

Awards for best doctoral and master thesis in public relations

Pamplona, October 8, 2021 – The European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA), a body of academic institutions, researchers and senior professionals in the field of strategic communication with nearly 500 members from 46 countries two master students for their excellent theses in strategic communication.

Best thesis on corporate communications, discourse analysis, media, organizational change, work stress

The **PhD Award for Excellent Doctoral Thesis** is a bi-annual prize awarded by EUPRERA aimed to stimulate the academic discussion and build the body of knowledge in communication management across Europe. The jury, headed by Prof. em. Dr. Betteke van Ruler and Prof. em. Dr. Günter Bentele, selected as winning thesis:



Corporate agenda for strategic topic planning Theoretical framework and empirical findings on topic-based corporate communications, by **Alena Kirchenbauer**, supervised by Claudia Mast and Frank Brettschneider, University of Hohenheim, Germany.

Kirchenbauer's dissertation deals with a topic that has hardly been dealt with in internal PR research and has received too little attention: topic-oriented corporate communication. Therefore, this dissertation offers a very new perspective on how Corporate Communication departments research, select and present topics that they see as relevant and are necessary to act on. The theoretical basis for this

dissertation is an approach of news selection theory, and the selection process of journalism. Although the research is explorative, it is very challenging for the mainstream stakeholder orientation in research of corporate communication. The dissertation offers an elegant new approach to our research and education on what Corporate Communication professionals do and how they structure their work. The study fills a gap in theory building and empirical research on topic based corporate communications and the organization of corporate newsrooms.

On the basis of precisely defined basic terms (topic, issue, message) she sensibly distinguishes them from each other within her own theoretical approach. As one result of the study, she identifies four different topic areas, which she understands as a strategic approach to strategically based corporate communication: competence topics, competition topics, context topics and core topics.

The dissertation both advances research, but it can also show a way, a procedure, for practical corporate communication that strategic communication professionals can work with.

Alena Kirchenbauer's dissertation, which was graded "summa cum laude" by the University of Hohenheim in November 2020, opens up a new field of research for communication management through its topic. It was clearly seen by the jury as the most deserving work among all the submitted papers. The jury warmly congratulates Alena Kirchenbauer on this prize.

The **Master Thesis Award** for Excellence is an annual prize aimed to celebrate the PR academia and the role performed by European Higher Education Institutions in the evolution of knowledge of this field. The jury, headed by Martina Topić, from Leeds Beckett University in UK, selected the winning theses in two categories:

Practical Impact Award – "Put your students before your public image": A Critical Discourse Analysis of Strategic Communications in the University of Warwick Rape Chat Scandal" by **Clara Heroux-Rhyme**. Tutor: Mrya Georgiou, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

After learning that 11 of their University of Warwick classmates and friends had explicitly discussed raping them in a Facebook group chat, two female students filed a complaint with the university. Warwick's subsequent mishandling of the investigation, led by the university's media relations officer, resulted in significant public outcry including an on-campus protest, #ShameOnYouWarwick trending on Twitter and an in-depth BBC documentary. This study evaluated what the strategic communications# discourse between the university and #ShameOnYouWarwick Twitter activism reveals about institutional power within the era of popular feminism. The research findings demonstrate that Warwick and the digital activists were linked in a discursive negotiation. Above all, through the visibility and erasure of feminist perspectives, the Warwick rape chat case seems to reveal how institutional power can be threatened and reclaimed by digital feminist activism. By avoiding addressing rape culture directly and inconsistently acknowledging survivors, the University of Warwick's discourse worked to erase and distance the university from the inherently gendered issues of the rape chat case.



Theoretical Impact Award – “Sexual Violation, Weinstein and Speaking Out: The role of public relations and media in legitimising accounts of sexual violation” by **Iris Lopez Wyld**. Tutor: Alenka Jelen Sanchez, University of Stirling UK

This dissertation explored how Weinstein as a perpetrator of sexual violation, Judd and McGowan as high profile victims/survivors of sexual violation use PR to legitimise or delegitimise accounts of sexual violation and how they are represented in news reporting. The study used a critical-interpretivist epistemology and a constructionist ontology to inform a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of discourses from Harvey Weinstein, Rose McGowan and Ashley Judd, exploring how the

Guardian mediates these discourses. A qualitative longitudinal research design allowed analysis of texts from three time periods: the first reports against Weinstein, to pre-trial and then post-trial discourse.

