

THE RELEVANCE REPORT 2020

# RELEVANCE

## R E P O R T

### 2020



**USC**  
**Annenberg**  
*Center for  
Public Relations*

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CENTER FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS

**RELEVANCE  
REPORT  
2020**

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**ABOUT THE RELEVANCE REPORT SURVEY**

The Relevance Report survey was conducted via Survey Monkey on Aug. 27-28, 2019, reflecting a U.S. census snapshot of 1,106 Americans.



*The mission of the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations is to connect corporations, agencies, academics and students to define the future of our industry and to develop those who will shape it. Our annual Relevance Report identifies emerging issues, examines current strategies and forecasts future trends.*



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world's largest public relations firms, with 50 offices around the globe. For the last 30 years, he has been providing marketing advice and crisis counsel to blue-chip companies like Nintendo, McDonald's and Toyota. Fred is the author of *Improvise: Unconventional Career Advice from an Unlikely CEO*.

# THE ROAD TO RELEVANCE

BY FRED COOK | @ FREDCOOK

Welcome to the 2020 edition of the USC Annenberg *Relevance Report*—a look into the future of one of the most dynamic professions on Earth. As in past years, we have curated a series of short essays from leading executives, academics and students in the public relations field, who are all connected to the University of Southern California.

Their stories cover a wide spectrum of topics and trends from Artificial Intelligence to Homelessness that will impact our society and our work in the coming year. I guarantee spending a few minutes scanning these pages will make you a little smarter and a lot more relevant to your company and your clients.

But first, what is relevance?

Relevance is hard to define and even harder to achieve. It's not the same as fame or popularity or power. It's more ephemeral, more elusive and more important. Brands seek it. Celebrities pursue it. Candidates crave it. At its most basic, relevance is simply being heard. Something every human needs.

When a story is relevant, people listen.  
When content is relevant, people share.  
When an issue is relevant, people act.

Every PR campaign strives to gain these outcomes. To earn the attention of the people they want to reach, by understanding what is truly meaningful to them.

This year, the Relevance Report offers a glimpse into what average Americans will tweet, stream and discuss in the coming year, based on a national consumer survey conducted in partnership with **Golin** and the **Institute of Public Relations**. The study examined what brands, technologies and media will connect with consumers in a meaningful way.

In some cases, the answers are simple: Americans rely on their mobile phones for information more than they do their televisions. In some cases, they're surprising: People want Disney tattoos more than Harley-Davidson ones. In some cases, they're ominous: U.S. citizens are more concerned about the policies of their own country than those of Russia.

In all cases, the answers are variable. A message that connects with one person may be rejected by another. If we add science to the art of Public Relations, we will discover human insights that lead to relevance. That's when our jobs become more interesting—and more relevant.

# CHANGING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

**BY WILLOW BAY | @WILLOW\_BAY**  
**USC ANNENBERG**

We're in the midst of a mental health crisis—one that has reached epidemic proportions. Universities, the place I work, are in many ways ground zero.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, nearly 1 in 5 American adults live with a mental illness. That's 46.6 million people. The situation is particularly acute in younger populations like Gen Z, where rates of anxiety and depression are rising at an alarming rate. The Child Mind Institute reports that "at some point, anxiety affects 30% of children and adolescents, yet 80% never get help." A study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that among adolescents and young adults, the suicide rate has reached its highest level in nearly two decades.

This is an area where all communications professions can make a big difference. We need to mobilize our collective intelligence, expertise and resources to confront this public health crisis by raising awareness and decreasing the stigma associated with mental health. We can leverage communication strategies

to change attitudes, beliefs and practices. We already see Gen Z leading the way.

At college campuses like USC, student journalists are rethinking how they cover suicides. Recognizing that "reporting on suicide can have the danger of inspiring others," our students at Annenberg Media cover suicides only in rare instances. Recently, the editorial board of the university's student newspaper, the *Daily Trojan*, acknowledged that "with students as our core audience, we must remain sensitive to our readers' wellness," changing its policy to limit reporting on student suicides.

As teachers of journalists, public relations and communications professionals, we are encouraging our students to create communication campaigns to increase awareness and decrease stigma around mental health. In honor of their daughter, Kaleigh Finnie, a Trojan who passed away after her freshman year, Kaleigh's parents established an endowment in her name that provides scholarships and awards to Annenberg students who are studying mental health. Thanks to this gift, we'll be able to support more students in this work.

We also need a collective communications effort in our larger society, and we're beginning to see steps in the right direction. A recent report from social analytics firm News-Whip suggests mental health conversations on social media are increasing, and brands are using social media platforms to address mental health issues. One of the loudest megaphones for destigmatizing this conversation has come from celebrities like Prince Harry, the NBA's Kevin Love and Selena Gomez, all of whom have spoken about their struggles and encouraged followers to seek help and know they're not alone.

Employees are starting to voice their perspectives in public, too. In a tweet that went viral, an employee shared her CEO's response to her mental health day in which he praised her: "You are an example to us all, and help cut through the stigma so we can all bring our whole selves to work." We need to encourage more companies to follow this CEO's example—not just to add mental health benefits but to contribute to this conversation around their employees' mental well-being.

As the tech world grapples with its downsides, more employees there are actively managing their mental health. And in true Silicon Valley style, startups are popping up that offer on-demand therapy with promises of "getting better 10x faster," and "dating" apps designed to match patients and therapists.

It's clear from the data that facilitating conversations about mental health can help to reduce the stigma, a positive new trend



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and potentially a leading indicator of meaningful change in how we think about mental wellness. There should be open dialogue about mental health in homes, schools, workplaces and communities. We all need to do what we can to support this conversation, extending its impact and its reach.



# FIRST THINGS FIRST: INSPIRING TRUST WITH EMPLOYEES

BY BLYTHE YEE  
LINKEDIN

*Investing in trust is an investment  
in long-term business performance*

It's been a hard year for trust. If it were a product we were trying to sell, we'd be alarmed about its future. We're surrounded by headlines of trust gone wrong. From employees staging walkouts over business practices to intensifying scrutiny on who to do business with, companies are standing in a big bright spotlight. And they are struggling to maintain the confidence of their employees, customers, investors and the public.

To help shift the eroding culture of trust, leaders need to start by looking inward—to the people who are closest to their business—employees. Leaders who aspire to build high-trust organizations do three things: They establish guiding principles, create values-driven cultures, and reinforce open and transparent communications. The payoff for this is not just a culture that draws in and engages top talent, it's also good for the bottom line. Edelman's 2019 Trust Barometer

shows that 'high trust' companies in the U.S. outperformed their peers by an average of 5%.

Trust within an organization is reinforced by consistent behavior over time. When leaders set guiding principles for trust, they create a clear, consistent ethical bar for doing business. Principles vary depending on the organization, but in general they should address how data is used, what customers can expect, and how employees can report issues and share feedback without retribution. Setting the expectation that trust is the first principle for doing business helps avoid or minimize decisions that break trust.

Employees have changing expectations about how and when their companies take a stand on issues they care about. Having clearly articulated values that are authentically reinforced throughout the organization helps create shared cultural expectations. To be effective in building trust, values need to move past just being words on a page to being actively used in decision making and recognition.

They can also help steer the course on complex topics that span across personal and professional identities, such as diversity, politics, and social issues. Patagonia is a shining example of aligning values with business practices. Can you imagine how employees might react if the company did things that were out of sync with its belief in being an active steward for the environment?

The most demonstrable way to showcase commitment to trust is through open, transparent communications that start at the top of the organization. This takes an unwavering leadership commitment to sharing an insider's view with employees, not just when things are going well, but most importantly when things aren't. Having the courage to openly talk about where you're falling short or when you've made a misstep is one of the most powerful ways to build trust. One bright example of this was how Microsoft's CEO and head of HR responded to a surge of women who were frustrated about their advancement within the company. It was hard feedback to hear, but the leaders moved quickly to address the concerns and open doors for discussions on how to get better. This constructive approach was possible because of the ongoing commitment to open communication.

Employee trust can make or break the success of a company, and it's imperative for leaders to invest in building a strong foundation to maintain confidence over time. To continue to win the hearts and minds of employees, trust needs to be the first leadership principle. The payoff for this is a more engaged and commit-



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ted organization, a stronger brand for retaining and recruiting top talent, and employees who are invested in helping their business thrive. To be a company you believe in, it all starts with trust.

# A ROLE FOR BUSINESS IN HEALING FRAGMENTED SOCIETIES

BY BOB FELDMAN

ICF NEXT

In the United States and many other places around the world, we are seeing the fragmentation of societies, the emergence of extremism, populism, and the clustering of like-minded people into hostile camps deeply suspicious of the other's values and motives.

One result of this fragmentation has been a kind of governmental paralysis in which major problems go unsolved. Yet polling data tell us that on any of a number of supposedly intractable issues, there is in fact a broad consensus. We see it in the immigration debate, in health care, in taxation, gun violence and even abortion. Why are we unable to translate consensus into policy, and policy into action?

Many have offered explanations, ranging from globalization, gerrymandering, social media, cable news, automation, and an inadequate educational system. Whatever the reason, it is driving people out of the debate, leaving the vacuum to be filled by more extreme voices.

We cannot afford to continue down this road. And while there has been much talk lately

about restoring civility to our public life—a worthy goal, to be sure—we need something more: a genuine willingness and ability to engage constructively with people we disagree with.

I believe that communications professionals and our companies have a major role to play in restoring constructive civic engagement. Why companies? Edelman's most recent trust barometer said business is now expected to be an agent of change. The employer is “the new safe house in global governance.” In our fragmented societies, work may be the last place where we engage on more than a superficial level with people who have viewpoints different from our own.

Many companies have already responded to BlackRock CEO Larry Fink's admonition to articulate a higher corporate purpose. Surely the elevation of our civic discourse is a purpose worthy of serious commitment. There are undoubtedly lots of ways to accomplish that. Here are three:

## 1. FACILITATE DIALOGUE BETWEEN ADVERSARIES

I've been active in the organization Seeds of Peace, a remarkable organization that brings together extraordinary young people in their teens and 20s from the Middle East. The centerpiece of the Seeds of Peace program is a summer camp in Maine at which hundreds of young Palestinians, Israelis, Egyptians and others come together for the first time and learn to listen and better understand "the other side."

Leslie Lewin, its executive director, says it is essential to start with values, not issues. Through professional facilitation and time, participants develop the capacity to genuinely listen, understand, and even begin to respect the other person's opinion. Corporations can embrace this approach to manage conflict within the organization and to train people to be more effective citizens outside it.

## 2. SUPPORT EDUCATION AND CRITICAL THINKING

The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said, "Everyone is entitled to one's own opinion, but not to one's own facts." But when people increasingly get their "facts" from ideologically driven news outlets, they just talk past each other. To help people broaden their base of information, and their skills in evaluating it, we need to do more to support education, scientific literacy, and critical thinking. We also need to encourage and support information consumption habits that will get people out of their bubbles and encouraged to see things from different perspectives.



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## 3. APPLY THE PRINCIPLES OF CORPORATE CHARACTER

The Arthur W. Page Society, an association composed of chief communications officers of large companies and agency CEOs, has emphasized the importance of corporate character and the activation of values. These values include respecting the needs and values of all stakeholders, inclusivity, and a commitment to live those values. We need to live them outside our corporate roles, in every aspect of our social interactions, and encourage others to do the same.

These are only a few ideas. I'm sure there are more worth trying.

The stakes are high. Around the world, we once again face the challenge of making compromise, tolerance and moderation more appealing than the seductive fantasies of extremists. Who better to take up the challenge than those of us who communicate for a living?

# THE DISRUPTION OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

BY DON SPETNER | @SPETD  
WEBER SHANDWICK

I was reading a report on the next generation of communications leaders, when I came across the following simple sentence:

“Communications is arguably one of the most disrupted professions.”

This declaration set me back on my heels. To tell the truth, it kind of shocked me. When I imagine disrupted professionals, I think of newspaper reporters, retail merchants, music executives, steelworkers, television producers and dozens of others whose industries are in upheaval. But I never really thought of my own profession as disrupted.

But there it was, right in my face. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the report was accurate. The world of corporate communications has been disassembled, and we are in various stages of disarray, evolution and transformation.

Agencies have been the first to shed the old models, and not surprisingly: For agencies, transformation and adaptation is an economic necessity. The old maxim of “change or die” is critically relevant to purveyors of commu-

nications services, and so they have evolved. They’ve expanded their offerings, recast their value propositions, and experimented with business models.

Consider these taglines from some of the world’s largest PR firms:

*“We move people.”*

*“We solve.”*

*“We build influence and deliver impact.”*

Yes, but what exactly do they do? PR agencies now offer everything from full-service paid advertising, to social listening, to digital marketing, to management consulting, and, yes, of course, they still sell old-fashioned media relations.

On the client side, in-house departments are being forced to reorganize and reimagine themselves as they grapple with the complex realities of a digital society. Communications functions are being asked to lead enterprise-wide initiatives ranging from employee engagement, to change management, to social

activism, to early identification and escalation of enterprise risk. Complicating these challenges is the reality that traditional organizational structures—and the existing talent pools—are not up to the task. Staff must be retrained, new roles and responsibilities must be mapped, and advanced skills must be developed or acquired.

I've had the good fortune of working with two of the more visionary chief communications officers, and when they talk about the future of the function it's with language I've never heard before from communications professionals.

One revealed that her department is using artificial intelligence to scan 20,000 outlets a day in order to provide a daily briefing that's relevant and impactful. "We're a little bit like the CIA," she says, "we're an intelligence group."

Another is investing in predictive analytics. "You have to be able to create actionable intelligence to know where the puck is heading," he says. "We can now track stakeholder behavior. We can do social listening. We can look at correlations and patterns. Bringing that all together is critically important for our organization."

The wisest insight he shared, and one that should be heeded by every leader of a communications department, is boldly challenging: "We have to position our function as a value center, not a cost center. We must constantly ask the question: What is the value that we're driving?"



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It's a great and relevant question, and one that will ultimately help us manage through disruption, rather than extinction.

# CAREER DECISION-MAKING IN THE AGE OF MISINFORMATION

BY MEGAN JORDAN | @COMMSPROFMEG  
CHROMADEX

We are living in an era where misinformation, or worse yet, disinformation campaigns are far too common. From the mudslinging in politics, to the safety—or lack thereof—of e-cigarettes and vaping, to innovative start-ups disrupting Wall Street, how do you know where the truth lies? And when it comes to your career in the communication industry, how do you know you are working for the “good guy”?

In politics, we have seen the influence and resulting impact of hyper-targeted digital content that not only defines the candidate, but colors the nature and track record—true or not—of the opponent. The voter is left to do their own homework, select the most compelling narrative, and discern the facts as best they can. And employees find themselves in the same position.

Fortunately, the significance of mis- and disinformation campaigns in politics has been thrust onto the public agenda, and there is a call for greater transparency in social media and digital content.

However, misinformation strategies are used

well beyond politics, and the deception is not always digitally driven. As in the case with Theranos, even highly respected journalists and successful investors can fall victim to the scam. Even Theranos’ own employees were deceived by misinformation espoused by a few individuals at the top of the company.

The good news for business is that with greater awareness of the problem comes an enhanced focus on the development of solutions to help discern the facts. For example, data analytics firms have developed early detection tools for digital activations, and the increasing use of artificial intelligence in reporting allows for a deeper level of research through data scraping and analytics.

But as an individual, without access to those tools, how do we safeguard our decision making when it comes to our own careers? If communications professionals mistakenly accept a position working for a company that uses misinformation or disinformation as a strategy, not only have they damaged their career, but they are also complicit in the deception.

So to help guide your career decision making in this age of misinformation, you need to re-think your approach to critical thinking.

### SEEK ALTERNATE VIEWS

Question everything, taking nothing for granted. Is there evidence to support every point? Do you get the same answer to your questions from multiple parties, both inside and outside of the company? Probe your own network to identify former employees who may be in your broader professional network. To further vet the information you have gathered, contact outsiders who are familiar with the company, including agency partners, industry associations and media that have covered the company. They will have different perspectives and will give you additional color beyond just business operations.

### FOLLOW THE MONEY

If the position is with a company that is publicly traded, read the SEC filings and listen to earnings calls, including recordings or transcripts from previous quarters. Look for consistency in business strategy, and pay particular attention to Form 10-K which details operations and risk exposure. Review business media coverage including the comments on articles. If possible, review analyst reports. Then talk to your own financial advisor, particularly if they work for a big investment firm. Understand who is investing in the company and why.

### CALIBRATE STRATEGIES

Develop a high-level scenario plan for three risks facing the company, mapping out your recommended communications strategies.



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Craft the messaging for each scenario. Then discuss the scenarios and messaging with the company's communications and leadership team to evaluate how closely their response aligns with your approach.

### ASSESS THE VALUES

Most companies have adopted a set of corporate values. How readily the leadership and employees can relay them to a candidate is telling. Values-based organizations make it a priority to weave messaging about their values into their communications. Also look closely at the department or team-level and consider the ethics and values that need to be instilled through all levels of a communications organization to ensure it is only communicating the truth.

