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Public Relations

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Context: Defining public relations

Public relations is better described than defined. It is an applied professional practice and an academic field, and both offer communication centered and research based ways to understand, inform, and intervene to adjust relationships between ideas, individuals, groups, and societies. The practice seeks to influence the building, maintenance, and restoration (or, on occasion, destruction) of reputations and also to integrate different perspectives and groups, particularly through its enactment of activities such as issues management, crisis resolution, and risk communication. Because the field's major arena of social action is the public sphere, especially in media (online and offline), politics, and public opinion, public relations activities can impact significantly on democracy. Public relations practitioners have, for example, helped mobilize populations to participate, or cease participating, in wars. Individuals and organizations who use public relations range from CEOs, corporations, governments (local and national), and think-tanks through to activists, charities, educational institutions, health organizations, NGOs, and ordinary people. Academic public relations is involved in some of the above. In its own right, it seeks to generate relevant theory; to improve the field's academic and social standing; and to undertake research, which is designed to contribute to effective and ethical practice, to inform teaching, to expand the body of trained practitioners, and to extend knowledge.

Contemporary public relations is in transition both in practice and in theory. Signs of the transition surface in significant differences between definitions, in contested accounts of its history, and in the different ways it is facing the major challenges of global uncertainties, increasing risk, and fast-changing and disruptive technologies. In the main Anglo-American professional public relations associations, the dominant definitions of the field in the 20th century clustered around the idea of public relations as a function of managing – with *managing* closer in its meaning of “to control” rather than “to cope with” – communication and relations between an organization and its publics. More recent definitions identify public relations as less organization centered and more democratic by emphasizing its role in constructing “mutually” beneficial relationships rather than aligning with traditional command and control management. Alongside these democratizing trends, driven by the global spread

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of the field (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003, 2009), public relations is also coming to terms with the impact of technological convergences. In a 2011–12 exercise, “Public Relations Defined,” the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) responded to the global aspect by augmenting the national process of updating their definition with international consultation and acknowledged the relevance of technology by using web enabled crowdsourcing. At the end of that exercise, the PRSA website defined public relations as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” to move away from the ideas of control and “top-down, one-way communications” associated with management (<http://prsay.prsa.org/2012/03/01/new-definition-of-public-relations/>).

At greater length, and taking a more socially responsible stance, the Inter-American Confederation of Public Relations (CONFIARP) (<http://confiarp.com/>), whose membership (covering about 30,000 professionals) includes public relations practitioners from countries in the Americas (predominantly Latin America), defined public relations as: “a social-technical-administrative discipline by which the opinion and attitude of the public is analyzed and evaluated and a continuous planned program is done with a reciprocal communication, based on the interest of the community, destined to maintain an affinity and beneficial understanding with the public” (Pérez-Senac, 2000, p. 22; cited in Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009, p. 358). CONFIARP adds to PRSA’s definition by covering more specific public relations activities and foregrounding its basis in research. The United Kingdom’s professional association the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) defines public relations as being concerned with reputation: “the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you” and “influencing opinion and behavior” (<http://www.cipr.co.uk/content/about-us/about-pr>). These shifting emphases assist in distinguishing the field from communication management, corporate communication, and strategic communication. Although sometimes used interchangeably with public relations, the former two, as their titles suggest, orient more toward serving the management function for businesses or governments.

Outside professional organizations, public relations faculty in colleges and universities generate more inclusive definitions. Some scholars – a number of whom were, or currently are, also practitioners – do stay aligned with the views of the professional associations. Others address what they see as an ongoing bias toward organizations in general and for-profit businesses in particular. Their definitions encompass not only a broader view and more egalitarian treatment of the organization’s traditional stakeholders, but stretch the potential beneficiaries to include individuals (e.g., celebrities from both traditional media and those with large social media followings), “stakeseekers” (i.e., those not previously recognized as relevant publics or stakeholders by organizations but who are also impacted by organizational activities), and society in general. Other scholars argue that public relations is, and should be, profoundly different than a management function, especially since the growth of the Internet and social media, and is already more society friendly than suggested in the more gradually democratizing definitions offered by professional associations.

