Paradigms of global public relations in an age of digitalisation

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Abstract

Although the attention being paid to the new digital media may be the latest fad in public relations, these new media have the potential to make the profession more global, strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical, and socially responsible. However, many practitioners are using the new media in the same ways they used the old—as a means of dumping messages on the general population rather than as a strategic means of interacting with publics and bringing information from the environment into organisational decision-making. For public relations to fully use digital media, practitioners and scholars must reinstitutionalise public relations as a behavioural, strategic management paradigm rather than as a symbolic, interpretive paradigm. This article provides a model of strategic public relations and offers suggestions for the use of digital media in each phase of this model.

Introduction

Public relations has long been a professional practice where fads are common and conceptualisation of faddish concepts is weak or nonexistent. Public relations fads have focused on such concepts as images, perceptions, messaging, reputation, brands, integrated marketing communication, return on investment (ROI), strategic communication, and corporate social responsibility projects. Most practitioners following these fads have skill sets that are limited to media and media relations, and they fervently believe that publicity in traditional media will produce the faddish outcome currently in vogue. Thus, it is not surprising that so many public relations practitioners view the new digital social media as a revolutionary force that changes the way they think and upsets the way they practise public relations.

Fads change quickly, however, and public relations practitioners have rapidly embraced social media as being at the centre of what they consider to be a new form of public relations. The traditional media frenzy of so many practitioners has been replaced by a new social media frenzy. Each day, I receive announcements of conferences, seminars, online discussions, publications, books, websites, and blogs discussing how practitioners can use social media to revolutionise their public relations work. Although many practitioners have simply transferred their traditional media skills and techniques to digital media, the new fascination with social media promises to have positive consequences for the public relations profession. If the social media are used to their full potential, I believe they will inexorably make public relations practice more global, strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical, and socially responsible.

In 1996, Verčič, Grunig, and Grunig proposed a global theory of public relations that was elaborated by Sriramesh and Verčič (2003, 2009) in their *Global Public Relations Handbook* and by Sriramesh in this special issue of *PRism.* Our global public relations theory attempted to answer the question of whether public relations theory and practice should be unique to each country or culture or whether it should be practiced in the same way everywhere. We answered this question by theorising that global public relations should fall in the middle between standardisation and individualisation. We theorised that, at an abstract level, there are a set of generic principles that *could* be applied universally but

that at a local level these principles *should* be applied differently in different locations. I emphasise the words 'could' and 'should' in the previous sentence because we did not argue that public relations 'is' currently practiced according to these principles, as, for example, Bardhan (2003) mistakenly interpreted one principle of the global theory (symmetrical communication) in a study of Indian public relations.

Our global theory is not a positive theory, which describes a type of public relations that currently is practiced everywhere in the world. Research, such as that reported in the *Global Public Relations Handbook* (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003, 2009), does show that there are many idiosyncrasies in public relations practice around the world that reflect cultural differences. It also shows that the one worldwide universal in public relations practice is what I have called the press agentry/publicity model (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995)—the least effective of the models. Rather, our global theory is a normative theory that argues that public relations will be most effective throughout most parts of the world when it follows the generic principles and applies them with appropriate variations for local cultural, political, social, and economic conditions. Its absence in a country, however, does not serve as evidence that it could not be practiced there.

The generic principles have been described in different ways in different publications, but the essential principles can be summarised as:

• **Empowerment of public relations**. The chief communication officer is part of or has access to the dominant coalition or other coalitions of senior managers who make decisions in the organisation.

• **Integrated communication function**. Excellent departments integrate all public relations functions into a single department or have a mechanism to coordinate the departments responsible for different communication activities.

• **A separate management function**. Many organisations splinter the public relations function by making it a supporting tool for other departments such as marketing, human resources, law, or finance. When the function is sublimated to other functions, it cannot move communication resources from one strategic public to another as it becomes more or less important—as an integrated function can.

• **Headed by a strategic manager rather than a communication technician or an administrative manager who supervises technical services**. Technicians are essential to carry out day-to-day communication activities. However, excellent public relations units have at least one senior manager who directs public relations programmes; or this direction will be provided by members of the dominant coalition who have no knowledge of public relations.

• **Involved in strategic management**. Public relations develops programmes to communicate with strategic publics, both external and internal, who are affected by the consequences of organisational decisions and behaviours and who either demand or deserve a voice in decisions that affect them—both before and after decisions are made.

• **Two-way and symmetrical communication**. Two-way, symmetrical public relations uses research, listening, and dialogue to manage conflict and to cultivate relationships with both internal and external strategic publics more than one-way and asymmetrical communication.

• **Diverse**. Effective organisations attempt to increase the diversity in the public relations function when the diversity in their environments increases. Excellent public relations includes both men and women in all roles, as well as practitioners of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

• **Ethical**. Public relations departments practice ethically and promote ethical and socially responsible organisational decisions and behaviours.

We have identified six contextual conditions that should be taken into account when these generic principles are applied multinationally: culture, the political system, the economic system, level of economic development, the extent and nature of activism, and the media system (see Sriramesh's discussion of the

contextual conditions in this special issue). At times, these contextual conditions make it difficult to apply the generic principles, such as in a country with an individualistic or masculine culture, an authoritarian political system, or a low level of activism. Nevertheless, I believe that the principles can be practiced incrementally, and carefully, almost everywhere. The new digital media, I also believe, are a global force that conform well to the generic principles and that make it possible to overcome the contextual conditions that limit the practice of these principles.

