

**Civics, Industry**

**Report By:** Kate Fitch, Murdoch University

*The annual Australian & New Zealand Communication Associations conference took place in Melbourne over two days on 5-6 July 2007. This report from Kate Fitch, a member of the ANZCA Executive Committee and a lecturer in public relations at Murdoch University in Western Australia, focuses primarily on the public relations stream but also includes a general overview of keynotes and conference 'hot topics'. A link to the conference website is included at the bottom of this article.*

Who says academic conferences do not have political impact? Francis Herman, the former head of Fiji Broadcasting Corporation, one of two keynote speakers, was prevented from boarding the plane to depart Fiji, sparking some media interest and urgent behind-the-scenes lobbying by ANZCA vice president and conference organiser, John Tebbutt. As I write, Francis is still in Fiji and unable to take up his new Ausaid-funded appointment with VBTC, the public service broadcaster in Vanuatu.

Why should public relations academics attend a communication conference? Perhaps this sounds like a riddle but given public relations ongoing struggle to establish its credentials as a fully fledged academic discipline, the question is an important one. Certainly public relations researchers may have felt like the forgotten cousins as media studies academics expounded about ?media, communication and journalism. The poor audience numbers (i.e. the three presenters, the panel chair and me) at one public relations session could be explained by its scheduling clash with a panel session with five journal editors on the future of journals in the new Research Quality Framework (RQF) environment. An alternative viewpoint may be that public relations scholarship has limited impact outside its field, even to communication scholars.

At the same time, the opportunity to mix with over a hundred academics researching diverse aspects of communication is extremely useful. Certainly, papers such as Steven Maras *Reading James W. Carey on the University Tradition*, although focused on journalism education and the tension between professionalisation and academia, resonate for public relations scholars. Similarly, the imaginatively titled presentation *Move Away From the Croissant*, from Professor Toby Miller, the other keynote speaker, called for media studies to become more international and reflective and avoid disciplinary myopia; it is not difficult to see the relevance of his Hegelian synthesis of Media Studies 3.0, which advocates embracing both society and economy with audience and meaning, for public relations scholarship.

And the public relations papers? There were some gems. Sean Chaidaroon of University of Sydney presented an eloquent paper based on a literature review of ethical communication consulting for public relations and marketing communications. Kim Johnston, Queensland University of Technology, explored the relational perspective of community consultation, which is a much needed examination of community concepts in 20 major infrastructure projects in Australia. The University of Tasmanias Libby Lester drew on her research in media and environmental conflict to explore the implications of senior journalists moving into public relations/media advisory roles and how such appointments influence subsequent news coverage. This is a thoughtful paper which tried to tease out the nuances of a common but perhaps little theorised phenomenon.

In a *Public Relations and Society* session, Steve Mackey drew on Peircean semiotics and Anne Surmas work on public relations and rhetoric to argue for the regulation of the semiological-rhetorical forces which rule over civil society. Alison Hendersons paper on the marketisation of risk was another thoughtful paper on the communication of risk in regard to genetic modification in the New Zealand dairy and kiwi fruit industries.

The ANZCA conference offered a heady two days, with five sessions running in each timeslot. In addition to the ?future of journals session mentioned earlier, the final session was dedicated to three presentations on the impending RQF in Australia. Broadly, the RQF is designed to measure quality and impact of, and to ensure access to, published research. While the full implications of RQF for an emerging discipline such as public relations were not discussed, Professor Graeme Turner from the University of Queensland did point out that at least in journalism not one institution in Australia would meet the RQF criteria. A discussion about the New Zealand experiences under PBRF suggested there were implications at the institutional level where different kinds of research were prioritised ? and funded ? over others.

The 2007 conference proceedings will be published shortly at <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/ANZCA2007/>

The next ANZCA conference will be in Wellington in July 2008. Confirmed keynotes include Professors Maxwell McCombs and Jennifer Craik, and investigative journalist and best-selling author Nicky Hager. For details go to <http://anzca08.massey.ac.nz/>

**About the reviewer:**

*Kate Fitch lectures in mass communication and public relations at Murdoch University, Western Australia. Her research interests include ethical communication, media relations, and the links between public relations theory and ideas about community and democracy. She has more than ten years' industry experience, and worked as a public relations consultant specialising in the arts and community sectors. Kate has a first class Honours degree and is a member of PRIA.*

[Back to PRism Volume 5](#)