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## Editors' letter: New research and opportunities in public relations and visual communication

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### ABSTRACT

We are proud to present four articles exploring the intersections of public relations and visual communication as a way to move both fields forward, together and separately. The articles focus on health communication, crisis communication, social media, and corporate social responsibility, and the editors end with concrete suggestions for future research, including expanding theory and methodological applications.

At the 2016 annual conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), we were three of 10 presenters on a panel exploring intersections between public relations and visual communication. This panel, and a similar one the following year, explored diverse topics including the role of visuals in crisis communications, ethics and visuals, employing visuals as part of relationship maintenance in the organization-stakeholder relationship, visuals as a mechanism for explaining complex scientific data, and improving health communication through visual narratives. At both panels, all of the seats were filled and the discussion following the sessions was robust.

However, we were struck by the lack of resources available to researchers and practitioners in the way of best practices, and the lack of more focused, deep and developed work done to bring the two fields together. After the 2016 conference, we dug into offerings from the past five years in major public relations and visual communication journals and discovered a dearth of research combining the two. In fact, the limited number of studies that touch on visuals are mainly focused on how to use a social media tool, rather than the role of visuals and visual narratives in the larger scope of public relations theory and practice.

The use of visuals by all manner of communicators is pervasive. Whether it's infographics, video, photography or emerging visual narrative forms such as augmented reality, visuals are employed to help increase the likelihood that a message is seen/heard, received, understood, and acted on. The research that exists in these areas tends to focus heavily on process, on the proper buttons to push or the right way to get students engaged, but not on measurement or theory testing. Recent work focuses on crisis communication (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2011; Dencik & Allan, 2017; De Waele and Claeys, 2017; Liu et al., 2017); health communication (e.g., King, 2015); using visuals to explore difference (e.g., Anarbaeva, 2016); using visuals to send messages (e.g., Grebelsky-Lichtman & Cohen, 2017; He, 2017) and a wealth of information about how specific organizations use different social media platforms (e.g., Agozzino, 2015; Allagui and Breslow, 2016; Kim, 2015; Kim & Molleda, 2011; Mortensen, Hull, & Boling, 2017; Verhoeven, Tench, Zeffass, Moreno, & Vercic, 2012). With respect to these articles and their contributions, often they end up reinforcing ideas that are familiar: that people respond more to communication that includes a visual, that the visual cannot be confusing or too complicated, and that visuals help us identify and connect with others more effectively.

In this special issue, we present four articles that address a range of ways to engage that growth as emerging research at the intersection of public relations and visual communication, offering concrete opportunities for both fields to expand, together and

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separately. The articles illustrate key areas of this intersection: health communication, crisis communication, social media, and corporate social responsibility, while also offering both traditional and new methods as well as theories from public relations and a variety of other fields.

### **1. HPV vaccination campaign fear visuals: an eye-tracking study exploring effects of visual attention and type on message informative value, recall, and behavioral intentions**

The issue's first study embraces visual communication's eye-tracking methodology. As our world is becoming increasingly focused on visual communication (Houts, Doak, Doak, and Loscalzo, 2006), this study's methodological and theoretical contribution to understanding how audiences process and react to visual stimulation is central to advancing research in the field. First, while eye tracking has been used in fields such as psychology, human-computer interaction, and marketing for decades, public relations scholars have been slow to adopt this psychophysiological approach. At the intersection of public relations and visual communication research, this contribution opens many new possibilities for understanding the cognitive mechanisms at play in audiences' responses to visuals. Further, while Witte's (1992) EPPM is often used to explore verbal fear-appeals, it is less common that this model is used in any context to study fear visuals. Thus, author Elizabeth Avery breaks new scholarly ground in not only public relations research but research in a variety of fields, and further begins to address what has been called a lack of effects-based public relations research on the role of visuals (Coombs & Holladay, 2011).

### **2. Effects of 360° video on attitudes toward disaster communication: mediating and moderating roles of spatial presence and prior disaster media involvement**

Taking readers deeper into the ideas of visual communication technology, authors Julia Daisy Fraustino, Ji Young Li, Hongmin Ahn, and Sang Lee link visuals to the disaster setting of a flood through 360° video. They present a laboratory experiment comparing traditional unidirectional video content as viewed on a computer monitor to 360° omnidirectional video content, a form of virtual reality (VR), as viewed in a head mounted display. Built on the ideas of spatial presence and telepresence (Heeter, 1992; Kim & Biocca, 1997; Minsky, 1980; Nowak & Biocca, 2003; Sheridan, 1992; Steuer, 1992), virtual reality allows users to experience a situation, rather than just view it, as in unidirectional video content. As crises are often difficult to understand in their full breadth, the 360° video approach holds promise as a way to show a crisis in a variety of public relations settings, including disaster readiness, donor engagement, and emergency response. In this context, the authors found users were more responsive to natural disasters they viewed in 360-video, as it allowed them to truly see the effects of a flood from their own perspective, unfiltered by media framing. Ultimately, 360-video offers a true telepresence for a given situation, and not a hypothetical one, as is traditionally used in crisis research.

### **3. Let's give them something to talk about: global brands' use of visual content to drive engagement and maintain relationships**

Digging deeper into the use of social media as a tool for relationship maintenance, study authors Pamela Brubaker and Christopher Wilson present a longitudinal content analysis of 1393 Facebook posts made by the world's top 100 brands in 2013 and 2014. While research (Chi, 2011; De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Labrecque, 2014; Mangold and Faulds, 2009) has shown consumers engage brand social media messages of all kinds, social media serve multiple purposes and content can vary across contexts from sales and promotion to crisis response and outreach. Thus, the authors examined brand posts, visuals used in posts, likes, comments, and shares to determine what kinds of posts sparked engagement from users. They found visuals do not necessarily drive engagement, but they do get users' attention, and help to predict likes and comments, a kind of endorsement that generates conversation among communities of networked users. In this context, visuals provide a sort of digital "stop sign," as the authors refer to it, for users to pause and engage.

### **4. Effects of emotional visuals and company-cause fit on memory of CSR information**

The final study in this special issue examines how emotional visuals and company-cause fit affect the memory of corporate social responsibility (CSR) messages. While most research on CSR company-cause fit focuses on the influence of perceptions of companies (e.g., Lee, Park, Rapert, & Newman, 2012) and some public relations research has demonstrated that the use of visuals in messages can increase attention (Galloway, 2017), little research has examined the role of visuals in the specific context of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Here, authors Son Young Lee and Sungwon Chung use Lang's (2006) limited capacity model of motivated mediated message processing (LC4MP) to study how different motivations (appetitive and aversive) trigger cognitive resources of varying levels (encoding, storage, retrieval). Further, much CSR research focuses on an outcome of increased public awareness, and not the awareness itself (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Lee & Shin, 2010; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). This study fills a gap in the research by exploring what increases CSR message memory, specifically positive/negative emotional visuals and high/low company-cause fit.

#### *4.1. Thinking ahead and moving forward*

The breadth of these four articles only scratches the surface of what the intersection of public relations and visual communication

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