Reconsidering contemporary public relations: Theoretical engagement of practitioners in a communication society

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that theory-guided public relations practice is more likely to contribute to socially responsible behaviours by organizations than public relations approaches that are based solely on the emphasis on skills and the elaboration of "techniques," and, to be frank, solely on the mythology of "best practice." Consequently, theory-guided public relations may be better suited to bridge the gap between service for an organization and service for society. The article sets out with a short historical overview of the relationships between public relations theory and practice. It then goes on developing a methodological and empirical context designed to show connections between theory and practice. Furthermore, the paper highlights different types of practitioners. Finally, a summary including prospects closes the article. Due to this, the following research question confirms these assumptions: how and why can theory-guided public relations contribute to socially responsible behaviours by practitioners?

KEYWORDS: public relations theory, public relations practice, professional public relations, types of practitioners, image of public relations

INTRODUCTION

Realistically — for better or worse — we must acknowledge that public relations has been, historically, dominated by the pragmatic, even the practical paradigm. Up to the present, this practical orientation appears omnipresent — and pervasively so. As an academic discipline, public relations is rather young — compared to, say, sociology, psychology, business studies, and communication science for that matter. In Europe, the beginnings of public relations scholarship date back to the mid-1970s. By this time, public relations has become an ambitious and up-and-coming occupation. Accordingly, public relations practice was the bedrock for the scholarship. "The

power exerted by public relations as a socially-embedded profession is a focus for increasing numbers of scholars in the field" (Edwards, 2009, p. 251). Due to this, public relations theory examined daily routines and offered how-to approaches. This, in turn, led to a sorely felt lack of empirical research and theoretical engagement in the sense of scientific theory. The first examples of somewhat systematic European public relations literature were created by practitioners; e.g. Carl Hundhausen (1951) *Advertising for Public Trust (Public Relations)*; Herbert Gross (1951) *Modern Public Relations*; Alphons Helbling (1963) *Public Relations Handbook*; Albert Oeckl (1964) *Handbook of Public Relations* and (1972) *Public Relations Practice,* to name a few practical scholars of the first period in German-speaking countries during the 1950s and 1960s (Kunczik & Szyszka, 2008). It should be added that the US tradition is quite different in this regard. In fact, ever since the first book on public relations was published in 1923 (*Crystallizing Public Opinion* by Edward L. Bernays), the field has become a subject taught at US universities (Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 190). In spite of this, public relations theory and practice differ most notably in view of professional and ethical correctness servicing organizations and society because theory and practice are two faces of the same coin in public relations.

Practice has its own logic, driven by a practical sense of what is appropriate, legitimate, and effective in a particular context (Bourdieu, 1990; Edwards 2009). Beyond that, organizational objectives continue to affect intentions of public relations and day-to-day tasks. Accordingly, best practice public relations might be driven by organizational goals, which are not necessarily serving society. Bourdieu (1984) and Edwards (2009) argued "that people who dominate the field of power tend to dominate the economic field, because all fields are homologous with the field of power." Thus, those organizations which are powerfully dominating the economic field will tend to exert a disproportional influence on public relations practice. And the practitioners are legitimizing their best practice actions by means of the organization's power. This, in turn, may or may not be conducive to the adoption of responsibility approaches to public relations.

However, theory-guided public relations could be more socially driven by following the principles of perception, cognition and solutions, which are based on theories. Consequently, science and theory also have their own logic. Social scientists are driven by a specific *modus operandi*. The unit of analysis should focus on everyday life. The observation of the activities and behaviours of people should be the base for empirical research (Schütz, 1971). However, in public relations scholarship this bedrock is sometimes less obvious. This could be one of the reasons why practice and theory have travelled different paths after the first common period. Up to this day, practitioners' focus is on best practice. In contrast, a scientific community has emerged, which, at times, fosters an abstract theory, potentially without any connection to public relations practice. In a somewhat sobering vein, then, we must recognize an obsession with best practice at the expense of theory, on the one hand, and abstract theory, on the other.

