

Global Public Relations In The Roiling Twenty-Twenties

**Confronting Disinformation,
Serving a Sustainable Society**

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This book is dedicated to the public relations educators around the world who are preparing the next generation of public relations leaders to be of service in the rapidly evolving global society.

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“Roiling”:

V. roiled, roiling, roils

1. To make (a liquid) turbulent or muddy or cloudy by stirring up
Sediment: *The storm roiled the waters of the harbor.*
2. To cause to be in a state of agitation or disorder:
wars that roiled the continent for decades.
3. *Usage Problem* To put in a state of emotional agitation; rile or
Upset.

Vainer.

1. To move or be in a state of turbulence, especially because of
an abundance of something: *storm clouds roiling overhead; a stream roiling with s
almon.*
2. To be agitated or chaotic: *when campuses were roiling with demonstrations.*
3. To be vexed or upset: *a person who is roiling with shame.*

<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/roiled>

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Preface

Let me explain.

It can be said that “Global Public Relations In The Roiling Twenty-Twenties – Confronting Disinformation, Serving a Sustainable Society “ addresses two reader communities.

Primarily, it is free to public relations educators and students as a contribution to their study and advancement of our profession’s significant role in global society. That work has rarely been as needed as in this decade rent with waves of toxic, divisive disinformation/misinformation.

However, this brief book may also present insights for a broader “audience”: public relations professionals in the practice, organization managers, schools or departments of communication, political science or business, and other readers who may benefit from this assessment of the current and future relevance of public relations principles and their application.

Why now?

Essentially an optional supplement to planned public relations curriculum and pedagogy, and a freeze-frame of the ever-evolving society, this compact book is also a forecast of long-term global issues relevant to public relations professionals – and to many others.

But why a snapshot of highly volatile current issues now? Because it presents a “marker” at a time of urgency as it foreshadows future challenges. Over time, students may choose to monitor the issues, analyze the changes and participate in those changes.

Not a textbook, but rather a “long-read op-ed”, it nevertheless is offered to generate classroom and seminar thought, discussion, and even debate. It presents alerts and summary descriptions – not presumptuous potential solutions – for addressing major global issues. Many are formidable, long standing and inter-related. They warrant frequent media revisits because the traditional “news cycle” is now a continuous flow of change and opinion presented in many media forms.

Free book, accessible topics

As a digital downloadable PDF, the book is free to educators and students for their review, use, and sharing for educational purposes, in this format and printable. Permission is hereby granted.

To facilitate potential class assignments, (one issue at a time, or in toto, perhaps for extra credit), issues and related material are clearly segmented and demarcated throughout the book.

For other readers, “purchase” may be made in the form of “honor system contributions” to the Public Relations Student Society of America (<https://prssa.prsa.org>) or your charity of choice.

9/2/2021 Note: This edition is published as the sudden, tragic return of the Taliban to governing Afghanistan begins to generate vast global uncertainties. To be updated.

Introduction

Confronting Disinformation, Serving Sustainable Society

“Global Public Relations In The Roiling Twenty-Twenties – Confronting Disinformation, Serving a Sustainable Society” is published at a time of exceptional global turmoil. Tectonic plates of social cohesion – truth, trust, transparency, democracy and international cooperation - all vital to global public relations, are shifting beneath nations, institutions and organizations.

A climax: At the outset of 2021- even as the catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic raged and “anti-vaxxers” generated misinformed doubts on the safety of the virus vaccines – rogue American citizens protested, many violently, the democratic transition of the U.S government by attacking the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C.

Related seminal disinformation has become the basis for current U.S. state legislation potentially restricting voting and transferring election outcomes from popular vote to executive authority.

Disinformation’s long “half-life” is especially dangerous. By mid-2021, it had generated a veritable “Vaccinated America” and “Un-vaccinated America”.

Roiling, indeed.

Urgency

So, there is urgency here, and it may well be sustained. Truth and trust – the very foundation of a functioning society – have been undermined. Millions seem inoculated against facts. Historians and sociologists fear disinformation, distrust and tribalism may become a global new-normal.

In one early response, The Public Relations Society of America published this 2021 entreaty relating to COVID-19: “To Serve the Public Good PR Pros Can Help Stop the Spread of Vaccine Disinformation” <https://bit.ly/36YZb3h>. Importantly, the society also established a digital special portal, “Voices4Everyone” addressing disinformation, diversity and inclusion, civility, and public engagement <https://voices4everyone.prsa.org/>.

Even more will be needed from our profession.

Prospects

To examine the immediate and long-term prospects for the global public relations profession, this vital question must be confronted: What kind of a global society will the profession serve in the foreseeable future? And within that:

Will that society be largely cohesive or divisive? Promising or threatening? Centripetal or centrifugal? In what way, and to what degree, “interconnected?”

How might this play out if the tectonic plates of social cohesion and “interconnectedness” (globalization) shift dramatically?

And, most important in this context: Will we face a society where free-speech/free press, and classic liberal democracy - or repressive autocracy - is dominant?

In 2021 and well beyond, the importance of these questions is compounded by existential international crises – among them, the fallout from the deadly COVID-19 pandemic that has wounded the world economy; a proliferation of global racial justice protests; historic attacks on liberal democracy; climate change; and social media excesses.

Part One of this book summarizes contemporary global crises and issues from the perspective of the public relations profession; how the profession can help a global sustainable society evolve; and how the reader can participate in that progress.

Part Two presents methodologies for response to these challenges, including the potential positive impact of sustainable management of strategies and operations. It concludes with the critical importance of public opinion and suggestions for classroom discussions.

Overarching realities:

1. Global society is irrevocably interconnected, with great progress but also with inherent peril.
2. Whatever transformative new-normals evolve, reliable information from informed sources is clearly the sine qua non for progress at all levels of society.

Despite formidable obstacles, the public relations profession will help advance international cooperation to develop a “sustainable society” – once defined as, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Report, 1987). The public relations principles and ethical codes that have served society for many decades will continue to prove relevant and impactful in that enterprise. They will be applied, with important variations, in countries around the world.

Invitation

To some, our counsel may seem more aspirational than predictive. But the opportunities for the profession are great and promising, especially in this era demanding fact-based information from reliable sources - this, for mutual understanding, cooperation and progress. In a word, *harmony* – or, at least, sincere efforts to achieve it.

To public relations students: This counsel is offered to help you enter the profession successfully, to contribute to it and to society, and to benefit from that service.

Part One

Global Crises and Challenges: Public Relations Lessons Learned And a Bridge to the Sustainable Society

“Public relations students entering global society professionally should have developed an acute ‘curiosity antenna’... to be receptive and comfortable with the world’s many variations of thought, action and effect.”

- The Commission on Public Relations Education,
2017 Report on Undergraduate Education

It is hard to imagine a more impactful, extended “teachable moment” for public relations students and educators than the advent and the projection of “The Roiling Twenty-Twenties”.

We begin by addressing how public relations principles and methodologies can facilitate a global society that, despite formidable obstacles, is gradually evolving from upheaval and trauma toward a “new normal” sustainable recovery: Global society is confronting a new spectrum of existential challenges – crises that transcend borders – such as pandemics; race and class injustice; assaults on democracy, truth and trust; climate change; and social media.

Public relations students are increasingly alert to the potential effect of these issues and the evolving society on their futures. So we begin with a real life example of such student engagement ...

A Public Relations Students Issues Forum in which an iconic public relations educator asks her “Public Relations Principles” students for their views and early-career plans relating to national and global issues. They respond.

Dr. Susan Gonders, Southeast Missouri State University Professor and Public Relations Option Coordinator, November, 2020:

“For the final forum of this class ... read about business influencing government to pursue peace, environmental responsibility and human rights ... Identify the two issues you think should have the highest priority and ... explain why you think [they] should be high priorities for business ... speculate about what you might do in your career to encourage your employer/clients to address the issues.”

