Toward Understanding the (Lack of?) Significance of Dialogue to the Practice of Public Relations

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Abstract

The public relations literature has tended to present dialogue as an idealised concept, with a focus on how it should, could, or ought to be carried out in public relations practice. There is little in extant literature that considers the significance of dialogue to the actual practice of public relations. This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study of public relations practitioners’ day-to-day work. It concludes that dialogue does not – and arguably, cannot – occur in public relations practice and instead articulates an empirically-based practitioner perspective on two-way communication, which displays pragmatic characteristics that significantly distinguish it from dialogue.

Keywords: public relations, dialogue, normative, practitioner, pragmatic
Introduction

For the past 30 years – ever since the emergence of Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) two-way symmetric model of public relations, and its subsequent positioning at the heart of ‘excellent’ practice (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Grunig & Dozier, 1992) – there has been increasing pressure on public relations practitioners to demonstrate that they can be even-handed and non-partisan in how they deal with stakeholders on behalf of organisations. This role has become increasingly important in recent times as organisations’ operating environments become ever more complex, uncertain, and ‘turbulent’ (Freeman, 2010); and stakeholders become more and more powerful, particularly through the use of the Internet and social media (Kim, Park, & Wertz, 2010; McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009). One particular type of communication – dialogue – has traditionally been positioned as the form that best enables public relations practitioners to conduct ethical and effective interactions between organisations and their stakeholders, such as those advocated in the two-way symmetric model of public relations. Yet the literature (such as L’Etang, 2003) also acknowledges that dialogue is difficult – if not actually impossible – to carry out in practice. The emergence of post-Grunigian (St John, Lamme, & L’Etang, 2014) and indeed post-symmetrical (Porter, 2010) perspectives on public relations calls into question the usefulness of theories and models that are unattainable in practice, even as aspirational ideals. The research in this paper therefore addresses the question of whether dialogue is in fact relevant to the practice of public relations, and what this means for the development of a dialogic theory of public relations.

The term ‘dialogue’ has become ‘ubiquitous in public relations writing and scholarship’ (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2011, p. 5); while Stoker and Tusinski (2006) accuse public relations of being ‘infatuated’ with dialogue. The links between dialogue and public relations clearly provide a persistent and widespread theme in both industry and the academy (International Communication Association, 2013). As a broad indication of this popularity, a Boolean search on Google Scholar for articles using the terms ‘public relations’ and ‘dialogue’ brought back 79,400 results, of which 18,400 have appeared since 2010 (6,410 in 2013 alone).

This high number of hits, however, disguises the fact that dialogue has actually only been mentioned in passing in much of this literature: there has been little clear discussion of dialogue as a discrete concept in its own right. Instead it has been incorporated into the discourses around topics such as relationship management and symmetrical communication. Dialogue has therefore been present largely by implication, as in the two-way communication in Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) germinal models; and the two-way communication at the core of the relational perspective on public relations.
relations (Ledingham, 2006). Dialogue as an independent concept has emerged in the public relations literature only in relatively recent times, and is still struggling to forge a clear theoretical identity (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Although scholars clearly find dialogue an interesting concept, it has also been described as a form of communication that cannot be easily carried out in practice: indeed, some commentators – such as Kent and Taylor (2002) and L’Etang (2003) – question whether it is even possible to demonstrate its existence in reality. These apparently irreconcilable inconsistencies provided the platform upon which discussions of dialogue in public relations have been carried out for the past 30 years. However, the continued and increasing significance of dialogue to public relations has led to a call to develop a dialogic theory of public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

**Dialogue in public relations**

From the instrumentalist/functionalist viewpoint through to the rise of the influence of the two-way symmetric model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), dialogue has been positioned as a communication method of choice in public relations. The emergence of the relational perspective on public relations in the early 2000s (see, for example, Ledingham, 2003; and 2006) resulted in increased interest in dialogue. This was because dialogue was proposed as the form of communication best suited to achieving mutually-beneficial relationships between organisations and stakeholders (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

In 2002, Kent and Taylor published a paper that called for scholars to respond to this persistent and widespread interest in dialogue in public relations to be given a focus by developing a dialogic theory of public relations. Traditionally, the first step in developing such a theory would be to define the key phenomenon of interest – in this case, dialogue. In dialogue studies though, there is no universally-accepted single definition of dialogue (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004). In lieu of this, the work of five of the most influential writers on dialogue (as identified by Anderson et al., 2004) – Bakhtin (1981, 1986), Bohm (1991, 2006), Buber (2002, 2004, 2007), Gadamer (1980), and Rogers (1961) – was reviewed to determine how they interpreted dialogue. From this an understanding of dialogue in general was developed that could be translated to the specific context of public relations.