Recent trends in academic literature suggest that public relations is better defined as a creative and democratic social activity available to almost everyone to engage public

relations principles and practices with personal reputations, organizational reputations, crisis and risk communication situations, and so on. This is not ivory tower idealism since it is already socially visible. It is widely evident in how people in economically advanced democracies move comfortably in heavily promotional environments and are frequently capable of absorbing techniques and applying them for, and to, themselves. This is very marked in the case of younger people with social media savvy and skills and young entrepreneurs launching extremely successful companies (e.g., Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and the less well known Kelsey Falter, CEO and founder of Poptip). It also surfaces clearly in how the current environment of citizen journalists, bloggers with massive followings, and Twitter assisted social movements is further democratizing those who practice public relations and long-running authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere. It similarly surfaces in examples of how previously unknown individuals have posted material that has gone viral to win redress for personal grievances – even against very large organizations – not just in public opinion but sometimes with material consequences. One instance was musician Dave Carroll's trio of YouTube protest songs "United breaks guitars" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YGc4zOqozo>) against United Airlines' refusal to compensate for baggage handlers carelessly damaging guitars. This led to international public embarrassment for the airline with reputation damaging coverage still available on the web.

Public relations by activists is also receiving attention on a range and scale that seem to be acknowledging previous neglect when these critical, in both senses of the word, stakeholders were categorized as corporate enemies. This parallels the growing trend to acknowledge public relations outside the corporate sector. There have always been "amateur" – in the sense of not being paid rather than in lacking professional skills – practitioners; but this sector has become increasingly influential (e.g., through blogging and YouTube posts) in the public sphere. Professional practitioners do *pro bono* work but amateur public relations people can now more easily access and afford technology that, through a combination of globalization and accessible technology, exponentially increases their reach and influence. Indeed, the practice of professional practitioners paying popular bloggers who promote the campaigns, clients, politicians, and products serviced by those professionals is well known. As knowledge of the practice, especially when the blogger payments or gifts were not made in transparent fashion, emerged in online and offline media, the revelations sparked negative media coverage and adverse public reactions damaging to the profession's already poor reputation around the globe.

Critical scholars from outside the field describe public relations more harshly. Some contend that in its genesis, and continuing through its activities to the present, public relations is best seen as an apparatus for legitimating the interests of the few at the expense of the many. Such critics reject any distinction between public relations and propaganda and see both as efforts to control people's attitudes in favor of the already powerful. Some argue that as societies gain more freedom and become more democratic, public relations replaces violence as a way to control people. Other critical scholars see corporations as employing public relations professionals and techniques to secure their power and interests against the forces of popular democracy without much benefit to the less powerful.

As a scholarly domain, public relations shares many similarities with a complementary (some may see a competing) domain in organizational communication. Wehmeier and Winkler (2013) have outlined some epistemological and conceptual differences between the two and laid out ways of bridging some of the gaps. However, scholars of public relations also disagree with organizational communication scholars who characterize public relations only in terms of persuasion and control, as Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) have done: “Why should scholars of organizational communication pay any attention to a managerial mind-set so clearly preoccupied with marketing or public relations concerns of visibility, linear persuasion, communication impact, and control?” (p. 395). Public relations scholars have consistently maintained that public relations has, as its primary purpose, *relationship building* with both internal and external publics of organizations through the use of communication. Public relations is often equated with only *corporate* communication – an erroneous linkage, because the majority of public relations activities around the world are conducted by governments and nonprofits (NGOs), two other major types of organizations. Outside academic circles, there is little or no public acknowledgment of a perceived “chasm” between public relations and organizational communication.

Transitions in the history and geography of public relations

The outsider radical critique is the polar opposite of the positive mainstream of public relations, whose members see the field as being aligned with democratic growth and requiring a certain level of democracy to flourish, or even to exist at all, as in the view “that only through the expertise of public relations can causes, industries, individuals, and institutions make their voice heard in the public forum” (Cutlip, 1994, p. ix). One of the major architects of that account in the United States was Edward Bernays (1947), who associated public relations with democracy and distinguished it from propaganda. Early in his career, in common with other famous US public relations practitioners, Bernays drew on knowledge gathered in work for the US Committee for Public Information (CPI). The CPI was set up by the US government to get public support behind US participation in World War I through propaganda techniques (though CPI chair George Creel noted it was not called propaganda because that word, at least for some, was associated with deceit and corruption).

Bernays carried propaganda techniques over into his influential postwar practice as a “public relations counsel,” the term he subsequently used to describe the field and his role in it. This was, as he candidly admitted, because the term “propaganda” had gathered too many negative associations for a public who had subsequently learned of World War I’s atrocity stories and other excesses. Accordingly, Bernays endeavored, almost entirely for reputational purposes, to split public relations apart from propaganda and to integrate the split into a grand narrative of progress that explained away unethical actions as, like any profession, the work of bad apples or unqualified shysters. He constructed the development of public relations as a linear progression that moved, in the 20th century, from press agency to two-way forms of communication with stages characterized by the different sets of attitudes held by the powerful toward the general

population: the public be damned; the public be informed; mutual understanding; and mutual adjustment.