As of June 30, 2009, there were 1,668,870,408 internet users in the world—24% of the world's population of nearly 6.8 billion (Internet World Stats, 2009). The percentage of the population that uses the internet ranges from 6.7% in Africa to 73.9% in North America. Internet usage is higher in developed regions of the world (50.1% in Europe and 60.1% in Oceania/Australia) than in developing regions (23.7% in the Middle East and 30.0% in the Latin American/Caribbean region). Although only 18.5% of the Asian population uses the internet, 42.2% of all internet users in the world are in Asia. In addition, internet use worldwide grew 362% from 2000 to 2009, including 516% in Asia, 1,360% in the Middle East and Africa, and 873% in the Latin American/Caribbean region. Finally, in 2008, China surpassed the United States as having more internet users than any other country in the world (CNN.com, 2009). On December 31, 2008, there were 298 million internet users in China, 22% of the population, with an annual growth rate of 41.9% (China Internet Network Information Center, 2009).

The statistical evidence, therefore, is clear. A huge proportion of the world's population now has access to and is using digital media, and usage in developing countries is catching up to that in developing countries. In addition, digital media have made most public relations global and force organisations to think globally about their public relations practice. Public relations departments of organisations

are moving rapidly to adjust to this change in media. According to a report from iPressroom, Trendstream, PRSA, and Korn/Ferry International, as reported in PR News online (2009), 51% of public relations departments in the United States are responsible for digital communication, 49% for blogging, 48% for social networking, and 52% for micro blogging (such as text messaging, instant messaging, and Twittering). In addition, a 2007 study by the Arthur Page Society, a US association of chief corporate communication officers, included "Leadership in enabling the enterprise with 'new media' skill and tools" (p. 7) as one of four priorities and skills that will be needed by chief communication officers (CCOs) in the future. (The other three skills, which fit squarely into our global theory of public relations, were leadership in defining and instilling company values, building and managing multi-stakeholder relationships, and building and managing trust.)

Recent books on online public relations, such as Phillips and Young (2009) and Solis and Breakenridge (2009) have argued that the digital media have changed everything for public relations: "The Web has changed everything" (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009, p. 1); "… it is hard to avoid making the claim that 'the internet changes everything.' … for public relations the unavoidable conclusion is that nothing will ever be the same again" (Phillips & Young, 2009, p.1). In one sense, I agree with these assertions. For most practitioners, digital media do change everything about the way they practice public relations. Other practitioners, however, doggedly use the new media in the same way that they used traditional media. From a theoretical perspective, in addition, I do not believe digital media change the public relations theory needed to guide practice, especially our generic principles of public relations. Rather, the new media facilitate the application of the principles and, in the future, will make it difficult for practitioners around the world not to use the principles.

Abandoning the illusion of control

Most of the discussions I have heard about the impact of the digital media on public relations

have begun with the assertion that communication professionals previously could control the flow of messages and influence from the organisations they represent to their publics—usually by trying to control the information entering traditional media. With the advent of digital media, the arguments continue, neither public relations practitioners nor journalists working in traditional media are able to control the flow of information. Anyone now can be a journalist, members of publics can talk freely to each other about organisations, and information is widely available to everyone with little cost and effort. Although I agree that digital media now make control of communication largely impossible, I also believe that the assumed control of messages and influence has always been an illusion rather than a reality of public relations practice.

The illusion of control comes from a traditional paradigm of public relations that views public relations as a messaging, publicity, informational, and media relations function. Practitioners who think within that paradigm emphasise publications, news, communication campaigns, and media contacts in their work. Often, they define public relations as a marketing communication function that supports marketing through media publicity or by combining publicity with advertising in a programme of 'integrated marketing communication'. Practitioners within this paradigm generally believe that they can control what messages members of publics are exposed to. Often they describe the recipients of their messages as audiences, rather than publics, which further suggests an illusion of control. These practitioners also typically believe that organisations can define, or even create, their publics and 'target' them. Then, they believe that publics can be persuaded—i.e., that their cognitions, attitudes or behaviours can be influenced through asymmetrical communication—communication designed to promote the interests of the organisation with little or no concern for the interest of publics.

Persuasion, as explained by these practitioners, usually takes place when messages change the cognitive representations in the minds of publics—representations they typically call images, reputations, brands, impressions, perceptions, or similar names. These cognitive representations, therefore, supposedly can be 'managed' through programmes given such names as image management, reputation management, brand management, or perception management.

In contrast to the paradigm that produces this illusion of control, research that my colleagues, my students, and I have conducted over the years yields a different picture of the public relations process and discredits the notion that control ever occurred. This research reflects a behavioural, strategic management paradigm of public relations rather than a messaging and purely cognitive paradigm. This paradigm describes public relations as a participant in organisational decision-making rather than a conveyor of messages about decisions after they are made by other managers. It also views public relations as research-based and a mechanism for organisational listening and learning. Its purpose is to help all management functions, including but not limited to marketing, to build relationships with their stakeholders through communication programmes that cultivate relationships with the publics that can be found within categories of stakeholders that are relevant to each management function.

Extensive research on a situational theory of publics (Grunig, 1997) has shown that members of publics always have controlled the messages to which they are exposed—not the organisations or media that disseminate messages intended for them. Research on the theory began with studies in the 1960s of Colombian peasant farmers (Grunig, 1971) and large landowners (Grunig, 1969), studies that showed that even poorly educated peasant farmers in a developing country control their own exposure to information. Recently, Kim (2006) and Kim and Grunig (in press) extended this theory to explain why and how people not only control their exposure to information but also why and how they develop cognitions and

give information to others as publics move from loose aggregations of people facing similar problems to active publics communicating with each other.

Thus, the situational theory shows that publics create themselves and that they are motivated to do so by the problems they experience in their life situations. Stakeholders, therefore, define their stakes in an organisation; organisations cannot do that for them. Many of the problems that bring publics into existence are caused by the consequences of an organisation's behaviours on people both inside and outside the organisation—such as loss of a job, an unsafe product, pollution, interference with government decisions, or discrimination. Other problems are simply experienced by members of publics, and they seek help from organisations to solve those problems, such as a drug to cure the disease AIDS, unemployment, or excessive traffic. There are many people who are not members of active publics, whom I have described as passive or non-publics—even though the organisation might want them to be publics. Typically, public relations people try to create active publics by disseminating messages to passive or non-publics; but those messages have little effect because non-publics are not exposed to them and passive publics hear and remember little of the messages.

