



## Journal of Public Interest Communications

ISSN (online): 2573-4342

Journal homepage: <http://journals.fcla.edu/jpic/>

---

### Editor's Essay

Brigitta R. Brunner

*Auburn University*

---

In an era of uncertainty, fake news, and declining trust of government institutions and media, a renewed confidence in experts, including CEOs willing to speak out on important social issues, is emerging. According to the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer trust in news and government is still low. Globally only 64% of respondents had trust in traditional media. Perhaps even more worrisome is that 73% of respondents feared false information or fake news being used as a weapon. Similarly, only 49% of the mass population believe they and their families will be better off in the next five years.

What is interesting is these same respondents embrace the idea that organizations, particularly businesses, can be agents of change. The majority of respondents (75%) trust the organizations for which they work, and 73% of respondents believe a corporation can earn profits while also work to make the economic and social conditions of the community in which it operates better. In addition, about 76% of respondents want CEOs to take the lead when policy change is needed. As this shift is occurring, organizations' leaders are increasingly held responsible for more than just products, services, and profits; now "they stand up for our [communication professionals'] values on behalf of all stakeholders—including employees, customers, partners, community and the planet" (duBrowa, 2018, para. 7).

What I find most encouraging in the report is the embrace of change. News engagement rose by 22 points meaning people are taking the time and effort to be informed about issues. In addition, respondents state their employers have a greater purpose than making profits, and through shared action the respondents themselves see how they are driving societal change. Of course, along with this shift also come varying emotions – anger, relief, anguish, disappointment, fear, and perhaps even hope. These emotions will also have to be given attention to be understood and harnessed to drive positive change. Organizational leaders prepared to embrace

*\*Please send correspondences about this article to Brigitta Brunner, School of Communication & Journalism, Auburn University. E-mail: [brunnerbr@auburn.edu](mailto:brunnerbr@auburn.edu). Copyright Brunner 2019. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons. PO Box 1866 Mountain View, CA 94042. USA.*

these shifts in expectations and responsibilities as well as having the willingness to face the emotion, both good and bad, of constituents have the opportunity to position their organizations as trusted groundbreakers, and it seems some are heeding this call. The articles within this issue are testament to this shift in responsibility and societal expectations for organizations, as well as the intense emotions that surround this change.

Austin, Miller Gaither and Gaither's article examines attitudes toward the role of corporations in social advocacy and as agents for social change. The findings from their nationally representative survey of U.S. citizens suggest that overall respondents believe corporations should engage in social issues. This piece was presented at the International Communication Association preconference, "Bridging Borders: Public Interest Communications in the Global Context," hosted by *JPIC* in Washington, D.C., May 2019.

Also presented at the preconference was the work of Teruggi Page. Teruggi Page's piece focuses on the La Peña Cultural Center and how the leaders of this organization have been change agents amplifying marginalized voices since 1975. Her work looks at engagement strategies used to affect social and cultural change through public interest communications.

The kidnapping of 300 Nigerian schoolgirls and how narrative storytelling was used to create commonality and engage audiences is the topic of Addie's article. This piece examines how despite the U.S. media typically report less on missing women of color and also report more on negative news from Africa, the story of the kidnapped schoolgirls found resonance among U.S. readers.

Finally, Maben, Benedict, Holley, and Goen identified themes that emerge around the #ILookLikeAProfessor hashtag popularized in August 2015. Through qualitative content analysis the authors contend that this example of activism has allowed for conversations about diversity, appearance, identification, and self.

I hope after reading the contents of this issue, you, too, find examples of shifting roles, responsibilities, and social expectations being championed by organizations practicing public interest communications and presenting messages of hope.

duBrowa, C. (2018, March 18). The new CCO: Chief Conscience Officer. *PR Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.prweek.com/article/1459851/new-cco-chief-conscience-officer>

Edelman. (2019). Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report. Retrieved from [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-02/2019\\_Edelman\\_Trust\\_Barometer\\_Global\\_Report.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-02/2019_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report.pdf)