The 2021 Awarding Ceremony has been an opportunity to reward also the 2020 winners who, due to the pandemic, could be awarded only online. The 2020 jury, headed by Alexander Buhmann from BI Norwegian Business School in Oslo, selected as winning theses:



Practical Impact Award – “Inside an evolving organisation: a framework for assessment”, by **Sasha Jurchak**. Tutors: Wim Elving, Hanze University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands; Rudiger Theilmann, Leeds Beckett University, UK.

Jurchak centers her efforts around testing and advancing a practice-based model on organizational change in globalized and digitized environments (the 21st Century Continua Model; Hamlin, 2018). In her work, the author not only explores the extent to which the model corresponds with the perception of experts or the extent to which

it can be used to identify meaningful opportunities for growth, but delves particularly also into the role of communication in such organisational change. As one reviewer stressed, “the managerial approach is definitively pertinent, questioning the agile versus the traditional organizational perspective shows a maturity and a feeling for what matters within organisations.” Jurchak does a good job in explaining shifts in business thinking and delivers a well-integrated literature review.

In her empirical part, Jurchak employs a substantive mixed-methods approach to evaluate the model, including 10 in-depth interviews, 10 focus groups, and a survey (n = 439). As one reviewer put it, Jurchak takes “strong methodological steps to get into the core of the issue” and in her empirics delivers a “very well documented and referenced piece of work: really well done!” Her qualitative results help to detail the validity of each of the components of the model and question their usefulness in guiding organizational change. While the quantitative data show that the model was useful rather on a general overview level, but had limitations in its linear-binary elements.

Ultimately, a highlight and main contribution of Jurchak’s work comes exactly from the author’s reflections and innovative thinking on these very shortcomings as she develops forward-looking recommendations to improve the model. Specifically, these alterations are formulated towards more operationally focused models for transition. Here the author suggests flexibility and communication as processes facilitating change, and thus aligns her contribution skillfully with important related work highlighting especially the role of communication in organizational change.



Theoretical Impact Award – “Work stress among communication professionals. A comparative study between Germany and the United States” by **Daniel Ziegele**. Tutors: Ansgar Zerfass, Leipzig University, Germany; Juan Meng, University of Georgia, USA.

The author aims to further our understanding of work stress in communication management, he empirically addresses stress factors and sources of stressors at work as well as individual and organizational coping methods, and he proposes a framework of components and process of work stress that can support and inspire

further research in this field. The thesis, in the words of one reviewer “addresses a very relevant and interesting topic...the theoretical and empirical approach are absolutely convincing and original.”

In his empirical study Ziegele employs a qualitative design focusing on professionals in communication agencies both in Germany and the United States -also comparing between top-management and young professionals-, conducting 40 in-depth interview, transcribing over 1,200 minutes of audio subjected to qualitative content analysis. In his work, Ziegele reveals, e.g., not only major misjudgments between seniors and juniors about stress factors of the other group but his data also suggest that common organizational coping offers (such as fitness, wellness, and health programs) as not invariably useful. Based on his data and a thorough literature review, Ziegele proposes a framework for work stress in communication management that may inspire further research on, e.g., highlighting work stress related to 24/7-availability or agility. In the words of one reviewer "Results contribute to a better understanding of working conditions, collaboration, internal organizational practices and job satisfaction in communication management."

In sum, Ziegele's work shows a rigorous effort and original thinking focused on a little researched but important topic in the field. His thesis is theoretically versed yet practically relevant. As one reviewer put it "I would like to emphasize that this is a laudable work. I can see that the author spent a lot of effort and work hours and can and should be proud of the result!" The jury could not agree more.