The review of the literature by these five dialogue philosophers revealed their discussions consistently presented dialogue as a construct consisting of two-way communication structured around three elements: the motivation of participants to engage in this two-way communication; the
implementation of that communication; and finally, its outcome. Using this framework it became clear that although each of the dialogue theorists had differing ideas about the specifics of each element, they shared the view that the elements demonstrated certain highly-desirable characteristics. Firstly, they believed that participants were motivated to enter into dialogue by their mutual respect and a desire to know each other better. Secondly, the two-way communication the participants undertook was inclusive, respectful, and not bounded or constrained by any external factors. Finally, the outcome of such communication was shared understanding and acceptance between the participants resulting in mutual benefits and respect. According to Bakhtin, Bohm, Buber, Gadamer, and Rogers, these characteristics in combination distinguish dialogue from other forms of communication.

Defining dialogue in this way made it possible to identify links between the ideas of the dialogue theorists and the discussions of dialogue in the public relations literature. As a starting point, the literature was reviewed to look for discussions of two-way public relations communication. This was appropriate as all of the dialogue literature reviewed had noted that carrying out two-way communication was central to dialogue. Identifying potentially-relevant literature in this way enabled comparison between the characteristics of the elements of motivation, implementation, and outcome of the two-way communication in public relations, and the ideal qualities of these elements in dialogue. It was hoped that undertaking this analysis would help develop an understanding of the significance of dialogue to public relations that could be contributed to the discussion of a dialogic theory of public relations.

One of the earliest discussions of two-way communication in public relations was provided in Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) influential work in developing four theoretical models of public relations practice. Two of these – the two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric models – involved the conduct of two-way communication between organisations and their stakeholders. Connections have been made (as in Leichty & Springston, 1993; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2011, for example) between dialogue and the symmetric model based on the similarity of the characteristics of their elements of motivation, implementation and outcome. For example, participants in both are motivated by their mutual respect and a desire for mutual understanding, which they seek to achieve through two-way communication. The implementation of this communication involves repeated interaction until an outcome that is mutually acceptable to both the organisation and its stakeholders is achieved. Grunig and Grunig (1992, p. 308) commented that ‘Symmetrical public relations provides a forum for dialogue’, indicating the intertwined nature of this connection. Despite its reliance on two-way communication though, the asymmetric public relations
model is excluded from being regarded as having connections to dialogue because it fails to display characteristics that match dialogue’s ideal qualities. Instead, organisations are motivated to participate in two-way asymmetric public relations by a desire to manipulate their stakeholders. Two-way asymmetric communication is undertaken to both identify and exploit areas of stakeholder concern: organisations involved in two-way asymmetric public relations seek to achieve an outcome of organisational benefits through persuasion of stakeholders.