Our research also shows that programmes of symmetrical communication are more successful than asymmetrical communication in building relationships between organisations and publics (see, for example, Grunig, 2001; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999)—further undermining the persuasion assumption underlying the illusion of control. Finally, research shows that reputations, images, brands, and other types of cognitive representations are what members of different publics think and say to each other, not something that organisations can create or manage (Bromley, 1993; Grunig & Hung, 2002). In addition, our research shows that these cognitive representations reflect organisational decisions and behaviours, the extent of active

communication with publics, and the quality of organisation-public relationships (Yang, 2007; Yang & Grunig, 2005). Therefore, the only way in which public relations managers can 'manage' cognitive representations is by participating in managing the behaviours of organisations and by managing communication with publics in order to cultivate relationships with them. In their book Online Public Relations, Phillips and Young (2009) maintained that this

> Excellence model developed by James Grunig and various collaborators has provided the underlying paradigm that has dominated much public relations theory for over 20 years. The issue now for those trying to understand the changes being brought about by the internet society is to determine whether the developments outlined in this book are sufficiently dramatic to challenge the Grunig model. Let's try. (p. 247)

The Excellence model they described can be found in Grunig (1992) and Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2001). It has produced the global theory of generic principles and specific applications described at the beginning of this article. The Excellence model actually is much more than a model. It is a general theory that is made up of a number of middle-range theories such as a theory of public relations and strategic management, the situational theory of publics, practitioner roles, the organisation of the public relations function, internal communication, activism, ethics, and gender and diversity. Today's digital world, according to Phillips and Young (2009), challenges the Excellence theories because, in their words,

> Excellence characterizes the vector of communication as being between an organization and its publics, and is concerned with the balance—the symmetry—of this transaction. The bold claim that emerges from the arguments put forward for 'the new PR' is that the fundamental vector of communication that shapes reputation and an organization's relationship with its stakeholders has flipped through 90 degrees. Now, the truly significant

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discourse is that which surrounds an organization, product or service, a conversation that is enabled and given form and substance by the interlinked, aggregated messages that emerge from internet mediated social networks. (pp. 247-248)

In contrast, I do not believe that the 'internet society' or the 'new PR' challenges the Excellence paradigm, as Phillips and Young argued in these two passages. They seem to believe that 'an organisation and its publics' are distinct from 'internet-mediated social networks'. Instead, I believe that an organisation and its publics now are embedded in internet-mediated social networks but that public relations is still about an organisation's relationships with its publics. Organisations do not need relationships with individuals who are not members of their publics even though these people might be actively communicating with and building relationships with each other. Organisations simply do not have the time or resources to cultivate relationships with everyone—only with individuals or groups who have stakes in organisations because of consequences that publics or organisations have or might have on each other.

At the same time, I believe that the internet society has empowered publics in a way that is truly revolutionary. People now are less constrained by the information that traditional media choose to make available to them or that organisations choose to disclose directly or through the media. Now, members of publics, as well as journalists, can seek information from millions of sources, anywhere in the world. Members of publics can interact with each other, and publics as a collectivity can interact with any organisation they choose and with other publics whenever they want. Conversations are taking place within and among publics throughout the world, and organisations must now use public relations to join these conversations. These conversations may still include journalists

writing online or in the traditional media[1], but people now have many more sources of information available to them than journalistically mediated sources.

I believe that similar conversations took place before the advent of the digital media but that they were far more limited then. Digital media now make it easier for publics to form and to establish relationships anywhere in the world. They also make mediated dialog as easy as interpersonal dialogue—mediated dialogue that Phillips and Young (2009) described as "a conversation that is enabled and given form and substance by the interlinked, aggregated messages that emerge from internet-mediated social networks" (p. 252). Thus, rather than challenging the Excellence theories, I believe that the digital media actually facilitate the theories and make it much easier for organisations to apply them—if, indeed, they choose to do so.

Using new media in the old way

The new digital media have dialogical, interactive, relational, and global properties that make them perfectly suited for a strategic management paradigm of public relations— properties that one would think would force public relations practitioners to abandon their traditional one-way, message-oriented, asymmetrical and ethnocentric paradigm of practice. However, history shows that when new media are introduced communicators tend to use them in the same way that they used the old media.

For example, journalists first used television just as they used radio. Accustomed to reading news on the radio, they continued to read the news on television without making use of the pictures that the new medium allowed. Similarly, Mark Westaby, the founder of the London-based media analysis firm Metrica, pointed out in an online discussion that the same pattern occurred in "the film industry when 'talkies' first came along … [and] …

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[1] For example, a 2006 report by Edelman and First&42nd found that bloggers are more likely to comment on issues of corporate social responsibility identified by mainstream media than to initiate these issues themselves.

producers just started to film plays and stage shows … they didn't understand or appreciate that talkies enabled film to be used in a completely different way, which would allow it to become a new medium in its own right" (Research., 2009, posted 16-Jun-2009, 11:04 p.m.).

In the same way, public relations practitioners first used online media as an information dump, in the same way that they used traditional media, newsletters, and publications. Web sites were used to disseminate information and to post publications and news releases. Employee intranets largely have been online newsletters. Email has been used to push promotional messages to the extent that they have been named spam. Social media are being used to disseminate marketing messages through such techniques as viral marketing. Spamming has grown so much that SoftScan, a British internet security company, reported that in July 2007 91.52% of all email messages were spam (as quoted in Phillips & Young, 2009, p. 14). Russell Powell (2009), a public relations officer at Elms College in Massachusetts (USA), has pointed out that young people are turning away from email because it is messy, inefficient, takes too much time, is vulnerable to spam, and lacks immediacy. He added, "… if we choose to flood the social-networking sites with marketing messages, we likely will hasten their demise" (p. A43).

