

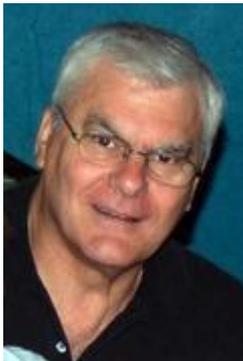
Editorial: The Illusion of Control In Public Relations

By: Mark Balnaves, Curtin University of Technology, and James Mahoney, University of Canberra



Public relations practice is intimately concerned with building and protecting organisational reputations (see for example McCarthy & Hatcher, 2004). This important role has perhaps never been as vital as it is now in the aftermath of the international economic recession.

There is little dispute that the financial crisis severely damaged significant organisational and government reputations. Re-building them will consume senior practitioners who work at strategic levels for some time. It will involve working in a global context and recognising that strategic communicators may not be able to influence dominant coalitions about issues of corporate social responsibility (Zerfass, 2009).



Even if dominant coalitions take advice provided by senior practitioners, success will be difficult. For one thing, they are already dealing with target public anger, negative word-of-mouth, and demands for accountability (Coombs & Holladay, 2009), tough issues that have to be addressed before damaged reputations can improve. Ironically, these are behaviours that in many cases may have been avoided, had the calls for increased openness and transparency from organisations in all sectors that followed previous organisational reputational defaults been more seriously and promptly addressed (Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009).

Mark Balnaves (top)
and James Mahoney

In this post-crisis phase, domestic and global boundary spanning will raise tough challenges for practitioners. Among them will be the way media gatekeepers frame organisational messages such as crisis responses. There is no guarantee that the media will treat organisational messages the way strategic counsellors present them (Coombs & Holladay, 2009). Of course, there never has been such a guarantee despite the hope of clients and the approach of some practitioners who focus on what J.E. Grunig in his article in this edition describes as the symbolic, interpretive paradigm of public relations practice. Nevertheless, journalists selection of news frames for post-crisis media coverage will greatly influence the success of efforts to re-build organisational reputations.

In addition, the reputations of executives are likely to be under intense media scrutiny. An and Gower (2009) found that the media appears to assume that executives have control over the actions of an organisation and should be held accountable for their ethical and moral lapses. Assessing how to communicate in the context of a mass news media working in a morality frame, or one of excessive cynicism, may be a critical task for senior practitioners after the global economic crisis.

The role of social media, and the speed with which they enable communication, may present unique problems. For example, shareholders are increasingly drawn from a broad social and economic base (McCarthy & Hatcher, 2004), many of whom have been severely disadvantaged by the crisis. When these demographics are coupled with greater activism against the corporate world, much of which already surfaces in social media, a wider spectrum of values will be used to examine organisational responses to the crisis. Stengel (2009) described this environment as the 'responsibility revolution; activist consumers are part of it' and they use social media. This will in turn create new logistical and analytical problems for practitioners as they attempt to boundary span in the context of what may be rapidly dynamic issues, promoted via social media.

Practitioners will need to be adept and sensitive in their use of social media if they are to build the relationships they need with publics to overcome reputational problems. As Tilley (2010) points out, social media do not necessarily present new or unique problems, they just open up the range of channels upon which organisation-public relating occurs. However, she also argues that public relations in a globalised world has a different stage of orientation as a discipline:

The profession needs to move rapidly and wholly to a phase of ethics in which the question 'how ought the world to be?' is the principal guide. In a field such as public relations, where ethics must be achieved not only in a private sense but in a very public fashion too, only a globally attuned, outcome-oriented mindset

can cope with the altered parameters and ethical challenges of new media. However, new media themselves also provide the most promising means for public relations practitioners to achieve workable outcome-focussed ethics standards and processes in the future. (Tilley, 2010)

Many authors have shown that the online environment is unforgiving when flogging (fake blogging) or astroturfing (bogus grassroots campaigning) are exposed and criticised by audiences or publics. Tilley's examples include: the 'Walmarting Across America' debacle in which Richard Edelman's public relations company did not actively divulge that a grassroots-style blog was in fact a paid tactic; 'The Zero Movement', that led to the Coca-Cola Company being ridiculed by blogger groups and criticised by mainstream media after what looked like an unaffiliated grassroots webpage and discussion board were shown to be brand-building for Coke Zero; the Whole Foods fiasco in which a senior company executive posted anonymous messages for years that denigrated a competitor; and the backlash over a flog campaign for Sony's PlayStation 3 (Tilley, 2010). Ironically, Tilley further shows, the individuals behind these campaigns often remain unaffected. Online technologies facilitate this disconnection between the individual and the incident. Online, all constructed identities have the potential to operate at a remove from the intensely personal sense of the 'offline' or embodied conscience. (Tilley, 2010). The blog debate about Edelman CEO Richard Edelman for example appears to have given him kudos for being willing to take responsibility and publicly apologise after the 'Walmarting' event. In this context, as Tilley concludes, the public relations profession cannot become relativist but needs to broaden its ethical gaze, broadening access to organisational decision-making processes and facilitating diverse input from a broader range of voices and ethical perspectives, including across cultures.

