

# Editorial 30.2: Sustainability and public relations

Since 2020, which is the year when I became an editor of the *Corporate Communications: An International Journal (CCIJ)*, and until the end of 2024, we published over 100 articles tackling sustainability and environmentalism. Papers range from looking into sustainability reporting and news media reporting to responses on sustainability reporting and policies from the *public*. I also wrote about sustainability and an increased need to tackle this issue in the first editorial I published after two years of editing *CCIJ* (Topić, 2022). Therefore, when I was approached by guest editors of this issue asking if *CCIJ* would publish a special issue on sustainability, I was thrilled to provide a venue for discussing this important issue. The current special issue of *CCIJ* comes as a result of the BledCom Public Relations conference, annually held in Bled, Slovenia, and hosted by the guest editors of this special issue. BledCom is one of the most important PR conferences in Europe that started in “response to the need for a global forum for both academics and practitioners to explore the rapidly growing body of international public relations and related applied communication disciplines, including corporate and marketing communication, public affairs and public relations, relationship and reputation management” (BledCom, n.d.). The BledCom conference was started in 1994, and since then, it has served as an academic and practitioner forum for debating the most pressing issues for the PR industry. Previously, in 2021, *CCIJ* also published a BledCom special issue on trust and reputation, which is a much-read issue of the *CCIJ* (Verčič et al., 2021).

Sustainability is an important topic that deserves tackling from the point of PR and the role of the industry in sustainability. The topic is often labelled as radical and thus left-leaning politically, but as guest editors say in their editorial, citing Larry Fink, Chairman and CEO of BlackRock, “We focus on sustainability not because we’re environmentalists, but because we are capitalists”. What is more, Fink also went a step further and said that “Stakeholder capitalism is not about politics. It is not a social or ideological agenda. It is not “woke.” It is capitalism, driven by mutually beneficial relationships between you and the employees, customers, suppliers and communities your company relies on to prosper. This is the power of capitalism” (Fink, 2022, n.p., emphasis in the original). Therefore, sustainability is for everyone, whether on the political right or left, and whilst the sustainability agenda originally came from environmentalist movements associated with the left, particularly the women’s movement (Brownhill and Turner, 2019; Holy, 2007), sustainability should be everyone’s concern. As Fink’s letter recognises, organisations are also coming on board and increasing understanding that depleting natural resources for profit is a short-term strategy. Long-term, if organisations are to survive to keep serving their shareholders, we need to save the planet first. I do not personally agree that one can be a capitalist and environmentalist at the same time; I think that the two things do not go together because capitalism is fundamentally based on economic growth, which depletes resources (Topić, 2021), but organisations at least trying to reduce their environmental impact is certainly a positive step forward.

Sustainability is not a new issue. Environmentalists have advocated for changes to ways of human living since the 18th century. Increased attention to the issue of the environment happened during the 1960s with Kenneth Boulding’s (1966) article on ecological problems, which then exacerbated the debate that was joined also by economists and sociologists who started to focus on the issue of consumerism as an environmentalist issue (Trentmann, 2016; Wright and Nyberg, 2015; Krstić and Krstić, 2017; Coghlan, 2009; Corrigan, 1997; Ewen and Ewen, 1992; Calder, 1990; Topić and Lodorfos, 2022a, b). Sustainability is often based on four pillars, namely social, human, economic and environmental, and whilst the environmental



pillar historically received attention, the other elements did not. The role of PR and communication in fostering sustainability is even a less researched area.

Human sustainability recently came to the agenda with issues such as well-being becoming debated, and this issue is also entering the PR debate, particularly with respect to the working conditions of PR professionals and mental health in the PR industry (Larrondo-Ureta *et al.*, 2024; Anton, 2024; Candello and Mohammadpour, 2024; Chmiel, 2024; Cunha *et al.*, 2024a; Eng *et al.*, 2024; Topić and Chmiel, 2024; Geiger Zeman *et al.*, 2024). Social sustainability is also largely missing from PR debates, but the debate is growing. Issues such as social capital that keeps society running have been a subject of research on PR industries respective to career progression and work satisfaction (Topić, 2023; Ihlen, 2005; Edwards, 2012). However, the notion of communities, cultures and globalisations is still largely under-researched in PR scholarship. Economic sustainability is focused on maintaining capital and improving living conditions, and this area of sustainability is most contested as many authors and activists do not support the view that it is possible to be neoliberal, economically and sustainable at the same time. Policies such as corporate social responsibility are often criticised as neoliberal and a smokescreen that blocks societal changes that would preserve and save the planet (Fleming and Jones, 2013; Ireland and Pillay, 2013; Sheehy, 2014; Topić, 2021).

This special issue contributes to the gap in scholarship on sustainability and public relations. Authors in this issue tackle PR education and its roles in communicating values (Barlik, 2025), green communication and mitigating moral outrage (Selaković *et al.*, 2025), environmental social governance in the context of already mentioned Larry Fink (Thompson, 2025), sustainability and communicative action in the context of the transformational potential of corporate sustainability communication (Weder, 2025), communicating sustainability in fashion (Dourado *et al.*, 2025), stakeholder response to airline sustainability signalling in the context of social media communication (Setälä *et al.*, 2025), sustainability issues in the fashion industry in the context of the lack of communication about deadstock and overstock (Hejlova *et al.*, 2025), sustainability and corporate communications and public relations in Turkey (Aksoy and Misci Kip, 2025; Geysi, 2025), generational differences in attitudes towards sustainable development and employer brands (Tkalcac Verčič and Verčič, 2025), business and SDG discourse on X (Ascencio and Eramudugoda, 2025), attribute framing of climate change in the news, studied in the context of fake news accusations often attached to climate change communication and news (Chmiel *et al.*, 2025) and corporate social innovation and institutionalisation in the context of sustainability (Sebastiao and Melchiades Soares, 2025).

What all these papers show is that the scholarly attention to sustainability in the context of communications and public relations is growing, and it is becoming international. What is more, many of these articles focus precisely on communicating sustainability, which is a role of PR departments, and some studies take sustainability forward and investigate concepts such as PR education and how *publics* respond to the sustainability debate. Many published studies in this special issue look at sustainability from an organisational perspective, which links to the concept of economic sustainability. In other words, organisations cannot survive if society does not survive, and in the context of ever more involved *publics* who take notice of what organisations do, being part of the sustainability debate seems essential. In a polarised world where some politicians engage in denial of problems facing the planet, such as climate change, it is indeed up to organisations to pave the way and ignore the convenience of the current political climate where there are no legal consequences in some countries for not being sustainable, apart from reputation damage if organisational *publics* are engaged with the sustainability debate. It is indeed paradoxical that it seems that organisations do more about sustainability than national governments, even though excessive trading and economic growth are depleting resources and running the planet down; however, at the current time, public relations departments have a unique opportunity to take a lead and engage with creating and

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maintaining a sustainable world. Engaged and aware *publics* will appreciate it, but most importantly, if the planet survives (socially and professionally), history will remember it.

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