The influential later account of Grunig and Hunt (1984) confirmed Bernays's accounts of the progressive ascent of public relations but, in addition, they refined his historical model to four distinct stages aligning with their "models of public relations." The essence of these four models was the notion of symmetry in purpose (intent) and direction (one way vs. two way) of communication. The models held sway in public relations scholarship for most of the rest of the 20th century and are still current in many parts of the field.

Almost all these architects, and other public relations histories in the 20th century, converged in situating the field as resolutely modern, emerging from "American beginnings" roughly around 1900, and subsequently developing alongside 20th-century US business. They disregarded anything prior to that as antecedents, as precursors, or, in some other way, as merely "public relations like." In the early 2000s, as globalization expanded, the idea of the United States as the prototype for public relations to be rolled out round the world failed to match with the historical accounts of other nations. Countries such as Germany had an earlier history of business public relations activities; India's firms had already established corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices long before their US counterparts; and Israeli histories charted fundraising activities, previously identified as starting in the 17th century in the United States, that took place centuries before Columbus landed in America.

Even in the United States itself, some scholars resist the dominant view that everything before 20th-century US business experiences was antecedent to what counted as "real" public relations history. These historical challenges were part of a pluralization of authors and methods within public relations in general with the publication of handbooks of public relations, global handbooks of public relations, encyclopedias of public relations, and a proliferation of scholarly articles, books, and new journals. These moves run parallel with a questioning of US-centric accounts of public relations, more by scholars in or from other parts of the world but also by US scholars themselves. Examples range from building distinctive European bodies of knowledge to providing national histories that refute the idea that public relations originated in the United States and the rest of the world simply imitated it.

The post-2000 publications of major handbooks and encyclopedias of public relations (Heath, 2001, 2010) included many more authors and material from outside the United States. Sriramesh and Verčič's (2003, 2009) *Global Public Relations Handbook* provided accounts of the state of the profession within specific contexts in around 30 countries as well as perspectives from all continents and some transnational organizations. One edited collection considered the field in 10 Asian countries and introduced new perspectives including public relations activities in prebiblical times in several Asian regions. All these contributed to a larger project calling for "a global theory of public relations by taking into account the *native's point of view*" (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009, p. 51; italic in original) and not just describing "various public relations practices across all regions of the world ... [but contextualizing] such practice by linking public relations practices with socio-cultural variables" (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003, p. xxiii).

The field also has witnessed a surge in the number of continuing conferences dedicated to public relations. Apart from the three big academic associations with large numbers of public relations scholars – the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), the International Communication Association (ICA), and the National Communication Association (NCA) – there are others for disseminating public relations scholarship. Notable new conferences include BledCom (founded in 1994), the International Public Relations Research Conference (IPRRC) (founded in 1997), the International History of Public Relations Conference (IHPRC) (founded in 2010), and the Barcelona International PR Conference (founded in 2011). Presentations at these conferences, and proceedings and other publications emanating from them, have addressed many themes relevant to expanding the horizons of the field including its contested history as well as its parameters. Special issues of journals have reinforced change by adding new dimensions to the field's notoriously ethnocentric views. This pluralization of voices – with new writers and perspectives on public relations from Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East – has opened different vistas, expanding the field with varied cultural perspectives and histories that include accounts of anti-imperialist campaigns, religious public relations, and the role of women in society.

In addition to the pejorative connotations of the term “public relations,” questions have also been raised about whether the term itself fits the various purposes and different interpretations evident across the diverse cultures of the world. Asian and European scholars, for example, have noted that there is no good translation of the term *public relations* into Asian or Germanic and Slavonic languages. Germans use the term *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit* to refer to public relations, but that term literally means “public work,” which is not what the term “public relations” connotes. Further, the English translation of the German means “working *with* the public, working *for* the public, working *in* the public,” which is again not how the term is commonly understood either, although many academics and practitioners strive to do transparent work for the good of society.

Studies from Europe reported a strong resistance to the term “public relations” because most practitioners saw it as an American term, and so carrying hegemonic connotations (see van Ruler & Verčič, 2002). That resistance, coupled with translation problems, has prompted the public relations associations of Denmark, The Netherlands, Finland, Norway, and Sweden to call themselves “communication” associations in their native languages and public relations associations only in English. Similar situations exist in Asia. In China, for example, the term *Guanxi*, which is translated into English as “network of relationships,” serves as the Chinese equivalent of “public relations,” and *Gao Guanxi*, “relying on personal relations,” is often also used in China to refer to public relations.