### CREATE A SAFETY NET

Once you make a career decision and move into the new position, put the necessary checks and balances in place that will stand the test of time. Situations change, executive transitions occur, and businesses encounter headwinds. As a result, strategies may change,



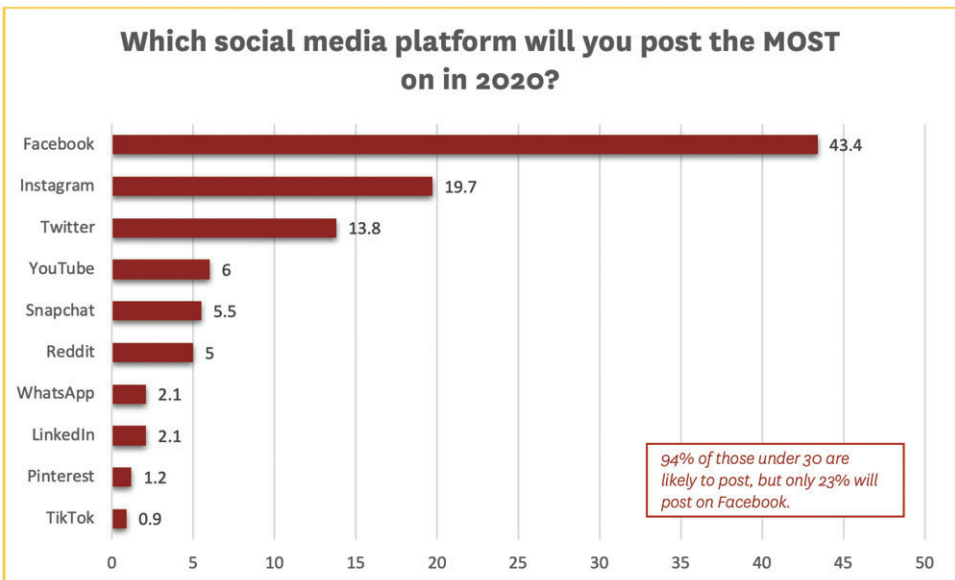
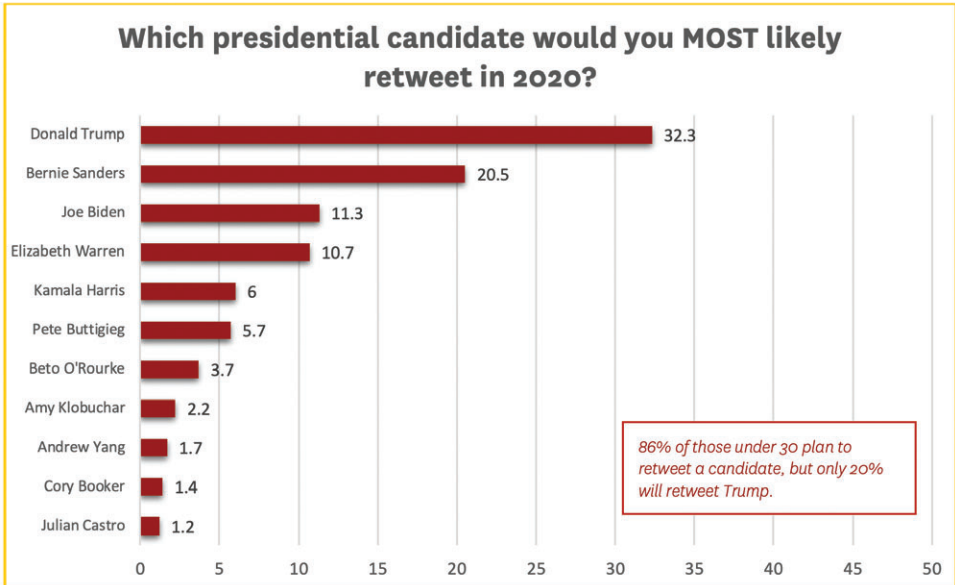
and it is important to create a safety net to identify misinformation as quickly as possible. Make use of the technology and listening tools at your disposal. Build a values-centered organization, hiring professionals not just for what they do, but also for how they do it. Establish a confidential process for raising concerns. And reinforce company values.

As we evaluate job opportunities in this age of misinformation, we must re-think our approach to critical thinking, seek out multiple points of view, and build values-based safeguards into our organizations.

This more rigorous approach to career decision making is essential to ensure the integrity of our profession, protect careers, and fulfill our obligation to provide only truth-based communications to the audiences we serve.

## 2020 RELEVANCE REPORT RESULTS

The USC Center for PR partnered with the Institute for Public Relations and GOLIN to survey 1,000 Americans about which products, brands and people will be MOST relevant to them in 2020. The results of the survey, which was conducted via Survey Monkey on August 28, 2019, are shared throughout this book.



# ACHIEVING GENDER PARITY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

**BY TINA MCCORKINDALE, PH.D., APR | @TMCCORKINDALE**  
**INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS**

The World Economic Forum (WEF) annually tracks the progress of 149 countries toward gender parity on four dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The bad news is the WEF 2018 Global Gender Gap Report predicts most of us won't see economic parity based on gender in our lifetimes. The earliest predicted adopter is Western Europe, and that's not supposed to happen for another 61 years.

According to the WEF, most companies still see a gender gap with women being significantly underrepresented in the corporate pipeline, and the public relations industry is no exception. In 2016, the Global Women in PR study revealed that although two-thirds of the global PR industry are women, 78% of the CEOs in the top 30 PR agencies worldwide are men and they occupy 62% of seats at the PR boardroom table.

To study gender and leadership in public relations, the Institute for Public Relations embarked on a two-phase study with KPMG. The final report will create a roadmap of experiences and actions that individuals and orga-

nizations can adopt and support to grow equal leadership in public relations. The focus of the report is on equity and parity.

Based on the results of the first phase of the study, my co-authors, Rebecca Rickett (Prudential) and Megan Dubrowski (KPMG), and I developed calls-to-action to help our industry improve (more to come with the publication of the second phase):

## **1. GENDER EQUALITY IS NOT JUST FOR WOMEN, BUT FOR MEN, TOO.**

Both men and women should work together to fight for equality for all individuals in our field, including transgender professionals. Equality benefits everyone. A 2019 LeanIn.Org survey found 60% of male managers said they are uncomfortable doing workplace activities such as mentoring, socializing, or having one-on-one meetings with women. This perception is extremely detrimental to our industry and to the career path of future leaders.

## **2. POTENTIAL PAY GAPS MUST BE ADDRESSED NOW.**

Only 15% of our respondents said there was a program to assess potential pay gaps based on

gender (38% were not sure) at their organizations. Half said they have experienced pay discrimination based on gender.

### **3. LEADERS MUST PRIORITIZE ACTION.**

Sixty percent of respondents have seen gender bias in their organizations. Change starts at the top, and leaders must be intentional. Leaders must ensure their boards reflect the diversity they seek to embed. Scrutinizing internal practices to ensure equity in hiring and promotion decisions is critical as is being transparent. Companies must also mitigate biases and increase cultural competency.

### **4. REVIEW POLICIES AND MAKE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE.**

While 92% of respondents said their organization offers maternity leave, only 56% offer paternity leave. Family leave policies are critical for both men and women. Some respondents said they had been penalized in their promotion trajectory after returning from leave—in fact, 46% said any type of leave would hurt their careers. Nearly all respondents said flex work arrangements are important to them. Policies should be enacted consistently.

### **5. TAKE CARE OF YOURS AND OTHERS' CAREERS.**

Twenty percent of respondents said they have never had a mentor, which is surprising considering how critical mentors and sponsors are to success. Forty percent said their mentor helped them receive a job promotion. Organizations should encourage their employees to find a mentor or sponsor to help guide their careers. My career success has been helped by the support of my mentors and sponsors, most of them are men.



**TINA MCCORKINDALE, PH.D.**, is president and CEO of the Institute for Public Relations, an independent research non-profit that studies the profession of PR.

Gender parity is just one area where our industry needs improvement. It's important to note that gender should not be considered in isolation. Rather, it's the intersectionality of individuals and groups—the interconnect-edness of race, gender, status, etc. Improving diversity, equity, and inclusion is critical for all marginalized groups, including people of color and the LGBTQ+ community. The public relations industry needs to do better and we have an obligation as a profession that represents both internal and external stakeholders.

Additionally, achieving equality can't be a one-off campaign. Instead, companies' commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) must be embedded throughout the organization and championed at the top. Until there is parity across the board, we must continue to challenge the status quo for change.

# PUBLIC RELATIONS FUNDAMENTALS ARE UNDER ATTACK

**BY MICHAEL STEWART**  
**HYUNDAI MOTOR AMERICA**

Reports on the demise of traditional communications strategies and tactics are greatly exaggerated.

On an almost daily basis, both internally and externally, I hear comments dismissing some of the staples of our communications programming—“auto shows are dead,” “earned media isn’t influencing customer decisions,” “traditional tactics like ride and drive programs and press releases don’t work,” among many other critiques. I’m sure the same is true for other industries, but it likely varies based on the industry and product.

Much of this is driven by the desire to do things differently, chase new technologies and platforms, and find ways to be innovative in reaching customers. Those are all things worth doing, but they shouldn’t necessarily come at the expense of traditional tactics that continue to prove effective, even as customer behavior changes.

## **THE DEATH OF THE AUTO SHOW?**

What surprises me most is that the desire to

do things differently is rarely supported by data. Take auto shows for instance.

It has become popular to dismiss the traditional auto show as having run its course, being old fashioned and too expensive. There is a movement among some car companies to no longer introduce new vehicles at auto shows, but instead at separate programs outside the convention center halls and auto show circuit. The argument being that you get the stage and media all to yourself without competitive announcements. There are certainly products and occasions where doing something separate is smart, but generally speaking, the auto show still drives tremendous value and regularly exceeds that of a standalone event at a lower cost.

At the 2019 New York Auto Show, Hyundai introduced the all-new 2020 Sonata in a traditional setting, but in an innovative way with a first-of-its-kind augmented reality experience. That press conference saw hundreds of media in attendance and 5,500 viewers watching online. In comparison, one of Hyundai’s

competitors introduced a new vehicle at a standalone event a few weeks before the auto show. Analysis of the media coverage from those events was striking:

	Hyundai New York Auto Show	Competitive Standalone Press Event
Number of Articles/Posts	751	52
Number of Impressions	259.6 million	4 million
Event Cost	\$2 million	\$2.5 million
Cost/Impression	\$0.01	\$0.63

As you can see, the built-in infrastructure and audience of the auto show led to results that far exceeded what one company could do on its own. The media cycle around the auto show, particularly in a major media market like New York, generated significantly more awareness and visibility for the Sonata than the competitive product. That’s just one example, but it would be hard to conclude that the auto show is dead from those results. Its role is certainly evolving, but it can still deliver a significant impact if utilized the right way.

**DOES EARNED MEDIA MATTER ANYMORE?**

In a fractured media landscape, there is a school of thought that says resources for traditional media activities should be allocated towards digital and social media where customers are spending more time and can be reached directly. When it comes to purchasing a new car, however, research shows that earned media coverage still has a significant role in the purchase process and customer decision making.

We are constantly surveying customers to find



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out what sources of information they used when buying a new car. Of the most influential sources, three of the top six are influenced by traditional public relations: third-party website content, consumer recommendation guides, and automotive reviews. And these all out-rank owner communications, TV ads and social media.

These results might be surprising, but

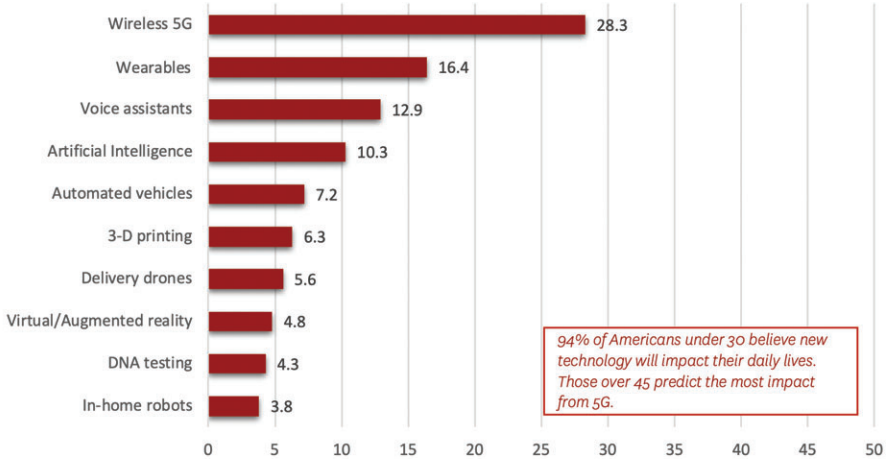
shoppers continue to rely upon and trust third-party commentary and reviews. The most important mindset shift needs to be in figuring out how to blend traditional activities with newer ways of building brands and reaching customers. It's finding the right mix, and allocating resources in a way that maximizes impact. It shouldn't be one or the other.

We are doing that at Hyundai by incorporating a customized social media influencer program into all of our vehicle launch events. We are complementing the earned media coverage with social media content that reaches the target audience for the particular vehicle. At our most recent launch, for the all-new three-row Palisade SUV, the influencer portion of the launch generated 6.1 million true impressions, 250,000 engagements and a 14% engagement rate.

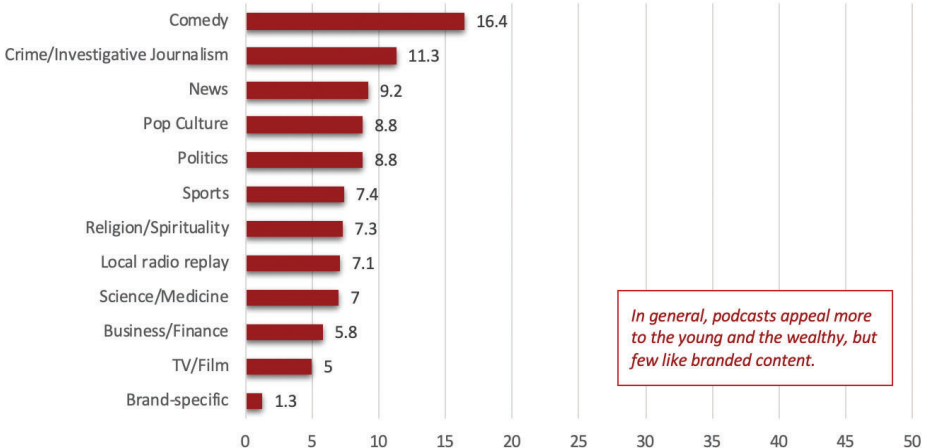
You never want to be the last one to recognize a significant industry shift, but there is still life left in traditional programming. Renewing focus on core public relations strategies and defending their value in generating business results will be far more beneficial than making a change just for the sake of change.

## 2020 RELEVANCE REPORT RESULTS

### Which emerging technology will MOST impact your daily life in 2020?



### Which type of podcast are you MOST likely to listen to on your daily commute?





# ENGAGING COMMUNITIES SUPPORTS INDUSTRIAL BRANDS' LICENSE TO OPERATE

**BY TOM LANGE | @TLANGE23**  
**UNION PACIFIC**

Brands often have operated as business to consumer (B2C) or business to business (B2B) organizations, choosing a lane largely based upon the industry in which they functioned. Consumer packaged goods (CPG) companies defaulted to B2C, while industrial manufacturers and heavy industry defaulted to B2B. Today, an emerging lane—Brand to Community—is rising to an equal place of importance for a company's reputation and social license to operate. This is especially true for industrial organizations because community members typically don't have the chance to interact with them through point-of-purchase or advertising.

In 2016, the Global Cities Business Alliance published a report that showed 41% of executives didn't know or didn't consider how satisfied they were with business interactions with communities, while only 17% were extremely or very satisfied with their interactions. Just three years later, it's obvious that failing to invest in engaging and influencing communities puts an organization's future at risk.

A brand's purpose and societal impact are

critical to millennials and even more so to Gen Z. Broadly speaking, communities today want companies to be more than an employer, economic driver and philanthropic contributor. They want companies to actively demonstrate that we care about a community's well-being and way of life, and that we're emotionally invested with them. Communities seek a relationship akin to the friendships they have as individuals, or at least a collaborative working relationship many of us enjoy in our professional environments. While that doesn't mean we necessarily agree on every community issue, it does require companies to invest in greater levels of outreach and engagement than perhaps they are accustomed.

CPGs, more than manufacturers, are in tune with this mindset. CPGs historically have understood the value of empathy and building one-on-one relationships. Industrial and heavy industry organizations are now starting to embrace that strategy by positively positioning their companies as influencers in their respective communities.

At its core, influencer communications is just a different version of spokesperson communications. While influencers have their skeptics—*The Drum's* 2019 report found 4% of survey respondents trust online influencers vs. 16% who said they believe in Bigfoot—brands see positive marketing results from working with influencers. It follows that communications pros—particularly in the industrial sector—can use our storytelling skills to position our brands as influencers within their communities.

Research supports this approach. The 2019 *Edelman Trust Barometer* reports a record peak in trust inequality between the informed public and the mass population. This difference creates the motivation for brands to inform their various target audiences and gain their trust.

A 2019 Pew Research Center report shows 90% of U.S. adults go online to connect with family, friends, search for information and get news. For that reason, content delivered by influencers, which are less scripted and more authentic, often works harder for brands than advertising. Content marketing can speak to a company's values and reputation, with stories explaining the "why" more than just the "what." GE has been masterful at this, both in telling stories and promulgating them to audiences across the web.

