Introduction

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Knowledge Translation in Public Relations

A fundamental principle of academic research is to be relevant to practice, regardless of the discipline in which it is conducted. One of the strengths of the field of public relations and communication is the experience of professional practice by researchers both prior to their transition to academia and/or in continuing consultancy. An understanding of the importance of research to professional practice while extending the body of knowledge and development of theoretical perspectives provides a foundation for public relations research. The papers in this journal are no exception in bringing this focus to issues relating to public relations research.

However, sharing the knowledge and insights gained from academic research with the practitioner community remains a significant challenge. For several years, this journal has been available to members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), yet the academic forums held at national PRIA conferences, in which much of this research is presented, attract few practitioners. The 2013 PRIA National Research Colloquium was no exception with only approximately 10% of the audience coming from practice rather than academe. Yet when we, the guest editors of this issue of the journal, introduced academic research into a break out session in the main conference that followed the Research Colloquium, the room was filled and the response following the session was positive. The practitioners’ desire for more information about research also became apparent. Indeed, this desire is in line with advice from senior industry
practitioners that professional development and understanding of advances in knowledge are critical for career advancement and professional status.

Predicting that a title for the presentation that included the word ‘academic’ may have been a detraction for the mainly practitioner audience, the session was simply described as ‘Inside research – what's in it for me?’ The main objective in appealing directly to practitioners was an attempt to bridge the research-practice nexus by creating greater awareness of the relevance and availability of academic research to public relations practitioners. While this tactic was successful, and indicates that we are able to practice what we teach, we continue to believe that academics shouldn’t need to hide scholarly research in a professional forum. Or that academic research should be quarantined in a separate session, as though it is of no relevance to the concerns of contemporary practice.

Grunig (2006) argued that a primary aim of research was to inform practice, but Gower (2006), Cheng and de Gregorio (2008) and others continue to identify gaps between research and practice. As Toth states, ‘[w]e must include in our knowledge-building the theoretical research that explains and improves practice’ (Toth 2006, p. 111). The research at the 2013 Colloquium, some of which is presented in this issue of the journal, demonstrated a significant relevance to practice with three main themes emerging; engagement, technology use and education. In the first theme, engagement, research spanned the public sector, advocacy groups and consumer based organisations, considering current analysis of participatory decision-making, evidence-based measurement and concepts of dialogue and organisational listening. The research presented reviewed and proposed practices of engagement that when applied could enhance the communication between organisations and their stakeholders. The second theme on the use of technology in public relations addressed a prominent topic of discussion in practice. Two papers in particular, published in this issue, consider the ethics of engaging and paying bloggers (Archer, Pettigrew and Harrigan 2014) and the effectiveness of advocacy groups that are community owned (Desai & Wolf 2014). The findings from this research provide professionals with valuable insights for their own practice. The third theme, education, might initially appear less relevant to practitioners. With professional development necessary to respond to the changing trends in communication however, research about education also provides useful insights for practitioners. This research theme was relevant in terms of contextualising the expectations of new recruits into the industry and in allowing practitioners to assess the current state of education for the industry.

Currently, the public relations research environment in the Asia-Pacific region is prolific considering the early stage of public relations as an
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academic discipline and the small number of qualified academics in the field. This community of scholars has established strong links with international researchers and a number of Australasian researchers now hold positions at the international level. The reputation of researchers from the region is excellent and the contributions they are making to the field of study, would in any other field of academic research be considered world class and worthy of wider attention.

However, there appears to be limited formal interaction between researchers and practitioners and a lack of understanding by practitioners about the scholarly research being undertaken. Amongst practitioners there is a low level of awareness and understanding of what research exists, how to find it, how to apply it, and how to tailor it to meet their own needs. This apparent disinterest may also reflect a lack of understanding about the value of research and a lack of networking between academics and practitioners. Anecdotally, attempts to create a research-practice nexus appear to come from the researchers on an individual level rather than as a strategic or coordinated approach within the academic discipline and the wider industry. There is clearly opportunity for research to investigate the research-practice nexus in the public relations profession.

The problem for the profession is that a weak research-practice nexus results in uninformed practitioners, misguided research priorities, duplication of effort and/or a lack of development of the industry as a profession due to the disconnect between the formal body of knowledge and practice conventions. Although, paradoxically, Merkelsen argues that it is the very close relationship of the public relations theoretical discipline and the profession that sometimes threatens the ‘intellectual capacity of public relations as a scholarly field’ (Merkelsen 2011, p. 133). Equally, this relationship threatens the capacity of outcomes of the profession to be better informed by theoretical and philosophical debates, informed by rigorous evidence from research with a PR focus.

We argue that knowledge gained through research needs to be shared with practitioners to inform policy and the communication activities of organisations. At the same time research priorities should consider, but not necessarily be dictated by industry needs. Public Relations practitioners and industry specialists must now address the perennial question of ‘industry relevance’ versus the need to interrogate and challenge conventional wisdom and entrenched positions. One neglected area of research concerns knowledge transfer or knowledge translation in the public relations and communication disciplines. Cornelissen (2000) made an early attempt by outlining differences in the application of instrumental, conceptual and translation models in examining the use of social science for public relations practice, emphasising the value of the translation model.
for its ability to combine science and practice to generate knowledge. Rather than the one-way dissemination of information from scholarly research to practice, the translation model accepts that information is taken from research and adapted in practice, based on the knowledge formed from practice itself, before being implemented.

Unfortunately, Cornelissen’s ideas have not been advanced in any substantial way since they were proposed in 2000. While a significant amount of practice-relevant research is being conducted by communications scholars, only a few attempts appear to have been made in examining the transfer of knowledge between scholars and professionals (for example Cheng & de Gregorio, 2008). In other fields of practice, such as health sciences, there is substantial inquiry about knowledge translation, knowledge transfer, knowledge exchange, research utilization, research implementation, research diffusion and research dissemination (for example, Straus, Tetroe & Graham 2013; Greenhalgh & Wieringa 2011; Graham, Logan, Harrison, Straus, Tetroe, Caswell, & Robinson 2006). Other professions where there is a closer relationship between the production of new knowledge in the academy through research and its transfer to professional practice include education, law, architecture and design and information management. Perhaps it is time to turn to these sources for models to inform and analyse the sharing or translation of knowledge between public relations scholars and professionals.

For readers of this journal, our provocation aims to inspire a more bipartisan approach to research. It aims also to generate debate about how this research builds on the body of knowledge in the public relations discipline and, perhaps more profoundly, how this research could be disseminated, translated and implemented to affect the quality of outcomes in the public relations industry. Furthermore, by applying the principles of mutually beneficial communication to the research-practice nexus, we want to encourage the development of partnerships between scholars and professionals. We contend that by working together they can share the knowledge and reap mutual benefits from valid and meticulous research while generating better communication outcomes and enhancing the standard of the profession.
References


