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Editor's Essay

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This special issue evolved from a collaborative venture between the Public Relations Division (PRD) of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) and the *Journal of Public Interest Communications* (JPIC) during the planning process for the PRD's preconference session. Once advocacy was determined as the main theme, it seemed logical to cooperate with JPIC as advocacy and work for public interest communications are intimately linked. The preconference session included practitioners, scholars, and individuals and organizations that bridge the two. The scholar panel featured the research you will find here—the top three articles from a special call on the topic *Advocacy: Perspectives from practice and research on public interest communications*. Also included are several articles that were submitted for the preconference session, went through JPIC peer review, and were accepted for publication in this special issue.

Because many PR scholars are interested in nonprofit organizations (NPOs) and many of us work with these organizations as part of campaigns classes or similar applied study, the original concept for the preconference was to focus on advocacy directed by NPOs. We realized early on, however, that limiting the concept of advocacy to NPOs artificially constrained the subject and the importance of the range and breadth of advocacy across sectors. Advocacy and public interest communications are not found merely in the nonprofit sector—corporations and governments also communicate in ways that promote change for public good.

Yet few scholars use the word advocacy to describe the efforts of communicating on behalf of NPOs, or for corporations or government interests. In fact, though advocacy is central to the field of PR and is part of the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) Code of Ethics, it is infrequently addressed in PR literature. Definitions of the word vary from the Merriam-Webster dictionary's "the action of advocating, pleading for, or supporting a cause or action"¹ to Wikipedia's definition wherein "*Advocacy* is an activity by an individual or group which aims to influence decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions."²

Both of these definitions lend themselves to the focus and scope of JPIC, which describes public interest communications as an academic discipline that seeks to help communicators working on social, political, and environmental issues impacting society. Editor Brigitta Brunner has indicated the intent of the journal is to feature studies that critically examine emerging issues and trends and report on the challenges and opportunities of this nascent field through a variety of methods.³ The articles in this issue will not disappoint. The authors have used explication, in-depth interview, and experiment to examine advocacy from the level of individual activism to transnational networks and changing societal expectations in the face of globalization.

Despite the unique and varied approaches to the topic I felt that there was a commonality to the research in the search for legitimacy. For example, Cizek notes how activists have engaged in strategic communication as means of advocacy for more than a century and yet “these activities have not been recognized by scholars as such because they originated from activists” (p. 204). The goal of activist communication is similar to that of organizations and relies on relationship building, development of alliances, and advocacy networks. Rather than seeking support for organizational goals from stakeholders, activist communication seeks to influence public perception of issues related to social change. Massey noted that organizations cannot claim legitimacy—it must be given by stakeholders who see their expectations met by the organization’s actions.⁴ The same can be applied to issues. Activists seek support from publics on issues for which social change is necessary. For such change to occur, the issue and those advocating must be seen as legitimate and compelling sources of information and calls to action. In Cizek’s piece, a transnational activist network for the *It Gets Better* movement “focused on shifting the narrative that LGBT people have historically told about themselves” (p. 211) from one with negative emotional impact to one of positivity and hope.

Activism also appeared in Choi, Overton, and McKeever’s study in the form of individual activism’s effect on skepticism toward corporate social responsibility (CSR) endeavors. In this context, questions of legitimacy can affect both the organization and the NPO when stakeholders from either may question the authenticity and purpose of the relationship. Results of their experimental study indicated that increased societal expectations of business, combined with an increasingly skeptical and therefore more vigilant public, suggest that stakeholders desire to know “*how* companies are doing good rather than just being content with hearing that they are, in fact, doing good” (p. 278) particularly when the CSR initiative involves something more integrative or in-depth than merely monetary contribution. They stress that “it is especially important that companies and NPOs strive to demonstrate that their work is intended to create positive societal changes, not just a way to gain favorable attention from the public” (p. 278).

Shifting societal expectations for advocacy and public good are also at the heart of Dodd’s article, which explicates the impact of these shifting expectations in the face of globalization and pluralization. In particular, Dodd explores the concept of corporate social advocacy (CSA), which she defines as “the public relations function in which a firm and/or its CEO intentionally or even unintentionally ‘align themselves with a controversial social-political issue outside their normal sphere of CSR interest’” (p. 222). She argues that as the power of nation-states and traditional institutions erodes, corporations are increasingly found as political actors in democratic society, along with NPOs and activists who try to pick up the slack left in society as the result of such erosion. She discusses the legitimacy of these actors in this postnationalist

system through discussion of legitimacy theory and the concept of deliberative democracy and adroitly ties these to public relations and communicating in the public interest, closing with a set of theoretical propositions.

Advocacy, activism, public interest communications, and social change—these are all compelling and relevant topics for our times. The research presented here as well as the presentations at AEJMC from practitioners and those who bridge research and practice are encouraging. They demonstrate a depth of caring—caring for social issues, social institutions, organizations, and the fundamentals of a democratic society—and they demonstrate a commitment to change.

¹ Merriam-Webster. (2018, September 16). Advocacy. *Merriam-Webster*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advocacy> September 6, 2018.

² Advocacy. (2018, September 6). *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?q=advocacy&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b-1>

³ Brunner, B. (2017). Editor's essay. *Journal of Public Interest Communication*, 2(1).

⁴ Massey, J. E. (2001). Managing organization legitimacy: Communication strategies for organizations in crisis, *The Journal of Business Communication*, 28(2), 153–183.