Student replies (edited; emphasis on issues)

. “I think the highest priority is establishing a national health service ... COVID-19 has been brutal ... The second issue I think should have priority is voting ... the right to vote is the cornerstone of democracy. I will close my office for a day encouraging co-workers to go vote.”

. “One of the highest priority issues ... is climate change. I could encourage clients and employers by pitching PSAs [public service announcements] and campaigns ... The second issue is the gender gap in the business world ... I could tackle this issue ... pushing for equality and equity in my workplace always [with] clients, employers, employees and coworkers.”

. “One of the issues that stood out the most to me was “Build Back Better”. I could persuade whoever I work for to see the upside of positivity and bringing people together... As a PR [professional] I will try to come up with tons of ideas to incorporate the support and the desire of a national health service.”

. “Building a wall is not a sustainable solution because the immigrants who are fleeing their countries are facing much worse conditions [at home] ... In my future career to address this issue, maybe bring up a non-profit organization to partner with a cause. If the business I’m part of [is] planning for long success, we [also] have to focus on forces such as carbon emissions.”

. “As a society, it is our choice to deal with the invasion of privacy ... Our privacy is not very private anymore. I will address this issue by never sharing someone’s personal information ... without first getting the person’s approval. Another issue is to work for peace [harmony] in business and society.”

These students’ issues – and many others - are addressed here and in Part Two as we examine the crises, issues and opportunities of The Roiling Twenty-Twenties.

I. Public Relations in 2020-2021 Global Crises

COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis

“A pandemic is a communications emergency as much as a medical crisis”

- Zeynep Tufekci, Associate Professor, University of North Carolina,
Citing Epidemic Intelligence Service, U.S. Centers for Disease Control, Prevention

The COVID-19 public relations case study is greatly inspiring - but equally alarming.

Inspiring, as it reflects the warp speed development and inoculation of the desperately needed vaccines, the result of historic efforts by scientists and essential workers - including communicators of vital, accurate information - around the world.

Alarming, because especially in the U.S., politicization, polarization and disinformation on testing and vaccine safety tragically delayed achievement of critical inoculation goals. By late summer 2021, COVID-19 disinformation had produced - it must be hoped, temporary - a “Vaccinated and Un-Vaccinated America.”

The pandemic will endure as an epic example of deep societal injury when disinformation/misinformation spins out of control.

Overcoming the vast disinformation waves discouraged inoculations: “Vaccine misinformation spreads to every kind of media” <http://bit.ly/2Vj6PUh> . In the U.S., in the summer of 2021 this disinformation was so rampant on vaccines, masks, mandates etc. that a governor in a particularly low-vaccination U.S. state reportedly pleaded to his constituents:

“Listen to your own doctors and medical professionals, not conspiracy theories.”

<https://bit.ly/2VvjIKh>

The pandemic tested the crisis management playbook (See Public Relations Society of America, below). It simultaneously attacked the health and livelihood of many millions of people throughout the world. In an unprecedented toxic feedback loop, its temporary remedy - strict containment of the disease via “lockdowns”, etc. - required behavioral change that undermined the global economy. Too, the virus emerged at a time when global inter-connectedness was already weakened by increasing nationalism, protectionism, and a push-back toward de-globalization... And COVID came in waves, the Delta variant being especially discouraging, coming as it did after great progress on the pandemic.

“Information Is Healthy. Fear Is Not.”

When, in a pandemic many sources are muted or are spewing misinformation, a flow of reliable, encouraging information can be heartening – and even lifesaving.

Early in the COVID-19 crisis relief was delayed by an international information breakdown as some national governments either repressed scientific analysis and/or presented it through political filters. Disinformation and misinformation were rife.

And *data management* of scientific research findings from many international laboratories, sometimes often evolving, sometimes conflicting, was often a central concern. The very nature of such research can be confounding, generating public uncertainty and frustration, as explained in “The U.S. is Getting a Crash Course in Scientific Uncertainty” <https://nyti.ms/3sHJLL1> .

However, some reliable early counsel *was* generated by informed sources. An example: This from the Public Relations Society of America:

“How Communicators Can Help Inform the Public During COVID-19 Crisis”

“Given the current global crisis as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19), PR professionals are uniquely positioned to guide communications and offer resources to the public as they navigate a vast array of information.

“The speed and level of misinformation and disinformation circulating in the public arena has reached “infodemic” levels. The result is too much information – sometimes inaccurate, and often in scientific terms or medical language that may be difficult to understand.

“PRSA and the PRSA Health Academy are taking action to involve members addressing the communications challenges of the current crisis...

“What follows are basic guidelines and resources that PRSA members can use to initiate and support factual conversations in your community and with your internal and external audiences ...

“**. Be transparent.** Respect builds and reinforces credibility.
. Be truthful. Honesty is fundamental to gaining and maintaining public trust.
. Be timely. Establish a sound and regular communications path as the authentic and accurate source.” <https://bit.ly/3yOFbNh>

Much later:

In July, 2021 The Rockefeller Foundation provided a “bottom line” for the critical public health discussion. Announcing \$13.5 million funding to strengthen public health response, it counseled:

“... effective public health begins with effective communication that cuts through the noise and confusion stemming from mis-information and disinformation.” <https://bit.ly/3iE0vel>

COVID-19 Vaccination Awareness Campaigns

With the arrival of vaccines, a related global challenge emerged: The herculean rollout to deliver many billions of vaccine doses around the world. With it, this daunting undertaking: *convincing many people to be vaccinated.*

A synthesis outline of the common elements in the many vaccination awareness campaigns waged around the world:

Context/Timing - The vaccines arrived at a time of great global distress: Infections causing millions of deaths. A wounded global economy. Polarized publics on existential issues *including vaccination*.

Messages – New COVID-19 vaccines can help bring the virus under control. Priorities were established for the publics to be vaccinated. Objective: ethical distribution within a nation, especially to racially/economically underserved publics, but also to people in less-developed nations (“getting doses from airports into people’s arms”).

Audience – Literally many billions of people on all the populated continents.

Information sources – Scientific experts prevailed as sources. A plethora of channels were activated - international and national governments (federal, state and local), civil society, celebrity endorsements, the private sector, word of mouth. Even high tech geospatial data and digital mapping was employed to pinpoint locations where cases were rising.

Media - All manner of legacy and internet media – many existing, some created especially for this global crisis. And personal networks.

Measurement – This unprecedented, vast, global multi-faceted communications wave defies early, widely-accepted public relations campaign effectiveness measurement. Nevertheless, even with initial logistics setbacks, in the first months of 2021 impressive progress was made toward achieving the fundamental objective: vaccination of a significant percentage of the world’s vulnerable population.

With all the valiant and effective work addressing the 2021 COVID-19 pandemic, the long term outlook is still sobering. From *The Atlantic*, August 13, 2021 [long read, but essential]:

“How the Pandemic Now Ends”

“The pandemic *will* be over one day – but the way there is different now.”

”<https://bit.ly/37KW9Ae>

Racial Justice Global Protests: “Black Lives Matter”

Sadly, crises sometimes overlap. That was the case with the Covid-19 pandemic and the proliferation of racial justice protests around the world.

By mid-2021 it was clear via inoculation data that people of color in many countries were being vaccinated at significantly lower rates than other groups. Much of this resulted from limited access, especially in less developed countries and long-standing inequities in education and healthcare.

Lesson Learned: Follow the Data

In late May 2020, global society was also confronted with a challenge that in its own way was also extremely significant: The “Black Lives Matter” protests around the world demanding historic change – that is, lasting structural progress in racial and class equality, opportunity and security.

