Introduction

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Public Relations Beyond Borders: Future Directions

As global communities merge and media systems converge, the boundaries within which we communicate are blurring and disappearing. With the rapid advancement of technology and the impact of globalisation, communities previously demarcated by national and geographical boundaries have melded into something akin to Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ (1991). In addition, the economic turmoil in Europe and the US shifts the focus to the East, to what has been dubbed the ‘Asian Century’. The term ‘Asian Century’ refers to a view that Asian politics and culture will dominate the 21st century based on the region’s increasing economic prosperity and population size. In particular, forecasts suggest that by 2050, Asia’s GDP and population will represent half of the global GDP and the world’s population (Kohli, Sharma & Sood, 2011).

The shifts in economic and political power present new challenges and opportunities for public relations and communication practitioners and scholars. Previously held paradigms of public relations practice and scholarship need to be revisited, reframed and recast to enable new ways of thinking and practice suitable to this ‘new world’.

As such, defining publics and audiences poses a major challenge. Aside from the breadth of potential audiences created by the World Wide Web, identifying ‘publics’ is not as simple as it used to be. Audiences, stakeholders and publics have become more mobile, more media savvy...
and more multicultural. Furthermore, in the world of social media and online networks, audiences have become content producers and citizen journalists. Thus a more nuanced and sophisticated approach to understanding audiences and stakeholders is needed for future public relations practice.

In calling for an interrogation of the power dimensions in current public relations models, critical scholars have argued that public relations move beyond its Western and corporate centricity. Instead of continually privileging the dominant and elite sectors of society, public relations practitioners and scholars need to ensure that all voices are heard and included in the conversations. For public relations to be authentic, ethical, and socially responsible, we need to enlist the activists (Demetrious, 2013; Holtzhausen, 2012) and the marginalised or ‘subalterns’ (Munshi & Kurian, 2005; Pal & Dutta, 2008) as legitimate producers of knowledge (Dutta, Ban & Pal, 2012).

The increased uptakes around the world of mobile media, social media and online communication provide platforms for knowledge production and supplement critical face-to-face community engagement. The rapid pace of change and the expanding realm of information, however, require practitioners and scholars to be nimble, agile and open-minded. Not only do we need to keep apace with the latest technology to determine new communication channels, we also need to participate in the innovation of new technologies. Why not co-create these technologies with our colleagues in IT, design and even games for applications in health, government and employee communication? Previous associations with advertising, marketing, media and journalism are simply not sufficient. Collaborative communities of practice that cut across multiple disciplines will be the way of the public relations future.

Public relations practice, however, is not just about producing or curating content for the next new social medium or gadget. We must also think about how we can use extant and emerging technology as a means for public relations to engender social transformation. Global issues such as climate change, health, food security, poverty reduction and transitioning democracies offer our discipline a much larger template in which to work. These are issues that we need to embrace and grapple with if we are to find a meaningful place in society. At the same time, we must be mindful that we do not trivialise these serious issues with slick and savvy campaign fads.

So in this quest for meaning, we ask how public relations practitioners and scholars might respond to this new world without borders. How will universities prepare future practitioners for this shifting template? How do
we connect and meaningfully engage with cultures and communities that may otherwise be unfamiliar? Will English continue to be the lingua franca of the profession? How are we integrating our indigenous communities in the public relations mix? How are we learning from our neighbours in the region who have longer histories as nation states than some of our developed countries? How will public relations be positioned with other disciplines such as international relations, public diplomacy, science and technology? Will ethics and corporate social responsibility drive organisations to maintain their social license to operate? What is the role of public relations in society, and in engendering social change?

It is within these contexts that we framed our call for papers for the inaugural Research Colloquium of the World Public Relations Forum that was held in Melbourne in November 2012. We received more than 100 submissions from around the world, twice the number we expected for a one-day conference. Thirty-six papers were presented around six themes: global issues; corporate social responsibility; social media; culture and communities; crises and disasters; and public relations education and research. Selected papers from the colloquium comprise this year’s special issue of the *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*.

**References**


