BledCom, one of the most prestigious and longest-lasting annual conferences for people dealing with public relations at universities, research, and analytical centers, think tanks, communication and public relations departments, agencies, and consulting firms, celebrated its 30th edition this year. The Alpine resort Bled w Slovenia has been systematically attracting the intellectual elite of public relations from around the world since 1994. After two pandemic online editions in 2020 and 2021 and the hybrid event in 2022, this year’s BledCom was finally held in the stationary formula with the participation of 140 persons from 28 countries, among which, apart from the hosts, Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, Portugal, the United States, Turkey, and Great Britain were the most represented.

First some memories

The two exceptions to the rule of attending the event in person were online speeches by Krishnamurthy Sriramesh (member of the organizing committee who was exceptionally absent at BledCom this year) and James Grunig, professor emeritus at the University of Maryland at College Park, the best known public relations researcher in the world, which has been confirmed for years by the results of bibliometric analyses and the still high number of citations of his publications.

James Grunig and his wife, Lauri Grunig, also a respected PR researcher, regularly visited BledCom in the 1990s and early 2000s, and – as mentioned in the conference opening speech by its main initiator and head of the organizing committee, Prof. Dejan Verčič from the University
of Ljubljana – their presentations and debate contributions were a reliable magnet attracting PR scientists and practitioners from Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain, the USA, and later the whole Europe and the world, including many students and associates of the Grunigs.

To this day, BledCom remains the oldest independent (i.e., not organized by any global or national PR association) conference devoted to public relations and strategic communication. Over 30 years, more than 1,500 leading representatives of the science and practice of public relations from 62 countries presented their papers, research results, reports, and studies during the conference. The lasting effect of BledCom – as mentioned by Verčič – is 11 published books, 9 special editions of peer-reviewed scientific periodicals (“Corporate Communications: An International Journal” and “Public Relations Review” – three times, “Journal of Political Marketing and Journal of Communication Management” – twice), 14 sets of post-conference materials and six collected summaries and abstracts, made available at www.bledcom.com/publications.

The organizers of the first BledCom conference in 1994 were: Toby MacManus from Bournemouth University in Great Britain (also present this year), Danny Moss from Manchester Metropolitan University, and Dejan Verčič (then a PR consultant and young PR researcher). Their intention was to create an international forum where academics and PR professionals could explore the rapidly expanding areas of institutional, corporate, and marketing communications, public relations, and relationship and reputation management. Later the initiative group was joined by Jon White from the University of Reading (UK) and Bruce Newman from DePaul University of Chicago. Since 2015, the organizing committee of BledCom consists of: Dejan Verčič (professor and head of the Center for Marketing and Public Relations at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana), Ana Tkalac Verčič (professor of the University of Zagreb in Croatia) and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh (professor of the University of Colorado), and the conference is co-hosted by the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana.

The topics of BledCom – as pointed out by Verčič – from the very beginning addressed the newest trends and the most interesting phenomena, announced the directions of the development of the discipline, and anticipated social and political events. As early as 1996 the main theme of BledCom was digital communication; in 1997 – environmental issues in PR; in 2006 – diversity, cohesion, and integration in the context of communication; in 2007 – the impact of globalization on PR; in 2014 – the emergence of new, digital publics in PR, and in 2018, shortly before the COVID pandemic and Russian attack on Ukraine – the role of communication in global crises.

**Communication and sustainable development**

In 2023, the theme of the conference was Public Relations and Sustainability and fit perfectly into the public debate on sustainable development, the involvement of international organizations (including the UN), communities (like the European Union), and states, increased interest in the role of the public sector, industries, companies, corporations, consulting, science, higher education (including communication and PR) and the third sector in solving global ecological, social and governance (ESG) problems.

Issues related to sustainable development, communicating about ESG, and social responsibility of companies and institutions (CSR) were the dominant themes among the 66 speeches and presentations delivered during 18 sessions (held in three parallel threads), six debates and panel discussions, and five presentations at BledCom 2023.

