



Journal of Public Interest Communications

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Editor's Essay

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The genesis of the Journal of Public Interest Communications (JPIC) can be linked to a phone call nearly 20 years ago. I picked up the phone and Frank Karel, whom I had never met, said he wanted to come to Gainesville to talk about research. I was delighted, yet surprised, as no other communications practitioner had ever called me before to talk about my academic research. But Frank was different. Rather than dismiss anyone with a Ph.D. as hopelessly out of touch, Frank saw the need for evidence-based decisions to guide practice. He knew research was key. Frank believed that even theoretical research, which we talked about when he visited Gainesville, could not only bestow academic credibility on a profession but also inform and improve practice.

Frank later invited me several times to Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to visit with his communications team and other foundation officers as they shared best practices. I was impressed with the foundation world--how they worked collaboratively rather than competitively--to advocate for public interest causes. I was certain I had picked the wrong career. Yet perhaps not. As an academic, I have different but equally important opportunities. Inspired by Frank's vision, one of these opportunities has been to develop a peer-reviewed academic journal focused on public interest communications.

I am delighted to guest edit the first issue of JPIC. In fall 2016, an open call for a permanent editor was issued, and Brigitta Brunner from Auburn University was selected as editor for a three-year term. JPIC is published by the College of Journalism and Communications with support from the University of Florida library system, which hosts the Public Knowledge Project's online, open-access portal. Given the spirit of public interest communications, everyone involved wanted JPIC to be available to as many people as possible for free.

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As a companion to the annual *frank* gathering in Gainesville, in 2016 the first-ever *frank scholar* conference took place. *frank scholar* brought together 30 academicians, including doctoral students, who shared a research agenda and passion for social change. A community was born. As the plans for JPIC began to come together, a special inaugural issue seemed appropriate. The scholars featured here responded to an invitation extended to the 2016 *frank* scholars to write an essay or submit research that would illustrate how their program of research could inform the emerging discipline of public interest communications. I am deeply grateful to all of them for their contribution.

My doctoral adviser and mentor, University of Maryland Professor Emerita Larissa Grunig, once told me that the best research suggests more questions than it answers. As I reviewed the pieces submitted for this issue, I was reminded of her wisdom. The essays are provocative, but they sometimes seem in contradiction to one another and/or do not provide obvious answers. These points of contention and unanswered questions are fruitful areas for further debate and scholarship.

Ann Christiano, Frank Karel Endowed Chair for Public Interest Communications, provides the foreword by telling the story of her journey to this unique position and the goals that Frank and his wife, Betsy, established for the chair. She makes a compelling case for institutionalizing public interest communications by building a professional community, developing university curricula, and fostering scholarship. JPIC will be a vehicle for publishing scholarship that develops a theoretical body of knowledge for public interest communications with an emphasis on informing and critiquing practice.

Jasper Fessmann's scholarship is the first to explicitly argue that public interest communications is a separate discipline from public relations. He uses principles from the philosophy of science to point out what he argues are irreconcilable differences between public interest communications and public relations. Excellence Theory suggests that parties involved in conflict resolution, as some of his examples illustrate, meet each other in good faith and start from a position of erring on the side of two-way symmetry. However, if one party does not reciprocate, the other party is justified in moving to a media advocacy approach. This pivot may be where theorizing about public interest communications is most efficacious.

Edward Downes draws on Fessmann's piece to discuss 10 considerations that lie at the heart of complex and nuanced concepts such as public interest and social good. Yet, rather than take a relativist position, he argues that civilized humanity does agree on many fundamental values around which public interest communications can thrive. And his discussion of the tensions and opportunities inherent in the relationship between academic and professional professors is an insightful call for a more collaborative and respectful approach.

Brigitta Brunner's essay suggests that public relations and public interest communications may be synonymous if public relations could be elevated in terms of ethics and effectiveness through a focus on civic professionalism. She provides a powerful vision of the field whereby public relations is driven more by the dynamics of democracy than capitalism. In this view, public relations serves the public interest by fostering dialogue, civil debate, and ethical communication.

Public relations practitioners have the professional obligation to see their work as a moral calling that is dedicated to empowering all voices to serve the public good.

Viviane Seyranian provides an overview of social psychology theories that are relevant to public interest communications campaigns. Her unique contribution is applying these theories specifically to the social change context and teasing out how variables such as majority or minority status affect persuasion. The malevolent/benevolent spectrum and transcendent social identity framing suggest particularly cogent areas for future research. Her piece is especially forceful given the interdisciplinary theoretical connections she makes so coherently.

Kathy Fitzpatrick provides an overview of diplomacy and traces how public diplomacy has become more social, with emphasis on soft power characterized by relationship building and engagement. Given the tumultuous political events that have swept the globe since the first *frank scholar*, perhaps no topic is more relevant to public interest communications than public diplomacy. She provides a convincing typology of the ways that public diplomacy serves the public interest. She concludes with a well-argued research agenda for scholars who are interested in studying public diplomacy through the lens of public interest communications.

Kristin Demetrious takes a critical perspective to discuss how the corporate public relations strategy and tactics that received so much disdain during the 20th century may be prevalent in the new digital social geographies of the 21st century. Using innovative social media analysis, she deconstructs how political hegemony, wrapped up as storytelling, was revealed in the Advanced Energy for Life global awareness-raising campaign designed to convince consumers that coal can be a clean technology that lifts people out of poverty. Her analysis suggests that, even with public outrage against the campaign posted and shared on Twitter, unethical public relations remains a complex and powerful tool for fomenting misinformation, confusion, and exploitation of publics who do not share in the advantages of globalization in risk society.

I thank all of the people who contributed to creating JPIC and this inaugural issue. A special thank you goes to Dean Diane McFarlin and Executive Associate Dean Spiro Kioussis at the College of Journalism and Communications (CJC) at the University of Florida for their unfailing support and encouragement. CJC librarian April Hines led us to the Public Knowledge Project and for this I am grateful. I am indebted to journal manager Lauren Griffin and CJC doctoral candidate Jasper Fessmann for their suggestions on how to improve the manuscripts and their tireless effort with editing and formatting the articles. Without their passion, this issue could not have happened. A final thank you goes to CJC master's student, Deaven Freed, and her ADV4101--Copy and Visualization students for designing the visual identity of JPIC.