



Journal of Promotional Communications

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://promotionalcommunications.org/index.php/pc/index>

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To cite this article: Tobin, N. 2016. Foreword, *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 5(1), 1-4

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Foreword to the Special Edition on Thought Leadership for Public Relations

Welcome to this special issue of the Journal of Promotional Communications on Thought Leadership for Public Relations.

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The PR consultancy business is increasingly building its reputation and revenue on the quality of its fresh thinking and research insights. These are interpreted as Thought Leadership essays, blogs and conference papers. In 2016, we worked with Bournemouth University's graduating PR students to synthesise their research, along with perspectives based on a year employed in leading consultancies and corporations across Europe, into articles for practising PR professionals.

The ability to source and showcase professional knowledge is now a top priority for management and public relations consultancies. Laurie Young, who used to lead the Strategic Planning Society, estimates that top consultancy firms such as McKinsey, PriceWaterHouseCoopers and Ogilvy marketing, invest up to \$100 million from their budgets for Thought Leadership and knowledge transfer (Young 2013). Topics regularly include marketing trends, economic and social research, demographic changes, behavioural research and the fast-moving role of technology across society.

The articles in this edition, researched by BU's graduates, show how digital technology and PR's role as a decision-maker and sometime mediator for their clients, is working with a broad suite of media channels. The PESO framework: Paid, Earned (PR's traditional territory) Social and Owned communication means that PR practitioners have greater scope for creativity, more perceived control over their messages and unfiltered conversations with the publics they choose to work with.

The challenge for professional communicators is that individuals trust information from friends, family and personal networks more highly than 'official' media sources. The Edelman Trust Barometer 2017 showed that the lowest levels of trust existed among 'mass populations' or economically 'left behind' groups, than college educated

professionals. Traditional media is now regarded as one of the lobbied and privileged elite, which could no longer be trusted to dispassionately represent the interests of the ordinary citizen (Edelman, 2017).

Moreover, people are selecting news and opinion that reinforces personal attitudes, preferences or beliefs, while rejecting alternative perspectives, even high quality research, if it contradicts their worldview. This relationship with media and information sources is not new. In 1960, the psychologist, Joseph T. Klapper produced research for his book *The Effects Of Mass Communication*, which indicated that people even then filtered messages they received from authority figures or commercial sources and were less 'passively influenced' than thought by professionals at the time (Klapper, 1960).

These findings are supported by the World Bank's analysis of *Governance Reform Under Real World Conditions* explored how the rise of digital stakeholder environments and local culture are driving social and political change through public conversation. This in turn is creating new elites and policy directions, which shape our national economies as much as traditional planning and regulation (Odugbemi et al 2008)

In its report, *Tech Nation 2016, More Than Just Disruption*, the innovation charity Nesta found that new communication industries, which did not exist 10 years ago, are now at the forefront of these dynamic social changes. Evidence from the Office of National Statistics' *Non-Financial Business Economy Report* (2014), suggests that digital communication and telecoms have become the driving force behind the growth of the media and communications consultancy sector. Between 2013 and 2014, UK turnover in these services increased by 5.2 per cent to £107.5 billion (ibid, 2014). The PRCA's *2016 Census*, showed PR fee income, supported by social and digital communication services, grew by 34 per cent, from £9.62 billion in 2013 to £12.6 billion in 2016 (PRCA 2016).

Even Bournemouth University's home, on the Jurassic Coast of Dorset, hosts Britain's fastest-growing digital economy. Dorset saw digital businesses increase by 212 per cent between 2010 and 2013 and UK Government has recognised Dorset as a regional digital hub (Telegraph 2015). The region also hosts an annual digital leaders' conference 'Silicon Beach' as well as a network in Bournemouth, where digital business leaders from Google, Microsoft and Facebook share their latest thinking with local agencies that serve a fast moving and global client base.

Technology is the significant driver of the professional reflections in the first part of this special edition. This includes articles which explore consumers' rejection of sponsored digital content, the use of SnapChat in elections, and the girl or boy next door brand "influencers", whose reach and following rivals that of national newspaper columnists.

The reflections in the second part of this journal challenge the role of the PR practitioner, corporate social responsibility and explore international PR practice that has developed outside the US/Anglo Saxon economic 'norm'. This is examined from the perspective of Bulgaria, which since 1992, has been shaped by the country's historical legacy as a Soviet-led, Warsaw Pact economy, where building public trust takes time, and this indicates why digital channels are used differently (Quelch et al, 1991; Watson, 2014).

In public relations journal articles dating back to 1964, the US educator, Ray Hiebert, reflected on the ambitions of professional bodies and industry leaders to create a new

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