One of the ways Union Pacific shares its impact and engages audiences is telling stories about outcomes stemming from our community-giving program. For example, one of our grant recipients, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit, exposes high school students to



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career opportunities in automotive mechanics. The headline "Teens Learn Auto Skills One Mustang at a Time" attracted thousands of clicks via a small paid promotion. More importantly, that compelling and authentic content generated significant positive community engagement as part of our brand-building effort in Southern California.

As brands look to the future, communicators who create meaningful community connections will best position their brands for growth and will generate the social capital to cushion the impact of whatever crisis lands at their doorstep.

# WORLD BUILDING AND IMMERSIVE BRANDING

BY HENRY JENKINS | @HENRYJENKINS  
USC ANNENBERG

Perhaps these news stories caught your attention during late Summer 2019. The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf launched two pop-ups in Los Angeles, which transformed their locations into Central Perk, the iconic hang-out of the beloved characters on “Friends.” For one week only, the locations were decked out with Friends-themed decor, a photo booth featuring the memorable orange couch, and special Central Perk sleeves were produced for hot drinks. All of this was part of a larger campaign to commemorate “Friends” 25th anniversary, which also included a Central Perk LEGO set and Pottery Barn mugs.

Meanwhile, Amazon worked with a range of brands to offer food, movie tickets, gas and hotel stays at 1959 prices as part of a For Your Consideration campaign for “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,” which was in contention for multiple Emmy Awards. This promotion got wide-spread news coverage when traffic snarl-ups around a Los Angeles Chevron station—as customers sought 30 cent gas—led police to request that the promotion be discontinued.

Both campaigns might be considered examples of immersive branding: Consumers are

invited to have a multisensory encounter with a fictional world. It’s yet another strategy by which entertainment properties and brands are creating memorable experiences at a time of media- and brand-saturation. Immersive branding has a larger history, but as these two examples suggest, these practices are being reimagined to exploit the potentials for grassroots circulation and promotion—hence, the photo booth set-up at Central Perk encouraging participants to spread the word through Twitter, Facebook and other social network platforms. Fans want to be *there*, inside these fictional worlds, and they want their friends to see them *there*, creating opportunities for brands to spread their messages.

There is a long history of brands hosting rides and other location-based entertainment intended to translate their core messages into memorable visitor experiences. Sinclair hosted Dinoland at the 1964 New York Worlds Fair, leading into the concept of fossil fuel by constructing life-size thunder lizards, including a 70-foot-long version of its mascot, the brontosaurus. When the Fair closed, the dinosaurs traveled the country, often being set up in filling station parking lots. (I have

a photo of my family at such an installation from my boyhood years.) When Walt Disney constructed Epcot as part of its theme park cluster in Orlando, they invited a range of brands to host attractions, including Exxon which hosted the World of Energy, which now featured animatronic dinosaurs.

For the most part, these examples of experience-based marketing were permanent—or at least semi-permanent—installations, compared to today's pop-up, one-week-only experiences. Pop-ups have become all the rage in the worlds of fashion and food, especially in Los Angeles and New York. Nike now does limited edition sneakers to create Twitter storms amongst hardcore collectors; Disney offers short-term food items or redecorates its parks to create opportunities for influencers to work their magic. Pop-ups create a sense of urgency—perhaps too effectively in the case of Chevron's "Mrs. Maisel" tie-in.

To understand these more recent examples of immersive branding, we need to look at trends in the branding of entertainment franchises. Over the past decade, media companies have invested more money and advertising agencies more creativity into the staging of "activations" at consumer shows like SXSW or San Diego Comic-Con. During SXSW 2018, HBO shuttled attendees—each wearing black or white cowboy hats—out to a mock western town they had constructed on two acres of land to promote the second season of "Westworld." Hosts (actors, not androids, as on the series) improvised Wild West interactions with guests much as they might within the fictional amusement park.



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Research suggests the average networked fan may convince 20 or more other viewers—friends, family members, colleagues—to try out a new entertainment franchise. With most of the 135,000 Comic-Con attendees active on social media, producers and networks behind "Watchmen," "Brooklyn 99," "The Good Place," "Carnival Row," and "Pennyworth" provided "experiences" and activations, hoping to gain another edge in a year when nearly 500 scripted shows will be launched.

Immersive branding makes sense for entertainment brands because Hollywood is increasingly interested in constructing worlds rather than simply telling stories. Worlds are complex systems with many moving parts (multiple clusters of characters and contexts), which may generate multiple films or TV projects across the history of the franchise. Think about the many films, games, books, and series surrounding "Star Wars" or the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Building out such worlds represents a strategy for intensifying engagement, encouraging fans to spend more time (and money) within these cult fictions.

Introducing complex worlds to new audiences requires careful orientation so that they will not be overwhelmed. Campfire, a branding company created by veterans of “The Blair Witch Project” (1999’s digital marketing success story), tackled the launch of “Game of Thrones” using a multisensory approach—both online and off—to help potential fans grasp the diverse environments in Westeros. For example, they partnered with celebrity chef Tom Colicchio to develop distinctive cuisines for King’s Landing, Winterfell, and other kingdoms, dispersing moving food trucks across Los Angeles and New York to offer patrons a chance to taste the fantasy.

What does this mean for consumer brands? Some have been building up worlds around their goods and services for years. Consider the McDonaldland promotions of the 1970s–1990s as a means of mapping the relationship between the fast food company’s various offerings. Today, Ronald McDonald may be the only character from this promotion still in active use, though characters like the Hamburglar persist in pop culture. LEGO has been able to break into the top tier of theme parks with attractions designed to promote their building blocks, and The World of Coca-Cola remains one of the most popular attractions for people visiting Atlanta. Other brands have the potential to construct rich and compelling worlds brand enthusiasts will want to visit.

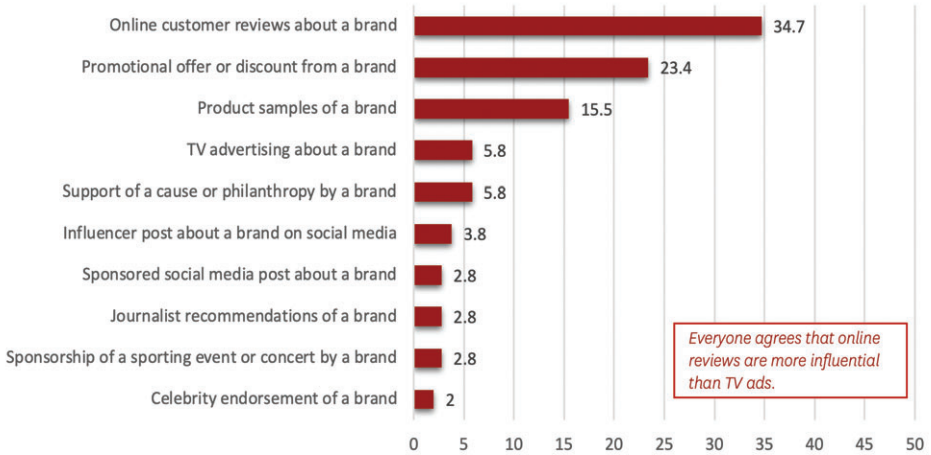
And some brands should consider partnering with entertainment franchises. These

cross-promotions work best where there is an organic connection—Chevron situates itself through its pricing, if nothing else, within the 1950s milieu of “Mrs. Maisel,” while Coffee Bean hopes its temporary impersonation of Central Perk may leave lasting impressions. Brands need to know these fictional realms well: Bad alignments may antagonize fans, as Covergirl did when it marketed “Colors of the Capital” tied to “The Hunger Games.” In “The Hunger Games,” the Capital is a site of decadence and corruption, hosting forces the fictional protagonists are fighting against, an association the brand probably wanted to avoid!

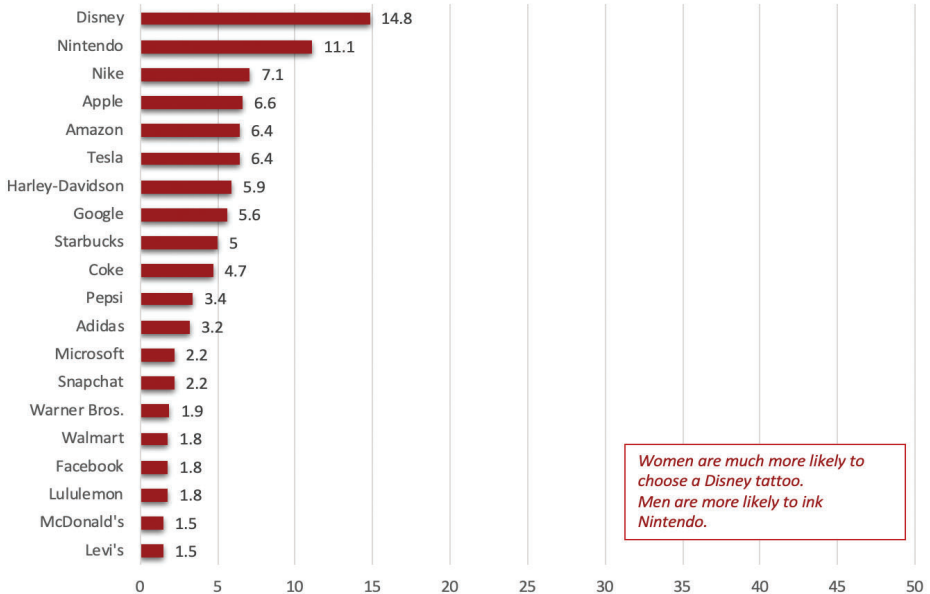
As fans immerse themselves into these multi-sensory, emotionally powerful reconstructions of fictional realms, the attachments and associations they form around brands are designed to be memorable and are apt to be lasting. So, make your choices wisely.

## 2020 RELEVANCE REPORT RESULTS

### Which is MOST likely to influence your purchase decisions in 2020?



### If you had to get a tattoo of a brand logo in 2020, which brand would you choose to ink on your body?



# TRACKING THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

BY JONNY BENTWOOD | @JONNYBENTWOOD  
GOLIN

There are a few common problems every PR pro faces but rarely has an answer to:

1. How can we influence the C-Suite when there are so many calls for their attention?
2. How do we prove the value of PR when frequently used KPIs (such as impressions) are little more than vanity metrics?

Fortunately, the answer to both these questions is the same—the Customer Journey.

Research from the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations in its 2019 *Global Communications Report* stated that there is a clear disparity between what CEOs want and what in-house communicators see as their goal. In fact, the whole C-Suite have different objectives—the CEO wants sales, the CCO talks coverage, the CFO worries about margin and the bottom line. Is it any wonder that with every executive talking a different language that PR has such difficulty trying to push mindshare in their direction by discussing hard-to-grasp concepts such as *earned media penetration* or dubious ones such as *reach*?

The customer journey is the solution. Known previously as the purchase funnel, this is the five-step process a potential customer travels through from being first aware of a company's solution, to considering it against the competition, forming an opinion about it, purchasing it, and finally advocating its benefits to their community.

Industry analyst firm Aberdeen Group has proven that when PR follows a customer journey approach, they increase the efficacy of their work by 50%. That means doing more with less—and with one bold strike you have the CFO on board.

The CEO sees things differently: They want sales. The truth is that to increase sales, a company must first address the earlier steps in the journey to optimize any future investment. For example, for a new product, if the goal is to increase purchase intent, then a sample PR tactic could include vouchers and in-store offers. This will undoubtedly increase short-term sales, but the long-lasting impact will be poor. Little has been done to raise awareness, which means that any blip in increased purchases will not continue as the wider

number of prospects have little understanding that the product is available.

A mapping exercise that calculates the gap between a product/brand and that of its competitors for each stage of the customer journey will clearly articulate where the focus of the PR campaign should be. If the largest delta is awareness, then a sample tactic could be to engage with high-reach influencers; if it's attitude, then you might focus on niche, trusted influencers who are respected in that market. The customer journey provides the focus and determines what jobs need to be done.

Understanding where this focus should be enables long-term sales. Now the CEO is paying attention!

And what about the CCO? This approach has finally informed them what the best use of their investment should be and where it should be focused. It helps to inspire the creatives to ensure their campaigns are aligned to the objective, while also providing specific KPIs that determine success. No longer will we be talking about vanilla metrics that aren't relevant—instead, we pick data-points that are most representative of improving the named objective within the customer journey.

I once worked with a company whose PR team was rewarded with salary bonuses based on impressions. The numbers each month were incredible, and if the problem this brand faced was one of awareness they would have smashed it. Unfortunately, this brand did not have an awareness problem—the market knew



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all about them. Their issue was one of consideration: They were known, but no one saw a need to buy them. By following a customer journey approach, it enabled the executive team to realize that they were rewarding the wrong behavior and instead the team should have focused their activities in other ways.

As our team at Golin has begun planning for the next year or next campaign, I have noticed a significant change with the brands we work with. PR is invited to discuss where the focus should be with the C-Suite—and, critically, that is determined by analyzing the customer journey. The result equals more sales...and that keeps everyone happy.



# THE FUTURE OF RETAIL

**BY JESSICA ADELMAN | @JEADELMA**  
**THE KROGER CO.**

Ask anyone: I'm obsessed with innovation. I love the connected-ness of our world and staying close to distant family, friends and colleagues via social media. I let my electric, autonomous car do the driving (where legal, of course). My kids wear activity monitors and count steps zealously. My 5-year-old made me post a picture of her on the family photo stream the day she hit 26,676 steps (on July 4th, in case you're wondering). Apparently, a five-mile "race" **and** parade add up when you're 3 feet tall.

This 4th Industrial Revolution is mind-blowing—offering the promise of artificial intelligence, smart cities and more. Likewise, I marvel at the speed of change in the retail landscape and consumers' shopping habits. While the top three buying destinations are brick-and-mortar stores, branded ecommerce websites and online retailers, who is shopping and why they buy from each differs by channel and generation.

Reports indicate that 87% of all consumer spending in the U.S. still occurs offline. Similarly, a recent Gallup study found only 11% of Americans order groceries online at least once a month. Their findings: "For now, Americans are sticking with the traditional ways of getting

food – shopping for groceries in person at a grocery store, eating meals at restaurants, and ordering food for take-out or delivery."

Kroger has a clear vision: to serve America through food inspiration and uplift. Everything we do is designed to create a compelling promise and seamless shopping experience so we can serve customers anything they want, anytime they want, and anywhere they want. More than 60 million U.S. households shop with us today, and we believe we know them better than anyone.

I think the future of retail hinges on purpose and connection – how well retailers online and offline deliver on the promise of a convenient, personalized and meaningful experience. Hence, in the spirit of being bold, I'll proffer a few predictions:

## **1. RETAIL WON'T GO AWAY**

Retail is always evolving. During Kroger's history, we've seen disruption and transformation in the retail industry every 10 to 15 years, and it's certainly still happening ... just at shorter intervals than ever before. To survive, you must be willing to not only accept and react to change, but also to BE the change. Through Restock Kroger – our plan to change

the way America eats – we’re doing just that by changing the retail grocery customer experience once again.

## 2. RETAIL WILL BE DIGITAL & PHYSICAL

Many industry watchers are focused on whether the future state of retail will be physical or digital. But it’s not one or the other. Technology and digital are already mainstays of today’s retail landscape; however, most customers don’t spend meaningful time thinking about it. We choose the shopping modality that makes sense to meet our need – physical and digital are not exclusive paths to purchase.

A 2019 *Future of Retail* report from Walker Sands Communications asserts that all purchase decisions come down to two factors: convenience and connection. Even beyond creating a seamless online-to-in-store experience, it’s about using different platforms to facilitate a deeper connection that feels worth having.

Here’s how it goes down in my world: After my workout every Saturday morning, I visit my Kroger store to grab coffee and clean up a few emails from the busy work week. I sit at the sushi counter, chatting with the guys who start rolling sushi at 7 a.m. to keep up with the weekend crowd. I hang with the Snow Fox crew to see their and other familiar faces, connecting with my neighbors and community. Then on Sundays, the family orders our big shop for the week online through Kroger curbside Pickup. During the work week, we get Kroger Rush Delivery for lunch some days or delivery of sparkling water to the office via Instacart. Our health and beauty products



**JESSICA ADELMAN** is group vice president of corporate affairs for The Kroger Co., based in Cincinnati, where she focuses on reputation management and serves as president of The Kroger Co. Foundation and The Kroger Co. Zero Hunger | Zero Waste Foundation. She is a member of the USC Annenberg Center for PR Board of Advisors.

come directly to my house via Kroger Ship (the kids love to color the cute cityscape recycled cardboard boxes). That’s a lot of different modalities. What matters to Kroger is the profitability of my entire household overall, driven by our loyalty profile.

As it stands today, 92% of Kroger customers who shop in one of our brick-and-mortar stores can also shop with us for Pickup or Delivery. By the end of 2020, every family in America will have the ability to shop with us, whether they decide to come into a store or use Kroger Pickup, Delivery or Ship services.

## 3. RETAIL WILL OFFER NEW SOLUTIONS TO CUSTOMERS

Retailers and innovators are at our best when we’re solving problems for consumers. That’s why it’s important to build an ecosystem that offers different modalities.

Ocado, one of the world’s largest dedicated

online grocery retailers, is a huge accelerator of this transformation. Through our partnership with Ocado we will scale operations, use game-changing automation to increase fulfillment capabilities, and further redefine the grocery customer experience. We've committed to build multiple fulfillment centers powered by Ocado in the U.S. This partnership is just one more way we are expanding our footprint beyond our existing physical markets.