The brutal death of George Floyd ignited a storm of public demonstrations – first in America and shortly thereafter around the world. It was as if a lid had been lifted from long-held, simmering grievances on historical racial discrimination in countries around the world. VOX.com reported on many of these protests, some of them re-awakening vestiges of centuries-old colonialism and imperialism. Key excerpts:

“In Brussels ... the protest was also about Belgium: its colonial history, [King Leopold II brutality], its current inequities ... It wasn't just Brussels. Protests have erupted on nearly every continent, many defying coronavirus restrictions. People took the streets in London, Seoul, Sydney, Monrovia, and Rio de Janeiro. A mural honoring Floyd was painted amid rubble in opposition-held Idlib, Syria...” (<https://bit.ly/3mzP1vi>)

At the peak of the extraordinary global “Black Lives Matter” themed protests in 2020, this blog was posted:

“Global racial-justice protests around the world: The broad and deep need for ongoing dialogue, political changes”

“Stark reality today, posts BLM-protests: Achieving goals will require momentous efforts. Will the wave of 2020-2021 protesters across America and around the world - this new global ‘body politic’ – take up and sustain the many “grassroots” political and civic missions needed to achieve their demands for structural reforms?”

Will the protesters and their allies have the long-term focus, energy, talents, unity, patience, resources, leadership and perseverance to generate the epic political and cultural changes they seek? The protesters have demonstrated great passion. Now that must be augmented with great communication skills, negotiating power and political savvy.”

Former President Barack Obama: [Obama urges Americans to make "real change" in wake of George Floyd's death](#) :

"In some ways as tragic as these past few weeks have been ... they offer an opportunity for us all to work together to tackle, to take them on, to change America and make it live up to its highest ideals."

And, this challenge to local leaders to take immediate action: "Today I'm urging every mayor in this country to review your use of force policies with members of your community and commit to report on planned efforts."

Former U.S. Secretary of State of State Condoleezza Rice, suggesting that the protests must lead each American to individual responsibility:

"Floyd's horrible death should be enough to finally move us to positive action... So I ask my fellow Americans: What will each of you do? What is your question about the impact of race on the lives of Americans? And what will you do to find answers?"

"Black Lives Matter" Communication Strategy

For several years prior to its 2020 demonstrations the BLM movement had built a strong presence on social media, as confirmed in this summary of the Institute for Public Relations Research study, "Tweeting a Social Movement: How Black Lives Matter Built a Community and Promoted Action" (Abstract):

- When asked what function BLM serves, 60% of Tweets were "*Information focused*," 17.5% of Tweets were "*Community focused*," and 23% of Tweets were "*Action focused*."
- When looking at the subcategories, *sharing news related to the cause* was the most common type of message (55%). This subcategory falls under the "*Information focused*" function.
- *Information focused* messages decreased over time from 67% in 2014 to 49% in 2017, while *Community focused* messages increased over time (15% in 2014 to 22% in 2017), along with *Action focused* (18.6% in 2014 to 29% in 2017).
- The current results suggest that BLM or other social movements might want to consider posting more messages with a *Community* function if their goal is amplification rather than awareness.

Racial justice is a disconcerting example of a visceral global issue defying – so far – equanimity among major societal communities.

Attacks on Democracy: Disinformation vs. Truth

A vast accumulation of assaults on democracy and truth with lies, disinformation and conspiracy fantasies turned deadly in the United States on January 6th 2021 when a lies-inspired mob invaded the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Seminal repercussions, immediately underway, will be felt for decades.

The context:

Attacks on democracy come in many forms. The most toxic: Authoritarian regimes with populist nationalism and highly-centralized governments. They attack liberal institutions including the free press, fair elections and opposing political parties. Sadly, this form of government has gained favor in recent years in many democratic nations.

In their “post-truth” propaganda, demagogues in these regimes argue that facts are irrelevant. Facts, of course, are pillars of a functioning society; “alternative truths” are corrosive to those very pillars. Xenophobic authoritarianism diminishes liberty and sucks out the social oxygen needed for the new ideas, cooperation, and innovation needed for sustainable growth and prosperity. So public relations professionals have a great stake in whether this socio-political malady spreads or recedes.

Often, tragically, when these regimes suppress journalists, they suffocate democracy. The Committee for the Protection of Journalists reported that worldwide in 2020, some 36 journalists died while reporting. It confirmed that a great majority of these deaths were linked to government officials, military and paramilitary cadres and political groups. (<https://bit.ly/2KRS84U>)

Unfortunately, too often dormant vestiges of these regimes linger for years among acolytes and adherents.

Truth, Lies and Disinformation

Earlier, it had come to this:

“Only Truth Can Save Our Democracy”

That was the alarm *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman sounded in mid-November 2020 (<https://nyti.ms/3iIetjG>)

“The war for truth is now the war to preserve our democracy.

“It is impossible to maintain a free society when leaders and news purveyors feel at liberty to spread lies without sanction. Without truth there is no agreed-upon path forward, and without trust there is no way to go down the path together...”

“We need to restore the stigma to lying and liars before it is too late. We need to hunt for truth, fight for truth and mercilessly discredit the forces of disinformation. It is the freedom battle of our generation.”

Disinformation/misinformation so penetrated global society in the early 2020s that it very often poisoned public discourse and socio-political progress. In late December 2020, the severity of the issue prompted a coalition of several dozen non-profit organizations to publish an open letter to the incoming Biden-Harris administration, “Treating Disinformation as an Intersectional Threat”.

The letter presented this respectful request and observation “... we encourage you to recognize disinformation as a ubiquitous and foundational impediment to tackling [the administration’s many] challenges... It will be exceedingly difficult to build consensus and enact the administration’s ambitious agenda when the American people are not merely polarized, but living in disparate realities with warring sets of facts.” <https://bit.ly/2VEz67M>

PRSA Protecting Democracy, and Truth

Public relations students and professionals can, and must, confront the disinformation global socio-political toxin.

In early 2021, The Public Relations Society of America established a powerful resource for doing so: “Voices 4 Everyone” a website for sharing programs and outcomes on disinformation, diversity/inclusion, civil discourse and civic engagement. <https://bit.ly/2S1bW48> . (Page 36)

In addition to participating in “Voices 4 Everyone” students’ civil engagement can also include activities such as volunteering in voter registration/turnout non-profit organizations. Example: New Voters Project <https://bit.ly/3fPaHTP>

Also important, students can include courses on public affairs in their curriculum/co-curriculum portfolios.

The Trust Deficit

One of the most alarming topical sentences of the decade so far:

“Democracy’s most basic currency is trust, and, to judge by the usual indicators, we seem to be running out of it.”

That’s the start of the book review section of the July 26, 2021 issue of *The New Yorker*, “Are Americans More Trusting Than They Seem?” (<https://bit.ly/3j0Anxt>).

In the review, Idrees Kahloon, channels commentator David Brooks, who “sees an epidemic of mistrust as an existential threat: ‘Levels of trust in this country – in our institutions, in our politics, and in one another – are in precipitous decline. And when social trust collapses, nations fail.’ “

Mr. Kahloon’s conclusion: “Last spring, it might have been hoped that America’s acrimonious tribalism would be suspended in the face of national calamity. That the pandemic was so easily subsumed into the culture wars shows that the resolution won’t be easy. Don’t trust anyone who tells you otherwise.”

In early January 2021, Richard Edelman, CEO of the Edelman global public relations firm, introduced the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer with this assessment:” ‘This is the era of information bankruptcy. We’ve been lied to by those in charge and media sources are seen as politicized and bias. The result is a lack of quality information and increased divisiveness... The violent storming of the U.S. Capitol last week and the fact that only one-third of people are willing to get a COVID vaccine as soon as possible crystalize the dangers of misinformation.’”
<https://bit.ly/3j8GDmQ>

Of course, public lack of trust is not a new phenomenon.

Back in 2018, then International Monetary Fund Managing Director Christine LaGarde presented this discouraging assessment: “The world is facing a crisis of trust in institutions across all sectors that shows no sign of abating I am convinced that corruption both feeds on, and is fed by, the broader crisis of trust, which sustains a vicious cycle that undermines economic health and social cohesion” <https://bit.ly/3xP1BfY>

Climate Change

Glaciers are falling and ocean levels rising – together.