In addition, by making Western public relations the founding term and model practice, public relations activities in regions such as Asia are situated as lagging behind. This positions them as needing to catch up with the teleological destiny inherent in the evolutionary triumph of Western notions, and practices, of public relations. Such a monolithic modernist account has increasingly been rejected, especially by critical scholars, postcolonialists, and postmodernists in public relations and by those who

recognize the richness of other traditions and the diversity of environments. This is not a matter of geography: there also exists a “West is best” mentality among certain practitioners and scholars in other parts of the world who look up to Western practices as superior whether they are relevant to their sociocultural environment or not.

Changing methods: Is public relations art or science?

Scholars arguing for the origins of public relations to be located in the modern US practice, scholarship, and society buttressed their case by an associated shift in methods. The stress on modernity was often accompanied by a more science based, or at least social science based, set of public relations methods such as measuring public opinion using focus groups, and applying recent psychology to understand unconscious behavior and how to use it for persuasion. This matched the 20th-century growth of management science and, because it involved quantitative measurement, aligned the field more with business purposes.

The quantitative shift also addressed negative perceptions about public relations as merely an art, if not a “dark art,” and not requiring any education or training, as anyone who is artful in communication, or charismatic, or attractive, can succeed as a public relations practitioner. Many still believe in the old adage that “public relations practitioners are born and not made.” University students who wish to major in public relations often explain their choice to study “PR” by saying they “like people” or “like working with people” or that they are “people persons.” Others ask what there is to “learn” by becoming a student of public relations taking courses on the subject at a university.

Scholars and a section of public relations practitioners have emphasized that public relations is not all art but also has (or should have) elements of science (research based strategic planning) in it. For example, public opinion research, one of the typical activities of public relations practitioners, involves gathering empirical data and analyzing it scientifically in order to understand the opinion of publics so that the organization can communicate effectively with them. Environmental scanning, another key activity for public relations effectiveness, also involves empirical research based on sound methodology, and the growth of “algorithmic public relations” is following advertising and marketing into sophisticated mathematical modeling using big data and small data (e.g., Microtrends). Effective public relations has become a combination of art and science. In contrast, some critics seek to wrest the field away from science and reroot it in the humanities. In the middle, the United States based Institute for Public Relations (IPR) has identified its core mission as promoting “the science beneath the art of public relations” (<http://www.instituteforpr.org/>), which, despite assigning science a more foundational role, indicates that art and science complement each other.

Measurement of results and the ability to predict outcomes remain central to claims for scientific status. Reaching a successful conclusion to this quest remains a form of holy grail for both public relations scholars seeking credibility as a management science and public relations practitioners wanting to be able to present predictable outcomes and clear results to clients. The Institute for Public Relations, based in the United States,

set up the IPR Measurement Commission in 1998 consisting of representatives from corporations, government, and nonprofits as well as public relations agencies, research firms, and academia. Progress has been made, and continues to be made, but the field cannot yet approach the predictability established in such neighboring fields as marketing in terms of, for example, quantifiable outcomes for a specific campaign. Moreover, in the wake of the digital revolution now an integral part of promotional efforts, traditional methods no longer work, and not only does measurement become harder for public relations but advertising and marketing are having to come to terms with greater uncertainty in estimating quantifiable returns on promotional investments.

This does not necessarily mean that public relations will be valued less. It does open opportunities for the kinds of heuristic estimations that led organizations to place public relations above advertising (Ries & Ries, 2002), for the immeasurable – in the literal sense and the metaphorical sense – benefits of using issue management to avoid crises, and for the proven ability of public relations, unlike traditional advertising and marketing, to respond in uncontrolled conditions. These are likely to continue to lead the way in illustrating the benefits of public relations. It is important to note that this technologically enabled diversity does not lessen the urgency – see, for example, the recently updated research in Michaelson and Stacks (2014) and Watson and Noble (2014) – of finding ways to measure both the established abilities of public relations and its strengths in relation to the emerging phenomena that are succeeding Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in an environment that continues to fragment.