#### **4. RETAIL WILL BE PURPOSE-DRIVEN**

Retail will solve problems for customers, communities and our planet. Stakeholders are increasingly deciding which businesses to support based on shared values and clarity of purpose. A company's performance on environmental, social and governance (ESG) topics is top of mind for many investors and NGOs today.

Kroger is at the forefront of shaping the national discussion around the disparity between food waste and hunger in America through Zero Hunger | Zero Waste, an ambitious social impact plan designed to end hunger in our communities and eliminate waste across the company by 2025. More than 40% of the food produced in the U.S. is thrown away, yet one in eight people struggle with hunger. This simply doesn't make sense. As America's grocer, Kroger is uniquely positioned with the size, scale, connections and dedicated team to tackle this challenge.

We also recognize that we can't do it alone. We need innovative solutions and partners to tackle this challenge. To encourage such

creative thinking, we created a program from the Kroger Co. Zero Hunger | Zero Waste Foundation. We recently announced the first round of Innovation Fund grant recipients, bringing more partners into the Kroger ecosystem to create Zero Hunger | Zero Waste communities.

#### **5. RETAIL WILL DISRUPT THE AD INDUSTRY**

Any marketing professional knows the adage: "50% of my marketing dollar is wasted. I just wish I knew which half!" That age-old dilemma is going away – and fast.

In 2018, digital ad revenues exceeded \$100 billion in the U.S. for the first time, up nearly 22% from the prior year. Lately, advertisers want to quantify the outcome of every ad dollar, which will require a stronger measurement and verification mindset. But there is a problem: almost all advertising and influencer marketing today is unverified. It lacks precision. And there are only two factors that matter in ad spend – reach and precision.

Retailers are uniquely positioned to know how customers behave and react to those marketing messages. That's why we introduced Kroger Precision Marketing, which offers CPG advertisers the ability to reach Kroger's 60+ million customers more precisely with measurable results. There are larger players out there, but the ability to target advertising with precision is our advantage, and we plan to continue to grow.

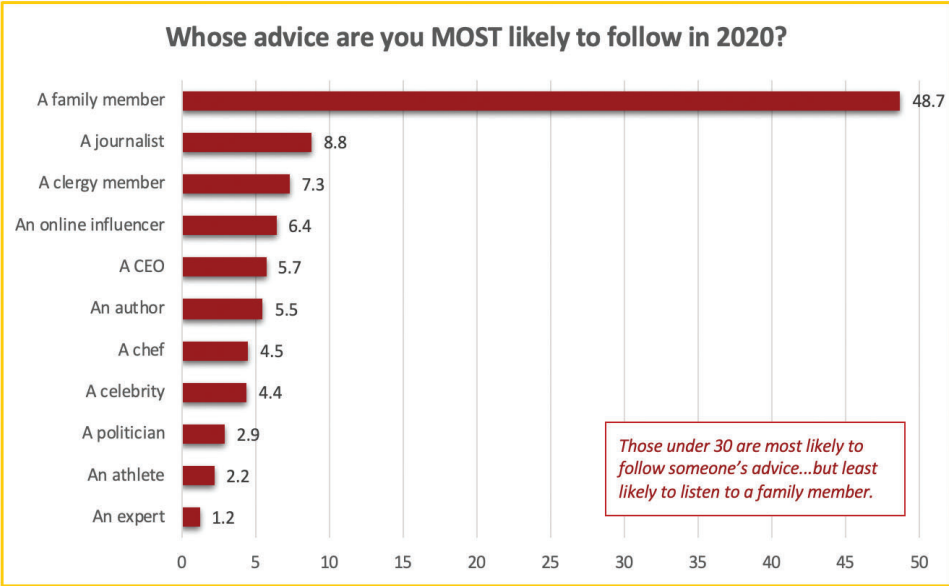
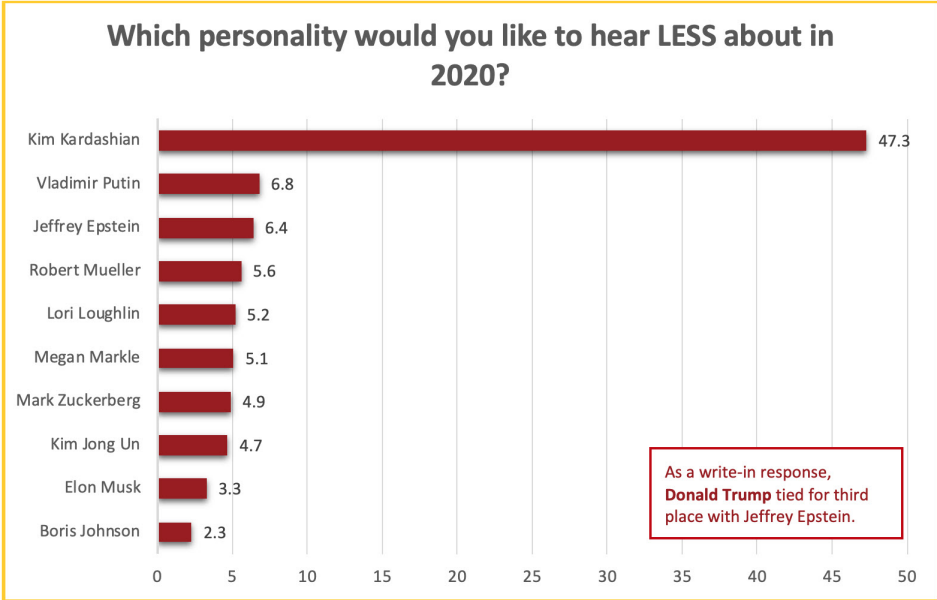
#### **REMEMBER THIS**

If you remember only one thing, it's this:

retail will not go away. Our customers tell us they still love shopping in their neighborhood store. Regardless, as consumers and retailers, we all need to become more comfortable with re-invention and resilience.

Just as we embrace technology to make our lives easier in big and small ways every day, we should welcome the future of retail. It's truly exciting, don't you think?

2020 RELEVANCE REPORT RESULTS



# A TALE OF A “5 BOTTOM LINE” BUSINESS MODEL

**BY MOLLY KEVENEY | @MOLLYKEVENEY**  
**CLIF BAR**

It’s an incredible time to be in communications. Our roles have always provided the opportunity to shape how a company creates and communicates its strategy and help leaders form their approach as they convey where the company is headed. What’s exciting now is the expectation that a company’s leaders will help solve major societal problems and what that means for our profession.

When an opportunity at Clif Bar & Co., a private, family- and employee-owned business, presented itself, I was excited to learn how this values-led business ran. Rewind to February 2019. Gary Erickson and Kit Crawford, Clif co-CEOs and husband and wife duo, decided to address the pay inequity the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team (USWNT) faced by closing the roster bonus pay gap for the USWNT World Cup team. Simply put, when players are named to a World Cup team they receive a roster bonus. Women players receive \$31,250 less than men players, and no one at Clif believed this was fair.

Through our LUNA Bar brand, Kit and Gary chose to close that gap, which cost the compa-

ny \$718,250 and was, in part, in response to a lawsuit that players filed against U.S. Soccer for gender discrimination. LUNA Bar was not, and still is not, a USWNT sponsor, but the brand’s rich history in addressing equal pay made this purpose-driven donation a natural decision.

The announcement was planned for April 2, Equal Pay Day, the symbolic day when women’s earnings “catch up” to men’s earnings from the previous year. We shared the news with the players six weeks beforehand. Initially, some were skeptical. Why would a brand that wasn’t even a sponsor offer to close this gap? As our team shared the brand’s history and conveyed that we didn’t expect anything in return – we just wanted to right a wrong – the players were thrilled.

An abundance of awareness has been raised for women’s equality, generating a global conversation. So LUNA Bar’s announcement was culturally relevant, and reported not only on Equal Pay Day, but throughout the World Cup games. Beyond media coverage, employee pride was palpable—yet for many, this was just one example of what they have come to

know, love and *expect* from the company.

Kit and Gary told me this experience was one of their top three most memorable and impactful moments in Clif Bar's 28-year-history. Wow.

Why "wow"? In 2010, their "5 Aspiration Business Model" was written into the company's bylaws. Also referenced as "5 Bottom Lines," their innovative model focuses on balancing the needs of five key stakeholders: the business the company operates, its brands, the people Clif employs, the communities where Clif operates, and the planet we all inhabit. And every year Clif's leadership team creates goals for each bottom line and reports results to employees quarterly.

There have been many "wows" over Clif's 28 years and employees are engaged to think about how to solve vexing problems like climate change, living income for farmers, better packaging solutions, sourcing sustainable ingredients, creating a better work environment and on and on.

Through the Business Roundtable's (BRT) efforts, 200 CEOs are seeking a new purpose for American corporations. Based on the business model at Clif, there's pretty clear evidence investing in all stakeholders works.

#### **AS YOU NAVIGATE SERVING ALL STAKEHOLDERS, ASK YOURSELF & YOUR TEAM:**

- What does serving and partnering with all stakeholders look like? What hard trade-offs are you and your organization willing to make?



**MOLLY KEVENEY** is vice president of communications and digital for Clif Bar & Company, a family and employee-owned company crafting energy food with organic and sustainable ingredients to feed and inspire adventure. She is a member of the USC Annenberg Center for PR Board of Advisors.

- If you aim to be more vocal about social issues, what is authentic to your company or brand?
- What problem are you solving? Will solving it help people? Will it tap into what matters to them?

# THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY IN INFLUENCER MARKETING

BY CATHY PARK | @CATHYGPARK  
USC ANNENBERG CENTER FOR PR

Influencer marketing grew on the basis of trust. It's simple—people appear more trustworthy than corporations. But in recent years, the influencer marketing terrain has faced a loss of authenticity. As brands continue to spend more on influencers, it's important to consider how they can maximize the effects of their partnerships and what the future of influencer marketing will hold.

## THE ISSUE WITH DISCLOSURE STATEMENTS

We've entered an age where branded content is no longer standardized, and this presents ethical and legal challenges.

According to a study conducted by influencer marketing agency Mediakix, only about 7% of endorsements on social media from the top 50 celebrity influencers comply with FTC's guidelines of appropriate disclosure verbiage. Furthermore, *Harvard Business Review* reported that 28% of influencers were requested by the sponsoring brand to not disclose the partnership. It seems like the ability to deceive has somehow become tied to an influencer's worth.

The lack of transparency from influencers is troublesome. Truth in Advertising, a media watchdog organization, recently filed an FTC complaint against popular “kidfluencer” YouTube channel, Ryan ToysReview, for failing to disclose ad deals and deceiving young viewers. External entities are no longer sitting still, and we can anticipate an increasing emphasis on adhering to disclosure guidelines that have previously gone overlooked.

## INFLUENCER FRAUD

Influencers are a confusing entity, and although everyone can be an influencer, not everybody should be. The lack of a unified system has created some bad apples.

Brands compensate influencers based on their reach. Yet many influencers falsify their “influence” by buying followers through software programs that use bot accounts. A research study conducted by cybersecurity firm Cheq and the University of Baltimore reported at least \$1.3 billion of spending on influencer marketing is lost to fraud annually. Many influencers boast high—but fake—

follower numbers, which leads to brands paying for impressions and views they won't actually receive.

However, these deceptive numbers may soon be a thing of the past. Consumers and brands are catching on, and marketing firms are experimenting with data that measures consistency and are using artificial intelligence to make assumptions based on engagement rates. As technology improves, we can hope that these insights will weed out the fraudulent influencers and give brands more clarity and choice over their partnerships.

#### **INFLUENCER MARKETING—WHAT'S NEXT?**

On the USC Annenberg Center for PR's Relevance Report Survey, 34.7% of respondents said online customer reviews would most likely influence their purchase decisions in the coming year. Review sites have become popular avenues for people to discuss products freely and honestly. Consumers crave more genuine recommendations.

This is not to say that influencer marketing is going away any time soon. The question is, how can brands engage in influencer marketing effectively and authentically?

People trust their family and friends. Brands should consider leveraging word-of-mouth that is based on close circles and relationships by diversifying their partnerships and considering nano-influencers. Although nano-influencers may have a much smaller follower base, around 1,000 to 10,000 followers, they are seen more as subject experts and have higher engagement rates. Nano-influencers



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are considered “everyday people,” which can enhance their credibility.

Although audiences generally don't mind branded content, they expect it to be executed ethically. In order to preserve the integrity and authenticity of influencer marketing, brands and influencers must hold themselves to higher standards and make consumer trust a top priority.



# TIKTOK ISN'T JUST FOR TEENS ANYMORE

**BY TYLER STEVENS | @TYCHARLIESTEVEES**  
**AND PATRICK MAZUCA | @PATRICK.MAZUCA**  
**SHAREABILITY**

*"In July 2019 I did something I have never done before: I went viral. A friend and I quickly filmed a parody of the #BottleCapChallenge, where participants kick a cap off a bottle in epic fashion. Little did I know that, in less than 36 hours, the video would make it to TikTok's "For You Page" and accrue more than 155,000 views. I was officially famous." —Patrick Mazuca*

Often compared to the now-defunct Vine, TikTok is very different from social media platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter or Instagram. That's because it's not built on personal connections or friend circles. Rather, users see what's popular in a personalized feed, known as the "For You Page."

"For You Page" inner workings are a mystery, but one thing is clear—the algorithm has global users hooked. The platform reports that of over 500 million active users, two-thirds are under the age of 30. If you hear that, it's the sound of advertisers licking their lips. Equally impressive, TikTok says their 27 million US users open the app eight times a day!

The value of a platform with a massive young

millennial and Gen Z audience is obvious, but Snapchat has that too. Why are so many marketers increasingly taking note of TikTok engagement? Likes and comments on TikTok are reminiscent of other social platforms, but the new engagement opportunities TikTok has unleashed are where the story really is. One of those, "Duets," lets content creators create videos with a brand's audio and video to share to their own personal audiences. It's an entirely new ad format, similar to "sponsored lenses" on Snap.

On TikTok, users aren't just passively liking posts, they're creating pop culture. In fact, the "challenge" and "trend" elements of TikTok are seemingly stronger than any other platform today. There is no better example of this than Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" breaking the Billboard streaming record—17 weeks at #1—all because of its popularity on TikTok through viral dance challenges and parody videos.

Brands, of course, are jumping on the bandwagon, turning TikTok audiences into brand advocates in new and exciting ways. Chipotle is a great example. To celebrate National

Avocado Day, the chain hosted a challenge urging consumers to dance for free guacamole—the #GuacDance—and it paid off big time. Chipotle vice president of marketing Stephanie Purdue credited the importance of brands showing up where valuable Gen-Z and millennial target audiences are, “like TikTok,” when asked about what marketing efforts supported their 99% year-over-year digital sales growth.

That’s not to say the platform isn’t without criticism. In February 2019, the FTC fined TikTok \$5.7 million for illegally collecting the names, email addresses, pictures and locations of children under 13, a record penalty for violations of the nation’s child privacy law.

For months before the FTC fining, many politicians commented negatively about the platform. However, other politicians-turned-presidential-candidates have used TikTok to garner intel and help reach younger voters. Andrew Gauthier, former head of BuzzFeed Video and head of digital content on the Kamala Harris’ presidential campaign even was quoted to say, “It’s almost like a look into the teenage id.”

There’s no doubt TikTok has a scrappy feeling to it, with hastily edited raw videos produced with nothing more than a phone making its front page. For some marketers and PR professionals, that may make the platform seem risky—but that “authentic” communication style is what’s resonating with today’s youth, after years of polished perfection on social media.



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The best advice for understanding TikTok is to take a bit of time and really enjoy it. Look at videos, see what is trending, enjoy the content, perhaps film your own. Because the first step to crafting effective communication on any platform is to understand what audiences want. Who knows? You might even go viral.

# USC'S CROSSTOWN PROJECT TURNS DATA INTO STORIES

**BY GABRIEL KAHN | @GABEKAHN**  
**USC ANNENBERG**

Anyone who has glanced at the stock market lately must realize that data is the new currency. Companies like Facebook, Google, Amazon (combined market cap of \$2.45 trillion as of this writing) have turned data about what we like, search for and buy into gold.

But why should these behemoths have all the fun? In 2019, we are suddenly awash in data that can tell us everything from where we are most likely to get a parking ticket to which zip code has the fastest-rising real-estate prices. Led by the likes of Michael Bloomberg, who pioneered a data-informed approach to governing during his 12 years as mayor of New York, local governments across the U.S. have started collecting data on all sorts of activities.

Almost all of this data is publicly available, meaning anyone with a large enough hard drive can download it. But there is a difference between being publicly available and being publicly accessible. The data is out there, but sometimes you need a PhD in computer science to make sense of it. Put simply, you can drown in too much data. As a result, the main beneficiaries of all these data dumps have been

the usual suspects: big tech or finance firms that can put the resources toward separating the signal from the noise.

But change is coming. New software tools, such as Metabase, Tableau and others, are making it easier for mere mortals to wade through this data and visualize and analyze it. The impact can be tremendous. For the past year and half, at Annenberg, we have been experimenting with the kind of stories we can tell about Los Angeles from publicly available data. The project is called Crossover town (xtown.la).

We have a few built-in advantages: We have some data science PhDs on our team who can do the hard work. Our goal, however, is to make this data more accessible to all. What the data ends up telling us can be surprising. The highest crime neighborhoods in the city, for example, are not crowded in the oft-maligned South LA. Many are commercial hubs like Fairfax and Hollywood. The data can lift the veil on how bad traffic in LA actually is and how much it's getting worse. (Spoiler: The slowest freeway is not the I-405, it's the I-5.)

