

EDITORS' ESSAY

ENHANCING COMMUNITY THROUGH INNOVATION IN TECHNOLOGY AND STORYTELLING

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Editors' Essay: Enhancing Community Through Innovation in Technology and Storytelling

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Recent discourse highlights a heightened focus on technology, with particular attention on AI and social media. Communities across the globe are asking important questions in the face of technological advancement. What are the ethical implications of AI in today's tech and academic landscapes? Will emerging technologies replace knowledge workers in the near future? How do social media and AI affect adolescent mental health and development? These valid concerns largely emphasize the negative consequences of technology, but we have also seen technology strategically deployed to benefit communities and underscore community engagement efforts.

For public interest communicators, addressing the challenges of emerging technology means returning to the fundamentals of empathy and authenticity through ethical narrative storytelling. While digital platforms dominate the discourse, it's crucial to remember that transformative communication often occurs through community-driven initiatives.

Over the past eight years, our journal has published work related to creative and strategic approaches to communications, ever informed by the evolving needs of the diverse communities we seek to represent and serve. This latest issue of the *Journal of Public Interest Communications*, Volume 8, Issue 1, presents a compelling compilation of research and practitioner perspectives delineating the transformative potential of technology and storytelling. We invite readers to consider fresh perspectives on the shifting roles of firsthand narrative and technology in community empowerment and engagement efforts. For public interest communicators, this issue spotlights fresh perspectives on these evolving trends to address

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important societal issues and foster positive change, while also acknowledging the ethical challenges and possible risks linked with these advancements.

In the first article, Baines et al. highlight technology adoption and digital literacy among women transitioning from incarceration in the U.S. Midwest. The study elucidates modern challenges faced by underrepresented justice-impacted communities and underscores the significant role of social influence and facilitating conditions in fostering technology adoption to support individuals recently released from jail or prison. The article aligns with the core tenets of public interest communications, which uses research-based strategic communications to advance the public good and address pressing social issues. By focusing on the unique needs and challenges of women transitioning from incarceration, Baines et al. demonstrate how targeted, community-centered communication strategies can empower marginalized populations and promote positive change.

Building upon the theme of community engagement, Maben and Horton offer insight into the #CityHallSelfie social media campaign initiated by the organization Engaging Local Government Leaders. The campaign celebrates local government by asking local government employees and residents to snap selfies in front of their local government buildings. Through the lens of framing and social presence theories, this piece offers insight into how local governments can leverage social media trends to strengthen resident-government relationships, harness the power of digital storytelling associated with selfies, and celebrate civic engagement to foster a sense of belonging. By highlighting the potential of social media campaigns to bridge the gap between residents and their local governments, Maben and Horton offer valuable insights for public interest communicators looking to leverage digital platforms for community empowerment.

The third piece takes us to Albania via an interview with Elira Canga and explores Mister Stethoscope, a children's puppet show promoting vaccine awareness and combating public health misinformation. The project is sponsored by the WHO Country Office in Albania and funded by the European Union. Mister Stethoscope is a novel example of how creative arts can be used to convey crucial health messages to the public, including young audiences. The interview focuses on the Mister Stethoscope team's challenges and successes in creating a powerful, accessible tool for promoting public health through innovative storytelling. Ultimately, this article showcases how creative, audience-centered approaches to storytelling can be used to address pressing public health challenges. By highlighting the success of Mister Stethoscope, this piece offers valuable guidance for communicators seeking to develop innovative strategies for advancing public health goals.

The fourth and final piece in this issue features an interview with Maggie Kane, focusing on the transformative initiative A Place at the Table—a nonprofit, pay-what-you-can café battling food insecurity in Raleigh, North Carolina. The café provides access to healthy meals and fosters a sense of dignity and community among its patrons. Through strategic storytelling rooted in public interest communications, A Place at the Table amplifies the voices of those it serves and mobilizes community support to build a more inclusive, equitable community at the local level.

By showcasing how a local initiative can have a profound impact on the lives of individuals and the broader community, the piece offers valuable insights for communicators looking to effect change at the grassroots level.

Collectively, the articles in this issue of the *Journal of Public Interest Communications* showcase the transformative potential of innovative technology and storytelling in empowering communities and advancing social change. As we navigate the complex and rapidly evolving landscape of public interest communications in this age of emerging technology and social media, the insights and examples provided in this issue serve as a reminder of the enduring power of ethical, community-centered communication to effect change and promote the greater good. The work presented in this issue allows researchers and practitioners alike the space to consider an additional question: How can we make evolving technology work *for* us to help instigate positive social change?

By embracing the potential of new technologies and storytelling techniques, while remaining grounded in the fundamentals of empathy, authenticity, and social justice, public interest communicators can continue to play a vital role in building a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable future for all.