In this paper we shall argue that the next step should be a clear transition from theory to practice — in terms of recognizing the practice as the unit of analysis for public relations research. Moreover, the second step must be a translation into the practice; and the third step should be the theoretical engagement of practitioners. The third one could be somewhat difficult as public relations is an occupation in which a certificate of professional competence is not mandatory. Moreover, access to the profession is not formally associated with specific theoretical knowledge. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to bridge the gap between theory and practice by following a social scientific paradigm. In fact, ever more sophisticated clients in a communication society will increasingly be able to differentiate between best-practice practitioners and theory-guided (professional) practitioners, who foster ethical and social responsibility approaches. Furthermore, not only organizations and society would benefit from such a perspective, but also scholarship and practice. Theory and practice would close ranks in a specific way — resulting in inspiration for new research perspectives, theory-guided practice, and a sense of professional excellence. The benefits appear quite promising — for practitioners, scholarship and society alike: reputational gain for public relations practice through the use of theories (and also, to be frank, more success at the bottom line); increased impact and perceived relevance for researchers; and a more society-oriented public relations system.

To move beyond declarations of intent, quantitative and qualitative research is required. This study was designed to address the need to understand public relations as a theory-guided profession. Furthermore, the research was meant to demonstrate the importance of theoretical knowledge for the improvement of practitioners' reputation.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL DIVIDE IMPACTS ON THE IMAGE OF THE PROFESSION

A new trend in creating public relations approaches is somewhat detached from practical work in the sense that the initial point of research is not related to practical communication problems but rather problems identified in broader worldviews, such as sustainability or corporate social responsibility. Public relations theories tend to focus more on ideal circumstances instead of communication problems. In fact, this way is also very important in accordance with public relations as soft powers' contribution to some necessary changes in society in contrast to economic or political power, but the view comes up to some irritation. Hence, the practitioners are not interested in such abstract explanations. Another significant misperception about public relations is cited by Fitzpatrick (2007, p. 190). She argued that the discipline's core function is misinterpreted. "While many would characterize public relations' primary objective as creating or promoting false images or misleading publics into believing untruths that serve an institution's self-interest, ethical public relations professionals reject such thinking." We are not certain whether the majority of practitioners are really trying to reject this core objective; observations of daily routines

actually show that image building and creating new images continue to be most common in contemporary practice. Another observation is that public relations theory tends to idealize the profession in terms of lofty goals and practices. Certainly, the public relations approaches foster public relations work for large corporations. However, most of the corporations in Europe are small and medium-sized companies.

Consequently, historical tensions also contribute to the theoretical-practical divide. Creating positive — perhaps even propaganda-type — messages and images for corporations, politicians, and events tend to be more attractive for practitioners than professional and theory-based communication behaviour. Such negative practices, by necessity, impair the images of the profession. Fitzpatrick (2007, p. 187) stated in this context that "public relations has been viewed as the black sheep of the broad disciplinary family." The image of the practitioners also determines the self-portrayal and the identity of the occupation. Accordingly, it is not surprising that most of the practitioners put the focus on the creative paradigm because image and identity affect each other reciprocally (Spatzier, 2009, p. 459).

Another point of departure for the study were the consolidated findings about the image of the public relations profession presented in a recent Ph.D. dissertation at Salzburg University (Spatzier, 2009). Some of the findings are quite sobering: the image of the profession appears quite diffuse and tainted. Most of its stakeholders have no clear association with the occupation. In spite of this, public relations is viewed as a function that does matter in a communication society; however, credibility and trust are not universally granted to the profession as stakeholders perceive some practitioners as if they were working like creative performing artists. More specifically, stakeholders express criticism of, *inter alia*, inconsistent quality of work offered by practitioners, and instability of in-depth knowledge. Due to this, some stakeholders prefer doing their communication work on their own. Also, stakeholders tend to be annoyed when practitioners show a lack of professional distance by overselling the calibre of their work. Finally, and tellingly, the very term public relations evokes stakeholders' associations with irresponsible behaviours (Spatzier, 2009).

THE RESEARCH PROJECT: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Against this background, the following article is based on empirical research employing both a literature review (meta-analysis) and qualitative interviews done as part of a course project at Salzburg University with a view to demonstrating that public relations theory can support the practice by fostering professional and socially responsible behaviours through scientifically applicable solutions; and it should also be demonstrated that theoretical engagement of practitioners could bring about a better image for the profession by bridging the gap between service for an organization and service for society.