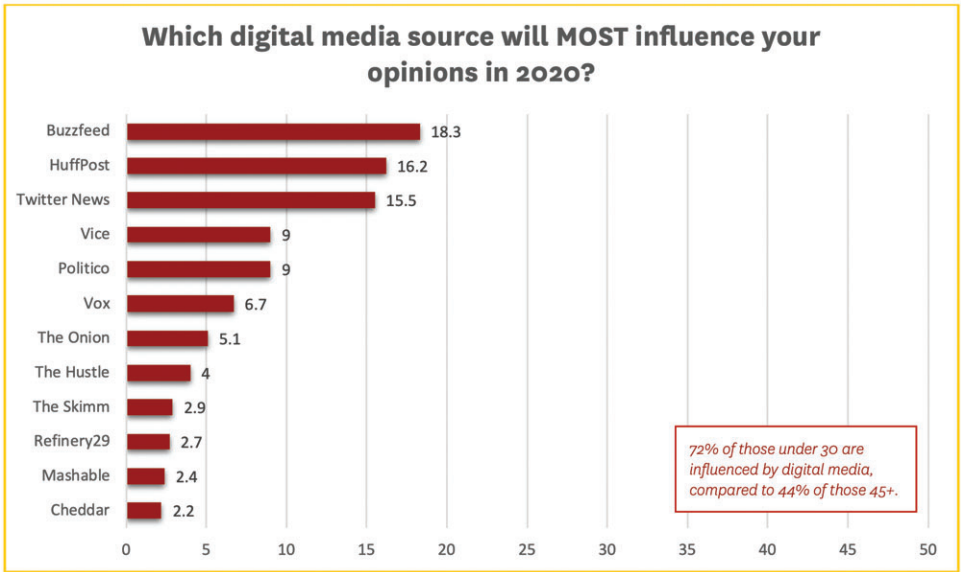
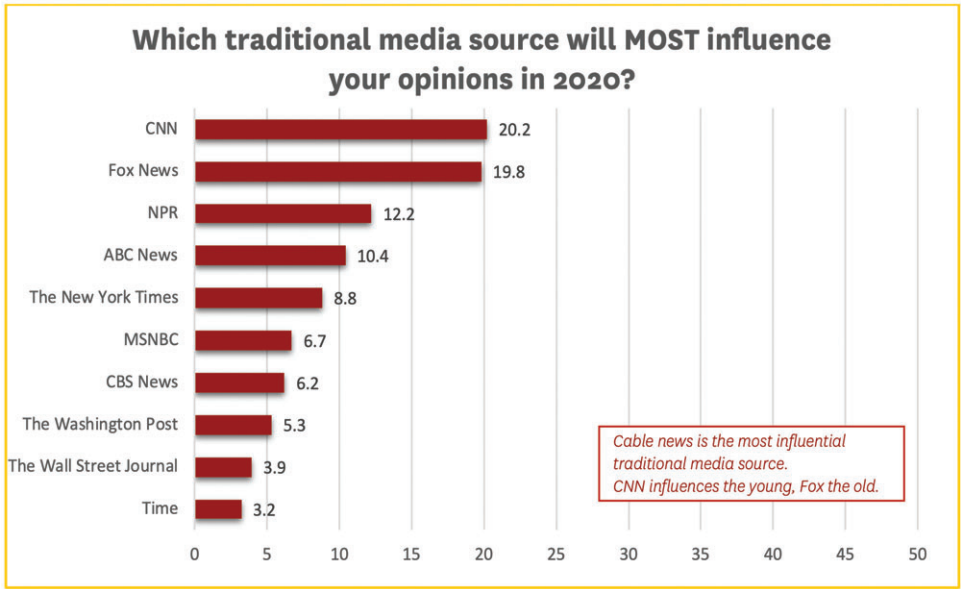
We can figure out which neighborhoods have had the steepest runup in home prices and which ones are building the most new units of housing. In short, the data can help us chart the vital signs of our communities and allow us to make informed choices.

The stakes are high: As data becomes more valuable, those who have it possess advantages. Those without it, well ... Making sure that as many as possible can make use of the data means making sure our democracy remains intact.

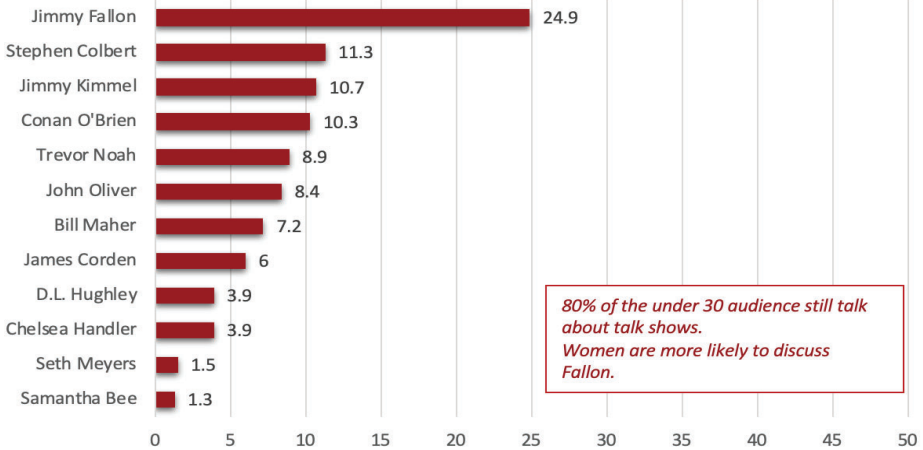


**GABRIEL KAHN** is professor of professional practice and innovations manager & co-director of the M{2}E program at USC Annenberg. He is a member of the research council at the Annenberg Innovation Lab, and founder of the Crisis Connection Project.

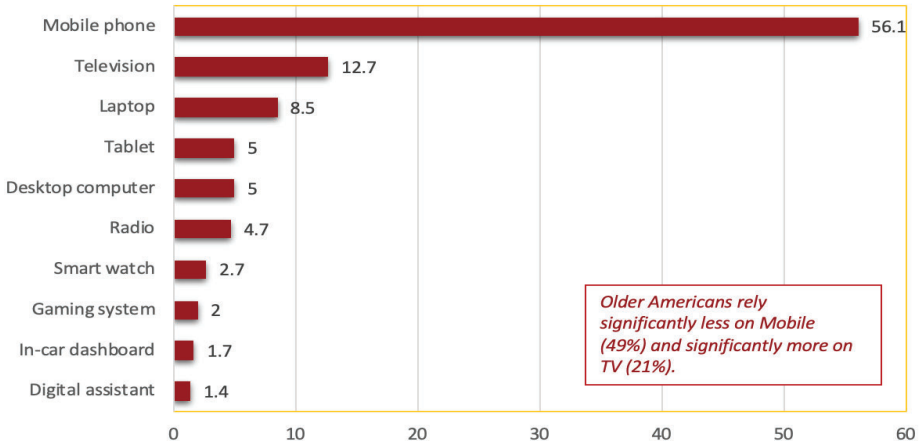
2020 RELEVANCE REPORT RESULTS



### Which talk show host will you be MOST likely to discuss at work the next day in 2020?



### What electronic medium will you rely upon the MOST for news and information in 2020?



# THE FURTHER DISINTEGRATION OF TRUTH

**BY KIRK STEWART | @KIRKSTEWART  
KT STEWART**

The old proverb, “seeing is believing,” is in serious jeopardy of becoming outdated.

With the advent of the latest AI deep-learning technology, it is becoming easier and easier for any computer-literate content creator to produce and distribute increasingly hard-to-detect fake videos that have people doing and saying things they didn’t really do or say. These so-called “deepfake” videos have become the newest way to spread disinformation and further undermine truth.

Deepfakes technology has a variety of mostly harmless applications, including use in creating Hollywood special effects, advertising, art and comedy. The first, more nefarious consumer-generated deepfakes were posted on Reddit in late 2017. These early deepfakes were crude videos that superimposed celebrities’ faces into pornographic movies. In early 2018, one of the creators of these videos posted FakeApp, a free, desktop computer software program that allowed just about anyone to create their own deepfake. And just this September, a newly released Chinese deepfake app called Zao became the most downloaded free app on China’s iOS App Store literally overnight.

Since then, Presidents Obama and Trump, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Tesla CEO Elon Musk, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (though not actually an AI-generated video) and a host of celebrities have all been the subject of altered videos. And there are several YouTube channels dedicated to these increasingly sophisticated, deceptive videos, including the aptly named channel, Ctrl Shift Face.

While all this seems relatively harmless today, the real concern is how these manipulated fake videos can be used in far more sinister ways to impact the outcome of elections, disrupt sensitive international political negotiations, create new kinds of blackmail, further fan social tensions, foment increased fear, commit fraud, and even severely damage an organization’s brand and reputation as well as the executives that run them.

“The circulation of deepfakes has potentially explosive implications for individuals and society,” said then University of Maryland law professor Danielle Citron in her Congressional testimony. “Under assault will be reputation, political discourse, elections, journalism,

national security and truth as the foundation of democracy.”

As if that weren't enough, deepfakes could ultimately lead us to distrust legitimate videos and other content—or even claim that a real video is a deepfake, a concept Professors Robert Chesney and Citron call “the liar’s dividend.”

As CSO Online senior writer J.M. Porup warns, “If we are unable to detect fake videos, we may soon be forced to distrust everything we see and hear. The internet now mediates every aspect of our lives, and an inability to trust anything we see could lead to an ‘end of truth.’ This threatens not only faith in our political system, but over the longer term, our faith in what is shared objective reality.”

Although in their infancy, deepfakes are already having an impact. According to a recent Pew Research study, nearly 70% of adult Americans surveyed said altered videos and images create a “great deal” of confusion about the “facts of issues and current events.” More than a third said “made-up news” had led them to reduce the amount of news they get overall. And more than three-fourths of U.S. adults said steps should be taken to restrict altered videos and images that are intended to mislead.

So where do we go from here? There are four avenues worth pursuing, but neither alone is going to solve this potentially insidious trend.

First, is technology. Although the technology needed to detect deepfakes is improving



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rapidly, the technology to create even more undetectable deepfakes is moving even faster. No matter how quickly detection technologies develop, they will likely never be able to keep pace with the creators or prevent all deepfakes from reaching their intended audience. But we need to keep trying.

Second, are even more complex legal and regulatory remedies. At the end of the day, it's a delicate balancing act between speech protected by the First Amendment and the existing laws that protect the targets of deepfakes, including copyright and defamation. Lawmakers are under increasing pressure to find new legislative and regulatory solutions, but those options are very difficult to fashion in a way that doesn't infringe on or aren't redundant with existing law.

Third, are the actions the social media platforms can take. Some platforms are working hard to improve their detection technology, but others are just allowing these videos to pervade their sites. There is clearly a need



for them to formalize some consistent and more stringent policies on deepfakes without running afoul of existing law.

Finally, is increased public awareness.

Consumers need to become far more knowledgeable about deepfakes and have a far higher level of skepticism when they see or hear things that just don't seem logical. The biggest hurdle here is the echo chamber many of us unfortunately live in. As *The Guardian* columnist Hannah Jane Parkinson noted, "It's increasingly concerning, in a polarizing world, how few people seem to seek out opinions that diverge from their own, or scrutinize things that adhere to their already held views. The internet has cultivated supercharged confirmation bias."

As professional communicators we also have the responsibility to protect the organizations and executives we serve from the potential risks associated with deepfakes—and any fake news, for that matter—or at the very least be better prepared to quickly respond to it.

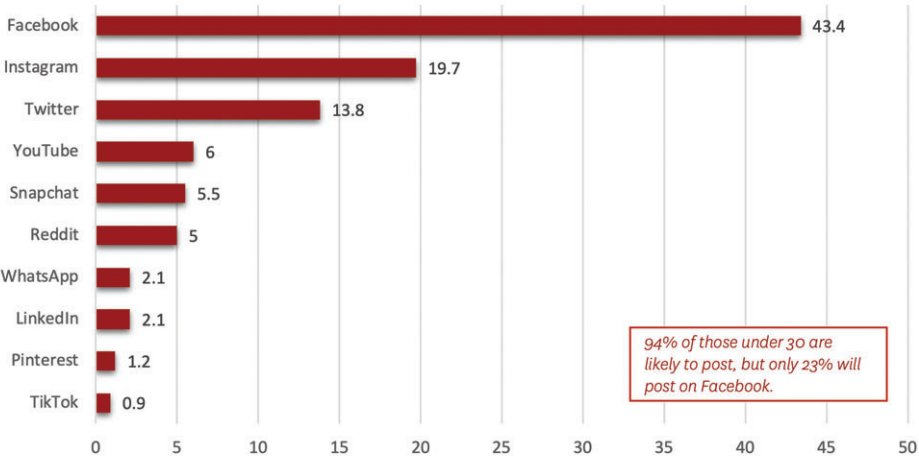
However, in a recent survey of public relations professionals conducted by the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations at the University of Alabama, nearly 60% of the respondents called fake news a "serious threat," yet only 13% are doing anything to detect fake information. And while 29% of respondents admit they have no plans to address the threat, only 19% think the issue has any bearing on their work.

"These studies reveal a collective passivity across the profession that's hard to explain," says Dr. Bruce Berger of the Plank Center. "It's time for PR leaders to stop paying fake attention to fake news." And to deepfakes.

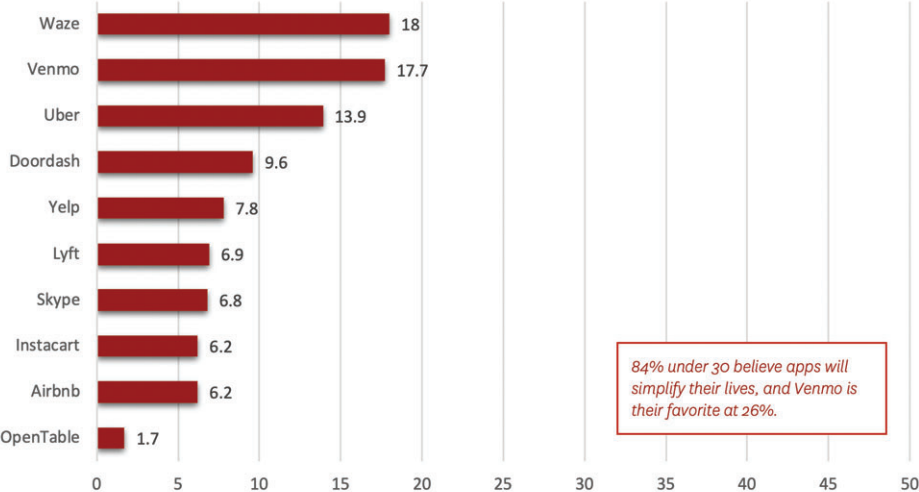
And it's time for all of us, including tech companies, lawmakers, social media platforms, the general public and professional communicators to step up and aggressively address deepfakes, which are quickly becoming perhaps the greatest threat to informed, objective and accurate public dialogue. We desperately need to restore faith in the truth before it's too late.

2020 RELEVANCE REPORT RESULTS

Which social media platform will you post the MOST on in 2020?



Which app will MOST simplify your life in 2020?



# PRIVACY: A POTENT FORCE FOR INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT IN THE DIGITAL CENTURY

BY COREY DUBROWA | @COREYDU  
GOOGLE

Privacy is one of our society's most crucial social constructs. The history of privacy is largely responsible for the freedom to think, to formulate free speech, and to challenge artificial social barriers across society. Time and time again, those generations that enjoyed strong privacy protections have been free to make the world a better and more inclusive place for all who follow.

I'm not sure the legendary Bob Dylan could have written "Masters of War" if he were writing under the scrutiny of the authorities. And this is important because privacy fuels the art that inspires us and governs how we shape our world. As time has repeatedly demonstrated, privacy is the only authentic safeguard for what makes being human *worth being human*.

This is why Google CEO Sundar Pichai has made privacy our company's most important priority. "Privacy is #1" is not corporate marketing rhetoric, nor is it some preemptive compliance strategy. It's a reflection of our belief that privacy is essential to a free and open web, and central to building products

that are helpful for everyone.

Since Google's founding in 1998, the nature of data, human expectations and considerations of personal privacy have all changed—dramatically.

Some of those changes are counterintuitive. Many people, for example, feel that their privacy is more secure if they ask an embarrassing question of Google's search box rather than asking the same question of a neighbor. If you are reading this on a plane or even in your living room, the person sitting next to you is more likely to search for answers about their health than to lean over and ask you.

That speaks to the major shift in notions of privacy over the last 20 years, and it has sweeping social implications. The private, direct relationship between individuals and information is one of the biggest transformations for our species in over 500 years.

This is especially true for people who have never previously enjoyed privacy or its bene-

fits. In many countries, families share devices and women aren't able to conduct private searches about their health. In an emerging market like India, for example, 29% of adult women only obtain internet access through a shared mobile device, and we find a much higher use of features like Incognito mode as a result.

While some speak reflexively of “the death of privacy” in the digital age, in ways we seldom consider privacy has not only evolved, it has *empowered people in new ways*.

This is why Google has always depended upon a bond of understanding with our users. Namely: *Your data is your data*. We will never sell it to a third party. Each of our products is designed with an emphasis on privacy and security, including easy user interfaces and features like Privacy Check-Ups, which allow people to control their data and keep their accounts safe and secure. As technology evolves, we are investing more than any other company in privacy.

