

**BIG IDEAS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS
RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

ADVANCES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

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ADVANCES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION
MANAGEMENT VOLUME 4

BIG IDEAS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

All disciplines are guilty to some degree of introspection and self-reflection. Much time is spent in academic discourse dissecting issues that have engaged groups of academics in a specific field for many years. This, of course, can be valuable in building deeper understanding of the discipline and making moves to aid understanding for future generations of scholars. Public relations (PR) as a field of academic exploration and applied practice is no different. As researchers and teachers, we concentrate on the defined and refined areas of our field and explore them in depth. We research, write papers and teach our discipline in this way ensuring we are thorough and detailed in our analysis and understanding. We apply the principles of multi-layered scholarship to really get underneath topics and themes of interest to ourselves and our peers. And from this deep dive enquiry we aim to advance knowledge and crucially build confidence in the robustness of our enquiry.

But, every now and then it's good to break away from standard practice and the norm. It's refreshing to challenge established thinking and the status quo to explore alternative ways to look at problems and issues. We often talk in academia about the lenses through which we observe and make enquiry about our field or a topic within it. For this reason we are excited with this collection of papers that emanate from the original and exciting congress we held in Aarhus, Denmark, in September 2018. At this meeting of our academic community we were challenged to break out of the tramlines and think differently, or, as discussed, through a different lens. This fresh thinking was inspired by the conference theme from our Aarhus colleagues to look for 'big ideas' in PR. And that is what our international collection of academic colleagues delivered. Collected here are 12 selected papers which capture in different forms some of the novel and innovative ways to expand and view the frame of reference for the field of PR scholarship.

In the first chapter, Jule Keller-Bacher and Ansgar Zerfass explore the specific role of strategic communication as a facilitator for business internationalization. It provides a new and comprehensive rationale for explaining the contribution of strategic communication to the global success of companies and shows communication leaders how they can demonstrate the value of communication for internationalization. The chapter identifies an important contribution of strategic communication in today's globalized world, which demands further attention in academia and in practice by addressing three research questions: (1) How can strategic communication be conceptualized as part of the internationalization of firms? (2) Which specific objectives, responsibilities and practices

can be assigned to strategic communication within the process of internationalization? (3) Does the theoretical framework capture the significant components of strategic communication within internationalization, appropriately from the point of view of senior experts in the field? The study identifies four core fields of strategic communication within the internationalization processes: initiation, transformation, expansion and integration. Communication should be implemented differently within the typical periods of internationalization, and communication management should focus on different aspects during these processes. From a theoretical standpoint, this study emphasizes the value of a cross-disciplinary perspective on corporate communications, which helps to bridge gaps between management research and communication studies. The study expands the body of knowledge in strategic communication by integrating new objectives and activities.

Chapter 2 moves us into the realm of technology and how aspects of digitalisation and datafication are challenging PR. Sine Nørholm Just and Rasmus Kjærgaard Rasmussen argue that technological developments have created a need to re-conceptualize PR to account for data as affordance and actor. The conceptual chapter discusses existing communicative theories in relation to current changes in the media landscape and its technological underpinnings. Focusing on the areas of crisis communication and issues management, the researchers argue that datafication provides new ways of dealing with issues and, in turn, presents new issues for PR professionals. Thus, the chapter presents a novel conceptualisation of PR in which technological affordances and agencies go hand in hand with human efforts in the configuration of communicative assemblages. They argue therefore that viewing data solely as an affordance merely provides new tools for solving existing issues. When the independent agency of data is recognized and employed, more effective means of solving such issues appear, but data itself also becomes an issue. They use the Cambridge Analytica scandal as a case with broader discussions about electoral manipulation. In this regard, balancing the dual demands of efficacy and ethics is as pressing a concern for PR as ever. The conceptualization of PR in terms of communicative assemblages, they suggest, may not only explain processes of issues formation better, but also provide a starting point for handling such processes ethically and effectively.

The next chapter investigates online branded video and how they can create positive impressions for viewers. This study begins with an exploratory approach to understanding how online branded video results in positive impressions among viewers. In their chapter, Gregory G. De Blasio, Komala Mazerant and Brad Scharlott highlight scholars who have previously examined the characteristics of videos that can contribute to their appeal as well as different literature discussions that have identified social practices and emotions likely to influence the perceptions of branded content. Their study aims to bridge the gap between those two strands by asking which social practices produce the emotions that lead to greater enjoyment of a video. Using a series of multiple regressions, they construct a path analysis model linking key social practices and emotions that

lead to positive evaluations of branded videos. The model provides future strategic direction for the makers of online branded video.

Chapter 4 by Renate Dam, Wim J. L. Elving and Roel van Veen discusses their exploratory study that looks at how various organizations are engaging millennials in ‘energy transition’. The authors place the chapter in the context of the Paris climate accord at which almost all countries in the world agreed to reduce greenhouse gasses to limit impact on climate change. To achieve this, countries need to reduce fossil fuel usage and fundamentally change behaviour. In their study the authors explored how organizations are engaging with young people, often referred to as millennials on the topic. Millennials are seen as digital natives; they grew up with digital communication. But the question they ask is do organizations engage millennials in this energy transition and do they do it in a way that millennials understand? The study finds that organizations, with a few exceptions, do not use interactive media and elements that millennials use, and subsequently don’t engage millennials in a way that encourages them to support energy transition. The authors provide some suggestions how organizations can engage millennials more effectively and to a greater extent.