Specializations within public relations

Issue management and lobbying

Businesses and corporations play important roles in contemporary society but often, rightly or wrongly, draw negative attention from activists. Activists often then seek to challenge business actions or even the legitimacy of their role in society and do so by seeking allies among workforces and the mainstream and online media in order to pressure governments to support their protests. They often do so by lobbying or trying to influence governments, officials, politicians, and stakeholder publics. Corporations, in turn, or even in anticipation, engage in *issue management* to counter what they perceive as threats to their autonomy arising from potential or actual government regulation of industry. Public relations practitioners – often amateur or unpaid on the activist side – are engaged at various levels of this issue management, often representing the different sides of the debate.

Proactive corporations detect emerging *trends* and adapt their practices before these trends become mainstream issues for activists seeking government regulation. Strategic issue management should help make organizations more proactive and thereby receptive to the legitimate demands of activists rather than being reactive and stonewalling. Lobbying is a significant part of the job description of public relations practitioners around the world in their efforts to influence public policy as part of issues management. Proponents of lobbying defend it as a fundamental freedom of expression and

the right to petition the government, while critics point to the *quid pro quo* that is often implicit in the interactions between powerful lobbyists and legislators. The boundaries between these two entities are often blurred when the “revolving door” creates lobbyists out of former government officials.

Public affairs

Public affairs has some overlap with lobbying but is more focused on creating and maintaining good relationships between organizations and relevant governments, lawmakers, officials, political parties, politicians, and other important public service decision makers and power brokers. Although previously included as a part of public relations, it has almost grown into a field in its own right with its own associations and journals. The relationship capital it gathers is frequently used to influence public policy legislation as part of issue management. The overt influencing of public policy is seen more in pluralistic political systems and countries where governments favor higher levels of regulation of private enterprise. Public affairs also refers to corporate activities undertaken by good corporate citizens through assisting in such things as community building programs. Government agencies usually use the term “public affairs” as a substitute for the term “public relations” because of the pejorative connotations associated with the latter, which is often perceived as propaganda and publicity. Government agencies do not want to be seen as investing public funds in what can be perceived as propaganda, and therefore terms such as “public affairs” and “public information” are used as a substitute for departments or ministries involved in what we would call public relations activities. But this may also be because of the mission of the department. Information departments, especially in developing countries, have the important function of contributing to national development through public information campaigns. In most instances, however, regardless of the name of the department, it is the public relations personnel who conduct these campaigns.

Media relations

Using the mass media for public relations purposes is as old as public relations practice itself. In many parts of the world, significant numbers of organizational managers and public relations practitioners erroneously equate public relations with media relations. Typically, practitioners spend most of their time developing relationships with members of the media with the sole goal of getting positive publicity in the media. Although members of the mass media have traditionally had a contentious, often explicitly adversarial, relationship with public relations practitioners, the two sides work together because each needs the other. The term “information subsidy” refers to the use of information provided by public relations people to the mass media at very little, or no, expense to them. Research from the 1990s found that even though the mass media editors surveyed had a negative opinion of public relations practitioners they still found that public relations supplied more information to the mass media than at any previous time (Pincus et al., 1993). Given that the deteriorating economics of media in general, and the mainstream press in particular, has led to massive reductions

in journalistic staff, the quantity of public relations content entering media is likely to have increased significantly. In addition, as the blogosphere and social media now often set the agenda and provide content (including still and moving images) for mainstream media, public relations has another point of entry as have activists with online citizen journalism. Media relations, then, continues to be a very important aspect of public relations around the world. It should also be noted that *personal influence*, garnered by building strong relationships with journalists and editors, also contributes to increased media coverage. Such influence can become particularly critical during times of crises when organizations face robust media coverage. Research suggests that the phrase “no comment” should never be used in media relations, particularly during crisis situations, because information that is often detrimental to the interests of the organization usually fills the void created by such silence.

Investor relations and financial relations

Investor relations helps add value to a company’s stock by keeping the key public of shareholders, or possible shareholders, adequately informed of the “financial health” of the company and by gaining and maintaining their confidence. Investors are more likely to be loyal to a company in which they have confidence. Maintaining relationships with investors is often done through media relations activities (especially media that specialize in financial matters). So, apart from keeping individual investors informed, corporations also use a two-step flow of influencing individual investors through opinion leaders such as financial analysts or the financial press. The public relations industry has been trying hard for decades to find ways of proving how it contributes to the financial health (the “bottom line”) of corporations. Investor relations is one specialty where public relations professionals can prove their contributions in more tangible (financial) terms. Investor relations is needed even in nonprofit organizations that have to attract and maintain good donor relations. The growth of crowdfunding, where communication is so vital, has also opened important roles for public relations in attracting investors and maintaining relationships with them – and adding more visible value in doing so.