Another influential early discussion of dialogue in public relations was provided by Pearson in his doctoral thesis (1989b), which was subsequently used as the basis of a number of journal articles (including Pearson, 1989a, 1990, 1991). Pearson (1989b) proposed that dialogue in public relations should demonstrate high levels of understanding and agreement between participants (specifically organisations and stakeholders) on six different ‘dimensions’: these are summarised in the table that follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Links to dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When communication starts and stops, and how it is implemented</td>
<td>Communication continues ‘as long as possible with respect to a specific decision’ (Pearson, 1989b, p.381).</td>
<td>Motivation – participants want to reach a mutually acceptable agreement on a decision by getting to better understand one another’s positions on the issue being discussed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long there should be between messages, or between questions and answers</td>
<td>There are agreed limits to how long participants can pause between receiving a communication and responding to it.</td>
<td>Implementation – participants agree to share control over the conduct of two-way communication, demonstrating inclusivity and respect, and a lack of power by participants over each other. There are no external constraints to the communication, which is founded on mutual understanding and agreement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who can suggest or change topics</td>
<td>Gives participants the chance ‘to make arguments progressively more radical, for instance, by asking questions which get at premises and assumptions which are not always or usually topics of discussion’ (Pearson, 1989b, p. 382).</td>
<td>Outcome – participants achieve increased mutual understanding and acceptance, and enhanced mutual respect, as well as making mutually acceptable decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What constitutes a response</td>
<td>Participants make a response to communication received. ‘This is not a question of whether a communicator likes the answer or not, but of whether a substantive response is given at all’ (Pearson, 1989b, p. 383).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What channels should be used in the communication</td>
<td>Using communication methods that are readily accessible to all participants, and which facilitate the making of appropriately timed responses.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What the rules governing the communication should be, and how they can be changed</td>
<td>The foundation of the other dimensions – agreeing to the rules about the rules.</td>
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(Adapted from Pearson, 1989b)
Pearson’s (1989b) perspective on dialogue in public relations was that it should aim to reach high levels of agreement and understanding between organisations and stakeholders on these six dimensions, which closely reflect the normative characteristics of the elements of motivation, implementation, and outcome identified in the dialogue literature.

The rise of the relational perspective in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Henderson, 2000; Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, for example) provided a new context for discussions of dialogue in public relations. Dialogue was found to be particularly effective in building, maintaining, and enhancing organisation-public relationships (Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008; Hung, 2007). In the context of relationship management, Bruning et al. (2008) concluded that organisations participating in dialogue should be motivated by awareness of their inextricable connectedness with their stakeholders. This should lead them to engage in two-way communication that would be implemented in a way that provides participants with ‘an opportunity to ask questions, express viewpoints, and better understand’ (Bruning et al., 2008, p. 29) each other. The outcome of this communication would be that organisations and stakeholders ‘will better understand the issues and each other’ (Bruning et al., 2008, p. 29), allowing public relations practitioners to ‘tailor communication and organizational action to specific recipients based upon relational needs’ (Bruning et al., 2008, p. 29). Again therefore it is possible to identify clear similarities between this understanding of dialogue in public relations and the positive characteristics of the elements of dialogue derived from the literature.

Kent and Taylor (2002) identified and discussed five principles of dialogue in public relations: mutuality, propinquity, commitment, risk, and empathy. Each of these principles bears a strong resemblance to the characteristics of dialogue discussed previously in this paper. For example, the principle of mutuality describes how organisations and their stakeholders should be motivated to enter into dialogue by their desire ‘to understand the positions of others and how people reached those positions’ (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 25). Organisations and stakeholders recognise and respect their mutual dependency, and strive not to exploit any perceived power they may hold over each other during the implementation of two-way communication (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 25). The outcome of this communication is that participants reach ‘mutually satisfying positions’ (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 30) based on their enhanced understanding and appreciation of each other.

The review of public relations literature therefore concluded that public relations academics positioned dialogue as an ideal(ised) form of communication, echoing (albeit often unconsciously) the perspectives of
Bakhtin, Buber, Bohm, Gadamer, and Rogers. Perceiving dialogue in this way aligns with the notion that it is the ideal form of communication for public relations practitioners who strive to be equitable and unbiased in how they deal with stakeholders on behalf of organisations (Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992).

In terms of contributing to the building of a dialogic theory of public relations, the current literature clearly articulates the theoretical or abstract qualities of dialogue. Although this is one of the important cornerstones of building a new theory (Whetten, 1989), it is not the only area that needs to be addressed. Equally important is the empirical or applied aspect of the emergent theory. Ensuring that new theory has relevance to practice has been identified as a significant consideration for academics (Starkey & Madan, 2002; van de Ven & Johnson, 2006), particularly in public relations (van Ruler, 2004).

The literature on dialogue in public relations practice has three distinct themes or perspectives: the first is that public relations practice contains lots of examples of dialogue, some of which work well and others that are the subject of criticism; the second focuses on how dialogue should/could/ought to be done in practice; and the third is that dialogue is difficult if not impossible to carry out in public relations.

