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**Editorial for Special Section on World Public Relations Forum Conference  
'Communication Across Cultures' By Professor Anne Gregory (University of  
Huddersfield, UK) and Dr Amy Thurlow (Mount Saint Vincent University,  
Canada)**

**Communication Across Cultures**

**1. Introduction**

From 29<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> May 2016 641 academics and practitioners met for the Ninth World Public Relations Forum (WPRF) in Toronto, Canada. The WPRF is the flagship bi-annual conference of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA), the world-wide confederation of professional associations. The conference is jointly hosted by GA and the national association where it is located, in this case the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS).

GA has always advocated a close relationship between practice and academia, believing that both benefit by focussing on the issues, challenges and opportunities that the field and function faces. In 2012 the practice-orientation of the WPRF was balanced by the introduction of a Research Colloquium whose purpose was to build a bridge between practice-based considerations of the theme of the conference and academic critique, exploration and expansion. The purpose was to have a comprehensive practical and academic examination of the topic with the desired impact being to both develop the credibility and rigour of the practice, and help to build and expand the body of knowledge.

The theme of the WPRF in 2016 was *Communication across Cultures* and it was particularly apt that it was held in Toronto, one of the most multi-cultural cities in the world. Canada, a country of 36 million people, has opened its doors to about 250,000 immigrants and refugees a year for the past decade and communication across cultures has been imperative to making these new Canadians welcome and gaining public acceptance for their increasingly diverse backgrounds. There are also ongoing challenges around the cultural differences between First Nations communities and the mainly white migrant descendants who now dominate the political, economic and cultural landscape in Canada.

Broadening the discussion beyond Canada, the world faces the issue of mass migration and a pressing and present global refugee crisis. This, along with continuing challenges regarding the integration and alienation of numerous communities within existing societies, made the theme of the conference particularly pertinent. The poor, disabled, working classes, indeed all those out of the mainstreams of power and privilege suffer from a lack of voice and are certainly rarely listened to as Professor Jim Macnamara's opening keynote speech on his research into organisational listening amply illustrate (Macnamara, 2016).

The authors of the papers in this Special Issue of Public Relations Review responded to a Call for Papers which was itself diverse. It recognised that public

relations has changed, not just channel use, “but also in the very nature of conversations and their purpose, reach and effect. This requires communicators to reconsider a range of issues and topics affecting culture.

“For example, communicators have to be more aware than ever that their actual audiences may be far more wide ranging than their intended audiences. The digital divide means that additional efforts have to be made to include those who might be excluded. Furthermore, the all-embracing and changing nature of public relations and communication means that it is not enough for professional communicators to maintain a narrow focus on their organizations and cultures and how they benefit, but to be aware that communication is changing the very nature of culture and society”. (WPRF, 2016)

In response to this Call, the papers to the conference were eclectic covering a host of subjects from in-country studies about varying communities, to changes in economic models that are driving cultural change in organisations. Indeed, it is this latter theme that is the first paper in the 13 that are published here. In their paper, *Understanding public relations in the ‘sharing economy’*, authors Anne Gregory and Gregor Halff provide a look into an emerging area of economic development. In spite of the attention commanded by the macro-economic impact of the new sharing economy, the authors point out that there is a relative dearth of research available from public relations scholars on this phenomenon. In making their call for increased attention in this area, the authors propose a reconceptualization of public relations as a ‘deliberatively disintermediated’ function that enacts and reproduces ‘circuits of communication’ in the post-traditional economy.

The second paper also covers circuits, this time the Circuit of Culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2005) in their paper entitled *Rethinking the Circuit of Culture: how participatory culture has transformed cross-cultural communication*, Bridget Tombleson and Katharina Wolf explore how the influence of digital communication, in particular social media has impacted on cross-cultural communication. Using the Circuit of Culture as a theoretical lens through which to look at Facebook’s Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender campaign, they argue that public relations practitioners must become *cultural* as well as *content* curators, able to translate content in a way that is appropriate to diverse audiences.

Rene Beneke and her co-authors also use the Circuit of Culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2005) in their paper on *Cultural intermediaries and the circuit of culture: The Digital Ambassadors project in Johannesburg, South Africa*. This paper describes and analyses the meanings that young people, as cultural intermediaries, ascribe to their participation in a digital empowerment project implemented by the City of Johannesburg. It investigates the range and complexity of the stakeholder groups involved, the significance of structure plays, the crucial importance of training for cultural intermediaries, and the benefits such intermediaries gain from their involvement.

Turning to the way that multi-national companies interact with overseas local communities, Dorain Kartikawangi looks at the CSR activities of three large multi-nationals in Indonesia in an a paper entitled *Symbolic convergence of local wisdom*

*in cross - cultural collaborative social responsibility: Indonesian Case.* Here, the efforts of multi-nationals to take into account the needs and preferences of local communities is acknowledged, but the author provides insight into how more collaborative approaches can be undertaken which are much more effective. The need of these large organisations to cede power, become less paternalistic and indeed humble is key, but the benefits of genuine collaboration are worth the effort.

