ICA

Bridging inequality gaps
in public relations and strategic communication:
Power, ethics and inclusion
June 3rd, 2026

Hosted by

Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT)

Rationale & theme

Public relations and strategic communication often sit at the intersection of power, ethics, and inclusion. Around the world, widening gaps in wealth, voice, and representation shape who gets heard and how institutions and organizations are held to account. This preconference invites scholarship and practice that examine **how public relations and strategic communication can help bridge inequality gaps**, as well as what role they play in reproducing them across organizational, community, governmental, and transnational contexts. We welcome conceptual and empirical work as well as practitioner-academia collaborations that surface **actionable** insights for practice and policy.

We especially encourage contributions that:
- Shed light on power dynamics (agenda-setting, visibility regimes, "strategic silence", influence industries) and their consequences for equity and justice;
- Advance ethical frameworks for practice under uncertainty, polarization, and AI-mediated communication;
- Move beyond diagnosis and into actionable research through workable tools, interventions, and partnerships that demonstrably improve inclusion and accountability in/through public relations and strategic communication.

Suggested topics (but not limited to)

- Inequality as a communication problem: who benefits/loses from current communicative arrangements?
- Organizational responsibility, legitimacy, and trust in divided societies (CSR/ESG, stakeholder capitalism, social license)
- Activism, advocacy, and coalition-building; tensions in corporate/NGO/grassroots collaborations
- Ethics in practice: competing accountabilities, dilemmas, and decision-making models
- AI, datafication, targeting, and automation: risks/opportunities for inclusion, transparency, and participation
- Publics, counter-publics, and audience segmentation beyond the "usual suspects"
- Internal communication, voice at work, and equitable change from within organizations
- Crisis, disaster, health, and environmental communication through an equity lens
- Measurement beyond media hits: evaluating social impact and equity outcomes
- Pedagogy and professional formation: curricula, credentialing, and pathways that reduce (not widen) inequality

Participation tracks

1) Research papers

Original scholarly submissions (conceptual or empirical) that advance theory and/or evidence on the conference theme.

Format

- Extended abstracts (800 words incl. references).

2) Actionable research & practice labs

Short, impact-oriented contributions that translate scholarship into tools for practice and policy.

Submissions should include at least one tangible output, such as:

- A practitioner toolkit/checklist or decision-making flowchart;
- A policy/practice brief (2–4 pages) targeting a defined audience;
- An open protocol (e.g., equity audit, listening/engagement method, evaluation template);
- A partnership plan with a civil-society, public-sector, or industry actor;
- A dataset or replicable codebook enabling comparative equity analysis (e.g., comparing voice/access gaps across sectors, countries, or stakeholder groups).

Publication opportunities

- Special issue in <u>Journal of Communication Management</u>
- Special issue in <u>Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa</u>

Costs

The conference fee is 40 USD and includes a light breakfast on arrival, lunch, and refreshments during session breaks. Participants attending this pre-conference on June 3rd as well as the Metamodern Public Relations pre-conference on June 4th will benefit from a reduced joint participation fee of 60 USD.

The pre-conference is supported by the Public Relations Division of the ICA.

Abstract submission

The deadline for submissions is **February 15, 2026**.

Abstracts of up to 800 words are invited. Please send your abstract to: **bridginggapsconf@gmail.com**

Submissions will undergo blind peer review, so please make sure to submit a suitably anonymized text. **Please make sure that your abstract is a specific contribution to this pre-conference**.

Acceptance notifications will be sent out by mid-March, 2026. It is understood that, by submitting an abstract, you are going to attend the pre-conference should it be accepted.

Check the Call for Papers on the ICA website:

https://www.icahdq.org/mpage/ICA26-prepostconferences

Organizers

- **Rene Benecke**, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
- **Anca Anton**, University of Bucharest, Romania
- **Alice Cheng**, North Carolina State University, USA
- **Jesper Falkheimer**, Lund University, Sweden
- **Cindy Ngai**, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong
- **Caroline Azionya**, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Local organizers

- **Nirvana Bechan**, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa
- **Deidre Porthen**, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa