

**Editor's Introduction:**

**The Future of Corporate Purpose: Delivering Value to All Stakeholders in the Digital Age**

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On August 19, 2019, the Business Roundtable, an association of about 200 CEOs from America's most prominent companies, issued a powerful statement redefining the mission of companies. After more than two decades with businesses driven for profit by putting shareholders first, these CEOs state:

“Each of our stakeholders is essential. We commit to deliver value to all of them, for the future success of our companies, our communities, and our country” (Business Roundtable, 2019).

Effective purpose-driven companies align their business objectives with improving global well-being. The 2016 *Harvard Business Review* study on purpose and profit found that purpose and profit tend to go together (Gartenberg & Serafeim, 2016). In fact, the statement issued by the Business Roundtable identified five stakeholders: customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and stockholders.

For years, purpose-driven companies like Unilever have effectively aligned business and social issues. Plus, the value of stakeholder communications is certainly nothing new in public relations. However, lately, the topic of purpose has substantially increased, and some consider it in response to decreasing levels of trust (Gartenberg & Serafeim, 2019).

The 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer found a slight rise in trust with the “general population,” however only 56% trust NGOs and businesses and 47% trust government and media to “do what is right” (p. 4). This pessimism is widespread with only 20% of the “general population” believing that “the system is working for them” (p. 4). With trust on the line, business leaders should think seriously about their role in society.

Not only can being purpose-driven impact trust, but research has found that companies with a clear purpose outperform the market by 5%–7% per year and have employees who feel a greater connection to their jobs (Gartenberg, Prat & Serafeim, 2019). Yet, meaningful connections with stakeholders can be challenging, especially in this fast-paced, social media saturated society.

Now more than ever, digital, social, and mobile technologies have become powerful forces for organization-stakeholder engagement. Yet, trust in social media continues to drop to a new low of 34% while trust in traditional media and search are at 66% (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2019). One reason for this decrease is likely due to concerns about fake news or disinformation. According to the IPR *Disinformation in Society* report by Tina McCorkindale (2019), 63% of Americans view disinformation or “deliberately misleading or biased information” as a major problem in society (p. 3).

Digital technology enables both opportunities and challenges between organizations and stakeholders. Yet, due to technology's rapid advancements, we still have much to understand about how it impacts companies and stakeholders. Through research, we can hopefully better equip organizations to strategically and responsibly use digital media to aid them in making a difference in society.

This special issue resulted from a call for Page and Johnson Legacy Scholar grant proposals from the Arthur W. Page Center in the College of Communications at Penn State University. The four research studies published in this issue help fill the gaps in literature about social media and stakeholder communications. Each article focuses on a different stakeholder group: employees, consumers, influencers, and low-income publics.

The issue begins with *Employee Perceptions of CEO Ghost Posting and Voice: Effects on Perceived Authentic Leadership, Organizational Transparency, and Employee-Organization Relationships*, by Tom Kelleher, Rita Linjuan Men, and Patrick Thelen. This study tests a conceptual model of the impact of CEO ghost posting on social media with the use of a national survey with employees from mid- to large-size US organizations. Their findings emphasize the importance of CEO voice consistency across communication channels while highlighting the role of CEO voice on social media and CEO authentic leadership in fostering transparency employee-organization relationships.

The second article, *Strategic CSR Communication in Social Media: The Effectiveness of Stakeholder Information, Response, and Involvement Communication Strategies Factoring Corporate Reputation*, by Yeonsoo Kim, utilized an experiment to study how consumers respond to CSR communication on social media. The findings support the use of different strategic communication approaches based on the reputation of the company.

In the third article, *Listening In: Fostering Influencer Relationships to Manage Fake News*, by Michele Ewing and Cheryl Ann Lambert, interviews with public relations professionals highlighted the importance of online listening as a means to catch fake news. Furthermore, influencer engagement was emphasized as an important component to overcoming a fake news crisis.

The fourth article, *Exploring Digital, Social and Mobile Dialogic Engagement with Low-Income Publics*, by Katie Place, reviewed the results of interviews focused on communicating with low-income publics. While face-to-face was still the preferred means of communication, the respondents identified mobile as an imperative tool since some members of low-income communities, especially youth, may engage only through mobile texting or messaging.

I hope you enjoy this special issue of the *Public Relations Journal*. I would like to thank the authors for submitting their research and the editor, Hilary Fussell Sisco, for the opportunity to publish this special issue. I am also very grateful to the 24 reviewers for their service. Each article was reviewed by academic scholars and a member of the IPR Digital Media Research Center.

## **References**

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