This year, we've announced a number of additional privacy and security tools across our products and platforms: easy data management, Incognito mode for Maps, auto-deletion of search history, and upgrades to our Advanced Protection Program. But the more deeply we progress into this digital age, the more that innovation must go beyond building better user interfaces.

For example, we have developed tools such as federated learning and differential privacy that preserve functionality while dramatically



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reducing the amount of data collected, used, and stored. Federated learning is machine learning that makes products more helpful while confining data to your device (instead of performing analysis on our servers). This—coupled with double-blind encryption, where data is encrypted locally before being sent to the service provider—allows us to do more with less data. Today, we are putting the same level of work into privacy as we are in our flagship Search product.

On the regulatory front, we've probably invested more than any other company in living up to the standards set by the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

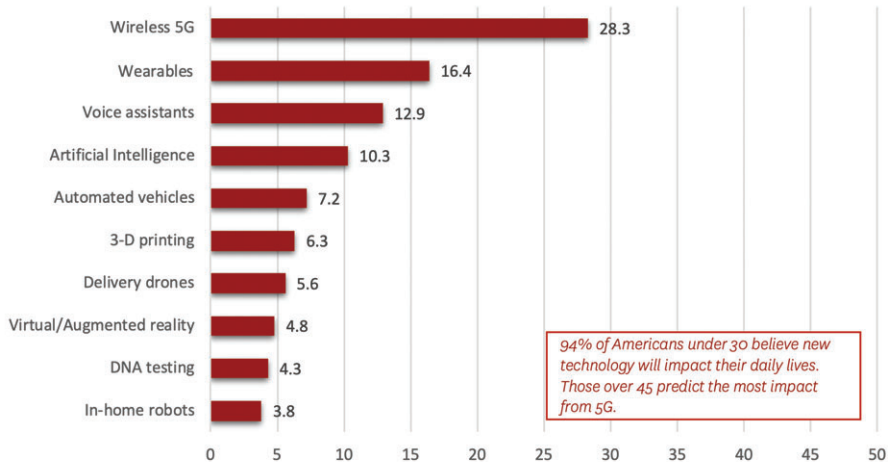
While much of the focus on privacy relates to individual user data, the evolution of the open web means there are also new needs at the enterprise level for professionals who are conducting research for customers. For example, when you're searching for information about a health condition, you might prefer

that inquiries not show up in your search history—now there are several ways to control that data, and even more tools under development to ensure that your privacy and that of your client is protected.

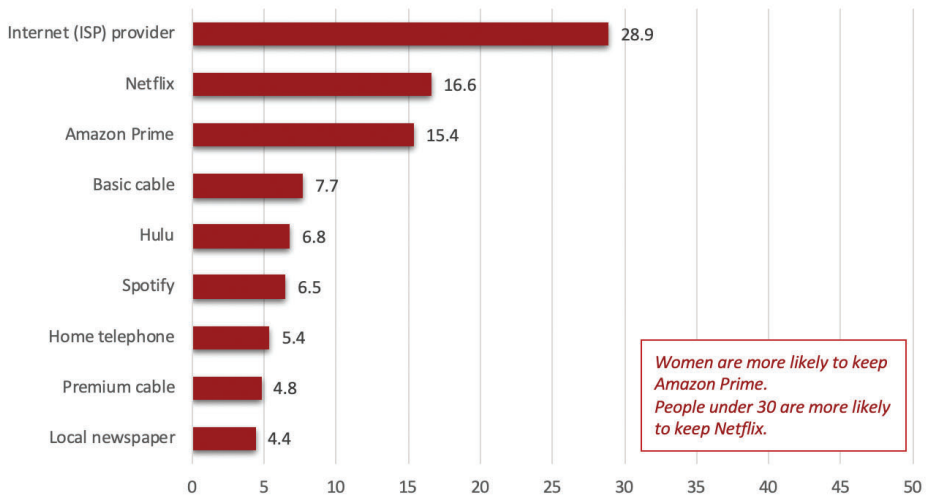
We believe that privacy is for everyone, not just those who can afford it, and that a free and open web must reflect our society's increasing commitment to privacy. Doing so will protect people and help technology to remain a potent force for individual empowerment in the digital century.

## 2020 RELEVANCE REPORT RESULTS

### Which emerging technology will MOST impact your daily life in 2020?



### Which cord are you LEAST likely to cut in 2020?



# THE JOY OF MISSING OUT

**BY ULRIKE GRETZEL, PH.D. | @ULRIKEGRETZEL**  
**USC ANNENBERG CENTER FOR PR**

In an article published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, USC Professor Robert Kozinets uses the example of *foodporn* to convincingly illustrate that social media are “networks of desire” that fuel our passion for consumption and our need to connect. They are persuasive technologies designed for us to want them and use them often. Together with equally needy smartphone technology, they create a web of temptation that is difficult for contemporary consumers to escape. When that artistically arranged plate arrives at their restaurant table, social media users feel an irresistible urge to immediately tell their (real or imagined) social media audience about it.

The same theme is central to the recent documentary “People’s Republic of Desire,” which presents a dystopian look at livestreamers hooked on fame, money and their entertainment- and status-obsessed fans in China. Livestream platforms and talent agencies alike do everything they can to sustain the mania.

PR and advertising fuel consumer engagement with social media by creating increasingly enticing contents, rewarding responses and enlisting influencers to reel in even more “likes” and “comments” from hyper-targeted audiences. Communication success critically depends

on consumers giving in to algorithms that never cease to want more of their attention.

From a communications perspective, the ideal consumer is “always on” and ready to be persuaded. The “Black Mirror” episode “Fifteen Million Merits” in which consumers spend their days pedaling on energy-producing stationary bikes while watching advertising to obtain so-called “merits,” a form of currency, depicts a world that is no longer unimaginable. Even when in their resting cells, every inch of their walls bombards them with sponsored content, unless they have enough merits to pay for an advertising-free environment.

Limiting “screen time” for children has become a ubiquitous aspect of parenting. But who is helping adult consumers switch off? Technological deceleration, digital detox, technology mindfulness, Facebook sabbatical, neo-luddism and off-the-grid lifestyle are concepts that have entered public discourse and are increasingly turned into business strategies. Tourism Switzerland advertises hotels with limited connectivity, yoga studios offer reboot workshops, mobile apps like Offtime and Flipd promise control over social media addictions, office spaces are convert-

ed into tech-free zones, and pop-up events promote settings in which humans along with their smartphones can go into flight mode.

While the fear of missing out (FOMO in social media lingo) characterized much of consumer life over the past 10 years, the joy of missing out (JOMO) is catching on in important ways. As a concept, it suggests that much can be gained from staying off social media and having technology-free experiences.

However, while some businesses seem eager to capitalize on helping consumers embrace JOMO, companies in general seem reluctant to acknowledge their role in feeding the social media addiction problem. Instagram has recently limited its users' ability to view "likes" on Instagram posts. They did this supposedly to reduce the potentially negative effect of their platform on the mental health of young consumers. More likely, they were motivated by the ability to sell the now hidden information to those who need to benchmark the effectiveness of their social media communication efforts. In general, very little appears to be happening on corporate accounts in terms of encouraging followers to be responsible social media users.

Selected pharmaceutical companies are currently facing accusations of having actively triggered the opioid crisis with aggressive marketing techniques. Will PR and communication professionals at some point in the future be made accountable for their role in promoting social media addictions?

At the very minimum, they need to recognize



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that consumer awareness of and resistance against social media dependence is mounting. If PR and communication professionals are not careful, they might be killing the social media goose that currently lays the shiny, golden eggs. Ideally, they need to devise responsible social media communication plans that produce effective contents without exploiting consumers' inability to resist the carefully engineered social media temptations.



# AI IN PR—FACT, FICTION AND THE FUTURE

BY GARY BROTMAN | @GARYZERO  
PROWLER.IO

For the better part of the last decade, artificial intelligence (AI) has played an increasingly prominent role in how we've experienced the world around us—in some ways that are obvious, like the digital personal assistant that responds to your every need, and in others invisible and technically complex, like the algorithms powering the camera in your mobile phone that help you take professional-looking photos worthy of Ansel Adams' admiration.

AI is also impacting virtually every market sector and profession globally. Gartner predicts AI will contribute \$3.9 trillion in business value by 2022, up from \$1.2 trillion in 2018. While it's difficult to quantify the bottom-line impact on the business of public relations, it's clear that AI is having a profound impact on the practice of PR today and will play a more important (and permanent) role in how PR professionals evolve their craft.

To understand the upside and impact of AI in PR, it's important to understand what it is, and what it is not.

## AI IS...

- A general term used to describe anything that mimics human intelligence. It's also a more specific term used by technologists to label a machine learning technique known as *Deep Learning*, which is where most of the media hype, mysticism and global technology investment is focused today.

- A powerful enabling technology that, when applied correctly, helps us improve speed, efficiency, and accuracy of repetitive, often mundane, but important tasks.

- Just math (middle school math) and rather basic computer science.

## AI IS NOT...

- A magical cure-all for the world's problems. In fact, *Deep Neural Networks*, the state-of-the-art in AI algorithms, which for the past several years have promised everything from autonomous driving to curing cancer, have fallen short of their intended goals.

- Capable of independent thought, reasoning or creative, out-of-the-box thinking—the unique traits that will continue to define and differentiate humans from machines for many generations to come.

- A threat to you, your PR job or the survival of mankind.

So what does this mean for you and the business of PR today and into the future?

From an efficiency standpoint, AI is already increasing productivity by streamlining and automating repetitive tasks such as news and social media monitoring, trend analysis, campaign performance measurement, and results reporting. Advances in natural language processing will make it easier to predict, react to, and even defuse an emerging brand-related crisis before it happens, and will continue to reduce the time needed to generate content such as blogs and press releases. Media outlets including the *Washington Post*, Associated Press and Bloomberg have been leveraging AI to automatically generate sports, financial earnings, and first drafts of general interest stories for a few years. As this same technology becomes more widely employed by PR and crisis communications pros over time, machine-to-machine communication will ensure that tailored messages hit the mark with greater accuracy in seconds or minutes, not hours or days.

With less time spent on repetitive, time-sucking tasks, an increasing amount of work bandwidth will be shifted to activities that require creative thinking, strategic planning, and instinct—the essential attributes of successful communications professionals that no machine will offer in our lifetime. And even in the case of automated tasks, human input and guidance are still critical. AI systems, while hyper efficient at achieving intended objectives, are not flawless and are only as good as



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the data and expertise used to train them.

Confronting a brewing brand crisis with an immediate, AI-driven response may blunt the virality of the news at the outset, but snuffing it completely still requires strong personal relationships with media and influencers (and a healthy dose of nuance). But with the help of AI, communications professionals can make faster, more informed decisions, resulting in what will be a necessary and fruitful collaboration between humans and machines. We will do our best work as a team.

To be truly successful in an AI-powered world, it's important to be well versed in its terminology, concepts, and applications in your business and the business of your clients. Technology is now more relatable and accessible, and having conversational knowledge of AI will be expected at a bare minimum. Functional knowledge of AI, to be most effective in selecting and utilizing AI systems, will increase the efficacy of your efforts and value of your results.

# HOW ETHICAL IS YOUR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE?

**BY BURGHARDT TENDERICH, PH.D., & PROF. DOTT. ING. ROBERTO V. ZICARI**  
**USC ANNENBERG CENTER FOR PR**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming a game changer with tremendous potential for people and organizations. It is expected to have a significant impact on society. However, some AI applications raise fundamental ethical and legal questions, as the examples below illustrate:

- COMPAS is a ‘risk assessment’ software developed for American courtrooms to use artificial intelligence in predicting the likelihood of a criminal to become a repeat offender. According to ProPublica, the system had a tendency to rate black men as more likely to repeat than white men.
- PredPol is an AI system designed to predict where and when crimes will be committed. In a field trial in Oakland, Calif., the system repeatedly sent police to primarily low-income, predominantly minority neighborhoods without regard for the actual crime rate in that neighborhood.
- In a test conducted by MIT researchers, face-recognition software developed by Microsoft, IBM and Chinese developer Megvii very accurately recognized the gender of white men—99% of the time. This accuracy dropped to below 35% for women with darker skin.

- In a truly bizarre case, a Palestinian worker in Israel posted a photo of himself next to a bulldozer with the Arabic caption “good morning.” The posting got him detained by Israeli police, who questioned him for hours before it was discovered the Arabic words for “good morning” and “attack them” look quite similar—Facebook’s automatic translation software had confused the two.

The systematic and widespread use of artificial intelligence bears enormous potential for automating mundane and complicated tasks. For example, in the healthcare sectors, start-ups and established companies alike are bringing to market AI-based systems with the unprecedented ability to accurately diagnose and predict complex health conditions.

But as the cases above indicate, AI algorithms can also lead to false conclusions. In the Facebook example, this is due to the common practice by social media companies to deploy technology that is half-baked, at best. The first three are due to a more profound problem: algorithm bias.

This bias is typically introduced in the design of the algorithm, or in using biased data for training and testing the AI. In most cases,

this is probably not done on purpose and may come as an unwanted surprise.

Here's an example of how an ethical flaw may sneak into a system. Most large employers use AI readers to scan applicants' resumes. If the algorithm is designed to take into account the people who have previously held the same or a similar position, such as middle-aged white men, the algorithm might over-index applications by that demographic group.

With the current *democratization* of AI applications and the speed of their deployments, it is likely that more offensive or dangerous errors will become public, catching corporate public relations teams off guard, forcing them to switch into crisis communication mode.

This can be avoided by proactively assessing whether the use of an AI system is unethical by conducting an AI ethical inspection. This process minimizes the risks associated with AI, helps establish trust, and overall improves the quality of AI systems.

Ideally the ethical inspection will be conducted prior to developing the system as part of an AI ethics-by-design process. However, if the AI has already been designed, it can be used to do an AI ethical sanity check, so that a certain ethical standard of care is achieved.

At the core of an ethical examination of AI is the desire to understand how decisions are made and what the consequences are for society at large. For that reason, policy makers are calling for AI to be *explainable* and *transparent* so that citizens and businesses alike can



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**PROF. DOTT. ING. ROBERTO V.**

**ZICARI** is Full Professor of Database and Information Systems at Frankfurt University.

develop trust in AI. While this is a good principle, it is not so easy to implement in practice. Since most of the advanced AI are based on Deep Learning—where neural networks learn by using million of features automatically selected—it is extremely hard to explain why a certain AI-driven algorithm came up with a given prediction or recommendation.

The outcome of this investigation is a degree of confidence that the AI analyzed—taking into account the context (e.g., ecosystems), people, data and processes—is ethical with respect to a scale of confidence.

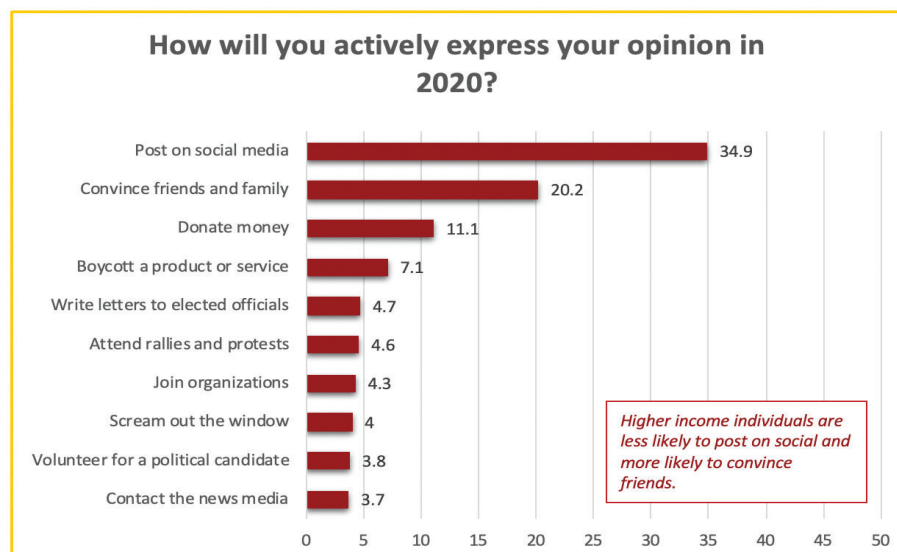
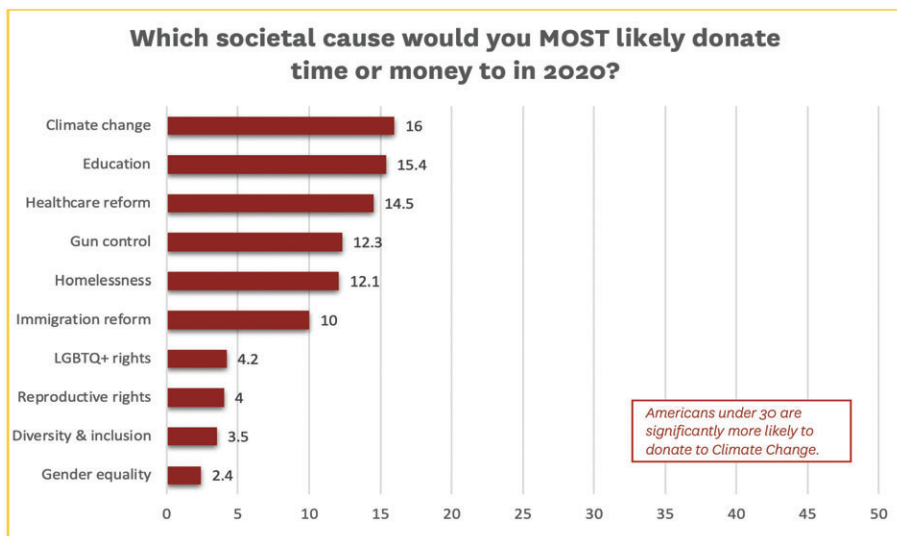
Processes for AI ethics checks are still maturing and they may involve the following elements: an in-depth review of systems design; testing the system for fairness,

unwanted bias and discrimination; examining transparencies, explainability, intelligibility, interpretability, privacy, responsibility and accountability; legal and policy implications; consequences for employment; addressing any potential conflicts of interest; and assessing potential biases of the team of inspectors.