Literature describing instances of dialogue in the practice of public relations is plentiful (see the previous comment about the number of hits resulting from a Google Scholar search). What is missing from much of this literature though – with the rare exception of articles such as that by van Huijstee and Glasbergen (2008) – is any justification for labelling the communication involved ‘dialogue’. There is a clear tendency for articles to use the term ‘dialogue’ without any recognition of its highly-specialised meaning. Indeed, a review of this literature concluded that authors were using the label of dialogue to refer to any two-way communication between organisations and stakeholders (see, for example, Ayuso, Ricart, & Rodriguez, 2006; Bennett, Kemp, & White, 2006; Parker et al., 2009; and Stephens & Malone, 2009). This literature therefore contributed little if anything to the articulation of the role of dialogue in public relations practice.

Another stream of literature presented perspectives on how dialogue should look in practice. These authors (such as Isaacs, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 2002; O’Riordan & Fairbrass, 2008; and Welpa, Vega-Leinerta, Stoll-Kleemann, & Jaegera, 2006) provide clear recommendations for public relations practitioners on how they might translate the characteristics and principles of dialogue into practice. This literature tends to be hypothetical and speculative in nature, so again does not provide the
insights into actual practice necessary to articulate an empirical contribution to a dialogic theory of public relations.

Academics have also suggested that dialogue is difficult if not impossible to put into practice. For example, Kent and Taylor (2002, p.33) note that although:

Dialogue is considered ‘more ethical’ because it is based on principles of honesty, trust, and positive regard for the other rather than simply a conception of the public as means to end…[n]ot everyone agrees, however, whether dialogic public relations is even possible or practical.

Similarly, Pieczka (1997, p. 70) concludes that dialogue is an excellent utopian ideal but not practical as it fails to deal with the ‘strategic tactics’ of participants. In other words, the conduct of dialogue is reliant on a number of preconditions – see the previous section in this article – that are incompatible with the strategic use to which two-way communication is put in public relations practice.

The synthesis of these three themes in the literature on the topic of dialogue in public relations practice led to a significant conclusion: academics had theoretically devised ways in which the normative characteristics of dialogue could be translated into action, but it appeared this was too hard to achieve in practice. Logically this must mean that the normative form of dialogue is difficult/impossible to implement in practice (see, for example, Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor, 2010). Yet public relations practitioners were doing something in their work that they thought qualified as dialogue.

The conclusions of this literature review left several questions unanswered: is the ideal form of dialogue really so hard to carry out, and if so, why? Or are public relations practitioners in fact carrying out dialogue in practice? Overall, what does this mean for the significance of dialogue to the practice of public relations? These questions had to be answered in order to articulate the empirical perspective on dialogue in public relations.

In order to answer these questions it was necessary to find data on the perspective of public relations practitioners. A further review of literature determined that many practice-based discussions of ‘dialogue’ contained insufficient information to be able to determine whether the communication described actually demonstrated the ideal characteristics of dialogue identified in the literature. It was therefore determined that there was a lack of an empirical understanding of dialogue in public relations practice. This
gap in the literature was potentially impeding the development of a dialogic theory of public relations.

Research

Developing a practitioner perspective on the practice of dialogue in public relations is an important step toward articulating the missing empirical understanding. This was achieved by identifying practitioner perspectives on the characteristics of the three elements of dialogue previously identified in the literature – its motivations, implementation, and outcomes. These perspectives were then used to compare and contrast with the characteristics of dialogue to see how this aspirational form of communication related to what was happening in the practice of public relations. This would provide data to answer the overarching question of the significance of dialogue to the practice of public relations. In order to obtain the depth and breadth of data necessary to achieve this answer, the following subsidiary research questions were asked:

- What are the public relations practitioner perspectives on the characteristics of the motivation, implementation, and outcome of two-way communication in public relations?¹?
- How do these characteristics relate to those of dialogue?
- What does this reveal about the alleged difficulties and/or impossibility of conducting dialogue in public relations?