Employee relations

A general misperception exists that public relations practitioners only communicate with external publics. Employee relations or employee communication also falls within the realm of public relations in many countries. For over 70 years, management and communication scholars have studied how to improve organizational culture because engaged employees tend to be more productive and generate greater profits. They found that organizational culture is both “subjective” (intangible, but powerful enough to be felt) and “objective” (evident in tangible artifacts). Effective organizations have *strong* cultures. Strong organizational cultures generate such positive employee feelings as trust, openness, supportiveness, and loyalty. Communication is the underpinning for each of these (and other such) characteristics. The excellence project found that excellent (highly productive) organizations also had good overall communication

and robust employee communication (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Good employee communication also helps align organizational goals with goals of individual employees, thereby creating harmony in organizational purpose and process.

Community relations

In this age when the public is questioning the right to exist of many institutions, especially those corporations considered “too big to fail” in the wake of the global financial crisis, the traditional public relations function of maintaining good relations with the community is more vital than ever. Nevertheless, maintaining good relations with the community in which they operate also remains as big a challenge as ever for all organizations because of the competing values and expectations that different sections of the community have with regard to an organization’s existence and performance. In the past decade, the need to exhibit “corporate social responsibility” has thrust the importance of being a good “corporate citizen” to the fore, underlining the importance of being a good community citizen. Whereas organizations often help the community by providing jobs, a tax base, and goods and services, in the process they also may pollute the environment, create unemployment during economic downturns, and contribute to other socially detrimental effects. Activist groups often challenge corporations for “irresponsible” activities. In the contemporary context, maintaining good community relations involves not merely pushing out propagandistic publicity but also “listening” and being responsive to genuine community demands. Similarly, regardless of the political philosophy of a society, government agencies are obliged to be receptive to the demands of citizenry that happen through good community relations. Public relations helps in this process and therefore performs a vital function to organizations by being the “eyes and ears” for the organization, by perhaps acting as the organization’s “conscience,” and by bridging the gap between the organization and the society.

Corporate social responsibility

In the final decades of the 20th century, corporate social responsibility (CSR) received a great deal of attention. Then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan escalated this movement by inviting the business sector “to embrace, support and enact a set of core values in the areas of human rights, labor standards, and environmental practices” (United Nations, 1999) and by launching the Global Compact in the year 2000. As *The Economist* stated in 2008: “Corporate Social Responsibility, once a do-gooding sideshow, is now seen as mainstream.” The nexus between CSR and public relations extends beyond the community relations function of public relations. Communication is integral to the success of CSR activities of any corporation, and public relations provides that key ingredient by helping define and execute CSR activities for corporations including mobilizing human and other resources. “CSR communication” is an area pertinent to the field of public relations where corporations use public relations to leverage their CSR activities. This has given rise to activist criticisms of “greenwashing” when, for example, organizations take only superficial green actions but accompany them with deceptive or

exaggerated claims – often heavily promoted – about their environmental friendliness and responsiveness.

Main approaches to public relations research

Excellence study as a program of research

In 1985, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) funded a study to answer the question: “What is the value of public relations to organizations?” The question was prompted by a continuing challenge to public relations practice: justifying its relevance to organizations. When it was completed in 2002 the study had cost US\$400,000, and it remains the largest funded research project in the field. Although referred to as a “study,” this was more a program of research that was built on some of the theorizing that had already taken place (led by some members of the research team) such as public relations at the individual practitioner level (Broom & Dozier, 1986), public relations at the organizational level (the models of public relations), and segmentation of publics (particularly the situational theory of publics). As the field’s first multinational study, the program gathered data from CEOs, communication managers, and employees of 327 organizations predominantly in the United States but also from Canada and the United Kingdom. During its 16 year span, and since, the study produced three major books, hundreds of scholarly articles and essays in trade publications, scores of master’s theses and doctoral dissertations, and hundreds of conference presentations. The members of the team were particularly focused on ensuring that the lessons from the study were useful to public relations practitioners. This was evidenced by Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig’s (1995) book, which sought to “translate” the theoretical concepts and empirical evidence for the benefit of practitioners. More recently, the study has been criticized for being too organization centric. Although it is a landmark in theorizing in a practice oriented field, its originating mandate from the research funders was how to better manage, or best manage, the communication function.