During the plenary session, the audience’s attention was captured by the well-documented presentation about the Canadian market entitled *The Emergence and Evolution of Sustainable Development Communication Practices*, authored by Solange Tremblay of Sustainability Com-
munication and Université de Québec in Montreal, who is considered a pioneer in this field of communication on a global scale. Another consultant from Canada, Daniel Tisch, led a panel discussion with the representatives of Slovenian corporations (the largest telecommunications company and a leading bank), who described how communicating about sustainable development and social responsibility looks in practice, how important it is to involve managers in social, ecological, charity and volunteering projects, and indicated the need for interdepartmental coordination of activities.

The head of the British Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and manager of the telecommunications company Vodafone, Steve Shepperson-Smith, pointed to the possibilities of artificial intelligence in supporting less creative and more routine tasks in PR. According to research conducted by CIPR, in the coming years, it is expected that over 40% of PR duties will be handled by tools such as ChatGPT.

The problem of effective combating of fake news regarding climate change was discussed by Michał Chmiel from Royal Holloway University in Great Britain, who presented the results of his team’s research on the reception of positive and negative messages by people of different political views, including those who question climate change. Contrary to expectations, positive messages, showing the benefits of preventing a climate catastrophe rather than threatening with its consequences, turned out to be more effective in convincing those reluctant or undecided to accept the findings of science about climate processes. In turn, Harri Ruoslahti from Laurea University of Applied Sciences in Finland, based on a research project commissioned by the European Union, presented an organization’s resistance to Internet attacks as a condition for effective communication management in the digital environment and discussed the need to reach diverse audiences in accordance with the rules for communicating ESG and sustainable development.

The links between communicating about social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development were studied by a team from Germany led by Jörg Forthmann from the Institute for Management and Economic Research think tank. Using the social listening method involving AI, based on analyzing over 400 thousand Internet statements about the 40 largest German companies, the researchers managed to identify the relationship between communicating about CSR and the three dimensions of ESG. It turned out that the more discussions about social responsibility, the more mentions of ecological, social, and governance (ESG) issues in online narratives about corporations, and the links between CSR and ESG apply equally to each of the three aspects of sustainable development. This creates an opportunity for companies to improve their reputation by the clear and planned strengthening of a selected aspect of ESG, as long as the other two do not give reasons for criticism, while involvement in CSR projects should improve the perception of the company and its brands in the areas of ecology, management, and transparency of operations.

An empirical study conducted in Italy by a team from the University of Udine found that only half of the companies from the Friuli—Venezia Giulia region do well at communicating about sustainable development despite a considerable social demand for information on this topic, especially for larger companies. According to the Italian scholars, this results from both the insufficient supply (i.e. shortage of ESG communication specialists) and the still insufficient demand from companies that are not genuinely interested in communicating information about ESG engagement. This heralds future problems both for enterprises, which will have to deal with regulations regarding ESG and communicating about it, and PR consultants, whose place in communicating about ESG may be taken by other specialists already investing in competencies and relationships in this area.
Some of the projects related to ecological, social, and governance lack credibility and real impact on society and the environment, as was indicated by a team of researchers from Prague’s Charles University led by Denisa Hejlova. A good example of this is clothing companies like H&M, Boohoo, and Shein, and their promotional projects, such as unfounded boasting about reduced water consumption or hiring celebrities to encourage mass purchases, which exhibit all the attributes of the so-called greenwashing.