The global financial crisis also reminds us that, in the end, the public controls the message. Public relations has, as James Grunig argues in his lead article in this special edition, been hampered by the underlying idea 'explicit or not' that organisations and communicators can, in fact, control the message and the corresponding behaviour of target organisations and publics. Grunig argues that despite the rise of social networking technology this has always been so. What social media do well, however, is to put the public as a voice into a different form of publication as well as relationships.

Robert Putman (2000) in his well-known book *Bowling Alone* mapped the decline in memberships in voluntary associations, informal socialising with neighbours and friends, religious attendance, and participation in politics and community affairs. He argued that television, the Internet, and other media speed up our lives to the point where we no longer invest social capital in each other by means of overlapping memberships in clubs and other organisations, which he argued are essential to human trust and mutual support. But contrary to Putman's expectations, the Internet and social media appear to be doing the opposite. Ravelry, for example, is a social networking site for knitters, spinners, and dyers, operated by two young enthusiasts. The site, with over 400,000 members, allows for commercial as well as non-commercial exchanges and brings together learning, friendship and gifting. The network, in fact, is a major economy in its own right (Humphries, 2008).

There have emerged communicative spaces where the medium, the learning environments in which publics learn to use the medium, and the social capital uses to which the medium are put, come together in complex and sometimes seemingly contradictory arrangements. Not-for-profit and activist groups have also established elaborate programs using social media. **Table 1** (below, adapted from Tran, 2009) gives a brief overview of the activities of Greenpeace and PETA.

➔ **Table 1: Greenpeace and PETA use of Social Media**

	Greenpeace	PETA
Web site	http://www.greenpeace.org/international Donate funds, sign up for e-mailing list, find out how to get involved, watch videos on Greenpeace TV, follow blog, read international Greenpeace news, shop online store, play games, watch ship webcams, participate in online discussion forums, access reports, discover Greenpeace career opportunities, and learn more about Greenpeace	http://www.peta.org Read news headlines, watch PETA TV, become a member, find information on how to live a cruelty-free lifestyle, support specific campaigns, discover ways to help, subscribe to e-news, read news releases, download resources, and connect to social networking sites
Blog	"Making Waves" Est. February 2006 Nine blog contributors Updated several times weekly	"The PETA Files" Est. October 2006 12 blog contributors Updated several times daily
Facebook Page	229,713 fans	198,420 fans
MySpace	12,711 friends	39,225 friends
Twitter	5,489 followers 757 updates	14,243 followers 4,395 updates
Flickr	443 contacts 168 posted items	2,932 contacts 1,295 posted items
YouTube	Greenpeace TV channel Joined: October 13, 2006 Subscribers: 10,208 Channel Views: 218,114 185 posted videos	PETA TV channel Joined: February 07, 2009 Subscribers: 8,762 Channel Views: 200,237 238 posted videos
Featured Campaign	GreenMyApple, 2007 Goal: Pressure Apple to improve electronic waste policies and practices via GreenMyApple.org	GoVeg 2007 Goal: Promote vegetarianism via GoVeg.com

Source: Tran (2009).

It is not surprising, perhaps, that Edelman is now arguing that public relations, more than ever, needs to reframe its ideas of control and become more concerned in the theoretical and practical modelling of its own profession as public engagement. As we move from public relations to public engagement, we will deal no longer with the pyramid of influence but with a sphere of cross-influence. The key tenets of such engagement will include: Democratic and decentralized; Informing the conversation; Engaging with influencers of all stripes; In both policy and communication. (Edelman, 2009, n.p.)

Modern governments have always faced a dilemma of how open they want their own activities to be in terms of public engagement. In the United States, the Open Government Directive explicitly requires government departments to explore participatory mechanics through new media (see http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment). The US Federal

government in the Obama Administration has deployed social media in a range of governmental contexts, including information about H1N1. The Presidential Records Act was altered to cater for social media as an archival source (Schere, 2009). Government communication, of course, is part of public relations. The modern agenda has become how can citizens better participate with governments? Such questions are not about persuasion - the very idea of engagement assumes a different type of orientation.