The study follows a four-step sequence. Firstly, a literature review examines possible connections between theory and practice. Secondly, qualitative interviews with practitioners demonstrate which principles guide their work routines. Thirdly, a comparative analysis reveals six different types of practitioners. Fourthly, a final summary examines new ways of understanding the interfaces between public relations theory and practice. Accordingly, a theoretical engagement of practitioners is needed for the implementation of such considerations.

In a more concrete vein, the following study shall yield insights into the dynamics of theory and practice and give answers to questions such as: how to locate a nexus between science and practice? How to identify, however precarious, connections between modern theory and practice? What types of practitioners may be discernable on the basis of a contemporary analysis of their everyday work? How may practitioners manage to bridge the very gap between organizations and society? How can public relations theory support the theoretical engagement of practitioners? In search for answers to at least part of these questions, it seems important to determine first possible links between theory and practice and, in a second step, to examine the current practical work.

This part of the study was designed to test the theoretical applicability that could link theory and practice in a first step. A literature review of main approaches in public relations science presents in some cases clear solutions for practice. Such secondary analyses present "the state of knowledge concerning the relation(s) of interests" (Cooper, 1989, p. 13). As a theoretical review, this analysis makes a declaration about the approaches and compares the applicability of the respective statements (Cooper, 1989, p. 13). From this perspective it appears necessary to critically compare their informative value. This part of the study is conducted as "science as map-making" (Beaugrande, 1997, p. 35) with the aim of a systematic outline and appraisal. The key question for this part of the study is whether public relations approaches do offer solutions for practical problems or not.

Following Cooper (1989), this analysis included the following steps:
- Problem formulation stage
- Data collection stage
- Collating sequence (selective appraisal)
- Data evaluation stage
- Analysis and interpretation stage
- Public presentation stage

Problem formulation stage

For answering the question in order to test the applicability of theories a list of categories in form of questions were defined:
- What were the motivations, the biases, and the intention of the approach?
- Which definition for public relations is the bedrock for the considerations?

- Are there declarative sentences which could be verified (or falsified)?
- Which (world) views of public relations can be discerned — organizational, marketing, or societal?
- Which of the various concepts of "publics" is being employed?
- Are there explicit solutions being offered? And for what kinds of problems?
- Are there any considerations about public relations goals and/or objectives?

Data collection stage and collating sequence

The main — and also, for that matter, mainstream — approaches, which would be analyzed, were selected from *Handbuch der Public Relations* (Bentele, Fröhlich & Szyszka, 2008) and *Public Relations Research: European and International Perspectives and Innovations* (Zerfaß, van Ruler & Sriramesh, 2008). Both of these rather elaborated handbooks present systematical overviews of key and contemporary approaches in public relations theory. The following approaches were purposefully chosen for the secondary analysis:

Table 1. Collected and collated approaches

Approaches	Sources for analysis	Collating
Excellence theory by J. Grunig, L. Grunig and Dozier Situative theory by J. Grunig 4-Models by Grunig and Hunt	Grunig, Hunt (1984) Grunig (1997) Grunig J., Grunig L., Dozier (2006) Grunig J., Grunig L. (2008)	Anglo-American influences; Approaches with an international range
Constructive approach by Merten Reconstructive approach by Bentele General theory for public relations by Ronneberger and Rühl Theory of corporate communication by Zerfaß	Merten (2008) Bentele (2008c) Bentele (2008b) Ronneberger, Rühl (1992) Rühl (2008) Zerfaß (2005) Zerfaß (2008a) Zerfaß (2008b)	Universal approaches
Consensus-oriented public relations (COPR) by Burkart Stakeholder approaches	Burkart, Probst (1991) Burkart (2007) Burkart (2008) Karmasin (2008)	Specific approaches; Middle range theories
Communication controlling by Zerfaß The intereffication model by Bentele	Zerfaß (2005) Zerfaß (2008a) Zerfaß (2008b) Bentele (2008a) Bentele, Nothaft (2008)	Middle range models
Social psychological approaches	Femers (2008)	Interdisciplinary perspectives

Results
(Data evaluation stage / Analysis and interpretation stage / Public presentation stage)

