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BIG IDEAS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

EDITED BY

FINN FRANDESEN
Aarhus University, Denmark

WINNI JOHANSEN
Aarhus University, Denmark

RALPH TENCH
Leeds Beckett University, UK

STEFANIA ROMENTI
IULM University, Italy
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ABOUT THE EDITORS

**Finn Frandsen** is Professor of Corporate Communication, Department of Management, Aarhus University, Denmark. His primary research interests are organizational crisis management and crisis communication, meta-organizations, stakeholders, intermediaries, and communicative institutionalism. His research has appeared in *Corporate Communications: An International Journal, International Journal of Strategic Communication, Management Communication Quarterly, Public Relations Inquiry, Public Relations Review*, and *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*. He is the co-author and co-editor of *Organizational Crisis Communication: A Multivocal Approach* (2017) and *Crisis Communication* (Handbooks of Communication Science no. 23, 2020).


**Ralph Tench** is Professor of Communication and Director of Research for Leeds Business School in the United Kingdom and President (2017–2020) of the European Public Relations Research and Education Association (EUPRERA). Professor Tench’s research involves national and international funded projects from the private sector, the EU, Public Health England, the NHS and research councils. He has written and edited 26 books; published over 30 academic journal papers; and presented worldwide more than 60 peer reviewed papers. His books include the market leading textbook for the public relations subject internationally, *Exploring Public Relations*, in its 12th year and fifth edition and recently *Communication Excellence — How to Develop, Manage and Lead Exceptional Communications*, with colleagues from the European Communication Monitor project.
Stefania Romenti (PhD) is Associate Professor in Strategic Communication and PR at IULM University (Milan, Italy) and Chair of the Master of Science in Strategic Communication. She is Director of the Executive Master in Corporate Public Relations (IULM University) and Adjunct Professor both at IE Business School (Madrid) in ‘Measuring Intangibles and KPI’s in Communication’ and at Monaco University (France) in Public Relations. She is Founder and Director of the Research Center in Strategic Communication (CECOMS) and Member of the Board of the European Association of Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA). Dr Romenti centres her research on strategic communication, corporate reputation, stakeholder management and engagement, dialogue, social media, measurement and evaluation.
ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Mark Badham (PhD) is Postdoctoral Researcher in Corporate Communication at Jyväskylä University School of Business & Economics in Finland. His research is primarily focused on distinct roles the news media adopt when participating with other actors, such as organizations and media audiences, in mass communication processes (e.g. agenda-building and discursive legitimation processes). A second research interest includes social media engagement by various actors, including organizations, their audiences and the news media. Prior to entering into a full-time academic career, he worked in corporate communication roles for politicians, political parties and NGOs in Australia.

Alexandra Crăciun (PhD) is Associate Professor at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters, Department of Communication Sciences and Chair of the Master of Arts in Advertising. She teaches courses in branding, advertising strategic and postmodern communication. She acts as Strategic Communication Consultant with over 25 years of professional experience, working as a creative at McCann BV or DDB Romania for Nestle, Unilever, WV, Coty, Coca-Cola, Ford, Toyota, HVB, General Electric, etc. Her books: Heterotopy: Handbook for a Postmodern User (2012), Branding for Stars’ Counters (2010) and Narcissism and Reflection (2002), are discussing the representations of identity, from corporate to personal, in the postmodern world.

Renate Dam is a Lecturer, Behavioural Trainer and Researcher at Hanze University of Applied Sciences, Groningen. Her interest lies in the use of psychology in communication and change processes.

Gregory G. De Blasio bridges the study and practice of marketing communication and public relations. He counsels an international roster of clients in music, education, information technology and other industries. Completing his PhD studies at Wayne State University in Detroit, Greg maintains academic interests in the areas of organizational legitimacy, advocacy and the confirmation of value in social media communication. At Northern Kentucky University, he teaches public relations classes and is a member of the Community Engagement Advisory Board, the International Affairs Council and the Phi Beta Delta Honor Society.