Moving outside of Europe, Zhao Alexandre Huang and Rui Wang discuss their work exploring diplomacy in China using Twitter. Using the theoretical frameworks of public diplomacy and PR, the authors in Chapter 5 have mapped how the Chinese government has used panda imagery to build its national brand on Twitter and how this ‘panda diplomacy’ has facilitated its para-diplomatic actions. Through this interesting case exploration the researchers’ findings uncover new attempts by the Chinese government to engage in digital diplomacy. They argue that by mobilizing panda imagery on Twitter the Chinese government has enhanced more friendly relations with foreign political leaders and the general public. This, they posit, has created a friendlier and more peaceful image of China on the Twitter platform worldwide.

Alexandra Crăciun provides a chapter that aims to redefine corporate identity as a PR tool, and part of a new communication syntax of hypermodernity (Lipovetsky, 2005, 2007). In line with relevant theories of narrative engagement coming from the post-structuralist semiotics and the “aesthetics of interaction” (Eco, 1978, 1979, 1990), corporate identity is discussed in Chapter 6 as a conversational instrument, retrieved and reconstructed by ‘echo chambers’ and ‘curiosity gaps’. The territory of the visual identity becomes part of a collective transaction, a sort of ‘open work’/ *opera aperta* (Eco, 1962), where the consumers are asked to build their own *intentio lectoris* (Eco, 1979, 1996), their own representamen (Peirce, 1998). In McLuhan’s terms, this can be translated as a ‘cooling down’ of the system of corporate identity. In her chapter Crăciun argues that ‘conversational branding’ is rooted in the dialogic model of PR, and provides an interactive usage of visual identity, and a new consumer-centric perspective in strategic communication.

Religion is one of our society(ies)’s biggest ideas, and Markus Wiesenbergs takes the book and the contributions on another turn with an exploration of the role of strategic communication in organized religion. His study examines how strategic communication can be modelled in organized religion with its specific

characteristics and logics by building a framework for strategic communication in this field of research. The framework he presents in Chapter 7 questions perspectives of strategic communication and communication management that only concentrate on entities like famous persons, groups, movements or organizations and rather less on belief systems, organized and less organized entities and their interactions with each other.

For Chapter 8 Sarah VanSlette explores a research gap in the field and specifically research and studies into the role of PR and communications for new enterprises. Her chapter argues there is a clear gap in research about how startup companies use PR in their tenuous and critical first few years of existence. She acknowledges a small body of literature focused on how startups should use marketing, but emphasizes how the PR literature is virtually non-existent. Citing a Google Scholar search, she found 50 results for titles with the words 'marketing' and 'startup' and only one result when searching for titles with the words 'public relations' and 'startup'. That single result is in fact an undergraduate project (Shimasaki, 2013) and emphasizes the missing body of research devoted to PR for startups.

Chapter 9 explores another neglected aspect of PR research. Paul Willis and Andy Green argue that while scholars in the field consider social capital's societal and organizational potential, little attention is paid to its practical aspects. For example, what steps should PR practitioners take when seeking to build social capital in support of their work with stakeholders? To initiate a discussion around these questions, the chapter introduces a conceptual framework developed as part of a research project involving an academic, PR practitioners and a professional association in the United Kingdom. This research collaboration positions the building of social capital as a key leadership competency for PR. The aim of the collaboration is to encourage and develop the PR profession's social capital building capability and capacity in the United Kingdom. With this goal in mind, the conceptual framework presented in the chapter is designed to inform a series of active, theory-driven interviews with practitioners during the project's forthcoming empirical stage. To underline the importance of the conceptual framework to the study's overall research design, its inclusion is discussed within the context of key ontological and methodological considerations.

For Chapter 10 we go inside the organization. Vibeke Thøis Madsen and Joost W. M. Verhoeven argue that PR professionals are increasingly taking on a coaching and training role, and communication technology has made employees more visible and approachable. As such they argue employees increasingly take on active communication roles with external publics. While PR professionals' roles are conceptualized fairly well, no framework exists that describes the many communication roles that employees play in contemporary organizations. Their chapter identifies different employee communication roles proposed in academic research in order to point out the increasing role of employees as strategic communicators in PR.

In Chapter 11 Mark Badham identifies, defines and explores four news media roles of conduit, facilitator, mediator and political actor through which the media participate with corporate, social and political actors in agenda-building

processes. The framework of the media's four agenda-building roles sheds light on how the news media perform their various roles as well as how other actors, such as organizations and media audiences, are able to mobilize the media performing these roles. This framework helps explain how and why media roles affect the way actors are able to influence the media agenda with the intention of shaping the public agenda.

Vanessa Moreira and Mafalda Eiró-Gomes investigate communication professionals' role and ethical responsibility in sharing information, misinformation and disinformation, specifically from the science and technology fields. Through a review of literature, the authors set out to contextualize the role of communication professionals in scientific and technological organizations in today's social and political environments. They conclude that communication professionals in scientific and technological organizations do need to embrace the responsibility to contribute to the empowerment of citizens regarding their access to information and ability to navigate through the overwhelming amount of data they have access to on a daily basis. Citing the rise and expansion of populist movements worldwide, they stake a claim for the importance to reflect on the role of scientific and technological organizations in the public debate. They argue it is here that public opinion is formed and therefore it is important that organizations involved in scientific and technology developments embrace this responsibility as part of their identity.

So we have 12 diverse chapters reflecting different aspects of the field of PR and communications and all providing innovative thinking and application to what we have discussed as big ideas in our societies. The chapters come from both theoretical and empirical positions thus providing refreshing interpretations and explanations of how scholars in the subject are addressing issues that concern them.