One of the main conclusions is that public relations approaches *do* offer solutions for practical problems. Some of them state the applicability more explicit than others. At times, practitioners need quite some scientific in-depth knowledge for recognition, as in the case, for example, of the constructive approach by Merten using abstract language which needs to be translated into everyday working knowledge. Likewise, the Ronneberger and Rühl's general public relations theory is an abstract one with relatively little impact on public relations practice. In contrast, Burkart's consensus-oriented approach to public relations does offer explicit solutions for crisis public relations including some advice as to evaluation measures. Grunig's situative theory provides a powerful analytical tool in connection with the segmentation of publics. Social psychological approaches highlight specific and different kinds of communication strategies and techniques needed for the successful transmission of messages and point out the pitfalls of information overload. The reconstructive approach emphasizes the necessity of trust and credibility as prerequisites for viable communication management. And Zerfaß's controlling-centered views include guidelines for evaluation.

In a more concrete vein, Table 2 demonstrates findings in view of connection between theory and practice and particularly with regard to solutions for practical problems. The first column names the approach, the second column establishes the link between theory and practice defined as "solutions for the practical problems" and the third one shows whether the applicability is explicit or only implicit.

Table 2. Connection between theory and practice

Approach	Solutions for the practical problems	Connection explicit/implicit
Excellence theory	• structure and implementation of public relations in an organization • arrangement of a public relations department in large enterprises • empowerment of public relations in organizations	explicit
Situative theory	• segmentation of publics • variables, which can support differentiation of publics • increased awareness as to different behaviours of different publics	explicit
4-Models by Grunig and Hunt	• need for different kinds of communication with the publics • managing of the communication acts in organizations	explicit
Constructive approach	• image building and image transfer	implicit

Table 2 (cont.)

Approach	Solutions for the practical problems	Connection explicit/implicit
Reconstructive approach	• need for trust and credibility of public relations in a communication society	implicit
General theory for public relations	• How and why do issues and topics emerge in the public sphere? • What, if anything, can public relations contribute to bring about a better society?	implicit
Theory of corporate communication	• acclamation of different kinds of communication acts	implicit
Consensus-oriented public relations	• crisis communication • evaluation	explicit
Stakeholder approaches	• settlement of claims	implicit
Communication controlling	• strategic communication planning • evaluation	explicit
The intereffication model	• relations between public relations and journalism • factors of mutual influence	explicit
Social psychological approaches	• specific kinds of communication strategies and instruments for specific tasks and specific publics or audiences	explicit

Qualitative interviews

To test the background knowledge of practitioners qualitative interviews were conducted using open questions. Theoretical knowledge was measured by asking interviewees to talk about specific situations in *everyday work-life.* For example: How do you do segmentation of publics or why and how important are normative concepts such as truth, trust and credibility in public relations work for you? The interviewed persons were also asked to tell about their main tasks and to talk about their daily work and their routines. In addition, the interviews included such questions as the following:

• You appear to have quite extended experiences in public relations practice. Please tell me something about your individual expert knowledge.

• What are your most important steps when accepting a bid?

• With which tasks are you confronted mostly?

• How important is setting communication goals for you in your daily work?

• Times of crises are a specific — perhaps even a welcome and worthwhile — challenge for public relations practitioners. What's your opinion about this?

• When disseminating messages to your target groups — what is your course of action?

• What is your procedural method in cases of image building for a company?

- To put the question straightforward: How important is truth?
- What is your contact with journalists like?
- How do you evaluate measures?
- In public relations theory and in practice there exist two different kinds of understandings: 1) public relations is information, 2) public relations is symmetrical communication. What do you think about this?
  - Are you applying some theories in your practical work?

The theoretical sample was drawn from a list comprising different fields of public relations practice (corporations, culture, politics, PR-agencies, sports, media). Fifteen interviewees were selected. This sample is a limited one in the sense that the interviewees were drawn from the Salzburg and Upper Austrian regions only — and that the number of interviewees was quite small and not representative. However, this part of the study was conducted as qualitative research and, as a methodologist Lamnek (1988, p. 175) argued, in qualitative research *typical* findings substitute for representativeness of quantative studies. The students of the class were interviewing the practitioners. Each interview was tape-recorded and the audio-text was transcribed. Data were analyzed using the documentary method following Bohnsack's sequence (2006): First, a transcript of each interview was made; second, a formation of the text was done by phrasing; this was followed by an interpretative reflexion as the third step; fourth, the comparative analysis was made.