One of the significant outputs of the study was the identification of 14 characteristics of excellent public relations departments (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). These characteristics center around the empowerment of the public relations function for greater organizational benefit and the need to have public relations as a function separate from marketing and similar functions. The study suggested techniques that public relations managers can use to make meaningful contributions to relationship building and strategic management including the use of multiple models of public relations (and not only the two-way symmetrical model). It also provided a conceptual framework to extend the discussion to the global arena through generic principles and specific environmental variables. The outcome of this study was best articulated, by its principal investigator and architect J. Grunig (2006), as a “general theory that explains how the public relations function should be structured and managed to provide the greatest value to organizations, publics, and society” (p. 153). The study has generated a significant amount of discussion and debate among scholars. The two-way symmetrical communication model has been one of the most critiqued aspects of the excellence

study for its implausibility. Midway through the study, partly stemming from these criticisms, the researchers reconceptualized the two-way models into the mixed motives model. Alongside its strengths, contemporary assessments of the excellence study's contributions, especially given that it initially formed around empirical evidence gathered from only three Anglo-Saxon countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada), need to take into account how the world, and the field, have since extended globally, transformed technologically, and changed in other significant ways.

Rhetoric

No other school of public relations is, or seeks to be, as unified as the excellence study, whose proponents fittingly characterize it as an edifice with conclusions that will stand the test of time. Neither are other schools as identified with a specific research program or with as ambitious a claim as offering a unique public relations theory, as distinct from, say, a communication theory. Indeed, what is probably the largest body of work in the field can be clustered under the heading of rhetoric not just because of its longevity and adaptability over time, but because it contains a considerable variety of viewpoints, methods, and research areas – to the extent that the utility of the heading has been questioned. Rhetoric, in Aristotle's famous definition “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion,” has clear compatibilities with contemporary public relations and its specialisms. Alongside longevity with roots in ancient Greece and Rome, rhetoric has displayed adaptability, especially in terms of extending democratic participation, across the centuries. In the early 20th century, as the “linguistic turn” expanded across and beyond Europe with its rich disciplinary sources in epistemology, linguistics, and philosophy, it helped revive language based and communication based studies including public relations.

Current rhetorical theorists in public relations continue to draw ideas from across the temporal spectrum. Rhetorical public relations resources range from the Greek philosophers, including Isocrates as well as Aristotle; through Biblical prophets; to the work of American literary theorist and philosopher Kenneth Burke, who effectively, and productively for its application to public relations, shifted the focus of rhetoric more toward the consequences of symbolic action. More recently, rhetorical public relations has turned to late-20th-century French theory via Baudrillardian postmodernism, Bourdieu's sociology, and discourse analysis through the writings of Michel Foucault. Contributors to the rhetorical stream have been involved in important points of contact with organizational communication, as in Boyd and Waymer's (2011) “Organizational Rhetoric: A Subject of Interest(s)” and the dialogue on “The Processes of Dialogue” (Heath et al., 2006) between leading scholars from both disciplines. Heath, Taylor, and Palenchar's (2011) special issue on external organizational rhetoric explored the two fields as complementary but with different approaches.

The guiding figure in rhetorical public relations is Robert Heath, who also wrote extensively about other topics such as issues management and risk communication while continuing to update public relations with rhetoric and extend rhetoric by applying it to public relations in numerous articles, books, and edited collections. Heath (2006) has characterized public relations rhetoric not as a building but as a journey

into unknown territory through the phrase “onward into more fog,” which promises neither a clear destination nor a guarantee of ultimate clarity. He has both developed and augmented the work of others through his initiating and editing role in such publications as: the *Handbook of Public Relations* (Heath, 2001), *The SAGE Handbook of Public Relations* (Heath, 2010); and the two *Encyclopedias of Public Relations*. These collections feature rhetoric strongly but are not dominated by it and allocate space to scholars from the “excellence school” as well as scholars from other perspectives (including new science approaches that challenge empiricism). They have also served a vital role in opening the field geographically, intellectually, and in terms of subject matter. That spread of subject matter ranged across deconstruction, postcolonialism, and postmodernism, covered collections on risk and crisis communication, and addressed communication and rhetorical reflections on terrorism. Another key marker in the field was Toth and Heath’s (1992) *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations*, which established both rhetoric and critical public relations as integral parts of the mainstream field and legitimized more critical and less functional approaches.