The use of the digital media as though they were the old media typically has been named Web 1.0, which supposedly has been replaced by Web 2.0 that takes advantage of the interactive and dialogic characteristics of these new media. However, the switch from Web 1.0 to 2.0 has not been universal. As Fitch (2009) points out in this special issue, communicators in Singapore are still confused over what the new media are and still confuse public relations with marketing when they think of how to use them.

In his blog, *LeverWealth*, Phillips (2009) constructed a model of digital communication tools to show how they fit into four models of public relations that approximate my press agentry/publicity, public-information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical models of public relations (see Grunig & Grunig, 1992). As shown in **Figure 1** (over the page), he called these models propaganda, information, one-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical. Although, as I have argued in this article, the digital media would seem to force communicators toward the two-way symmetrical model, Figure 1 shows that digital tools exist for each of the models. For example, static web sites can be used to implement the propaganda model; frequently updated web sites the information model; blogs with comment enabled the one-way asymmetrical model; and open corporate social media sites, Twitter, and interactive online community contribution the two-way symmetrical model.

Likewise, many of the same ethical problems that have plagued traditional public relations continue to occur in online public relations. The most common of these problems has been the use of fake blogs (or flogs) to give the impression that a blog created by an organisation or a public relations firm on behalf of a client to praise the client is managed by a blogger who is unaffiliated with the organisation. Also common is Astroturfing, the practice of public relations practitioners posting favourable messages on blogs or social media sites without disclosing the actual identity of the person posting or their relationship with the organisation they are touting. Both practices violate a disclosure principle of persuasion ethics—that a persuasive communicator has an obligation to disclose whom he or she is and what his or her interests are in the topic promoted in persuasive messages. (Grunig & Grunig, 1996).

Figure 1: A new media adaptation of the models of public relations
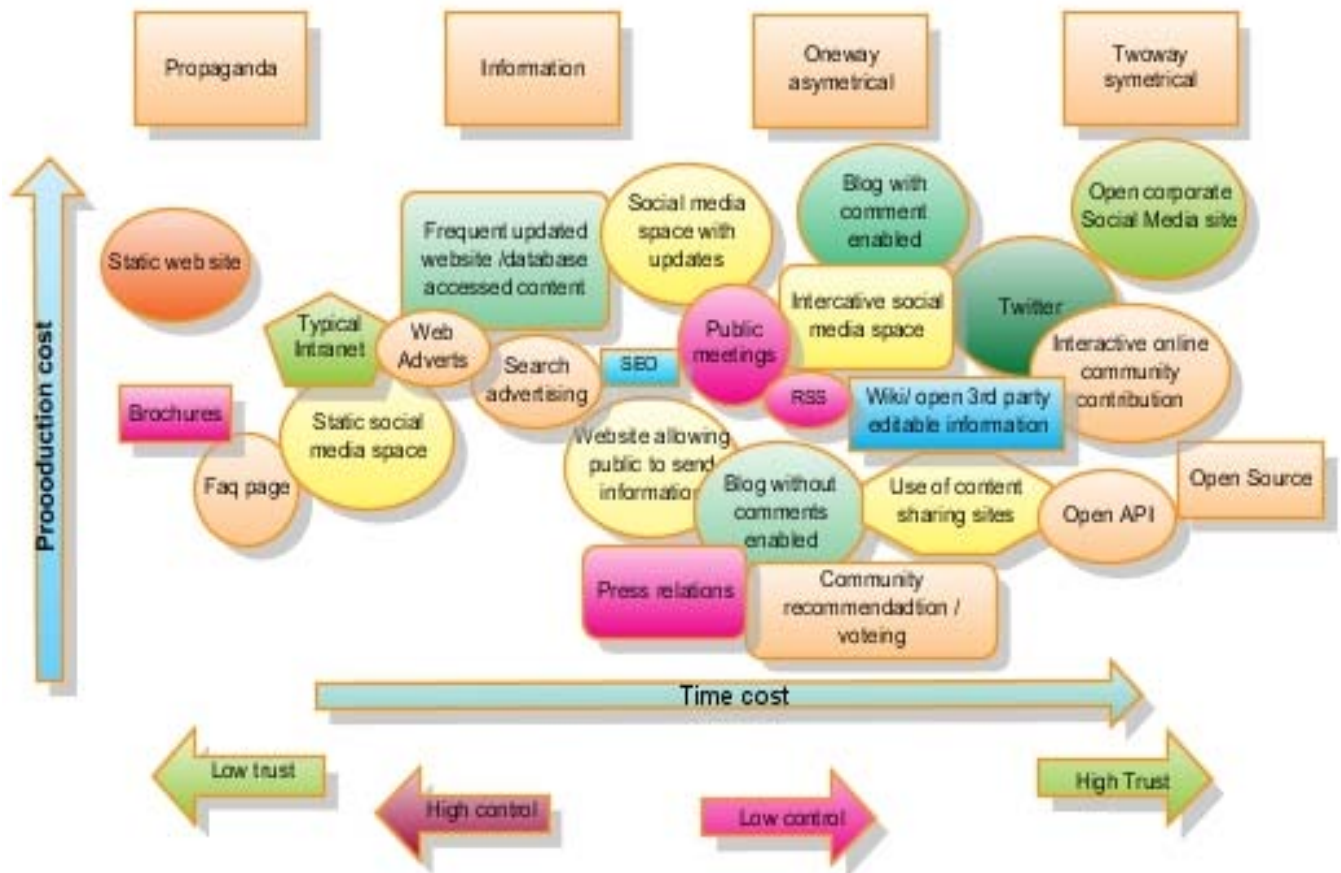
Source: Phillips, D. (2009).

To understand why many public relations practitioners use the new digital media in old ways, I believe it helps to distinguish between two paradigms of public relations that existed in the history of public relations, are practiced widely today, underlie many academic disputes about the discipline, and are competing for the future of the profession. I call these paradigms the interpretive, or symbolic, paradigm and the strategic management, or behavioural, paradigm. I believe that public relations cannot take full advantage of the digital revolution if it is practiced under the interpretive rather than the strategic management paradigm.