Mafalda Eiró-Gomes (PhD) is a Professor of Pragmatics and Public Relations (PR) at Escola Superior de Comunicação Social - Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa (ESCS-IPL)/IPL in Lisbon where she is a faculty member since 1992. She has been Director of both the undergraduate and the master programs in
PR/Corporate Communications, and is now the Head of the PR and Organisational Communications department. She has been working, pro bono, for NGOs for more than 20 years. Her interest on risk and scientific communication has made her study at a postgraduate level at the Public Health Master at Escola Nacional de Saúde Pública (ENSP) as well as at the post graduation in Travel Medicine at Instituto de Higiene e Medicina Tropical (IHMT) in Lisbon.

**Wim J. L. Elving** is Professor of Sustainable Communication at the Hanze University of Applied Sciences, Groningen, The Netherlands, as part of the EnTranCe — Centre of Expertise, Energy. In this position he is (co-)leading a research group (lectorate) of researchers on applied research in designing and testing communicative and behavioural interventions on accelerating the energy transition and the establishment of a sustainable society. He was previously part of ASCoR University of Amsterdam (2000–2017) and IE University (2009–2017), Spain, and as Editor-in-chief for *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* (2006–2016). He has published more than 200 articles, chapters, blogs, editorials, etcetera on corporate communication, CSR, sustainability, branding, engagement and change.

**Andy Green**’s work spans practice and academia including as Director of a social enterprise, Grow Social Capital, and as a Visiting Lecturer at four UK universities. Andy has written seven books on brand communications, including *Creativity in Public Relations* (published in four editions and translated into eight languages). A creative pioneer, he runs creativity classes on the London Tube. He was voted the UK’s ‘Outstanding Public Relations Practitioner’ in 2013. He is a Founder Supporter of the ‘Dublin Conversations’, a global network of thinkers and doers creating new thinking, definitions and practice for the future of ‘Comms’ and public relations.

**Zhao Alexandre Huang** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée and a Contractual PhD Candidate in Communication Science at the University of Paris-Est. He works in DICEN-IDF laboratory. His ongoing PhD thesis focuses on China’s public diplomacy and strategic communication in Africa. As a former journalist of China National Radio, he studies institutional practices, political and public communication strategies, and the strategic narrative in the process of public diplomacy. His research interests include public diplomacy, strategic communication, public relations and social media.

**Sine Nørholm Just** is Professor of Strategic Communication at the Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University. Theoretically, she is particularly concerned with the relationship between intended and realized strategy, including the realization of individual and collective agency via mediated affordances so as to constitute organizational assemblages. She is also interested in how legitimacy and identity interact with and are established through processes of meaning formation. Her empirical attention spans such issues as, for example, public debate about the EU, the communicative dimensions of the financial crisis, and organizational negotiations of diversity and difference.
Jule Keller-Bacher is a Consultant for strategic communications at Gauly Advisors GmbH. She works on national and international projects in positioning as well as in financial, strategic and crisis communications for companies across a broad range of industries. She graduated in Communication Management (MA) from the University of Leipzig after completing her bachelor studies in Psychology and Media Communication (BSc) at the University of Würzburg. She has worked at the finance and operations department of the automotive supplier Hella in Atlanta, USA, the department for crisis communication of Hering Schuppener Consulting, and at different PR agencies as well as German radio stations.

Vibeke Thois Madsen is an Assistant Professor in Digital and Organizational Communication at the Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University, Denmark. Her research interests are communication on internal social media, employee communication, employee communication behaviour such as self-censorship and discursive tactics as well as the construction of organizational identity on social media.

Komala Mazerant is a Senior Lecturer at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences and a PhD candidate at Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR). As a senior lecturer in Communication Studies, Komala is occupied with the integration of education and research. Together with students, colleagues and practitioners she explores the challenges and opportunities of communication in the network society, with the functioning of social media and the underlying mechanisms as a central theme. During her PhD research, she examined the use of real-time marketing in social media.