Critical public relations

Since Toth and Heath’s door-opening 1992 collection, critical public relations theorists have been catching up with the output of their rhetorical fellow travelers. Since 2000, critical public relations has been developing a corpus notable for concerns with critical discourse analysis, environmental degradation (and public relations contributions to it), European critical sociology and theory, justice issues, and socially transforming possibilities. Almost all of them mark a substantial departure from the norm of functionalist business and organization-centric studies and many contest the modernist frame of their positivist predecessors. By 2015, there was enough of a critical mass to generate a second enlarged collection of chapters on rhetorical and critical public relations, several journal special issues (including one on critical race and public relations), individual monographs on activism, ecology and equity, and postmodernism (Holtzhausen, 2012), numerous articles and chapters on postcolonialism, and the appearance of the first ever *Handbook of Critical Public Relations* (L’Etang et al., 2015). The editors themselves start out by eschewing the field’s usual assumptions of objectivity to comment subjectively, as well as theoretically, with autobiographical self-reflection. Since the future of public relations remains uncertain, whether critical public relations – the *Handbook* and the school – will signal the start of a new kind of public relations, a correction to past empiricism, a guide to new ways of doing practice, or simply a deviation of minor interest, will emerge over time and in a changing context.

Global public relations

Globalization is not new, having occurred in different millennia in the past. The current era of globalization began in the final decade of the 20th century, caused principally by the outcomes of collapsing trade barriers, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the onset of ICTs and social media, and the increased flow of capital and goods. In the 21st century, the transnational threats of ecological tipping points, global pandemics,

the global financial crisis, and massive resource inequalities have heralded a new stage in globalization. These have contributed to the widespread acceptance of German sociologist Beck's (1992) conceptualization of contemporary society as *risk society* at a global level and to the rise in importance of risk and crisis communication within and beyond public relations.

As new markets have opened in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, practitioners have begun to seek wisdom from scholarship on effective ways of communicating across cultures. The growing body of knowledge of global public relations has offered a blend of global strategies of public relations (generic principles) and communication efforts that are sensitive to local cultures (environmental variables such as political system, economic system, media system, culture, and activism) as a way to structure multinational communication efforts. Nascent scholarship provides some empirical evidence to support this framework but many more studies are needed to help confirm that this approach is indeed viable (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009). Existing empirical studies in international and global public relations have described how public relations is practiced, and for what purpose, in their regions and countries. In doing so, they have tried to address culture as an antecedent of public relations, most relying on Hofstede's dimensions of culture but some also attempting to focus on the unique cultural idiosyncrasies of the country or region.

These attempts have thus diversified the focus points of education and research beyond the United States, the United Kingdom, and a few Western European nations to other continents. This has also been borne out in the plethora of conferences held in many continents outside the United States and Western Europe that focus on public relations around the world. The process of reducing ethnocentricity has thus begun. But there is scope for much more progress. Public relations is a field still transitioning from its strongly US nation-state origins and its West-centric past. In essence, while globalization has increased the relevance and importance of public relations, the various outcomes of globalization have also exposed the many gaps in both theory and practice (McKie & Munshi, 2007). The field has barely begun to explore other issues and challenges relevant to a postimperialist and genuinely global public relations such as planetary interdependence and the inherent opportunities (extending human rights, tackling transnational environmental issues, liberating cross-border movements) and threats (increasing inequalities, terrorism, and climate change).

Future directions

Public relations scholarship has evolved from its relatively restricted geographical beginnings in a few Western regions to a more robust and diverse global effort. The body of knowledge has highlighted many ways in which public relations contributes to organizational effectiveness, but the journey has only just begun. A generational shift is currently under way as thought leaders who laid the foundations for the field have begun to retire, opening opportunities for new thinkers and perspectives to broaden the field's horizons.

Through such methods as public affairs and issue management, risk and crisis communication, community building and corporate social responsibility, and rhetorical

advocacy, the field has shown ambition in attempting to contribute to organizations and society at large. An interdisciplinary field from its origins, public relations has now borrowed from a widening range of disciplines – moving from, for example, journalism, management, and sociology to complexity science, critical race theory (Edwards & Munshi, 2011), and even Jungian psychology – to further enlarge conceptual frameworks and improve theoretical constructs. Looking to the future, there remains a need to experiment with nascent frameworks in multiple cultural environments to pull knowledges together in a more holistic fashion and to make them more relevant to a culturally fluid world. The next few next decades will continue to show tensions between (1) the need for many in the profession to retain employment from the already powerful in corporations and governments; and (2) the field's potential identity as a facilitator of community and relationships not just in activism and NGOs but in the core of business.

SEE ALSO: Communication Management; Corporate Communication; Corporate Social Responsibility; Crisis Communication in Organizations; Globalization/Internationalization; Information and Communication Technologies in Organizations; Issue Management; Organization–Society Relationship; Reputation; Stakeholder Communication; Strategic Communication

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