Results

The results show the combined interpretation of all fifteen interviews. The categories were developed through formation of the text by phrasing. The key categories are listed below, serving as headlines for the following interpretations.

Alignment/Orientation
Conceptually, practitioners' orientation can be divided into communication, journalism, event management, promotion networking, and marketing. The majority of the respondents mention press relations as the primary task in their day-to-day work. However, some of them stated that, to them, situation analysis, developing strategies, and defining publics are equally important. Some of the interviewees are promoters for specific events or for organizations. On the one hand, the predominance of communication orientation seems to be very fruitful to public relations discipline as form of communication, but on the other hand, the orientation in mind is not shown in the daily work, in fact, the common work is limited to writing press releases.

Tasks
This category highlights the journalism orientation. Under this directive the communications view decreases somewhat. Most of the interviewees refer to press releases as the main task in their daily work. One of the interviewed practitioners argued: "My daily routine is that I've to disseminate press releases to media as well

as news agencies. I've to survey and research topical trends and events. I've to search for pictures and write compatible text. I also have to look for photographers and instruct them. Another task is to search for video material. And, of course, the most important thing is simply to be informed. In a way, a public relations practitioner is just like a journalist working in a company." Somewhat in contrast, another practitioner with a degree in communication science said that his main task would be "solving communication problems." Still other practitioners stated that analysing developing strategies would also be very important. This notwithstanding, the core task are still press relations. To sum up, while press and media relations are still at the centre of the task structure, the broader communication dimension of public relations (in an academic sense) does surface once in a while — but, then, it somehow carries the appearance of a lip service with it.

Publics
Public relations theory emphasizes that information about different publics or the organization's environment constitutes core elements of any public relations strategy. Consequently, definition and segmentation of publics is considered crucially important with a view to developing tailor-made messages for different publics. However, and interestingly so, most of the respondents do not seem to be interested in defining specific publics. The majority of them seem to be satisfied with creating one central message for all. Only one of the interviewees puts a premium on as detailed publics-related information as possible as a basis for informed strategy and message building. In cases when practitioners *do* segment publics, they are likely to do it along media reception data. One rational practitioners' voice against "over-segmentation" was a concern for possibly neglecting the "general public," which might also be interested in the message.

Communication strategies/Communication goals
Another key concern of public relations theory is the need for setting specific communication goals. However, the goals the interviewed practitioners were referring to as "communication goals" were actually not communication goals in the proper sense. Instead, marketing goals such as increasing sales rates are quite common. We may conclude from this that practitioners might find it difficult to clearly distinguish between organizational goals and communication goals. Still, the interviewees leave no doubt about the necessity of goal setting at the outset of a public relations program. Some of them observed that good personal relations with the clients are quite helpful for the goal-setting process. Regardless of all this, one practitioner expressed his scepticism of the very usefulness of communication goals as such.

Evaluation
Evaluation is also considered to be part of best theory-guided practice. However, most of the respondents refrain from it because, as they say, evaluation would be too complex and expensive. If practitioners *do* evaluate, it is sales rates or large/less attendance. But, then, this does not appear surprising as they tend to substitute

the setting of communication goals for marketing/sales goals. The ability to conceptually and strategically distinguish between communication goals and organizational goals (e.g. marketing goals) appears to be one of the more promising areas for fruitful theory–practice cooperation.

Truth

All interviewees argued that truth plays a very important role in their everyday work. Apart from this, one practitioner said that "you've to fake something." Having said this with a smile on his face, he added quickly, in a more serious vein, that, of course, truth is the most important objective in public relations.

Public relations theories

In the light of the practitioners' statements, the initial interpretation would suggest that public relations practice is *sometimes* based on theoretical knowledge. However, *all* interview partners appear to be using common-sense theories in their daily work, such as how-to approaches or best-practice orientation. Yet, two respondents with an academic background are using public relations theories in some specific situations.