In light of all these challenges, opportunities, and sometimes seemingly intractable issues that globalisation presents, it is essential to get the best minds in the public relations world working on the problems. This special issue is a modest but timely and crucial start to this process. In this special edition of *PRism* the first two papers by James Grunig - Paradigms of global public relations in an age of digitalisation and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh - Globalisation and Public Relations - set the scene for discussion on principles of public relations and their instantiation in practice in different situations or cultures. Papers following give insights into the strategic and relational character of public relations and the role of public relations in different countries. Chiara Valentini looks at Italian Public Relations in a Changing World and Cinzia Colapinto analyses Trends in Media Relations: an Exploratory Study in Italy. Randall Hines provides an overview of German Public Relations. Alana Mann provides insights into the Campesino framing of its campaign for agrarian reform in Communicating the Right To Food Sovereignty. Marianne Sison in Whose Cultural Values argues that segmentation of publics in countries like Australia often misses out cultural diversity. Kate Fitch in Making Friends in the Wild West reports on her interviews with Singapore based practitioners and their perceptions of the online environment. Corne Meintjes and Ilse Niemann-Struwe present empirical evidence on professionalisation of public relations in South Africa in The Role of a Professional Body in Professionalisation. Chandni Gupta and Jennifer Bartlett look at recruitment advertisements in Recruiting Public Relations Professionals for Global Public Relations Practice. Elgiz Yilmaz and Saba Gamze Oral analyse the language of Turkish CEOs in The Communication Dynamics of Turkish CEOs as Strategic Leaders in Change Management. Finally, Arlette Bouzon and Joelle Devillard, in Changes in Contemporary Tourism Organisations and Interculturality, discuss changes in organisational work and how this might affect trust.

There have been and will continue to be changes to public relations practice as the theoretical and empirical base of the discipline grows. The challenges of globalisation also place public relations in a unique situation as the potential bridge between diverse and conflicting organisations, values and publics. The articles in this special edition contribute to the broadening of the ethical gaze in public relations as well as provide insights into the work of scholars across the world.

Acknowledgements: Mark Balnaves, James Grunig and James Mahoney, the editors, thank *PRism* editorial management for the opportunity to produce this special edition on Global Public Relations and the contributors for their work. A special thanks to Dr Elspeth Tilley, the managing editor, for her detailed assistance with manuscripts.

References

- An, S-K., & Gower, K.K. (2009). How do the news media frame crises? A content analysis of crisis news coverage, *Public Relations Review*, 35(2), 107-112.
- Coombs, W.T., & Holladay, S.J. (2009). Further explorations of post-crisis communication: Effects of media and response strategies on perceptions and intentions, *Public Relations Review*, 35(1), 1-6.
- Edelman, R. (2009). Is public engagement the future of public relations? Institute for Public Relations. Retrieved 28 November www.instituteforpr.org/digest_entry/is_public_engagement_the_future_of_public_relations/
- Humphries, S. (2008). The challenges of intellectual property for users of social networking sites: A case study of Ravelry. Proceedings of the 12th International conference on Entertainment and media in the ubiquitous era, Tampere, Finland. [pp.125-130] Retrieved 22 July 2007 from portal.acm.org/citation.cfm .
- McCarthy, P., & Hatcher, C. (2004). Reputation building: The public communication styles of Carly Fiorina and Rupert Murdoch. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 31(1), 1-18.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Schere, M. (2009). Obama and Twitter: White House social-networking. *Time*, May 6. Retrieved 26 November www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1896482,00.html

Stengel, R. (2009). The responsibility revolution. *Time*, September 21, 24-27.

Tilley, E. (2010). New culture/old ethics: What technological determinism can teach us about new media and public relations ethics. Forthcoming in German, K. M. & Drushel, B. E. (Eds.). *The ethics of emerging media: Information, social norms and new media technology*. New York: Continuum.

Tran, A. (2009). Social media and return on investment: Greenpeace to PETA; Multiple case study from a not for profit perspective. Masters of Professional Communication, Edith Cowan University.

Waters, R.D., Burnett, E., Lamm, A., & Lucas, J. (2009). Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How non-profit organisations are using Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 35(2), 102-106.

Zerfass, A. (2009). Institutionalising strategic communication: Theoretical analysis and empirical evidence. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 3(2), 69-71.

Copyright statement:

The authors of this article have elected, in the interests of open dissemination of scholarly work, to provide this article to you in open access format. This means that, in accordance with the principles of the Budapest Open Access Initiative (<http://www.soros.org/openaccess/>), you may freely copy and redistribute this article provided you correctly acknowledge its authors and source, and do not alter its contents.

Author contact details:

Professor Mark Balnaves
Senior Research Fellow in New Media
Department of Internet Studies
Curtin University of Technology
GPO Box U1987
PERTH WESTERN AUSTRALIA 6845
m.balnaves@curtin.edu.au

James Mahoney
James.mahoney@canberra.edu.au