Interpretive and strategic management paradigms

In her textbook on organisational theory, Hatch (1997) identified three perspectives on organisations—the modernist, symbolic-interpretive, and postmodernist perspectives. The *modernist* perspective is based on classic theories of management that view reality as objective and management as a set of activities designed to achieve organisational objectives—objectives that can be measured objectively. The *symbolic-interpretive* paradigm sees reality as subjective and views concepts such as organisations themselves, their environments, and the behaviour of managers as subjective enactments of reality rather than as observable

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Grunig, J. E. (2009). Paradigms of global public relations in an age of digitalisation. *PRism 6(*2): http://praxis.massey.ac.nz/prism_on-line_journ.html

and measurable reality—enactments whose meanings can be negotiated through communication.

According to Hatch, *postmodernism* "found its way into organization theory through applications of linguistic, semiotic, and literary theory via the interest in meaning and interpretation introduced by symbolic-interpretive organization theorists" (p. 44). Postmodernists reject general theories and favour fragmentation of theorising. They prefer to 'deconstruct' theories to determine whose interests are served by the theories and whose way of thinking has been incorporated into them. Thus, challenges to power are a major theme in postmodern thinking.

I believe that these three approaches to organisational theory can be found in two competing approaches to public relations: the *symbolic, interpretive,* paradigm and the *strategic management, behavioural*, paradigm. The strategic management paradigm contains elements of both modernism and postmodernism. Thus, I would call it a semi-postmodern approach to the role of public relations in strategic management.

Scholars and practitioners who embrace the symbolic paradigm in their thinking generally assume that public relations strives to influence how publics interpret the organisation. These cognitive interpretations are embodied in such concepts as image, reputation, brand, impressions, and identity. The interpretive paradigm can be found in the concepts of reputation management in business schools, integrated marketing communication in advertising programmes, and critical and rhetorical theory in communication departments. Practitioners who follow the interpretive paradigm emphasise messages, publicity, media relations, and media effects.

Although this paradigm largely relegates public relations to a tactical role, the use of these tactics does reflect an underlying theory. Communication tactics, this theory maintains, create an impression in the minds of publics that allow the organisation to buffer itself from its environment—to use the words of Scott (1987) and Van den Bosch and Van Riel,

(1998)—which in turn allows the organisation to behave in the way it wants.

In contrast, the behavioural, strategic management, paradigm focuses on the participation of public relations executives in strategic decision-making so that they can help manage the behaviour of organisations. Van den Bosch and Van Riel, (1998) defined this type of public relations as a *bridging*, rather than a buffering, function—again using Scott's (1987) terminology. Public relations as a bridging activity is designed to build relationships with stakeholders, rather than a set of messaging activities designed to buffer the organisation from them.

The strategic management paradigm emphasises two-way communication of many kinds to provide publics a voice in management decisions and to facilitate dialogue between management and publics both before and after decisions are made. The strategic management paradigm does not exclude traditional public relations activities such as media relations and the dissemination of information. Rather, it broadens the number and types of media and communication activities and fits them into a framework of research and listening. As a result, messages reflect the information needs of publics as well as the advocacy needs of organisations.

Critical scholars such as Weaver, Motion, and Roper (2006) tend to view the interpretive paradigm as the way public relations actually is practiced and the strategic management paradigm as "an unlikely rarity and even something of a fantastical ideal" (p. 15). I see these two approaches differently. I believe the interpretive paradigm reflects the hopes of many of the clients and employers of public relations practitioners who prefer to make decisions in isolation from publics. It also represents the wishful thinking of many practitioners who seem to believe that messages alone can protect organisations from publics and who promise clients and employers what they want to hear.

Evaluation research (e.g., as reviewed by Dozier and Ehling, 1992), however, generally shows this interpretive paradigm to be ineffective because it does not deliver the

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effects its advocates promise. Most importantly, the interpretive approach does not provide a normative model for how public relations *should be practised*—a model that can be taught to aspiring public relations professionals or used as a template for constructing a public relations function. The strategic management paradigm, I believe, provides such a normative model for an ethical, effective, and both organisationally and socially valued approach to public relations practice.

There has been a great deal of discussion among public relations scholars about whether the strategic management approach to public relations represents a modern or postmodern approach to management as described by Hatch (1997). Critical scholars such as L'Etang and Pieczka (1996) and Leitch and Neilson (2001) and postmodern scholars such as Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) have claimed that the strategic management theory is modernist—that it only helps organisations control their environment rather than provide publics in that environment a bridge to the organisation and a voice in management decisions. They claim that public relations serves only the interests of management or organisations and not the interests of publics or society.

In contrast, I believe that public relations departments that are empowered as a strategic management function rather than only as an interpretive function represent more of a postmodern approach to management than a modern approach. Knights and Morgan (1991) and Knights (1992) have described postmodern strategic management as a subjective process in which the participants from different management disciplines (such as marketing, finance, law, human resources, or public relations) assert their disciplinary identities. Public relations has value in this perspective because it brings a different set of problems and possible solutions into the strategic management arena. In particular, it brings the problems of publics as well as the problems of management into decision-making.

I believe that public relations provides organisations a way to give voice to and empower publics in organisational decision-making (a postmodern perspective). At the same time, public relations benefits organisations by helping them make decisions, develop policies, provide services, and behave in ways that are accepted by and sought out by their stakeholder publics—thus increasing the organisation's revenue, reducing its costs, and reducing its risk (a semi-modernist perspective).

Thus, the strategic management theory of public relations contains elements of both modernism and postmodernism, although I do not adhere rigorously to the assumptions of either approach. For example, although postmodernists dismiss general theories as metanarratives or "grand narratives" (Hatch, 1997, p. 44), I believe in the importance of integrating and enlarging theories. I also embrace the centrality of subjectivity in both theorising and communicating—the central assumption of the symbolic-interpretive approach (see Grunig, 1993). However, I believe the symbolic-interpretive paradigm devotes excessive attention to the role of communication and public relations in negotiating *meaning* and not enough attention to their role in negotiating the *behaviour* of both organisations and publics.

