

Editor's Corner: Winter 2010 *Public Relations Journal*

Donald K. Wright, Ph.D., APR, Fellow PRSA

Six research articles have been selected for inclusion in the Winter 2010 edition of *Public Relations Journal*, the open-access, peer reviewed, electronic research journal published by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and available at www.prsa.org/prjournal.

The articles are:

- “An Examination of Applied Ethics and Stakeholder Management on Top Corporate Websites,” authored by Shannon A. Bowen, Ph.D., Associate Professor, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication, Syracuse University.
- “Lessons on the Big Idea and Public Relations: Reflections on the 50-Year Career of Charlotte Klein,” authored by Diana Knott Martinelli, Ph.D, Associate Professor and Widmeyer Professor in Public Relations, P.I. Reed School of Journalism, West Virginia University and Elizabeth L. Toth, Ph.D., APR, Fellow PRSA, Professor and Chair, Department of Communication, University of Maryland.
- “Industry in Crisis: The Communication Challenge in the Banking Industry,” authored by Marcia W. DiStaso, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, College of Communications, Pennsylvania State University.
- “Confronting Media Nihilism: How Transparency Builds Meaning During Crises,” authored by Robert S. Pritchard, M.A, APR, Fellow PRSA., Instructor and Agency Advisor, Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Oklahoma and Vincent F. Filak, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Journalism, Ball State University.
- “Getting Even or Getting Skewered: Piercing the Digital Veil of Anonymous Internet Speech as a Corporate Public Relations Tactic (*Vengeance is Not Yours, Sayeth the Courts*),” authored by Samuel A. Terilli, J.D., Associate Professor of Journalism, School of Communication, University of Miami; Don W. Stacks, Ph.D., Associate Dean, Faculty Research and Creative Support and Professor of Public Relations, School of Communication, University of Miami; and Paul D. Driscoll, Ph.D., Vice Dean, Academic Affairs and Associate Professor of Electronic Media, School of Communication, University of Miami.

- “Toward a Publics-Driven, Emotion-Based Approach in Crisis Communication: Testing the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) Model,” authored by Yan Jin, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, School of Mass Communications, Virginia Commonwealth University, Augustine Pang, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore and Glen T. Cameron, Ph.D. Professor and Maxine Gregory Chair of Journalism Research, School of Journalism, University of Missouri.

Dr. Bowen, who is widely considered to be one of the nation’s leading experts on public relations ethics, conducted a content analysis involving web pages of a random interval sample of Fortune® 500 companies. Her study explored the application of ethics and stakeholder management on these web pages. The study found need for greater identification of stakeholders on organizational websites and recommended that linkages be made between ethics, trust, and other relationship variables between organizations and their stakeholders. Although the academic literature recommends that organizations commit to open communication with all publics, fewer than 30 percent of the companies analyzed in this research appeared to be doing so.

The article written by Dr. Martinelli and Dr. Toth explores the life and career of Charlotte Klein, a 20th century public relations executive who started her career with United Press International and the film industry in the 1940s and who went on to work on such accounts as the Ideal Toy Company, French couture and champagne, the government of Israel, and PBS to name a few. Along the way, her self-confidence and early work in Hollywood helped her develop “the big ideas” that served her clients, society, and the profession. Using in-depth interviews and primary and secondary documents, the authors discuss Klein’s big ideas that resulted in such outcomes as creating and promoting the first anthropologically correct black doll, building public support for the young state of Israel, and founding the U.S. Women’s Hall of Fame. The article also explores Klein’s influence as an early woman leader in public relations societies and the gender-related challenges she faced in her career.

As the number of high-profile failures and mergers of many large financial companies continues to grow, so does distrust in the industry. That makes Dr. DiStaso’s article in this edition extremely timely. Her research explores how communication professionals at financial companies are handling the global financial crisis. Although participants believed that communication must be accurate, timely, and transparent, they are greatly challenged by the quantity of communication needed. Many of the participants in this study had unique ways of handling certain aspects of communication needs. Ultimately, the collective of communication professionals at individual financial institutions can lead to the rebuilding of trust and confidence in financial organizations, and this study provides a glimpse into how they are accomplishing this massive feat.

This edition’s contribution by Professors Pritchard and Filak begins with information about how the traditional roles of the media in a democratic society are changing rapidly. The authors explain how factors such as media conglomeration, a “business” view of news, more sources and greater customization of those sources results in news morphing into entertainment and opinion, greater selectivity in our news sources and more conformity in our exposure to ideas. On top of the changing role of media in a democratic society is a condition Pritchard and Filak call Media Nihilism, the rhetoric of crisis and failure or the tendency to exaggerate and

“spectacularize” an event. This occurs when the media take the crisis out of its original context, give it an importance or impact it doesn’t have and actually help create a crisis where none exists. Media Nihilism robs society of the context needed to make intelligent decisions, creates a common culture of the expectation of failure and fails to inform the public completely of all aspects of the crisis. This article takes the position that transparency is the public relations strategy that confronts this phenomenon during crisis. Realizing that being transparent demands trust and courage from leadership, they submit that public relations has the functional responsibility for gaining that trust and inculcating in leadership the courage to be transparent.

The article by Professors Terilli, Stacks and Driscoll examines legal implications involving information that flows across the Web, especially those messages where one’s secrets are publicly aired, or when the criticism stings, whether well founded or not. This research also explores Web communication involving defamation, interference with business and personal relationships, exposure of trade secrets, business plans and other less business-like information, gossip, and harassing speech by unknown persons with a screen name and Internet connection all occupy “the dark side of anonymous online speech.” Memorialized and amplified by technology, this dark speech takes on a much longer life and potency than mere rumors spread by word-of-mouth or the occasional letter campaign or pamphlet. The authors explain how this dark speech can traverse the globe, for years, eluding countervailing efforts to correct the record. Responding to the unknown sources of destructive or mischievous speech is the public relations equivalent of fighting a guerilla war.

Professors Jin, Pang and Cameron extend communication theory in such a way that it develops a systemic approach to understanding the role of emotions in public relations crises and the strategies used to respond to them. The authors’ integrated crisis mapping model is based on a public-based, emotion-driven perspective where different crises are mapped on two continua, the organization’s engagement in the crisis and primary public’s coping strategy. The initial test on the first of the four quadrants in the model suggests theoretical rigor in the model and found that publics involved in crises pertaining to reputational damage, technological breakdown, industrial matters, labor unrest, and regulation/legislation, are likely to feel anxious, angry, and sad. At the same time, the authors tell us people they are likely to engage in cognitive coping and take active steps to restore some semblance of normalcy within their immediate environment. The study reported on in this article is the first of a series of studies to generate “analytic generalization.” The findings from this study, arguably, represent the imprints of an initial trail that may open up to a possibly new vista of research in crisis communication.

Public Relations Journal is edited by Donald K. Wright, Ph.D., APR, Fellow PRSA, Professor of Public Relations in the College of Communication at Boston University, with assistance from Elizabeth A. Polito, a Boston University graduate student. The major intention of the *Journal* is to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from the educational to practitioner communities. Additional information about the publication can be found at www.prsa.org/prjournal or by e-mailing Dr. Wright at don.wright@prsa.org.