Vanessa Moreira holds a master’s degree in Strategic Management of Public Relations and a first cycle degree in Languages and Business Relations. She is currently the Communication Officer at INOV INESC Inovação, a research and technology organization working in the field of information and communication technologies and electronics, focusing on corporate communications and science communication in European research and innovation projects.

Rasmus Kjærgaard Rasmussen is an Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University. He has published widely on crisis communication, public relations, organizational counter-narratives, reputational logics and nation branding in journals such as Public Relations Review, Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, and Valuation Studies. His latest publication proposes to re-inscribe rhetoric in crisis communication by way of stasis and framing theories in order to accommodate a constitutive view of organizations (forthcoming in Rhetorica Scandinavia). His current research focuses on the role of strategic narratives and policies in security controversies in the Arctic region.

Brad Scharlott taught communications for more than three decades at various universities in the United States, retiring from Northern Kentucky University in 2016. He also worked as a Newspaper Reporter and Editor. His doctorate in Mass Communications is from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His
research has focused on the history of communications technology, media law and the social impact of new communication technology. He has also has studied the diffusion of solar cooking technology in developing countries. He lives in the state of Kentucky, in the United States of America.

Sarah VanSlette (PhD) is an Associate Professor in the Applied Communication Studies Department at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She teaches public relations classes and her research is focused on public relations case studies, critical PR theory and PR pedagogy. She earned her MA and PhD from Purdue University, and previously taught at John Carroll University.

Roel van Veen is currently doing his PhD project in the field of sustainability transition studies. He focuses on epistemics in participatory innovation trajectories in transitions-in-the-making and employs discursive psychology to analyze real-life and real-time social interactions between stakeholders in local energy initiatives (LEIs) to understand how participants hold each other accountable and sanctionable for knowledge claims in processes of co-creation and shared decision-making. This PhD project aims to contribute to facilitating constructive and inclusive dialogues about achieving sustainable energy futures.

Joost W. M. Verhoeven is an Assistant Professor in Corporate Communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research. He studies employee communication in general, and work-related social media use, and employee voice and silence in particular.

Rui Wang (PhD) is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Emerging Media Studies at Boston University. His research interests include social media analytics, strategic communication and international communication. His teaching experience consists a range of mass communication courses, including mobile journalism, visual communication, and strategies for public relations and social media.

Markus Wiesenberg, Dr, is Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Strategic Communication at Leipzig University and free Consultant in the area of strategic communication. Beside his PhD project, he worked as Freelance Consultant in different projects and as Project Manager of the European Communication Monitor. Previously, he worked as Communication Assistant with Lakeside Labs and Deutsche Post DHL, as Independent Journalist and in the area of advertising and marketing. His main fields of research are strategic communication of religious organizations and other non-business entities, public relations ethics, sociology of religion, neo-institutionalism and new trends in strategic communication.

Paul Willis is Professor of Corporate Communication at The University of Huddersfield. He was previously Director of the Centre for Public Relations Studies at Leeds Business School. Before joining academia, Paul was a Board Director in the PR consultancy sector advising organizations such as BMW, BT, Proctor & Gamble, Walmart, UK Sport and The Football Association. He has managed research projects for the EU, the Government Communication...
Service and Department for Health. In 2016, he was appointed a Member of the Government’s Future Communication Council by the Cabinet Office and Prime Minister’s Office. Paul is the Co-author of *Strategic Public Relations Leadership* and his other published research can be found in the field’s leading journals and textbooks.

**Ansgar Zerfass** is Professor and Chair of Strategic Communication at Leipzig University, Germany, and Professor of Communication and Leadership (II) at BI Norwegian Business School in Oslo, Norway. He holds a doctorate in Business Administration and a habilitation (second doctorate) in Communication Science from the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany. He serves as Editor of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* (Routledge, USA) and Lead Researcher for the Global Communication Monitor series covering more than 80 countries. His published work includes 35 books and more than 340 journal articles, book chapters and study reports on communication management, strategic communication, and international communication.
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 digitization 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 Wiesenberg 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. She 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 Thoïs 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.