Although placing most public relations thinking into two categories is always an oversimplification, I do believe that identifying these two ways of thinking helps us to understand controversies in the discipline and to understand why much public relations practice is not adjusting to the opportunities presented by the digital media. To a large extent, I believe that the interpretive paradigm has been institutionalised in the way most journalists and people in general think about public relations. To a lesser extent, this paradigm also describes how a large portion of the managers for whom public relations people work and a large portion of practitioners themselves think about public relations. Thus, I believe it will be necessary to reinstitutionalise public relations as a strategic management discipline before it can reach its full potential as a profession that serves the interests of society as well as organisations. And, I believe the digital media will not be used to their full potential without this reinstitutionalisation.

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It is important, then, to look at how digital media can be used in a strategic management approach to public relations.
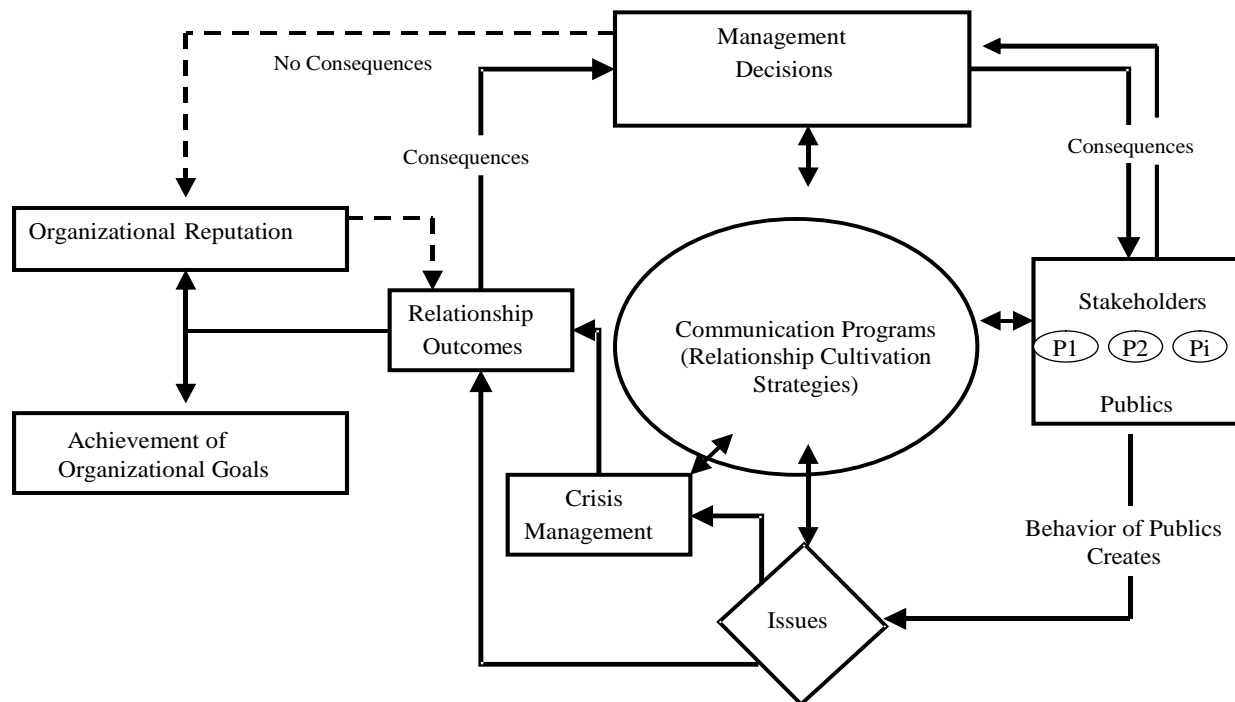
Digital media in the strategic management of public relations

In the Excellence study (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), we found that the most effective public relations departments participated in, or were consulted in, the making of overall strategic decisions in organisations. Less effective departments generally had the less central role of disseminating messages about strategic decisions made by others in the organisation. By participating in organisational decisions, excellent public relations departments were in a position to identify the stakeholders who would be affected by organisational decisions or who would affect those decisions. Once they had identified stakeholders, excellent public relations departments strategically developed programmes to communicate with them. They

conducted formative research to identify potential issues and define objectives for programmes to communicate with the stakeholders, they specified measurable objectives for the communication programmes, and they used both formal and informal methods to evaluate whether the objectives had been accomplished. Less excellent departments conducted no formative or evaluative research and generally had only vague objectives that were difficult to measure.

Figure 2 (below) depicts this role of an excellent public relations department in the overall strategic management process of an organisation and the nature of strategic management of public relations programmes. Figure 2 is useful in understanding how digital media can be used in all phases of this public relations process. The central concepts in Figure 2 are *management decisions* at the top, *stakeholders* and *publics* on the right, and *relationship outcomes* on the left. Connecting management and publics are the consequences

Figure 2. Model of Strategic Management of Public Relations

Grunig, J. E. (2009). Paradigms of global public relations in an age of digitalisation. *PRism 6(*2):
http://praxis.massey.ac.nz/prism_on-line_journ.html

that the behaviour of each has on the other—the interdependence between an organisation and its environment that creates the need for public relations. The double arrows between management decisions and stakeholders at the upper right of Figure 2 show that strategic decision-makers of an organisation should interact with stakeholders through the public relations function because their decisions have consequences on publics or because the organisation needs supportive relationships with stakeholders in order to implement decisions and achieve organisational goals. Stakeholders also might seek a relationship with an organisation in order to attain a consequence from the organisation to solve a problem it recognises—such as an environmental group that seeks a reduction in pollution from a chemical plant or nuclear laboratory. Thus the consequences of organisational decisions (and behaviours resulting from those decisions) define the stakeholders of an organisation and, therefore, the stakeholders with whom the organisation needs a relationship.