Pending the outcome of the evaluation, corrective measures should be applied as necessary. As a principal guideline, assessing ethical AI requires a constant flow of communication and discussion so that the developer and the assessor can mutually agree on what to present publicly during the assessment process, without harming the company or affecting the soundness of the assessment process.

Companies that have successfully completed an AI ethics check should treat the assessment as a badge of honor and include it in their marketing communication.

## 2020 RELEVANCE REPORT RESULTS



# SURVIVING THE TECHLASH

BY NIRIT WEISS-BLATT, PH.D.

USC ANNENBERG CENTER FOR PR

In the previous *Relevance Report*, I addressed the major shift in the tech industry, in which tech companies are experiencing recurring scandals and are “no longer a source of good, but also a source of the bad.” I claimed, “Consequently, the tech spokespeople need to adjust their crisis management know-how to manage the new combat era of Techlash.”

Since the Techlash keeps evolving, we should be aware of its changes in order to assess future directions. The first step is to realize that the Techlash is here to stay.

## THE INCREASING TECH SCRUTINY

The past year was filled with negative coverage of the tech industry. Its leaders and their innovations are no longer worshiped, but rather under increased scrutiny. The coverage tone has shifted from “positive bias” to “negative bias” (focusing only on the downside of tech). The rise of “tech investigative journalism” resulted in numerous scoops regarding various corporate misdeeds. And the critics are demanding changes that are ranging from the essential to the impossible.

This critical tone is now unmistakable and everywhere, including at tech events, as Axios' Ina Fried described: “Not that long ago, what people wanted from a tech conference was to hear from executives about the next shiny object coming down the pipeline. But nowa-

days, tech CEOs aren't talking about what's fresh from their corporate ovens—instead, they're the ones being grilled.”

Blaming tech companies of all the bad human behaviors (online and offline) became a common practice. You wish to get famous and adored? Talk against the tech companies. You wish to attract voters? Demonizing tech is “good politics.”

## GOVERNMENT ACTION AND #BREAKUPBIGTECH

Despite several years of scandals, tech companies are still growing and successful. Their shares are skyrocketing after massive earnings reports. Consumers continue to heavily use tech products as if they can't (or don't want to) avoid them. In essence, tech is too dominant, convenient, and beneficial to boycott.

So if usage is not affected by the techlash, what is? Consumers' sentiment about government action: They are demanding more of it, leading to calls for tougher regulations, including the call to #BreakUpBigTech.

According to a recent YouGov survey, nearly two-thirds of Americans would support breaking up tech firms by undoing mergers “if it means ensuring more competition in the future.” The poll showed that the support is bipartisan, and that on the extreme ends there

is even more eagerness.

Such polls don't provide the trade-offs of government action, such as degrading services, the ability to fight "malicious actors," and raising prices. But the techlash has generated an upsurge of active probes into tech companies: The Justice Department, the Federal Trade Commission, the House Judiciary Committee, the House Financial Services Committee, and the State attorneys general are all investigating Facebook, Google, Amazon, and Apple about their competition and privacy practices.

Overall, tech companies and their representatives should adjust to a new ecosystem of aggressive tech opponents that includes conservatives and liberals, regulators, antitrust and privacy advocates, tech workers, scholarly tech critics, and tech journalists (who may regret decades of "cheerleading" tech).

### **RESPONSIBILITY, TRANSPARENCY, AND CORRECTIVE ACTION**

Because of the increased scrutiny, tech companies need to sharpen their communication strategies.

First, companies must take more responsibility. As Apple CEO Tim Cook recently stated, "If you built a chaos factory, you can't dodge responsibility for the chaos." For example, tech companies constantly blame their algorithms: On the one hand, they glorify their core technology for solving many societal problems, on the other, they quickly blame the same technologies for any wrongdoing. It is absurd. Stop blaming the machine. People built it.

Second, after so many "apology tours," perhaps tech companies should create a new posi-



**NIRIT WEISS-BLATT, PH.D.**, is a visiting research fellow at USC Annenberg who has worked as a tech journalist and in tech PR in Israel.

tion titled CAO—a full-time "Chief Apology Officer." Cynicism aside, saying "sorry" is no longer enough. And even though the companies vowed to fix their issues, a lot of their fixes eventually required further fixing. As both outside critics and their employees put pressure on companies to pay attention to the greater good, they are increasingly being required to address societal issues.

Third, as coverage is moving from "too big to fail" to "too big to fix its problems," tech companies need to put a greater emphasis on the rigorous corrective actions they are going to implement. A recent poll by Fleishman-Hillard found 78% of Americans believe that companies should take more action to address the consequences of their policies, practices, and products to foster trust among consumers. Being ethical by maintaining transparency with customers is an essential step.

Lastly, I still believe that the best outcome of the Techlash is that tech companies are learning to work with governments, academia, and consumers to find solutions. In the long run, this wide collaboration could provide reputational benefits.



# SLACKER ACTIVISTS AS THE RISE OF THE ONLINE DISENGAGED DO-GOODER

BY SANDRA STANISA

USC ANNENBERG CENTER FOR PR

If you're on social media, there's a chance that at one time or another, a social cause resonated with you. You may have felt closely aligned to it through self-identity, past experiences or maybe it just pulled at your heart-strings because that's how humanity works.

So you did what people on social media do: you changed your profile picture, used a trending hashtag, liked, retweeted or shared. You may have even signed your name and provided an email address for an online petition. And be honest, it felt good, right?

After all, the payoff was two-fold—you spread awareness about an important cause and let your followers know that you are an altruistic, civically minded individual.

Except this type of armchair activism, known as *slacktivism*—a portmanteau of the words “slacker” and “activist” coined by Dwight Ozard and Fred Clark at the 1995 Cornerstone Festival—has actually been proven to do more harm than good.

The newest type of slacktivism, *clicktivism* takes place online and enables anyone with a social media account and access to the internet to be an activist in the most basic sense of the word.

The only problem is, most of these online campaigns operate under the unofficial motto of *ask simpler and easier*. Because social media allows for a quick and easy way for someone to show support for an organization or a cause, people are less likely to do research about what the cause actually is. A click is far more convenient than showing up to a protest or writing a letter to a government official.

By not understanding the complexities of an issue, supporters can be left feeling stupid or can harm the very cause they seek to help.

In 2009, Danish psychologist Anders Colding-Jorgensen created a Facebook group as part of his research and announced that Copenhagen city authorities would be demolishing the historic Stork Fountain. At first, 125 individuals joined the group, but

that number quickly inflated to over 27,500 people. The only problem was the cause they were supporting was completely fictitious. Colding-Jorgensen was seeking to prove the detrimental effects of showing online solidarity for an issue they didn't know anything about.

The problem stems from the fact that the internet is a largely unregulated, informational frontier that is often oversaturated with hoaxes, misinformation and bad science. While communication on a global scale has the potential to spread knowledge, bad actors and genuine misinterpretations often make online activism feel more like a game of broken telephone.

So what do you do the next time you come across a campaign that's asking for your support? The answer is simple: First, do your research. You will not only gain a better grasp of the issue, but also arm yourself with knowledge to discuss effectively enough to spread the word.

Second, adjust your expectations. Studies have shown that online campaigns are far more effective at targeting local issues than global ones. For example, if you're concerned about climate change, understand that while you may not have the power to convince the world to switch to green energy, you can begin to minimize your own carbon footprint through mindful lifestyle adjustments.

Never underestimate the power of showing up and making a difference through actual human interaction, whether it be attend-



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ing a protest, writing a letter to a government official/CEO or donating money, however modest it may be. In 2010, the Red Cross raised \$5 million in two days through \$10 text donations. That proves that a little goes a long way when we all come together.

There's no denying that through online activism, significant movements have taken place – the Arab Spring, #BlackLivesMatter and #TimesUp campaigns, and, recently, an effort to harness ownership over individual data privacy, to name a few. But what made these movements so successful is the fact that people moved away from their screens and gathered in person in the streets, on stages at awards shows, and before Congress in a strategic effort to bring forth tangible change.

So the next time you're compelled to change your profile picture, use a trending hashtag, or like, retweet or share a post about a cause you feel strongly about, ask yourself, "How much do I really know about this?" And then ask, "Is there something more that I can do?"

# STORYTELLING IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

BY MANUELITA MALDONADO | @MANUELITAM\_  
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In June 2017, *New Scientist* magazine published a story about how long it would take for artificial intelligence (AI) to surpass human intelligence. The article was later shared on Twitter through a tweet that read: “AI will be able to beat us at everything by 2060, say experts.”

“Probably closer to 2030 to 2040 in my opinion, 2060 would be a linear extrapolation, but progress is exponential,” responded Open AI co-founder and avid Twitter user, Elon Musk. What Musk didn’t know is that the initial tweet had been generated by Echobox, an AI-driven social media management tool that chose the article, generated the message and shared it at a time that would maximize traffic for the *New Scientist*’s website.

Studies on how AI is impacting the world of communications have shown that this technology is helping PR practitioners monitor news and social media, listen to and analyze industry trends, measure campaign performance, predict possible reputational crises and report campaign results more efficiently. In fact, a study conducted by the Chartered Institute for Public Relations established that

41% of the skills and abilities needed to practice public relations are currently supported by some form of AI. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Some researchers affirm that the automation of repetitive tasks like curating journalist lists and matching brands’ content with potential influencers will allow PR professionals to focus on more exciting areas like innovation and creativity.

But what if we start automating our creative practice such as our ability to tell compelling stories? Will a machine be able to produce a narrative with the same thought, care and emotion that a communication professional can? Not necessarily, but it will certainly help us create more meaningful and heartwarming stories.

In recent years, AI language models have become dramatically better at delivering coherent, human-like pieces of writing. In its first year, *The Washington Post*’s robot writer Heliograf produced approximately 850 articles, including 500 pieces about the 2016 election that generated more than 500,000 views. This is 75% more than what the *Post*’s staff generated in 2012. Other robots assisting

the newsrooms are *Forbes*' content management system, Bertie; Bloomberg's business reporter, Cyborg; and the Wordsmith platform used by the Associated Press. These AI-powered machines can report news stories, industry trends, corporate earnings and even sports results in a matter of seconds. But these reports often follow the same format and offer very little emotional pull.

Recent language models like Jamie Kiros and Samim Winiger's 'Neural Storyteller' and Open AI's 'GPT-2' have offered a glimpse into the future of a more exciting field: storytelling. These models have been trained on a wide array of sources, including Taylor Swift's music lyrics and romance novels. The results are hilarious —and sometimes nonsensical— pieces of writing that depict what storytelling will look like in the near future: challenging, experimental and fun.

Even though AI is not ready to write a best-seller yet, it is a powerful tool that can improve stories and increase audience engagement. In 2017, MIT Media Lab and McKinsey & Company announced they had successfully used machine learning to analyze the emotional arc of a movie and predict how engaging it would be. By offering data-driven insights, this breakthrough technology can potentially "supercharge" storytellers and help them tell meaningful stories in an already saturated digital world.

Algorithms are an efficient way to extrapolate information from past creations and predict what stories will work and which ones will not. But, contrary to Elon Musk's predictions,



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they still lag behind human creativity when it comes to radical and original thinking. Artificial neural networks and machine learning rely on vast amounts of data to identify patterns within them, but they can't predict when these patterns will change, a crucial component of creative thinking.

The element of surprise in storytelling still depends on our capacity, as communicators, to link an organization's goals with enduring aspects of our human nature. However, our ability to write surprising stories will grow more dependent on algorithmic tools that have the power to offer relevant insights we wouldn't otherwise know, and push our creative boundaries by forcing us to come up with ideas no one has ever heard before. To thrive in the age of artificial intelligence, PR practitioners must cultivate our ability to understand the influence of this technology and embrace it as a creative partner that will help us connect with other humans in a more profound and meaningful way.

# TECHNOLOGY WILL HELP CITIZENS BECOME MORE ENGAGED—BUT ALSO MORE POLARIZED

BY RON ANTONETTE | @RANTONETTE  
USC ANNENBERG CENTER FOR PR

Our fourth annual survey of the public relations industry, conducted earlier this year, revealed that a majority of global PR professionals predict the next few years will bring dramatic change to the communication industry. Eighty-three percent believe technological innovations will be a powerful driver of that change, and most believe not all of it will be good.

As shared in the 2019 USC Annenberg *Global Communications Report*, three out of five public relations professionals (61%) predict that future communication technology will cause the average citizen to become more engaged. However, the same number (61%) believe that engagement will be based on misinformation, which almost three-fourths (74%) think will create a more polarized society. PR students are slightly more optimistic. Only 43% predict the citizens will be more misinformed in the next five years, while 53% say society will be more polarized.

Technology advancements in the communication industry also raise the question of whether machines or humans will be more important in the future. The survey participants gave a mixed response. While nearly half (47%) of PR professionals answered, “Human capital will be more important in the next five years,” another 30% expect machines and humans will have equal importance. And students predict the machines will rise: 46% say that, in the future, technology will be more important than humans in the communication industry, while only 32% say the opposite.

While the number of technology tools available to the PR professional is growing exponentially, few are viewed as very important to communication work currently being done. PR professionals cite media monitoring services (44%) as the most important tech tool for their current work. When asked to predict what will be most valuable for future work, social listening (54%) and website analytics

(54%) both rise to the top, with social media management (51%) also predicted to increase in importance.

Interestingly and perhaps alarmingly, only 18% of all PR executives believe artificial intelligence, which is being heralded as the next big thing, will be a very important technology for them in the future. But that may be because only 3% claim to be very knowledgeable about potential AI applications.

When asked what technology skills future communication professionals will need to be successful, 65% of respondents cited *big data* analytics, with video production (59%), search engine optimization (59%), digital design (54%) and user experience (53%) among the top responses. Contemporary undergraduate PR programs teach coding, analytics and video production, which means a stream of tech-savvy recruits soon will be available to bolster agencies and corporate communications departments.

This year we also asked CEOs—through a joint survey with *Chief Executive* magazine—where they think their company’s communication efforts should be focused. Just under half (44%) of the respondents said sales is their most important communication goal, while 39% say their primary goal is to differentiate their company’s brand from the competition.

Asked what communication strategies would be most valuable to their companies in the



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future, social media and online influencers (**shared media**) were chosen by 38% of the CEOs, slightly ahead of original content distributed through their company’s channels (**owned media**) at 36%. Traditional, **earned media** coverage ranked third at 14%, and a mere 12% cited advertising (**paid media**).

One-third of CEOs identified **customer experience optimization** as an aspect of communications they would like to advance through future technology. This is a new area of opportunity for PR professionals—CXPR, where discrete communication is built into each interaction a customer has with a brand.<sup>1</sup> In-house communicators are also planning to marshal tech resources around the customer experience (18%), as well as measurement (21%), and audience targeting (20%).

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<sup>1</sup> Jonny Bentwood touches on this in the *Relevance Report* essay “Tracking The Customer Journey.”

# PURPOSE IS THE BOTTOM LINE

**BY MELISSA WAGGENER ZORKIN | @MELISSAWZ  
WE COMMUNICATIONS**

Not long ago, I started thinking about the brands that mattered most to me as a kid: Levi's, Cheetos, Toyota, Rossignol. What, I wondered, was their purpose? Why did they exist? What was their North Star?

The more I thought about these questions, the more obvious the answers seemed.

Cheetos wanted to sell me cheese-flavored snacks. Levi's wanted to sell me jeans.

Coke wanted to sell the whole world a Coke—a lovely, if self-serving, sentiment. Looking back, it's clear: The brands of my youth were just brands. To them, I was just a consumer. The world we shared was just a marketplace. Sure, brands helped shape my identity—I knew the perfect pair of Rossignol skis would make me ineffably cool (and I was right!)—but our relationship was purely transactional.

But, times have changed. Those brands have changed, too.

Earlier this year, WE Communications and Quartz Insights released a study called [Leading with Purpose in an Age Defined by It](#). We found it's no longer

enough for brands to focus only on maximizing their profits. Today, the public expects brands, companies, and organizations to respond substantively to the world around us, and to build relationships around our shared humanity—not just around the cash register.

For instance:

- Most respondents believe brands, rather than governments, are responsible for driving social change.
- Most respondents also believe brands can be a part of the solution to problems like climate change and widening inequality—but only if they define their purpose and take a stand.
- Nearly three-quarters of respondents think an organization's purpose leadership will become as important as its financial performance. In other words, purpose strategy is as essential to a company's long-term health as business strategy is.

Simply put, we've reached an inflection point. Purpose isn't a trend or a fad, and it

isn't optional; instead, it's the bottom line.