This paper is followed by a very powerful and moving description by Eni Maryani Sunarya and Rini Darmastuti of the communication strategy adopted by women in the Sukolilo village community to oppose the construction of cement factories in Pati in Central Java. Their paper, *The 'Bakul Gendong' as a communication strategy to reject the construction of a cement factory in Central Java* describes the highly symbolic and successful actions taken to demonstrate their commitment to the earth and the fruits of their labours, and the power they accrued to themselves as a result. This, despite Government's pre-disposition to approve projects they see as helping the economy and the resources of large multi-national companies.

A reasonable and legitimate question to ask is 'what competencies does a practitioner need to operate in this increasing complex and diverse world?'. Part of the answer comes from the work sponsored by the GA on behalf of its members summarised by Dustin Manley and Jean Valin in their paper *Laying the Foundation for a Global Body of Knowledge in Public Relations and Communications Management*. This is a huge piece of work analysing all the known credential schemes, education frameworks, and scholarly articles produced across six continents to develop a foundational list of knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours (KSABs), which entry and mid/senior-level practitioners across the world should possess. This study has provided the ground-work for a second project that GA is currently progressing which aims to develop an internationally usable and useful capability framework for professional associations and academic institutions across the world to benchmark and develop professional credentials and curriculum outcomes.

Another often asked question is 'how do we evaluate public relations' and it is to add to the body of knowledge in this area that Amy Thurlow and her co-authors wrote the paper *Evaluating Excellence: A model of evaluation for public relations practice in organizational culture and context*. Based on a case study of the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER), the authors have developed a novel evaluation model which seeks to provide a normative measure of public relations performance based on Grunig's (1992) Excellence Theory. The authors construct an index, based on Excellence Theory, comprising a range of dimensions, including requisite variety. Together these dimensions constitute a framework for measuring 'excellence in organisational context' which was then operationalised by AER and assessed by the research team.

Also concerned with the practice of public relations within organizations, Danny Moss and his co-authors provide an assessment of where public relations is located and how it is structured in their paper, *Structure of the Public Relations / Communication Department: Key Findings from a Global Study*. This paper draws on

a recent major global study that was sponsored by the former Research Foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). Among their key findings, these authors report that there is no one dominant structural model prevalent across organizations, however some interesting common elements emerged and these are discussed.

As we move from the question of where public relations is practice, to who should be responsible, Jesper Falkeimer and his co-authors offer a thought provoking piece which asks, *Is Strategic Communication too important to be left to Communication Professionals? Managers and Coworkers' Attitudes towards Strategic Communication and Communication Professionals*. This paper makes reference to a famous quote by Georges Clemenceau (1841–1929), France's president during the later years of World War I, that 'war is too important a matter to be left to the generals.' This paper applies that perspective to strategic communication and explores the perceived importance of communication in contrast with the perceived expertise and status of communication professionals.

Our final three research papers tackle issues of values and ethics in public relations practice. In Kristie Byrum's paper, *The European right to be forgotten: A challenge to the United States Constitution's First Amendment and to professional public relations ethics*, she asks some challenging questions about the tension between a communicator's ethical duty to transparent communication, and the legal and constitutional requirements of privacy in different jurisdictions. Suggesting that the European right to be forgotten violates the free flow of information in society, the author draws attention to potential conflicts between the debate for internet censorship and the need for open access to information.

In their exploration of the role of cultural values on public relations practice, authors Su Lin Yeo and Augustine Pang look at the multicultural nature of communication in Singapore. In their paper, *Asian multiculturalism in communication: Impact of culture in the practice of public relations in Singapore*, the authors aim to understand the role of cultural values in influencing public relations practice. To do so, they draw on Gudykunst's (1988) seven dimensions that influence individualism-collectivism on communication as a guide. Findings from this research emphasize that public relations professionals need to be multicultural themselves to effectively communicate with culturally diverse stakeholders in today's globalizing era of multiculturalism.

And finally, From cultural values in a multicultural environment, to the core values of practitioners in corporate environments, the next paper emphasizes the importance of the role values play in public relations. Graeme Trayner in his paper, *Why Values Matter - How Public Relations Professionals Can Draw on Moral Foundations Theory*, employs moral foundations theory (Haidt, 2012) to explore how core values impact the ways in which people evaluate issues, brands and claims. Expanding his discussion to look at the relationships between identity and values, the author explores the ways in which values drive actions and decision making.

To round out our discussion on communication across cultures, we end with a thought-provoking Endpiece. Dr Marianne Sison was one of the keynote speakers

for the Research Stream at the World Public Relations Forum in Toronto, Canada, 2016. In this article she draws on some of the strands of the conference, to provide a personal reflection on the more local issues surrounding communication across cultures, driven by consideration of one of the largest challenges of our time – migration. As a migrant herself she brings particular knowledge of the topic and it is fitting that she brings to a close this Special Issue.

As evidenced in the papers above, the WPRF 2016 brought together an exciting and insightful discussion about a wide range of issues reflecting *Communication across Cultures*. The theme itself was a broad call to public relations scholars to address culture from a variety of perspectives including organizational culture, multiculturalism, values and ethics within a cultural context, diverse voices in a global environment, and the need for innovative research in an era of new economic and global structures impacting culture and communication. We are pleased to present this collection of pieces which reflect some of the highlights of the WPRF 2016 Research Stream.

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