Comparative analysis

This part of the study has revealed a six-fold typology of practitioners. The different types were generated by the employment of "in-order-to motives" and "because-of motives" (Weber, 1976). The procedure employed produced the types below which were abstractly named as follows:

- The Agent
- The Communicator
- The Information Distributor
- The Journalist
- The Networker
- The Marketer

The Agent

The Agent is communication-oriented; for this type careful analysis as a starting point of strategic communication management is essential. The Agent is also committed to goal-setting and evaluation. This professionally oriented type is not very common. The mindset and professional values of some practitioners may be similar to the Agent's but not the actual occupational practice. The implementation of the Agent's agenda in daily work does not only depend on the Agent's orientation, but also on the organization, the organization's structure, and the needs of the client. Nevertheless, practitioners' knowledge and behaviour *can* foster the Agents' perspective and, accordingly, the perception by the organization.

The Communicator

The Communicator is a traditional "best practice"-guided practitioner. The Communicator's main task is organizing events; but, then, he is also communication-

oriented and involved in the segmentation of publics. He is committed to goal-setting and interested in evaluation — albeit at a fairly minimum level.

The Information Distributor

The Information Distributor is a bit schizophrenic. On the one hand, the Information Distributor is communication-oriented, but on the other hand, his work is largely reduced to writing press releases. This type would like to do a more sophisticated job, but the organization does not recognise the need for it. The Information Distributor gets the information, which he is meant to distribute, from the head of his organizations.

The Journalist

The main task of the Journalist is also press relations. In contrast to the Information Distributor, however, this type is not only involved in the dissemination of existing information but also in the search for new messages. The Journalist acts like a journalist inside an organization. Consequently, research, writing, and publishing are the most evident routines in his daily work. Evaluation is largely limited to analyses of press clippings.

The Networker

The Networker's tasks are dominated by event management and promotion. Similarly, contacting people and building relationships are very important for the daily work. This type is not very common in business but rather in cultural organizations.

The Marketer

And finally, the Marketer is, obviously, influenced by marketing perspectives. Somewhat surprisingly, goal-setting and segmentation of publics are not key to the role. Rather, this type is integrated in a marketing department doing some kind of supporting communication work. Public relations professionalism does not appear to be an explicit focus. In many small- and medium-size companies this type of practitioner is very common.

In sum, then, the Communicator, the Information Distributor and the Journalist are the main types in our typology of the field. The typology suggests an appreciable degree of occupational heterogeneity. This is confirmed by some other studies (e.g. van Ruler, 2004) which conclude that the occupation is obviously heterogeneous due to, *inter alia*, the kind of the access to the profession, which is, in the majority of societies, not legally — as a matter of fact, not even factually — bound to certified programs of theoretical education as is the case in such classical professions as medicine and law.

CONCLUSION

This study shows a multi-faceted relationship between public relations theory and professional practice. Some of the theories are quite directly applicable to the solution of real-word public relations problems. Others, in contrast, do not lend them-

selves easily to direct application requiring theoretical knowledge on the part of the practitioners. Public relations science is called upon to develop an explicit relation to practice and to mature and develop into higher degrees of applicability of its results. One way of accomplishing this is to squarely define practical public relations problems as the very point of departure for public relations research and to view them as a primary unit of analysis.

But then, again, practitioners, too, are called upon to contribute to more creative theory–practice interfacing — most importantly through very concrete theoretical engagement in their daily routines, thus bringing about more credible ethical dimensions to their work. To reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable, that is, service to the organisation and, simultaneously, service to society — this seems to be the path towards better professional image and increased reputation. *Public relations does matter in a communication society.* As doubtlessly as we do live in a communication society, the quality of communication does matter — so does the quality of public relations. From this perspective, it appears necessary (1) to observe the public relations practice, (2) to identify problems which need solutions, (3) to find solutions for the practice, and (4) to arrive at an understanding of the public relations practice, which fosters identification as a scientific practice for organizations, publics, and society alike. If public relations theory and practice are moving in this direction, both organizations and society may benefit from the outcomes.

Further studies are needed to gain more inside views of the very theory–practice linkage structures — open as well as latent. Such studies may also be worthwhile at a comparative country level, e.g. European and American. Also, the concept of "excellent public relations" could be profitably analysed along the lines spelled out above.

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