News on climate change often comes in waves... In 2021 it seemed like a tsunami. A confluence of natural catastrophes around the world – extreme weather, deadly intense wildfires, floods and droughts among them - commanded new media and public attention. Then, in mid-August came *The New York Times* report, “A Hotter Future Is Certain Climate Panel Warns. But How Hot is Up to Us”. The article summarized a major new report by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (195 governments represented). <https://nyti.ms/3s5HHMI>

A major obstacle: Can a human characteristic – some reluctance to commit to sacrifices to protect future generations – be overcome?

Of course, such issues had been building throughout the advent and of the decade.

At the time of the fifth anniversary of the Paris Agreement on climate change these reports, some challenging earlier forecasts merited special attention:

“Statement on Occasion of the 5th Anniversary of the Paris Agreement by UNFCCC ...”

[UNFCCC=United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change]

“Despite these difficult days, the Paris Agreement continues to be a beacon collectively guiding nations and all parts of society forward. Recovery from COVID-19 offers nations a chance to build forward better and to orientate green policies and plans toward this ... 2021 is an important year for the Paris Agreement ... The outcome needs to be a balanced package ... that also enables actions by all stakeholders at all levels of society. “ (UNFCCC December 23, 2020).

“States and companies are now hotbeds of climate change”

“Numerous states, cities and companies have pledged aggressive climate change goals in recent years. It’s a trend driven by ... the growing urgency of the problem, cheaper clean energy technologies, and investors increasingly concerned about the financial repercussions of a warming world. A record number of companies – nearly 10,000 – disclosed their environmental footprints, including on climate change [in the last four years], according to CDP [Climate Change Disclosures], a nonprofit focused on corporate disclosures.”

“The U.S. is Back in the Paris Agreement. Now What?”

“Hours after being inaugurated, President Joe Biden reentered the United States in the Paris Agreement, as he promised to do. The reentry takes effect on February 19... In addition to rejoining the Paris Agreement on day one, Biden signed an **executive order** instructing all agencies to review actions taken over the last four years that are inconsistent with his climate policies and to suspend, revise or rescind them.”(Columbia Climate School Climate, Earth, and Society, February 19, 2021) <https://bit.ly/3oOeZxU>

However, that optimism came in the wake of foreboding - a “what-if?” scenario:

“HOW RUSSIA WINS THE CLIMATE CRISIS” (caps in the original)

“Climate change and its enormous human migrations will transform agriculture and remake the world order – and no country stands to gain as much as Russia.” <https://nyti.ms/2U32oMq>

Social Media

It seems fair to ask: “How far has the social media genie escaped from the bottle?”

Sweeping technological advances often bring social and political challenges along with their many benefits. However, the twenty first century digitally-based technology wave is unprecedented: It has generated *a new species* of powerful companies with vast influence on general society.

They have power to persuade, influence and even affect behavior. (A startling *New York Times* January 9, 2021 headline: “In Pulling Trump’s Megaphone Twitter Shows Where Power Now Lies” <https://nyti.ms/2XtvdzS> - and this subhead, “The ability of a handful of people to control our discourse has never been more obvious.”)

What are the social responsibilities of these companies? How will they be met?

Public relations students, and professionals, will benefit by reflecting on these issues as addressed in excerpts from the continuous waves of information and analyses on these companies:

Polarization Helps Spread Disinformation

“Echo chambers”. That’s often what internet sites seem to resemble. They are convenient places for like-minded people to meet and propagate disinformation/misinformation; the process has been called the nourishment of socio-political tribes. Although social scientists disagree on just how powerful these sites are as polarization stimulants, there is little doubt that they contribute to such divisiveness.

“Is Social Media to Blame for Political Polarization in America?”

That was the headline for Andre Soergel’s March 20, 2017 U.S.News column. Key excerpt:

“America’s widespread adoption of social media and the so-called ‘echo chambers’ it generates have become a popular scapegoat for the rise of political polarization in the U.S., with study after study suggesting voters seeing what they want to see online drives some to more extreme leanings.” <https://bit.ly/3jSt2k5>

Privacy: Protecting Personal Information

These companies attract the attention of many users, often with “click bait” socially-arousing content, and use audience data to generate vast revenues, mainly from advertisers seeking precise audience demographics/psychographics. How they use this data is at issue.

(Ironically, some users are somewhat complicit: “I’m being watched at Amazon – and I don’t care” <https://bit.ly/3CZxCFW> .

“It doesn’t have to be this way”, opines Shoshana Zuboff, in “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism”. We are going to need laws that specifically outlaw the methods of surveillance capitalism.”

The Business Model Under Fire

Governments have begun to regulate these behemoths. The European Union's 2018 General Data Protection (GDPR) was the first such significant regulation. In 2021, The United States and China stepped up similar efforts on privacy protection and more strenuous antitrust enforcement. However, a needed powerful *global* regulating agency (these are truly *global* companies) was not yet on the horizon in 2021.

In terms of self-regulation, in 2019 Facebook established an independent "Facebook Oversight Board" of twenty putative national experts to review its content decisions and make binding rulings. In the first batch of the FOB rulings, in early 2021, the board overturned Facebook's original decisions to remove posts in four cases and agreed with Facebook on the fifth. The cases were among the thousands of Facebook content moderation decisions made by the company daily. (LAWFARE, (<https://bit.ly/3alwQFK>))

In a subsequent ruling the board imposed an historic six-month suspension of former president Donald Trump, generating a wave of reactions pro and con. It later suspended him for at least two years.

Dangerous "Derivatives": Cybersecurity, Ransomware

This is when digital technology becomes devastatingly anti-social:

Cybersecurity: "A day after President Biden warned that cyberattacks could lead to 'a real shooting war' he signed an executive order... aimed at preventing hackings on America's critical infrastructure... The effort is a way to get beyond the 'woefully insufficient' patchwork of mandates and voluntary actions to protect electric utilities, gas pipelines, water supplies and industrial sites that keep the economy running..." <https://nyti.ms/3fu6ULp>

"Ransomware attacks can cripple critical infrastructure like hospitals and schools and even core functions of major cities. Using methods as simple as spoof emails, hackers can take over entire computer systems and pilfer personal data and passwords and then demand a ransom to restore access..."

"In about a dozen years, ransomware has emerged as a major cyber problem of our time ..." <https://nyti.ms/3lurP54>

II. Contextual Twenty-Twenties Global Issues

Public relations students, educators, and practitioners will do well to regularly monitor the outcome and the remaining momentum of global geopolitical trends and upheavals.

Reassessing the World's "Great Powers"

The world is interconnected - whether or not we care to acknowledge it. The international community, of course, is always in flux. A "world power" has traditionally been a unilateral term. Now it can also be, in a new mode, *multilateral*. A capsule summary:

I. Economic size, strength

In November, 2020 China significantly increased its heft in world trade partly as a counterweight to American influence in the region after a retreat by the United States from sweeping trade deals that reshape global relationships: "Asia-Pacific nations sign world's biggest-trade agreement." <https://bit.ly/3ggSxuh>. The agreement relates to about one-third of the world's population and output.

The rhetorical climax a month later: "China to leapfrog U.S. as world's biggest economy by 2028: think tank", Reuters, <https://reut.rs/3jy2556>

However, this fundamental observation on China, especially significant for public relations professionals: The nation, with its highly centralized government autocracy and oligarchy, represses freedom of expression and other human rights.

"Owning the Future"

With grave concern for a potentially dire ultimate "Great Powers" outcome, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks recently framed a worst-case scenario this way: "This could be the Chinese century, with their dynamism and our decay. The unexpected combination of raw capitalism, authoritarianism and state direction of the economy could make China the dominant model around the globe."

Thankfully, he concluded: "The Chinese are convinced they own the future. It's worth taking this shot [2021 U.S. initiatives] to prove them wrong." <https://nyti.ms/3xj2Dkc>

II. "Menacing the World"

There is now yet another way to become a "world power". It is the newly-evolved capability to use digital technology to disrupt, or even paralyze, an opponent's society: "Russia's New Form of Organized Crime is Menacing the World". <https://nyti.ms/3lurP54>

"... The place to start is Russia. That, according to the experts, is where the majority of attacks originate. Three other countries – China, Iran and North Korea – are also serious players and the obvious commonality is that they are all autocracies where security apparatuses doubtlessly know full well who the backers are and could shut them down in a minute..."

