Call for Papers:
Communication for Social Change: Activism, Trust, Responsiveness, and Responsibility

DATE AND TIME: Wednesday 19 June 2024; 8:30 - 16:00

OFF-SITE LOCATION: Hosted by the School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, QUT Business School, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Gardens Point campus, 2 George Street, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

TRAVEL: Attendees are responsible for their own transportation to the pre-conference venue. QUT Gardens Point campus is centrally located in Brisbane’s CBD for those flying into Brisbane airport. The pre-conference registration fee includes the cost of coach transfer at the end of the session from QUT Gardens Point campus to the main conference hotel (The Star Gold Coast). The Gold Coast is approximately a one-hour drive from Brisbane (pending traffic).

COST: $75USD

DIVISION AFFILIATION: The preconference is aligned with the Public Relations and Organizational Communication Divisions, but the organizers welcome submissions from those affiliated with other Divisions.

BACKGROUND:

“Society’s expectations of business have changed more in the past two years than in the previous 20. A pandemic, expanding and ever-more-expensive natural disasters, George Floyd’s murder, attacks on democracy, and more: All moved us past a tipping point. Both practically and morally, corporate leaders can no longer sit on the sidelines of major societal shifts or treat human and planetary issues as “someone else’s problem.” For their own good, companies must play an active role in solving our biggest shared challenges. The economy won’t thrive unless people and the planet are thriving.”

The Net Positive Manifesto

As the above quote illustrates, we have seen a significant shift in the role of business in recent years, with stakeholders increasingly expecting corporations to play an active role in addressing significant social and environmental problems and advancing social change. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), the Business Roundtable’s redefinition of the purpose of a corporation, as well as emerging terms like ‘stakeholder capitalism’ and ‘ecological case for business’ (as opposed to a business case for the environment), give further credence to this statement.

While there has been increasing attention on the role of business when it comes to social change in recent years, the concept of social change itself is not a new topic. Bates and Peacock (1987), for example, posited a definition of social change back in the 80s, defining it as an alternation in the structure of the social system, which affects its functioning. More recent conceptualizations of social change suggest it requires comprehensive change in the typical characteristics of a society including its political systems, social institutions, and cultural products (Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2009, p. 14). Arguably, and in light of criticisms
that the world will fail to meet the majority of the UN SDGs on time, more research is needed to understand how such changes occur, and importantly, what role organizations can or should play in these changes.

From a communications perspective more specifically, it has been suggested that communicative practices are at the center of all processes of social change (see Tufte & Tacchi, 2020). However, while contemporary approaches to public relations increasingly recognize and advocate for a social imperative in both practice and research (see, for example, Hurst & Johnston, 2021) – an approach which aligns nicely with social change – there are very few papers in that explicitly consider the role of public relations when it comes to social change (see Fehrer et al., 2022 as a good exception).

Drawing inspiration from these ideas, as well as Polman and Winton’s (2021) points - that concepts like traditional corporation social responsibility and philanthropy are no longer adequate, and that leaders must rethink what a business is and how it can drive change in the world - **this pre-conference is specifically interested in exploring the role public relations and organizational communication can – or perhaps should - play in relation to social change.**

We invite submissions from research teams or individuals from a range of different theoretical perspectives (e.g. dialogic, managerial, critical, strategic, corporate/non-profit etc), but particularly those in areas related to activism, trust, responsibility (i.e. social impact, social license, corporate responsibility), and responsiveness (i.e. engagement, dialogue, power). Papers may focus on communication and social change in the context of individuals, governments, not-for-profit/civil society actors, and/or corporations. We also encourage submissions that consider the revision of and extension to, existing theories and practices, as well as those that use and integrate multiple disciplinary lenses to introduce new theories and practices. Submissions may be empirical or conceptual in nature.