I define stakeholders as broad categories of people who might be affected by management decisions or who might affect those decisions—such as employees or community residents. When a strategic public relations manager scans the environment, therefore, his or her first step should be to think broadly in terms of stakeholder categories. Then he or she should use a theory of publics—e.g., Grunig's (1997) situational theory of publics—to identify and segment active, passive, and latent publics from the non-publics that might also be present in the stakeholder category.

It is important to segment active publics, because active publics typically make issues out of the consequences of organisational decisions. This behaviour may be individual or it may be collective—when members of publics organise into activist groups. Sometimes publics react negatively to harmful consequences of an organisation's behaviours—such as pollution or discrimination. At other times, they act positively to try to secure a behaviour from an organisation that has useful consequences for

them—such as a community public that wants cleaner rivers and streams. At still other times, publics collaborate with organisations to secure consequences of benefit to both. Figure 2 then shows that publics that cannot stop the consequences that harm them or secure the consequences that benefit them generally make issues out of the consequences. Issues, in turn, can become crises if they are not handled well. When issues or potential issues are discussed and negotiated with publics, the result is improved relationships with publics.

At the centre of the strategic processes described in Figure 2 is an oval representing communication programmes—programmes to cultivate relationships with publics and to manage conflict with them. Communication with potential publics is needed before decisions are made by strategic decision-makers, when publics have formed but have not created issues or crises, and during the issue and crisis phases. Communication programmes at the latter two stages are generally termed *issues management* and *crisis communication* by public relations practitioners. What Figure 2 illustrates, however, is that communication with publics before decisions are made is most effective in resolving issues and crises because it helps managers to make decisions that are less likely to produce consequences that publics make into issues and crises. If a public relations staff does not communicate with publics until an issue or crisis occurs, the chance of resolving the conflict is slim.

The centre oval in Figure 2 depicts the strategic management of public relations programmes themselves—as opposed to the participation of public relations in the overall strategic management of the organisation. These programmes are developed from strategies to cultivate relationships with publics, a new concept we have used to replace the models of public relations and to integrate the concepts of direction (one-way or two-way), purpose (symmetrical or asymmetrical), mediated or interpersonal, and ethical or unethical (see Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2001; Hung, 2007). Communication programmes should begin with formative research, then develop achievable and measurable objectives,

implement the programme, and end with evaluation of whether the objectives have been met.

The final path in Figure 2 can be found in the dotted lines from *management decisions* to *organisational reputation* to *relationship outcomes*—a path labelled no consequences. This path depicts the approach taken by public relations practitioners who are guided by the interpretive paradigm and believe that positive messages about management decisions— mostly disseminated through the mass media— can by themselves create a positive organisational reputation. Such a path might also produce a reputational relationship—a relationship based only on secondary sources and not based on an actual relationship between the organisation and a public (Grunig & Hung, 2002). I believe that publicity about management decisions can create such a reputational relationship between an organisation and the audience exposed to the messages, but only to a limited extent and in certain situations. Therefore, I have labelled the dotted line *no consequences* because I believe that organisations have reputational relationships only with people for whom the organisation has no consequences. Such people can be defined as *audiences* because they are not truly *publics*. These audiences have little importance to an organisation. As soon as an organisation or public has consequences on the other, it begins to develop an involving behavioural relationship rather than a low-involvement reputational relationship. It is at that point that a group of people becomes an active and strategic public rather than a passive audience.

Figure 2 provides a theoretical overview of how public relations executives should participate in the strategic decision-making processes of the organisations they serve. Nevertheless, these executives need additional and more specific theoretical and applied tools to help them in this process. The digital media, I believe, provide such tools.

Digital tools for public relations and strategy

Communication programmes

Most public relations practitioners think immediately about the centre oval in Figure 2 when they contemplate using digital media in their work, and these media already are used extensively for such programmes. For example, a study by the IABC Research Foundation and Buck Consultants (2009) showed widespread use of digital media for employee communication programmes, including social media (used frequently or occasionally by 80% of survey participants), emails (75%), intranet (88%), websites (76%), virtual meetings (55%), and podcasts (20%). Digital media also are being used extensively for media relations, customer relations, financial relations, community relations, member relations for non-profits, donor relations, alumni relations for colleges and universities, public affairs and political public relations, and many other programmes designed to cultivate relationships with publics.

As Phillips (2009) pointed out (see Figure 1), digital media still are used extensively for communication programmes that are one-way and asymmetrical. However, many organisations now are developing two-way, interactive, and dialogical communication programmes through digital media, especially using blogs and microblogs such as Twitter. Rebecca Harris (2009) of General Motors and Brandy King (2009) of Southwest Airlines described two such programmes at the 2009 Summit on Measurement of the U. S. Institute for Public Relations. Southwest Airlines has a blog for its employees and customers called Nuts About Southwest (http://www.blogsouthwest.com). Southwest also uses Twitter to interact with customers about real-time problems they might be experiencing with a flight or reservation. General Motors used its GM Fastlane blog (http://gmfastlane.com) to make its executives available for interactive discussions about the company's 2009 bankruptcy, new products, and other concerns. A recent post, for example, addressed a number of rumours about the privacy of General Motors Onstar navigation system, such as rumours that Onstar operators could listen in on people in their cars or track speeds to give to law enforcement authorities

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(http://fastlane.gmblogs.com/archives/2009/11/web_chat_onstar_debunks_privacy_misconceptions.html).

Environmental scanning

The main point conveyed by Figure 2, however, is that the public relations process actually begins with management decision processes and not with communication programmes. When public relations participates in or has access to decision-making, its contribution is to identify consequences, stakeholders, publics, and issues that result from decisions or require management attention in decision making. The public relations process then ends with communication programmes, rather than beginning with them as is so often the case when practitioners use new media to implement old programmes.