“So the presumption is that the criminals are protected, either through bribes – which, given their apparent profits, they can distribute lavishly – or by doing pro bono [!] work for the government or both.

“It’s clear that the ransomware gangs take care not to target the powers that shelter them.”

Refugee/Immigration Upheavals

The many waves of immigrants seeking better lives have long been a global humanitarian tragedy. War, civil authority collapse in poorer countries with concomitant violence, brutal anti-immigrant repression at national borders, and even climate change, have exacerbated the tragedy throughout the world. The scale is astonishing. Global migration more than tripled between 1960 and 2020, rising from 77 million to almost 281 million, according to the Migration Policy Institute. <https://bit.ly/3mq1QMj>

The Institute has outlined five options for addressing this extremely troubling and complex challenge, specifically at the U.S.-Mexican border, but also with potential for adaptation at many international borders under duress. These are the fundamental options suggested: Re-thinking asylum; strengthening immigration institutions; developing a regional approach to address smuggling networks; creating legal pathways; and investing in development and public safety in poorer countries.

In May 2021, U.S. President Joseph Biden mounted a multi-year high level commitment to deter migration at the southern border by assisting to improve conditions in Central America. He delegated Vice President Kamala Harris “to oversee the administration’s plan to pump billions of dollars into the ravaged economies of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. She will work with the leaders of [these] Central American governments ... to bolster the region’s economy in the hopes of reducing ... violence and poverty

“Biden Names Harris to Work with Central America on Migration” (New York Times, May 24, 2021) <https://nyti.ms/3cccUHi>

International Corruption

Transparency International reports annually on the state of corruption and transparency in countries around the world. In early 2021 it published its “2020 Corruption Perceptions Index”. From its Executive Summary:

“This year’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) paints a grim picture of the state of corruption worldwide. While most countries have made little to no progress in tackling corruption in nearly a decade, more than two-thirds of countries score below 50 [a key standard].

“Our analysis shows corruption not only undermines the global health response to COVID-19, but contributes to a continuing crisis of democracy. 2020 proved to be one of the worst years in recent history; with the outbreak of the global COVID-19 and its devastating effects ... COVID-19 is not just a health and economic crisis, but a corruption crisis as well ...”
<https://bit.ly/3miersD>

In January 2021 this ray of hope in a headline from Transparency International: “Historic Anti-Corruption Measures Become Law in the U.S. – most significant update to U.S. anti-money laundering laws in a generation” (<https://bit.ly/3b1FI5o>).

John Kerry, then U.S. Secretary of State, said at a 2016 conference in Nigeria: “Corruption costs the global economy \$2.6 trillion a year. It’s not just a disgrace and a crime. It’s also dangerous...money being lost to corruption across the world was enough to provide a decent livelihood for people.” <https://bit.ly/3CUN5Hu>

To “manage” many such global macro issues, apply the principles of the public relations sub-discipline, “**Issues Management**”. Essentially, it involves these strategic communication management steps:

Regularly scan global media, literature and other sources of news on current issue trends.

Evaluate each issue’s status, velocity and direction; check relevance to the organization.

Prioritize issues by their likelihood to be sustained and affect your organization.

Develop a strategy and tactics – policies and action, especially communication - for issues likely to affect the organization.

Execute the plan and periodically measure its effectiveness.

III. A Bridge to the Evolving Sustainable Society

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

– Brundtland Report, 1987

Sustainability Leaders/Trends

“Change is hard, but necessary.” <https://bit.ly/3bYJSdO>

As with many seemingly simple observations, there is much truth beneath the froth in that epigram. It’s especially relevant in the evolution of a global society. A more sustainable society is not easily won. It requires outstanding leadership, vision, resources and perseverance. Here are leaders and trends at the head of this movement.

United Nations Global Compact

The United Nations Global Compact, launched in 2000, is by far the largest and most productive global sustainable development organization. In mid-2021, it was comprised of some 13,832 companies of many sizes from all industrial sectors and some 4,000 affiliated organizations— governments, non-governmental-organizations (NGOs), foundations, academic institutions, and civic group in 162 countries. <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/>

From the Compact website:

“Our Mission -

“At the UN Global Compact, we aim to mobilize a global movement of sustainable economies and stakeholders to create the world we want. That’s our vision.

“To make this happen the UN Global Compact supports companies to

“1. Do business responsibly ...

“2. Take strategic action to advance broadest social goals.”

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030:

In September 2015, leaders of 193 countries adopted seventeen goals addressing societal problems around the world within this framework: “People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnerships ...we can end extreme poverty and hunger, fight inequalities and address climate change, ensuring that no one is left behind.”

Of special interest to public relations students and professionals: measurement of SDG communication commitments and outcomes. *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020* presents an overview of progress towards the SDGs before the pandemic started, but it also looks at some of the devastating initial impacts of COVID-19 on specific goals and targets.

<https://bit.ly/3m3drAL>

Educators may also want to consider assigning student research/reporting on these additional key sustainable development trends:

Integrated Reporting: International Integrated Reporting Council
<https://integratedreporting.org/>

Socially Responsible Investing: The Forum for Social and Responsible Investing
<https://www.ussif.org/>

Benefit Corporations <https://bit.ly/3xs80gM>

Brands Taking Stands <https://bit.ly/3lyQT11>

Clearly, solutions will not come early and easily for society's many grave challenges. However, an interconnected, sustainable society will generate profound opportunities for the application of public relations principles and ethics on an issue matrix from national to global. Progressive change—even if in fits and starts—requires application of a public relations universal, the lubricant of discourse, that is, two-way communication.

The formidable macro global issues notwithstanding, we believe that the public relations profession will contribute significantly to the evolution of the global sustainable society. Part two presents evidence for that assertion.

In the final analysis, publisher-philanthropist Walter Annenberg may have summed up this mission and era - and other eras - most succinctly and effectively:

“Every human advancement or reversal can be understood through communication... Educating students to effectively communicate this message and to be of service to all people is the enduring mission of this school.”

<https://it.ly/3zYznko>

Part Two

Public Relations Helps Companies, Organizations Adapt to Evolving Society

“Preparing students to enter the profession with a global mindset is vital to the advancement of the profession.”

- Commission on Public Relations Education,
2017 Report on Undergraduate Education

Public relations professional principles share symmetry with those of the evolving sustainable global society. With an increased understanding of that society, students will gain a broadened horizon and be better prepared to apply knowledge and skills in their careers.

I. Public Relations in Sustainable Society Development

Public relations students and practitioners interested in a global sustainable society can benefit by becoming aware of how broadly this societal evolution is taking place. Here we present a broad spectrum of institutions ranging from higher education to professional societies helping to advance this society and create opportunities for public relations careers

Higher Education “Gets it” on Sustainability

Educating future generations of organization leaders on sustainability principles and implementation has taken root globally. This preparation is being offered in a variety of higher education centers – colleges, universities institutes and academies.

Principles For Responsible Management Education (PRME)

“The Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) is a United Nations-supported initiative founded in 2007. As a platform to raise the profile of sustainability in schools around the world, PRME equips today's business students with the understanding and ability to deliver change tomorrow.

“Working through Six Principles, PRME engages business and management schools to ensure they provide future leaders with the skills needed to balance economic and sustainability goals, while drawing attention to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and aligning academic institutions with the work of the UN Global Compact.

“As a voluntary initiative with over 800 signatories worldwide, PRME has become the largest organised relationship between the United Nations and management-related higher education institutions.” <https://www.unprme.org/>

University of Pennsylvania Wharton School New Curriculum

An example of the rationale for this evolution in higher education: In 2020, the prestigious Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania re-configured its curriculum to integrate instruction on diversity and inclusion, inequality, climate change and , more broadly, business in society.