Guiding questions to be addressed in this pre-conference may include, but are not limited, to the following:

- What are the implications for theory and practice in organizations seeking to achieve social change through communication?
- What are the benefits and/or disadvantages to profit-making organizations in aligning themselves with social change movements?
- What tensions emerge when profit-making organizations position themselves as agents of social change, or act themselves as corporate activists, sometimes using their leaders to propagate change (CEO activism)?
- What challenges face organizations that exist to change society, such as activist groups? How might communication be used to address the challenges?
- How can activist groups use communication to push organizations to engage more readily in social change?
- How do questions of power play out in the use of communication for social change?
- How can engagement or dialogue be effectively used in the context of social change?
- What is the relationship between social change and concepts like CSR and social license?
- Do we need new conceptualizations of what organizational ‘responsibility’ means in the context of social change?
- Does the current communication landscape provide a level playing field for all those wishing to achieve social change?
- What are the implications of recent and likely developments in the technical aspects of communication – such as artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) – for those seeking to achieve social change?
- What are the benefits and dangers of using micro-targeting and AI in social change communication; will dialogue be supported by propaganda techniques in the digital world?
- Where are the ethical boundaries to communication for social change?
• What is the role of communication and trust in efforts to achieve social change?
• How do trust and/or distrust influence communication for social change?
• How can organizations and communities involved in social change leadership prepare for and respond to trust challenges due to disinformation?

INTERESTED?

You are invited to submit a 500-word fully referenced abstract of your paper to Associate Professor Bree Hurst (bree.hurst@qut.edu.au) by 31 January 2024. Please ensure you include a title, key words, and author/s contact details on the first page. All abstracts will be peer-reviewed, and acceptance letters sent by 1 March 2024. Those who have their abstracts accepted will be invited to register for the pre-conference.

FORMAT: The pre-conference will open at 8.30am with light refreshments. Sessions will run from 9am to 3pm.

Participants will be provided with morning tea and lunch. These breaks will divide the day into three sessions. Sessions, depending on the number of attendees, may be structured as follows:

• Standard format presentations over two sessions with three 15-minute papers in each, totalling 6 presentations over the morning.
• Speed dating – up to 10 summary presentations of three minutes each (strict maximum) followed by break out discussions around tables, limited to 5 minutes per table.

OTHER INFORMATION: The pre-conference will be held at Queensland University of Technology’s (QUT) Gardens Point campus in the center of Brisbane. There is plenty of reasonably priced quality accommodation in Brisbane’s CBD or across the river in Southbank if you want to arrive early and spend some time in the state capital of Queensland.

Storage for luggage will be provided on campus during the pre-conference so attendees do not need to make separate arrangements.

The cost of coach transport to the Star on the Gold Coast (the main conference hotel) at the conclusion of the pre-conference will be included in the registration fee. If you are traveling with others, who also require transport to the conference hotel, please contact the pre-conference organizers to arrange additional seats on the coach (additional charges will be incurred).

PLANNING YOUR TRIP: There are a number of pre- and post-conferences aligned with the Public Relations Division. As a suggested itinerary, you might like to consider flying into Sydney for the Impacts of Strategic Communication in an Interconnected World pre-conference held on 16-17 June. Then, you could fly to Brisbane on 18 June and catch the train (or an Uber or taxi) from the airport into Brisbane City or Southbank, and spend the rest of the day exploring the city, before taking part in this pre-conference on 19 June (the QUT Gardens Point campus is easily accessible from the CBD, or via a walking bridge from Southbank). As part of the pre-conference fee, transport from Brisbane (QUT) to the Gold Coast on the afternoon of the 19 June will be provided. Following the main conference, a post-conference on The Impact of Public Relations and Promotional Communication on Human Rights, Inequalities and Social Justice: Interdisciplinary Reflections and Future Directions will be held at back at QUT Gardens Point Campus on 25 June (there’s a train line that runs between the Gold Coast and Brisbane if you need to organize your own transportation). You can then fly directly out of Brisbane, which is a larger airport and will likely offer more flight options than the Gold Coast.

CONTACT: If you have any questions, please email bree.hurst@qut.edu.au or kim.johnston@qut.edu.au.