The digital media are ideal for environmental scanning research, and there are many tools available for scanning cyberspace for problems, publics, and issues. These tools can be as easy to do as setting up Google alerts using the name of the organisation as a key word, by entering key words that describe potential problems and issues that relate to an organisation, or entering key words related to decisions or behaviours the management team might be contemplating but hasn't yet implemented. Media monitoring tools now are available widely for use in cyberspace. I believe that media monitoring actually is much more valuable when used for digital media than for traditional media. Digital media monitoring can be used for environmental scanning whereas monitoring of traditional media typically is done mostly to evaluate media relations programmes. Although there is still much debate over whether digital media should be monitored using automated machine coding or human coding (Research, 2009), the researchers debating the issue agree that both methods can be used in different circumstances and that both have unique advantages.

Segmenting stakeholders and publics

Although most writers about public relations tend to use the terms 'stakeholders' and 'publics' interchangeably, I distinguish between the two. I use the term stakeholder to define a broad group of people with similar stakes in the organisation, such as employees, customers, or community members. Stakeholders can be defined as anyone who has a similar risk resulting from a relationship with an organisation (Post, Preston, & Sachs, 2002). Not every member of a stakeholder group is a member of the same public, however; and, as Figure 2 illustrates, several different kinds of publics can be found within each stakeholder category. These publics can range from activist to active, passive, and non-publics.

As Phillips and Young (2009) have noted, it is important to segment stakeholders and publics to understand their differing relationships with an organisation and to be able to communicate with them about their problems and interests using the new media. I segment stakeholders by identifying the impact of consequences or potential consequences of management decisions on groups such as employees, customers, or shareholders. I then further segment publics from these stakeholder groups using my situational theory of publics (e.g., Grunig, 1997; Kim & Grunig, in press). This theory segments publics using the concepts of problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement recognition. Phillips and Young (2009) also suggested segmenting publics by values and concepts. In addition to values and concepts, I would add ideology as a segmentation concept. However, I would integrate these concepts into the situational theory of publics because I believe values, concepts, and ideologies influence the problems people recognise and how they define them.

I believe that public relations researchers can segment stakeholders and publics using the content of digital media as a database. Although I have not yet done so, I believe that content analytic techniques can be used with online materials to identify and code concepts such as problems, constraints, and types of involvements, using the situational theory, as well as values, concepts, and ideologies. Once identified, the problems recognised by these publics can be communicated to management as it makes decisions; and the categories of

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publics derived from these concepts can be used as formative research to plan communication programmes.

Anticipating and dealing with issues and crises
The next two phases of Figure 2 relate to issues and crises. Figure 2 also suggests that most issues result from the actions of publics (publics make issues out of problems) and that most, but not all, crises result from poor management responses to issues. Thus, analysis of online media can continue beyond segmenting stakeholders and publics to search for and categorise the issues publics might raise and the crises that might result from these issues.

Digital media such as websites and blogs also can be used for issues and crisis communication programmes (Coombs, 2008). General Motors, for example, used several blogs and web pages at the time of its 2009 bankruptcy crisis (Harris, 2009). Organisations also are developing dark web sites that are ready to go when a crisis occurs, such as a natural disaster or accident, that could be anticipated in their industry or environment (Coombs, 2007).

Measuring relationships and reputation
The outcomes of the strategic public relations process, as depicted in Figure 2, are relationships and reputation. Organisations that segment their stakeholders and publics, anticipate and deal with issues and crises, and actively communicate with publics at all stages of the process, should be more likely to develop relationships with their publics that make it possible to achieve organisational objectives, develop a positive reputation, and reduce the consequences of poor relationships on the implementation of management decisions.

As with other phases of this process, I believe it is possible to use cyberspace as a database for measuring the type and quality of relationships developed with publics using the concepts of trust, mutuality of control, satisfaction, and commitment developed by Grunig and Huang (2000), Grunig (2002), and Hon and Grunig (1999). Measuring relationships in this way would require a content analytic scheme that reflects the relationship concept. In addition to measuring relationships from online content directly, additional survey research can be done to evaluate the outcomes of communication programmes implemented through social media (Paine, 2007a). Finally, reputation could be measured using Bromley's (1993) and Grunig and Hung's (2002) definition of reputation as what people think and say about you. This can be done by measuring themes that reflect the most common behaviours and attributes of an organisation discussed in cyberspace. As Phillips and Young (2009) have said, "your reputation … will increasingly depend on what comes up when you are Googled" (p. 157).

Evaluation of communication programmes
A number of analytical schemes have been developed to evaluate the effects of digital media programmes (see Jeffries-Fox, 2004; Paine 2007a, 2007b; Phillips & Young, 2009). These range from simple measures of hits on a website to measures of cognitions, attitudes, and behaviours, as well as indicators of the types and quality of relationships. In many cases, these measures can be applied directly to online content. In other cases, additional survey or experimental research will be required.

Conclusion

In some ways, public relations has not been changed by the revolution in digital media. Many public relations practitioners long have had the illusion that they could choose their publics, control the messages received by their publics, control the cognitive interpretations publics form about organisations, and persuade publics to change their attitudes and behaviours. In reality, however, our descriptive theories have shown for many years that publics create themselves and control the messages to which they are exposed. In addition, publics form their own cognitive representations and choose their own behaviours. Using a normative prescriptive theory, my colleagues, students, and I have long provided evidence that public relations has greater value both for organisations and society when it is strategic, managerial, symmetrical,

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integrated but not sublimated, diverse, and ethical—as captured by our generic global principles. Public relations, when practiced according to this global theory, helps organisations to achieve their goals, cultivate relationships in societies and globally, and reduce conflict.

To reach this state as a profession, however, public relations practitioners and scholars must minimise the extent to which the symbolic, interpretive paradigm of public relations affects their thinking and institutionalise public relations as a strategic management, behavioural paradigm. The digital media provide tools that facilitate this paradigm shift. Thus, these media have the potential to truly revolutionise public relations—but only if a paradigm shift in the thinking of many practitioners and scholars takes place.

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