Dean Erika James’ candid rationale: “The conversations in the classroom are changing because the students are asking for it. Their expectation is that, that’s in our syllabus. We’re going to have coursework and reading material on corporate social responsibility. We have to. If we want to be an attractive choice for business school students, then our curriculum has to reflect what their asking for...” <https://nyti.ms/3jFEqzQ>

Georgetown University “Democratic Capitalism”

From the Georgetown University Law School website:

“The Denny Center for Democratic Capitalism at Georgetown Law exists to reconcile the benefits of free market capitalism with the values and expectations of a democratic society.

“Over the last 200 years, free market capitalism has proven itself as an unmatched engine for driving economic growth in the United States and around the world, and yet big problems persist, including uneven economic opportunities, degradation of natural resources, and questions of corporate integrity when profits appear to be the sole motivator.

“The Denny Center’s primary work is to evaluate the relative balance of economic performance and societal health and stability. To that end, we will attempt to measure the ‘vital signs’ of both business results and the needs of society, to highlight the tensions present in the existing system, and to search for potential solutions, especially those that consider all stakeholders and favor long-term objectives to measure success” <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/denny-center/>

Students Say ...

Leaders of the leading national/international organization of public relations students, The Public Relations Student Society of America, are articulate on national issues. In early 2021 PRSSA was composed of some 7,000 students and advisers in about 300 chapters in the United States and in Argentina, Colombia and Peru. <https://prssa.prsa.org/>

A 2021 statement on national and global issues:

“PRSSA firmly believes that one of the biggest issues that all communications professionals should take note of is the ongoing discussion around racial justice. The events of 2020 have put a new spotlight on all companies to respond in some shape, way, or form. Companies should look to make authentic, effective change in order to combat systemic racism and discrimination. Communications professionals serve as the link between organizations and the publics that hold them accountable for their words and actions in this regard.

“Another area that will continue to affect the communications landscape is the continued evolution of dis/misinformation. With the rapid evolution of communication technologies and the growing interconnectedness of world regions comes an exponential growth in opportunities for misinformation. Communications professionals will need to stay vigilant in combating misinformation with timely, accurate, and authentic communications to a growing number of publics.”

University World News ...

... has encouraged long-term commitments by educational institutions to service the interests of these students: “Universities Must Lead on Sustainable Development Goals”

“To increase the likelihood of success for the 17 SDGs, higher education institutions worldwide must teach and train today’s students—tomorrow’s decision-makers—to think both critically and ethically, to learn to cope with ethical dilemmas and apply systems-thinking approaches to serious and complex societal problems....Commit for the long term. Changing norms and behavior is an inherently slow process”

The Global Sustainable Society at Work: Careers

The sustainable society projects a range of career and avocational opportunities in public relations practice operating at the interface between an organization and its publics. These include several basic paths.

The Private Sector

Counseling firms specializing in sustainable development/corporate social responsibility for their clients: This is an important portfolio element for many public relations counseling firms.

Sustainable development departments (under various titles, such as corporate relations, external affairs or –yes –public relations) in companies of various sizes in many industrial sectors: These corporate sections are successful when they act essentially as *stewards* of sustainability strategies and, often, as participants in its implementation (that is, via two-way communications influencing policy and performance). However, the sustainability commitment must be organization-wide.

“Soft integration”: Job functions without explicit sustainability responsibilities. Examples: financial planning, design/engineering, and marketing can often be enriched by integration of sustainability principles.

Sub-category: Business sectors have founded many national and international specialized “trade associations” and professional societies to improve their members’ performance on sustainability issues.

Government

Although many sustainability commitments are voluntary, laws and regulations on the local, state, and national levels often apply. This is especially the case on issues such as environment, equal opportunity, diversity and inclusion—and, now, with growing attention, to personal privacy on the internet. Legislatures pass sustainable initiatives, and regulatory agencies assure that these are properly implemented. Most require implementation by the private sector and civil society. Compliance is the minimum.

Non-Profit Organizations (NGOs)

Partnering of major societal segments is often essential for successful sustainable development. In many cases, this is tri-partite cooperation of government, business, and non-governmental organizations, perhaps augmented by research from academic institutions and “think tanks”. Such NGOs have proliferated and contributed greatly in the sustainability space.

Media

Both traditional media and new media, mainly digital, regularly report on sustainable development (more traditionally called, “corporate social responsibility”). They generate career opportunities, not only for public relations students but also for journalism/communications, liberal arts or business majors who have included communication sequences in their studies.

These opportunities in media companies exist both in the newsrooms as well as in the companies’ media relations/public relations and marketing departments.

Also relevant: Volunteering

Sustainability career development can occur through volunteering. Students and early-career professionals can gain valuable insights by contributing their communication skills to sustainable development organizations, especially on the local level. Later, as employees, they can volunteer in pro bono programs provided by many employers to help NGOs locally, nationally, and internationally.

Net Impact

Net Impact can be thought as a “half-way-house” between preparing academically for the global sustainable society and practicing in that field. It is a global network of more than 400+ chapters with 130,000 members in 40 countries on university campuses and in companies, governments, and NGOs. Students, young professionals, and business and civic leaders organize and implement programs, campaigns, and events “mobilizing[ing] next generation leaders to use their skills and careers to make a positive impact on the world.”

At its October 2019 annual conference the organization addressed a range of global social topics including: Social Impact Career & Professional Development; Corporate Citizenship; Environmental Sustainability & Circular Economy; Social Finance & Impact Investing; Climate Solutions & Responsible Living; and International Development & Entrepreneurship.

How to Become/Remain an Informed Communicator

The sustainable society presents public relations professionals with an array of resources for reporting progress in this field. Media, a wide variety of sources and a steady flow of news and commentaries abound.

Specialist Sustainable Development/CSR Media

With the proliferation of new media forms, channels, and providers that complement legacy media, there are now many more information sources, but also more distracting chatter, to navigate for sustainability news and analysis. Mainstream Media (MSM) covers these subjects but, unfortunately, too often it is with news of challenges, setbacks, or scandal (ethical shortcomings, corruption or failures of initiatives).

Media devoted largely or exclusively to sustainability vary considerably by frequency, depth, audience, and life cycle. However, taken as a whole (especially when aggregated with MSM) they provide a broad and deep reservoir, regularly replenished, of information on sustainability progress. Examples of the more established and reliable sustainable society media:

- Business Ethics <https://business-ethics.com/>
- Business In Society <https://businessinsociety.net/>
- ESG Investor <https://www.esginvestor.net/>
- Ethical Corporation <https://bit.ly/2VuCfaa>
- 3BL Media/ <https://www.3blmedia.com/>

Public relations students and practitioners must be “news junkies”—not only on the developments within sustainable development, but, as always, on all sectors of society from which relevant news can originate.

Sources For Sustainable Development News

In addition to these “specialist” sustainable development media (and legacy mainstream media) many global and national organizations generate relevant news and context through their research, events, programs and reporting. These focus on communication, public relations education and standards for sustainable development commitments:

(A.) Within the Public Relations Profession

1.) The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management

In the international public relations community, The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management ranks highly as a resource for promotion and support of the global sustainable society. In 2021 this international confederation of the world’s major public relations national and regional associations and institutions, was comprised of organizations representing 320,000 public relations and communication professionals across the globe.

<https://www.globalalliancepr.org/>

During the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, The Global Alliance published “Twelve Messages for COVID-19 Responsible Communication”. This timely initiative demonstrated not only the “reach” of the global public relations profession, but also the value of its counsel in addressing vital issues.

Among the “Twelve Messages”:

“Use straightforward, plain language to minimize dramatizing the situation.

Spread good examples and practices.

Give priority to messaging from official sources.

Support the work of media providing accurate information in the right moment.”

In December 2020, GA published “The Nine Challenges PR Will Face after the Pandemic”, addressing the development and inoculation of COVID-19 vaccines. The projected challenges – with prescience – ranged from “...promote the recovery of truth as the basic substance of communication processes” to “continue training managers to be better communicators”.

