve some of these problems, it is pertinent to recognize that public relations should own responsibility for contributing to creating and/or exacerbating some of the world’s worst problems. Organizations have employed public relations to produce culturally induced ignorance of, and doubt in, science. Take, for instance, the use of communication campaigns by the tobacco industry that not only hid the harmful effects of this product on human health but often touted its supposed health benefits to cure a variety of ailments. The same strategy and tactics have been employed to deny global warming against overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary thus hastening what might become a cataclysmic environmental disaster. In fact, in many parts of the world climate change has been affecting populations with paradoxical extremes: droughts in some places and storms and ravaging floods in others. This is contributing to migration, as people are trying to move from uninhabitable to more hospitable (at least as far as non-human nature is concerned) areas – creating a new set of problems. One is already witnessing competition for scarce natural resources and soon water may become the key scarce resource that spawns wars.

Another cultural product of public relations is the normalization of rising social inequalities, not only between regions and countries, but also within individual countries. Such developmental divides are not limited to underdeveloped countries alone. Around the world one can witness the richest and the poorest neighborhoods touching each other, but being separated by walls and armed guards or protected fences. It seems as if the middle class, the foundations of a healthy and open democratic society, is disappearing and social



bifurcation is paralleled by political extremes. This leads to hate speech and hate crimes, which are becoming a standard feature in daily news.

Public relations has also been instrumental in sanitizing warfare. Because technology pits fighters with intelligent machines against those who have less, drones and other weapons may be expensive, but they do not add to our body count. Society does not seem to heed the other side – the have-nots – because they are deemed less human, even if they are civilian and children. We believe communication plays a critical role because every war starts and ends with communication (or lack thereof), and hybrid warfare is nothing but communicative warfare. One has to acknowledge that public relations is at the forefront of every military conflict throughout history and even in present times.

Academics and practitioners totaling 175 and hailing from 30 countries discussed this theme and during the 25th anniversary of the International Public Relations Research Symposium – popularly known as BledCom from July 5 to July 7, 2018 in beautiful Lake Bled, Slovenia. The essays in this special issue reflect some of the ways in which attendees approached, and analyzed, the theme of the conference. We hope this discussion will continue as we negotiate a world in crisis.

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