

*Special Section*  
**BREAKING THE RULES**

## **Special Section Introduction: Breaking the Rules**

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The history of innovation is unwieldy, diverse, wide, and deep, according to the [OLC Innovate 2016 conference's Timeline of Innovation](#) digital installation. The introduction to this digital archive notes that the origins of the word *innovation* started with slave labor yet now is the go-to word for the tech world:

Innovation is largely used as a positive today, either as a trait or as the result of such a trait infusing a product or process. Historically, innovation has had a much different meaning. Originally a term used specifically to describe changes in government and policy (usually in the negative), innovation becomes associated with the religious through Greek drama, a relationship strengthened through translation of the Bible. From there, things become more complicated. (Moe, 2016, para. 1)

Communication scholar Everett Rogers (1976) defined innovation as a thing (place, product, or idea) that is “discovered” and thought of as new by a person unfamiliar with that thing. Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen pioneered the theory of disruptive innovation, and the term has become a lumpy catchall for any type of innovations offered by organizations. The term “disruptive innovation” has mushroomed into a mishmash of inappropriate and inconvenient connotations. As Markides (2006) wrote, “despite the widespread use of the term by both managers and academics, there is still a rather unclear understanding of what constitutes disruptive innovation” (p. 19). The original intent for

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disruption rests in the idea of the opportunistic, flexible upstart taking advantage of new paradigms, thus usurping dominant, large firms:

“Disruption” describes a process whereby a smaller company with fewer resources is able to successfully challenge established incumbent businesses. Specifically, as incumbents focus on improving their products and services for their most demanding (and usually most profitable) customers, they exceed the needs of some segments and ignore the needs of others. Entrants that prove disruptive begin by successfully targeting those overlooked segments, gaining a foothold by delivering more-suitable functionality—frequently at a lower price. Incumbents, chasing higher profitability in more-demanding segments, tend not to respond vigorously. Entrants then move upmarket, delivering the performance that incumbents’ mainstream customers require, while preserving the advantages that drove their early success. When mainstream customers start adopting the entrants’ offerings in volume, disruption has occurred. (Christensen, Raynor, & McDonald, 2015, para. 6)

With these varying ideas of what innovation is, what does innovation and disruption mean for strategic communication? This special issue focuses on strategic communication disruption and innovation. Rather than examining the historical contexts of an innovation, plotting how products are scaled up into larger society, or questioning how new business models upend the competition, the disruption and innovation presented in these cases showcase non-normative best practices and question established theory and research.

Two of the articles challenge the dominant corporate social responsibility (CSR) narrative that many companies follow. Erica Ciszek’s historical case study of American Airlines and its LGBT outreach provides sociopolitical and cultural context missing in most analyses of corporate communication and audience messaging. Derek Moscato analyzed the transformative CSR campaign produced by Patagonia. The outdoor clothing company, long a critic of consumerism, used an innovative approach steeped in social movements and grassroots activism than the traditional norms of CSR.

Disruption exists within the public relations industry, particularly in elements of popular culture such as fashion and entertainment. Strategic communication scholars are catching up with understanding, dissecting,

and translating disruptive practices used in those arenas into theoretical insights and research. The remaining papers achieve that. Sarah VanSlette and Damion Waymer focused on the greatest technological disruption that the industry is facing: social media. In their case study, the authors interrogated how Brandy Melville, an Italian clothing retailer, shunned the traditional advertising avenues used by its competition and introduced its reputation, aesthetic, and brand via social media. In their critique and application of image restoration theory to LeBron James, Katie Stansberry and Jessalynn Strauss score by pairing reputation management to celebrity personal branding.

The cases presented in this special issue emphasize the transformative, the unusual, and the forward-thinking execution of strategic communication in real organizational contexts. The cases strive for balanced praxis, meaning that there is the clear articulation of ideas that those external to the academic conversation can grasp easily for pragmatic application as maintaining scholarly rigor to produce theoretical insights. Special thank you to Sam Ford, formerly of Peppercomm and currently with Fusion, for proposing the volume to *Case Studies in Strategic Communication* and recommending me as the guest editor, and another special thank you to Melissa Vigue of Peppercomm for her continued assistance with this project. I heartily thank the ad hoc reviewers and the emergency reviewers who offered their expertise, time, and insight to the authors: Rowena Briones, Avery Holton, Amber Hutchins, Katherine Fleck, Karen Freberg, Melissa Janoske, Jacqueline Lambiase, Jason Shumaker, and Richard Waters.

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