As noted by Gareth Thompson from University of the Arts London, referring to sustainable development goals and investing in ESG-oriented companies have become a reason for media criticism and organized public relations campaigns undertaken by conservative American politicians and officials (including state prosecutors) against the involvement of state investment funds in listed companies that strive for climate neutrality and reduction of carbon footprint. According to Thompson, populist campaigns against ecologically and socially conscious companies do not bring results, as evidenced by the 65% share of such companies in European investment funds listed on stock exchanges (so-called exchange traded funds, or ETFs), and the identification of anti-ESG narrative strategies can help to further reduce their impact. The researcher noticed a growing discrepancy between understanding ESG in the USA and in Europe (not only the EU), where this area has gained exceptional importance. In Europe, broadly understood ESG is slowly replacing corporate social responsibility (CSR). After over 100 years of the primacy of investors’ interests and profit, European companies and investment funds are increasingly asking themselves questions about non-financial business goals and obligations towards various groups of stakeholders. In Thompson’s view, for most of the previous century, public relations played a servant role to companies and industries, encouraging mass consumption and supporting the exploitation of natural resources rather than their preservation for future generations. Only the recent trend towards sustainable development, visible especially in Europe, is an opportunity for a new, more pro-social and pro-environment direction in contemporary public resources.

The close relationship between communication and sustainable development was similarly depicted by Ansgar Zerfass, a well-known scientist from the University of Leipzig, who summarized 15 years of the longest-running cyclical study in the PR industry: “European Communication Monitor”.

In addition to the above-mentioned, this year’s BledCom was attended by many leading researchers working in the field of public relations at universities around the world: Jimmy Hollenczer, Hua Jiang, Minjeong Kang, Jeong-Nam Kim, Soo Yun Kim, Arunima Krishna, Dean Kruckeberg, Rita Men, Hongmei Shen and Marina Vujnovic from the USA, Steve Doswell, Jaideep Prabhu, Kevin Read, Tanya La Roux, Thomas Stoeckle and Paul Willis from Great Britain, Ana Adi, Florian Meissner, Holger Sievert and Arne Westermann from Germany, M. J. Broersma, Wim Elving, J. G. M. Jonkman and Yijing Wang from the Netherlands, Jiang Chan, Yi-Ru Regina Chen and Shih Chia Wu from Hongkong, Chun-Ju Flora Hung-Baesecke, Maureen Taylor, Lukasz Swiatek, Franzisca Weder and Katharina Wolf from Australia, Chris Galloway and David McKie from New Zealand, Ganga Dhanesh, Nikolina Ljepava, Marko Selakovic and T. Serra Gorpe from the UAE, Fraser Likely from Canada, Chiara Valentini from Finland and Jarim Kim from Korea.

Polish participation

Polish universities were represented by Jacek Barlik from the Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies of the University of Warsaw, who delivered a paper entitled *Caring or selling? Communicating values or promoting products in PR education* and – as an experienced participant of BledCom, attending the event for the fifth time – chaired one of the sessions. He presented the
results of his research conducted among students of public relations from six Polish universities, which concerned values, PR ethics, professional and sustainable development in study programs, and the usefulness of these issues in professional work, also in comparison with practical competencies. Polish PR students value the role of values, ethics, and sustainable development in the course of their studies even more than technical skills such as writing and preparing social media entries because they are aware of the expectations of especially younger generation regarding social and ecological behaviors of enterprises, institutions and organizations.

Similar topics were addressed by researchers from Spain, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, who analyzed public relations study programs in their countries in terms of the presence of sustainable development, communication ethics, and values. The issues of PR education and technical, professional, and ethical preparation of students were also present in the presentations of scholars from South Africa (the role of PR lecturers in improving the well-being of university students in South Africa, where 50% of undergraduates drop out after the first year), Germany (opinions of young PR specialists about the future of the industry, including the importance of education and values), and Turkey (in the context of university communication as well as comparing the opinions of professionals and academics on sustainable development in the practice, research and education in the area of PR).

The theme of next year’s BledCom 2024 will be Public Relations and Human Well-being. The organizers stressed in the announcement that this time the emphasis will not be placed on the effectiveness of communication by organizations and institutions but on the publics with whom PR consultants maintain relationships and conduct dialogue, and on people working in the PR industry. Entries can be submitted until February 5, 2024 on https://www.bledcom.com/my-post. It remains only to hope that next year Polish universities will be represented by a stronger team of researchers that in recent years.