2.) The Public Relations Society of America (*Does not include 2021 late summer reports*)

PRSA is widely recognized as the nation’s leading professional organization serving the communications community with its nearly 30,000 members, 110 chapters and 14 professional

interest sections. The society serves its members and the profession with many offerings in professional development, accreditation, advocacy and ethics. Its Public Relations Student Society of America is active on many U.S. College and university campuses.

<https://www.prsa.org/>

In early 2021, PRSA, with its Advocacy Committee, launched a major national outreach initiative, “Voices4Everyone” - a robust communication-management commitment to proactively address national and international issues. Here is how *PR News* heralded it:

“Earlier today (April 20) PRSA debuted Voices4Everyone, an online resource addressing a quartet of PR issues: misinformation/disinformation, DEI [diversity and inclusion], civility and civic engagement. A collection of articles, case studies, videos and other material, Voices’ is true to its name: it’s available to PRSA members as well as the general public ...

“A glance at the misinformation/disinformation tab this morning revealed six subgroups: social media, thought leadership, learning, media literacy, inoculation (including five-minute ‘games’ designed to inoculate communicators and build their resistance against spreading disinformation and misinformation) and research.”

PRSA explains that “Voices4Everyone” “supports a national conversation building mutual understanding through a more inclusive civil discourse.”

3.) Commission on Public Relations Education

CPRE, founded in 1973, is a confederation of national and international organizations considered by many to be the authoritative voice on behalf of public relations education.

<http://www.commissionpred.org/>

In its 2017 report, “FAST FORWARD: The 2017 Report on Undergraduate Public Relations Education”, the commission articulated its increasing interest in global standards for public relations education:

“As the industry of public relations continues to grow globally, so does the pursuit of a global standard for public relations curricula. Public relations practitioners and educators alike must work to exchange ideas and information with other practitioners internationally to help develop and define these global standards”

(B) Sustainable Development Facilitator Organizations

Planning for sustainable development progress is admirable but without standards of operation and measurement it is incomplete.

1.) Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)

From the GRI website:

“GRI is the independent, international organization that helps businesses and other organizations take responsibility for their impacts, by providing them with the global common language to *communicate* [emphasis added] those impacts. We provide the world’s most widely used standards for sustainability reporting, the GRI Standards We work with businesses, investors, policymakers, civil society, labor organizations ... to develop the GRI standards and promote their use by organizations around the world... <https://www.globalreporting.org/>

In December, 2020 GRI reprised its longstanding support for mandatory integrated reporting of companies’ financial results and environmental, social and governance (ESG) impacts: “GRI has called for strengthened financial reporting that complements sustainability reporting and takes account of the financial risks and opportunities related to a company’s sustainability impacts – with mandatory disclosure to ensure transparency on corporate contributions to global challenges”.

2.) The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD)

WBCSD describes itself as “a global, CEO-led organization of over 200 leading businesses working together to accelerate the transition to a sustainable world. We help make our members companies more successful and sustainable by focusing on the maximum positive impact for shareholders, the environment and societies. Our member companies come from all business sectors and all major economies representing a combined revenue of more than USD \$8.5 trillion and nineteen million employees.” <https://www.wbcsd.org/>

In late 2020, WBCSD published a macro-issue brief on why capitalism needs to be reinvented if it is to create the conditions for long-term business success: Key excerpt: “A capitalism that rewards true value creation will be characterized by five features: stakeholder-oriented, impact-internalizing, long term, regenerative and accountable.”

3.) Business For Social Responsibility

For over 25 years, Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) has been a leader in corporate sustainability, working with some 250 member companies and other partners. Its mission is to “work with business to build a just and sustainable world ... in which everyone can lead a prosperous and dignified life within the boundaries of the Earth's natural resources.” <https://www.bsr.org/en/>

In late 2020, BSR proposed a comprehensive national agenda urging businesses to call on the Biden Administration to adopt an ambitious “build back better” model addressing these macro issue-and-policy structural elements: Employment/ economic, climate and environment, social - racial justice and [Corporate] Governance

Sustainability Communication in Action:

A Climate Change Confluence

Public relations professionals—many with titles such as chief communications officer, director or manager of corporate relations, or director of external relations—are central to the success of sustainable organizations. They collaborate across societal sectors on major issues. Example:

The United Nations Global Compact ...

As noted in Part One, The United Nations Global Compact is reportedly comprised of some 13,832 member companies and 4,000 affiliates (governments, NGOs, labor organizations, academic institutions, and civic groups) in 162 countries... It has prioritized members' regular reporting of progress via its Communication of Progress requirement. The UN Global Compact is a forum for discussion and a network of communication including governments, companies and labor organizations ... it provides facilitation and encourages dialogues: policy dialogues and stands to play a critical role in helping signatories and governments work in part to achieve the UN SDGs

How does this play out “in the field”? An outstanding example is how “partnered” sustainability communicators are addressing what is the existential issue of our age: planetary climate change.

With The Private Sector

When The U.S. Government signalled its intention to formally withdraw from the Paris Agreement as of November 2020, almost immediately, a broad-scale multi-sector national organization, “We Are Still In”, was established... It projected continued dedication to progressive climate change policies. <https://www.wearestillin.com/>

In a timely news release, executives of Walmart, a “We Are Still In” stalwart, presented a rationale:

“Walmart is one of over [now 3,900] American businesses, states, cities and other entities that have joined together in the coalition “We Are Still In” to continue our efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement. Together these entities represent nearly 70 percent of the country’s gross domestic product and two-thirds of its population ... Climate change is a global challenge that requires a global response... We encourage others to stay in to insure we can have a safer, stronger, more resilient and prosperous world for all.” <https://nyti.ms/37E4pSH>

The “We Are Still In” commitments became somewhat prescient when the Biden-Harris administration, immediately after its inauguration, took action to have the United States rejoin the Paris Agreement.

II. Public Relations/Public Diplomacy

Relations between and among nations are, of course, complex. So it is important to examine whether fundamental public relations principles can be applied therein with success.

Public Diplomacy: Public Relations Writ Large

In the ebb and flow of international relations throughout many decades, public diplomacy and “soft power” has too often been mainly aspirational. But its potential contribution for harmony now has great promise. It is not hyperbolic to say it: Public relations professionals have an epic opportunity to serve the global society and thereby win new appreciation of our profession.

This was posted on Linked In December 22, 2020:

Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates: Bring Back USIA-level “strategic communications” A cabinet post?

Robert M. Gates, the U.S. Secretary of Defense in the George W. Bush and Barack Obama Cabinets, has a foreign policy suggestion for President-Elect Joseph Biden:

Let's recapture primacy in strategic communications.

In an op ed in *The New York Times*, "The World Is Full of Challenges. Here's How Biden Can Meet Them", [Mr. Gates](#) recommends a return to a top-level U.S. "public diplomacy" agency perhaps reporting directly to the president. In effect, a new U.S. Information Agency which was quite successful during the Cold War.

(Full disclosure: In 1988, Paluszek was included in a group of media and public relations professionals in a series of glasnost/perestroika Moscow-Washington D.C. meetings hosted by the U.S. Information Agency. See below.)

As a key part of his counsel that the Biden Administration needs to update our foreign policy, Mr. Gates is quite explicit about the critical importance of America's voice in international affairs:

"...America's strategic communications - our ability to spread our message and influence governments and peoples - are pitifully inadequate and outdated.

"... in 1998 Congress abolished the U.S. Information Agency; subsequently, 'public diplomacy' was tucked into a corner of the State Department in an organization that today doesn't even report directly to the secretary of state.

"There is no coordination of messaging across the government, and efforts to make better use of social media and other technologies have been laggardly and disjointed. Surely,

the country that invented marketing, public relations and the internet can figure out how to recapture primacy in strategic communications."

This analysis suggests that a "new U.S. Information Agency", perhaps in linkage with the Voice of America, should have direct access to the Oval Office as a Cabinet level entity. Precedent: When he became U.S. Information Agency Director in the Kennedy Administration, iconic journalist Edward R. Murrow insisted on such access: "If you want me in on the landings, I'd better be there for the takeoffs."