So: How can brands build a purpose that endures? For one thing, purposeful leadership starts with listening. A brand's purpose isn't a top-down edict from the C-suite; it's an organic, authentic connection with the needs and values of customers, employees, and communities.

Purposeful leadership also reflects an alignment of story and action. This means, it's not what we say that matters—it's what we do. That's why our research shows that personal conviction is the heart of purpose leadership. Without an authentic commitment to a brand's mission and values, purpose is just lip service—and customers can see through it in a flash.

Purpose is an organization's story, its road map, its soul—its why. An organization's purpose shapes every decision it makes. It brings meaning to its everyday work. It drives genuine, lasting change. It buoys commitment and communication, and it helps us stand tall in the face of adversity.

I know it's not always easy to build a brand with purpose—but I also know we're not going back to the days when companies could peddle snacks or jeans from inside a bubble sealed off from the world around them. What's more, I wouldn't want to. Would you?



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# APARTHEID TACTICS & LANGUAGE RAISE THEIR UGLY HEADS IN AMERICA

BY JULIA A. WILSON | @JULIAWILSON\_DC  
WILSON GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS

In traveling to South Africa to cover Nelson Mandela's historic presidential win (I was an L.A. TV news reporter), I was captured by the warmth of that nation's culture and people. So I stayed. I soon discovered I held many negative stereotypes about the continent and its peoples, false preconceptions mostly based on Western news reports, books and movies.

What a surprise! Not all Africans were uneducated natives, living in grass huts, running around half-naked or riding elephants. In fact, Johannesburg and Cape Town had trappings similar to progressive U.S. cities. South Africans were fashionably dressed, carrying briefcases and conducting business like us Westerners.

Despite these positive revelations and Mandela's election, some stark facts remained: most people there could not enjoy those luxuries. Black workers had to carry identification "passes" that gave them city access for specific purposes. The extent of their privileges was set by a numbering

system, based on skin color. Even in the aftermath of apartheid, social status was determined by skin color, ethnicity, education and wealth.

As the 2020 U.S. presidential race gears up, I see similar, sinister apartheid strategies at work in America. ICE raids are separating immigrant children from parents, and revised U.S. government regulations are making it easier to reject immigrant requests for green cards and visa applications, especially for the poor.

Venomous white power talking points label people of color and immigrants as "invaders." "Send her back," referring to four duly elected U.S. congressional leaders and women of color, is being chanted at racist political rallies. A prominent black U.S. congressional leader was verbally assailed for representing a city within his district, which was called "infested with rats (that) no one wants to live in." Racist tactics and messaging have manifested as violent terrorist acts and mass killings of

people of color and immigrants in California, Texas and Ohio. PR spin and divisive rhetoric cloaked as faux patriotism have become existential threats to our nation and democracy.

America's demographics are shifting to a browner, younger and more digitally focused population. PR professionals recognize this: In the 2019 USC Annenberg *Global Communications Report*, 64% of PR professionals surveyed acknowledge Diversity and Inclusion as the most relevant societal issue they plan to communicate. A March 2018 Brookings Institution report notes that by 2045, whites will be a minority, comprising 49.7% of the population. Hispanics are predicted to make up 24.6%, African Americans 13.1%, Asians 7.9% and multiracial people will represent 3.8%. This *browning* seems to be at the heart of *white fright*.

The USC report also notes that 62% of communications experts predict that in five years most consumers will be unable to distinguish information written by a news reporter from that paid for by a brand or shared by a digital influencer. And, moreover, they will not care where the information comes from. As PR professionals, we must verify the accuracy of news reports, as well as statements from editorialists, political pundits and elected officials. We need to reveal partisan motives behind editorial and political vitriol that poses as "news." We must vet the information we consume as if our lives and democracy depend on the truth. Because they do.



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And consumers should not be underestimated. They recently responded with boycotts and gym membership cancellations when *The Washington Post* revealed the owner of Equinox/Soul Cycle was planning a political fundraiser for a candidate they deemed to be a white supremacist.

As professional communicators, we must make the tough decisions that not only build our client's brands and earnings, but reflect cultural sensitivity to—and inclusion of—all Americans. We cannot ignore the disturbing signs of apartheid behavior: They will not benefit our clients' brands today, their profitability tomorrow, or our stability as a democracy.

# SEEING THE TRUE FACE OF HOMELESSNESS

**BY HEATHER RIM | @HEATHERRIM  
AECOM**

Last year, on any given night, more than half a million people in the wealthiest nation on earth had nowhere safe and secure to sleep.

Once an issue primarily confined to our cities' most disadvantaged neighborhoods and their hardest-luck residents, homelessness can now be found just about everywhere in the United States. It's one of the biggest—and certainly the most scandalous—crises of the 21st century.

Yet it is largely an untold story. Despite millions of words and thousands of pictures published in the media every day, the narrative of homelessness for many people is based on a multitude of outdated stereotypes—from mental illness and drug addiction on the one hand, to a view that homeless people simply prefer living on the streets or don't want to "get a job" on the other.

The true story is more complex—and much more heartbreaking. There are any number of tripwires that plunge people into homelessness today. An unexpected rent increase.

A sudden job loss. A family medical emergency. All too often, a vulnerable teenager or abused spouse running from a dangerous relationship. The public safety nets to catch these individuals have frayed badly, and the private economy is simply not producing enough affordable housing, healthcare, or the adequately paid jobs to help them regain their balance in society.

This is where you and I enter the picture. We alone cannot change the complex circumstances driving homelessness today. But we can use our story-telling tools to put a human face on homelessness. We can introduce a wider audience to the many different, increasingly common ways that people lose a home, and the treacherous downward spiral that can follow. We can help build greater understanding and empathy for this very human tragedy that, in today's world, can befall almost anyone.

Let me share one such story. Ericka is a resident supported by the Downtown Women's Center, an organization that helps women facing homelessness transition back into a stable economic life.

Ericka was a top-performing employee at a local Los Angeles bank branch with her own car and apartment. A rent increase suddenly made her apartment unaffordable, and Ericka's car became her only form of shelter. When her employer discovered she was living out of her car, she lost her job, too. Without a job, Ericka's car was repossessed, and she soon found herself on Skid Row.

With the power of her words, Ericka is changing the narrative. "For me the experience of being homeless was scary, lonely, and confusing," she shared. "I was harassed by men on the streets. I was afraid to fall asleep. I stayed awake at night because I was afraid of being assaulted or robbed, and I slept on the Metro trains during the day. It was difficult finding services, so I kept roaming the streets to see if I could find help or assistance."

There are thousands of stories out there just like Ericka's. And they all need to be heard if we are to change hearts and minds, dispel fears, and encourage people to make a place in their neighborhoods for the homeless.

We, as professional communicators, have the skills to tell these stories. Communication and advocacy are our stock-in-trade. We have the power to shape opinion, change behavior, advance policy and transform thinking. I think it is time we began to speak up.



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# ASIAN-AMERICAN REPRESENTATION TODAY IS AN INVESTMENT FOR TOMORROW

BY BILL IMADA | @BIMADA  
IW GROUP

When Warner Bros. Pictures released its romantic comedy “Crazy Rich Asians,” Asian-American community leaders were elated. Nearly a quarter of a century had passed since Hollywood Pictures, a division of The Walt Disney Company, released the widely acclaimed full-length feature film “The Joy Luck Club” with a majority Asian-American cast. “Crazy Rich Asians,” along with a few other Asian-centric films, needed to be successful for a variety of critical reasons. For one, if it became a box-office hit with Asian-American audiences, it would validate the rising economic clout of Asians within the world’s largest economy, the U.S.

Warner Bros. Pictures invested \$30 million to produce “Crazy Rich Asians” and hoped to make a modest profit in the U.S. and other global markets. After Asian Americans and other movie-goers flocked to box offices to see the movie, it grossed more

than \$170 million domestically. The popularity of the film demonstrated that a film with a significant Asian-American cast would not only be supported, but championed by Asian-American consumers. It wasn’t long before other studios accelerated their plans to produce movies with Asian actors and themes to secure their share of the lucrative Asian-American market. The entertainment industry recognized the opportunity and hasn’t looked back.

In past years, companies from various industries focused their attention on the growth and economic power of consumers in Asia. American companies opened outposts in major Asian capitals and competed aggressively for highly educated Asian talent. All sights were squarely on Asia. With all the corporate attention, it only seems logical that more of these companies would also tap Asian-American consumers right here at home. Howev-

er, only a small fraction of American Fortune 500 companies actively target Asian-American consumers despite some impressive data.

Consider the following statistics:

- Asian Americans represent seven percent (7%) of the total U.S. population, or approximately 22 million people, which is larger than 48 out of 50 states.
- Asian-American spending power exceeds \$1 trillion annually, which would position Asian America as the 15th or 16th most prominent economic powers in the world. (This figure rivals the nominal GDPs of countries such as Indonesia, Mexico, and the Netherlands.)
- More than 50% of all Asian-American adults have a college degree, while only about half of the total overall U.S. population has graduated from college;
- Average household income for Asian Americans has grown to more than \$90K per household—significantly more than the mass market;
- More than two-thirds of Asian Americans were born outside of the U.S., making these Americans an essential resource for companies wishing to expand their networks to Asia;
- By 2065, the population of Asian Americans will surpass the number of Hispanics/Latinx who live in the U.S.

Warner Bros. Pictures found success with “Crazy Rich Asians” because they planned with purpose. They created an



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internal team of multicultural experts in the U.S. and also engaged outside experts with proven experience working with Asian-American civic leaders, media, and social influencers. Their attention to the growing Asian-American market and other diverse segments is an exceptional case study for other industries seeking to build revenue with a broader group of American consumers.

No company or organization should sit on the sidelines and simply watch what unfolds. Marketers and communication professionals who wish to remain relevant in the years ahead must take decisive action now since the U.S. population is evolving rapidly. By building cultural competency here at home—especially with the growing Asian-American consumer segments—U.S. companies can reap substantial dividends in diverse markets throughout the country and in other parts of the world.

# IT'S TIME TO DECLARE MISSIONS, NOT MAJORS

**BY JIM OLSON | @JIMOLSON**

**AFRICAN LEADERSHIP UNIVERSITY**

Nearly 30 years ago when I was interviewing for my first PR job, the senior partner at J.D. Power and Associates asked me what the most important thing was that I learned in school. Without much hesitation I responded — “I learned how to learn.” He smiled and I was offered the job later that week.

To this day, I continue to believe that learning how to learn was by far the most valuable thing I took away from my four years at Syracuse University. That’s not to say that learning how to craft a story-sparking press release, design an attention-grabbing press kit or produce a perfectly polished VNR weren’t important foundational skills, but the reality is most of what we learn in college is outdated within the first 10 years of our careers.

Jobs like Social Media Manager, AI Engagement Specialist, VR Experience Director and Data Mining Scientist were not even on our radar a decade ago and will likely be as irrelevant as the press kit and VNR ten years from now. So it’s not surprising that a 2013 study by the Feder-

al Reserve Bank found that only 27% of college graduates end up in jobs related to what they majored in.

The reality is that the problems facing our world—healthcare access, climate change, poverty, urbanization and racial conflict—are simply much bigger, more complex and more dynamic than the concept of conventional university majors were intended to address. In our purpose-driven world and profession, the time has come for universities to consider a new breed of degree—one that encourages students to declare a “mission” or “purpose” and collaborate with faculty to chart an individualized interdisciplinary journey of courses, projects, immersions and experiences.

Earlier this year, I discovered a university that is doing just that. It can be found in one of the most unexpected places in the world—the remote Indian Ocean island of Mauritius, where I’m currently serving as an executive in residence after climbing the corporate ladder for the past three decades at Fortune 500 brands including Starbucks, United Airlines and US Airways.

African Leadership University (ALU), which graduated its inaugural class of students last June, has created a new blueprint for 21st century education. Our leadership-focused curriculum is centered around preparing a new generation of African leaders to solve Africa's biggest challenges (such as wildlife conservation, unemployment, agribusiness and education). And we're doing it by having students *declare missions not majors*—and in doing so unlock their full leadership potential.

The school's unique entrepreneurial approach to higher education is focused on preparing "life-long learners" equipped to solve the continent's biggest problems and chase the most innovative solutions. With state-of-the-art campuses in Mauritius and Rwanda, students discover their purpose, identify a "grand social challenge," and work with faculty to handcraft an individualized learning path to catalyze their self-selected mission.

Longstanding research by the Center for Creative Leadership suggests that only 10% of a leader's development comes from what they learned in the classroom, 20% comes from their developmental relationships with other people, and an overwhelming 70% comes from real-world challenges and experiences. That's why at ALU our accredited and personalized bachelor's degree is built around real-world projects, experientials, peer-learning and mentorship—instilling seven essential 21st century *meta skills* that organizations around the world are seeking in their next



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generation of leaders.

These skills are intended to augment academic theory and provide students with the lifelong learning and leadership mindset necessary to stay a step ahead in our ever-changing world—and be prepared for the jobs, issues and opportunities of tomorrow that haven't even been thought of today. These seven *meta skills* include understanding how to lead others; entrepreneurial thinking; quantitative reasoning; self-awareness; critical thinking; complexity management; and communicating with impact.

Now don't take my word for the power of this idea (I'm biased sitting here in the middle of the Indian Ocean surrounded by the courageous and visionary students, faculty and staff of this *university of the future*. Consider that earlier this year, *Fast Company* honored ALU as one of the 50

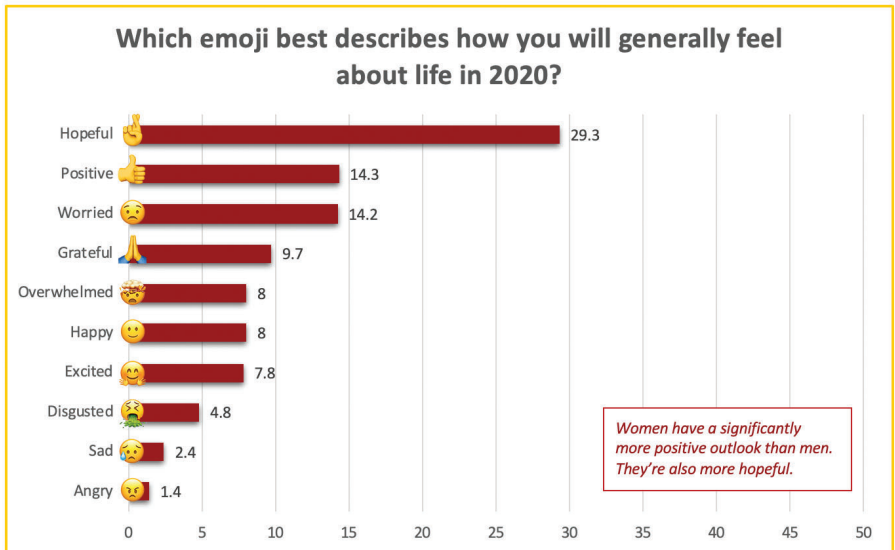
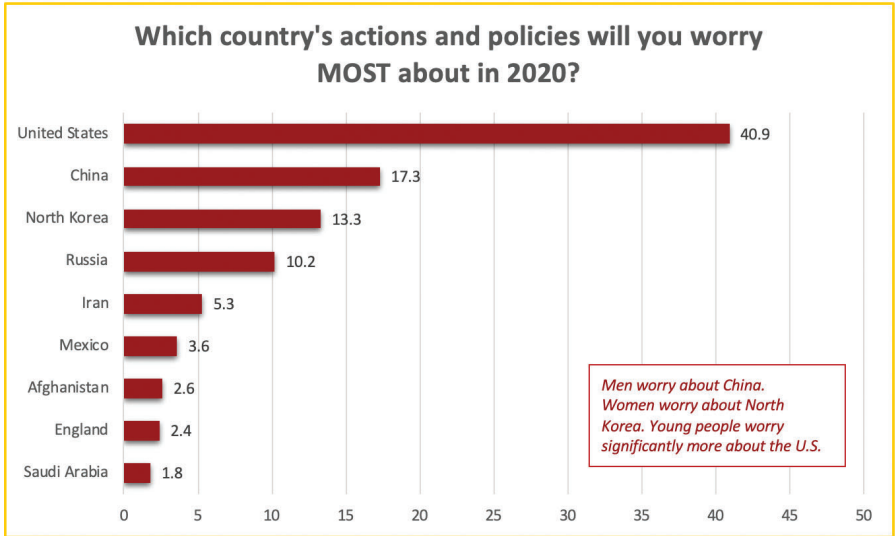


most innovative organizations in the world (no other university on the planet made the cut). *The New York Times* spotlighted ALU as one of 10 places in the world “where history is being made.” ALU’s founder, Fred Swaniker, was named one of TIME’s 100 Most Influential People in the world last April. And ALU’s innovative “missions not majors” approach is catching the attention of the world’s most admired and influential leaders, including Bill Gates, Jack Ma and President Barack Obama.

Put simply, the purpose-inspired employers of today want more than functionally focused, work-ready graduates—they are seeking the entrepreneurial-minded leaders and problem solvers who possess the wide-angle perspective to win today and innovate for the world of tomorrow.

Nelson Mandela declared, “Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that generation.” Communications schools, particularly their public relations programs, are uniquely suited to take the lead in catalyzing a new wave of difference makers—and unleash a new generation of greatness.

## 2020 RELEVANCE REPORT RESULTS



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