Murrow's philosophy of transparency in government is timely: "To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable, we must be credible; credible, we must be truthful."

“Mr. Burson Meets the Soviets”

In December, 1988, Harold Burson—even then a public relations profession icon—led a group of about a dozen of American public relations and media executives in a series of Washington D.C. and Moscow meetings. In these sessions we met with our putative Soviet counterparts in an exchange of views and experiences. At this critical period of international tensions we addressed free speech, censorship and government information programs. The Soviets were led by Alexander Yakovlev, the chief of the Communist Party ideology and considered to be the intellectual force behind Mikhail Gorbachev’s reform program of glasnost and perestroika.

President Ronald Reagan in this December 23, 1988 acknowledgement letter:

“This is simply to thank you for all you’ve done for America by fostering private sector initiatives ... I’ve always believed government could draw on the counsel of private citizens who had the knowledge and expertise to solve problems and who would willingly share them at no cost to the taxpayers You have given invaluable advice about public relations I salute you for proving so well the private sector’s capabilities.”

Did we help change the world, even a bit? We’ll never know, but it’s just possible.

Fast forward from that Burson initiative to Stockholm, 2010, and The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management’s Sixth World Public Relations Forum. Klaus Schwab, eponymous founder and executive chairman of the globally-influential World Economic Forum, encouraged a “higher calling” for public relations.

“In a complex network future, public relations must build trust and create sustainable communities ... public relations [has] become even more crucial... provided global and other issues are addressed in the framework of the common interest of all stakeholders” (Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, 2010).

Syracuse University Program

The melding of public relations and public diplomacy has been manifested in U.S. communication curricula. A prime example: In the Fall, 2020, Syracuse University, a pioneer in this field, introduced a single-degree Public Diplomacy and Global Communications Master of Arts program. It combines public relations and international relations to help develop communicators who, it explains, would “learn the art of public diplomacy from people who have done what you want to do: work with governments, organizations and international corporations to make it possible for people on opposite ends of the world to understand and communicate with each other.”

The program builds upon a successful partnership between the Syracuse University S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communication and the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. The one-and-a-half year, 43-credit program includes a capstone project: an online portfolio of student work reviewed by professionals.

The program is impressive; its “marketing” is engaging:

“It’s easy to change the world for the worse. It’s harder to change it for the better. We’re here to teach you how to do the hard part.” <https://bit.ly/3yYNSo6>

III. Public Opinion: Democracy's Ultimate Arbiter

(November 3rd, 2020 – Some 155+ million Americans expressed their opinion by voting in the U.S. national election. Shockingly, just two months later, polarized terrorists within this electorate assaulted the U.S. Capitol.)

Public relations students and practitioners interested in—and, perhaps, committed to—the evolution of a sustainable global society should be prepared to “play the long game”.

Epic changes in global society, with their virtually countless forces pro and con (“tides and undertows”) must play out, even if over decades. This has surely been the case of the economic system we now call capitalism. And it has been the case as well, with various national and international results, on many “vertical” social issues, such as the decline of smoking tobacco, increased vehicle safety, and recycling.

In “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism” educator Shoshana Zuboff, while attacking the “surveillance society”, articulates the critical importance of public opinion, making an impassioned plea for “indignant young people” to become active in public affairs:

“The critical role of public opinion explains why even the most destructive ‘ages’ do not last forever... Whatever has gone wrong, the responsibility to right it is renewed with each generation...

“The future of this narrative [surveillance capitalism] will depend upon the indignant citizens, journalists, and scholars drawn to this frontier project; indignant elected officials and policy makers who understand that their authority originates in the foundational values of democratic communities; and, especially, indignant young people who act in the knowledge that effectiveness without autonomy is not effective ...

“[Milton] Friedman’s cycle of public opinion and durable law now reverts to us: it is up to us to use our knowledge, to regain our bearings, to stir others to do the same and to found a new beginning” (Zuboff, 2019, pp 520 – 524) <https://bit.ly/3gbEgiN>

This power of public opinion in liberal democratic societies is at the epicenter of tectonic societal movements. It is manifested primarily in the right to vote.

The case for companies making fair elections, voter turnout a priority

Full, fair elections: What's in it for business?

A leading international business organization asked that question and answered it expansively in the context of the current evolution of corporate social responsibility that is extending to embrace society as “a stakeholder”. The response: “Everything. A high-road, sustainability-minded company’s value depends on corporate social responsibility”

The American Sustainable Business Council (associated with European Sustainable Business Federation and International Society of Sustainability Professionals) strongly urged business leaders to support voter turnout. <https://bit.ly/37pl3Fo>

Decrying the dominance of "big donors" in politics as well as gerrymandering, bogus purging of registered voters, and meddling by foreign adversaries, the article lists eight practical, creative initiatives for maximizing voter turnout. They stress the need for workplace policies that facilitate employee voting and for evangelizing business colleagues and local communities.

Context

Sociology guide—A student guide to sociology summarizes this public opinion power:

“Public opinion is concerned with a matter of public importance ...

“Public opinion is for social welfare. The welfare of society is an essential characteristic of public opinion.

“Public opinion is arrived at after careful thought. It is the tentative deliberative adjustment of public to a situation. It is the logical view of things....

“Public opinion is related to a particular age or times. It is to be evaluated in the context of a particular situation.

“Public opinion has a cultural base. The culture of a society influences public opinion.

<https://bit.ly/3Atiy1h>

“Listen to the People”

The advent of “The Roiling Twenty-Twenties” brought with it what historians may well call tragic “perilous polarization” - the destructive chasm in public opinion referred to reductively as “experts” versus “the people”. This societal divide was especially regressive to global progress when applied to the value of science and informed research conclusions on the COVID-19 pandemic and inoculations.

However, in his 2020 book, “Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World”, Fareed Zakaria (implicitly, perhaps unintentionally, channeling public relations principles) suggested first steps in a constructive path forward:

“The public can grasp nuance if it is presented honestly ... After all, in democracies, at least, the people’s wishes are the ultimate source of authority. So, let’s be clear, as we navigate this pandemic and future crises, people need to listen to the experts. But the experts also need to listen to the people.” (Book pages 82, 96)

Interview: <https://nyti.ms/3mczjd2>

In the aftermath of the 2021 visceral assaults on truth and a democratic society - “anti-vaxxers” and the terrorists’ attack on the U.S. Capitol - perhaps this interpretation is precious: We must only listen to reliable people who are truly informed – yes, “experts”; and we should listen and confront early signs of dangerous anti-social threats.

In all cases: Carefully assess the credibility of every source of information.

The Takeaway

From time to time, reflect on these enduring, foundational truths about the power of public opinion in democracies:

Abraham Lincoln: “Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed.”

Mark Twain: “Its name is public opinion. It is held in reverence. It settles everything. Some think it is the voice of God.”

Joseph de Maistre: “In a democracy, the people get the leaders they deserve.”

May we always deserve – and serve - our democracy.

Questions for Discussion -

Part One

- 1.) Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic advanced or set back global interconnectedness and the prospects for the “sustainable society”? Why?

- 2.) Many racial-justice incidents and events - even lives lost – have accumulated in recent years and decades. Do you think the 2020-21 protests, and such subsequent demonstrations, “set the world on fire” progressively or regressively? Why?

- 3.) Is social media a net contributor or detractor to social cohesion and global progress? What are the pros and cons of social media?

Part Two

- 1.) To what extent do you believe that public relations professionals can influence an organization’s policies and performance, especially on social issues?

- 2.) After reading this book and perhaps with other sources, how well do you think “business” and capitalism are adapting to the values, interests and priorities of your generation and the generations to come?

- 3.) In addition to majoring and/or concentrating in public relations/communications, what other activities will help you to succeed in your career – and life?

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“Global Public Relations in the Roiling Twenty-Twenties

Confronting Disinformation, Serving a Sustainable Society” ...

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