Formulating answers to these questions meant it was possible to develop a practitioner perspective on the characteristics of two-way communication between organisations and their stakeholders. These characteristics could then be compared with those of dialogue to see what differences – if any – there were, and why. Undertaking this analysis would therefore result in the development of an empirically-based perspective on dialogue in public relations, and thus contribute to the emergent dialogic theory of public relations.

The research used a qualitative, interpretive approach to find the rich, textured data required to articulate the practitioner perspectives on the characteristics of two-way communication in their work. Participants were sourced from among contemporary public relations practitioners using a convenience sampling approach, although care was taken to include practitioners from a spread of practice contexts (corporate, government, not-for-profit, and association) and interviewee demographics (age, gender, length of experience etc.). Data were gathered through semi-structured

¹ As the literature review had concluded that two-way communication was at the heart of dialogue (that is, all dialogue involves two-way communication) this was seen to be an appropriate way of identifying relevant data for analysis.
long interviews using the framework of the three elements of dialogue to discuss with participants their experiences of communication in their work. Theoretical saturation was reached after 17 interviews – that is, no new themes emerged from the data. These interviews were transcribed and found to contain 82 separate examples of communication for analysis. This was because each of the 17 interviewees provided multiple examples of two-way communication in their day-to-day practice.

Post-interview analysis was carried out using NVivo software to facilitate the process. An early conclusion was that the practitioners interviewed indicated that the two-way communication they experienced in their work did not occur directly between organisations and their stakeholders as extant literature implies. Instead, it occurred in two loops between organisations and their public relations practitioners, and between the public relations practitioners and the organisation’s stakeholders. This initial conclusion allowed the decoupling of these differing perspectives, allowing the identification of a discrete role for public relations practitioners; and the articulation of practitioner perspectives on not only that role but on those of the organisations and stakeholders involved too. This meant that the characteristics of two-way communication in public relations were being discussed from three different perspectives (the organisation, stakeholders, and public relations practitioner) even though two of those perspectives relied on interpretations offered by the practitioners.

**Analysis**

The framework of the motivation, implementation, and outcome of dialogue derived from the literature was used to structure the analysis of the data relating to the communication between organisations and public relations practitioners; and between public relations practitioners and organisational stakeholders. The interviewees believed that organisations were motivated to enter into this communication either because they had to, to satisfy powerful external stakeholders; or because they wanted to avoid or resolve issues. Regardless of the specifics of the motivation, organisations participated in two-way communication because they expected it would benefit them. The interviewees believed that stakeholders also entered into two-way communication because they expected it would do them some good, because it gave them a means to influence organisational decisions and behaviour. The public relations practitioners believed their own motivation to engage in two-way communication came from their desire to satisfy their perceptions of their professional role. These perceptions came from their education and training. In addition, they acknowledged the importance of the need to fulfil their duty as paid employees by complying with their employer’s instructions.
These three sets of motivations are often antithetical to those relevant to the conduct of dialogue. As noted previously, participant motivation in dialogue is driven by the desire to better understand one another in recognition of the interconnected nature of their relationship with each other. Such participation is always voluntary: there is no question of entering into dialogue because of pressure from others. Dialogue is never motivated by the need to avoid or resolve issues by seeking ways to gain advantage over another participant, or to impose one participant’s preferences on another.

The interviewees noted the existence of tensions in their work that resulted from their attempts to meet the expectations participants had that motivated them to become involved in two-way communication. Because these expectations and motivations were competing and often contradictory, the public relations practitioners involved in facilitating the two-way communication found they were conflicted in their work. They were motivated by their education and professional training to undertake two-way communication as often as possible, yet frequently found themselves dealing with organisations and stakeholders who did not want to participate in what they regarded as situations in which they could not ‘win’ – that is, where they could not get their way over a decision. On other occasions, organisations who felt obliged to enter into two-way communication to satisfy the requirements of powerful external stakeholders – such as government – did so in a way that could be regarded as tokenistic or un-genuine. This is because such organisations had little or no desire to actually gain mutual understanding with their stakeholders: they were simply complying with the rules.

Similar tensions were noted in the analysis of the data relevant to the implementation of the two-way communication involved in public relations. The interviewees’ descriptions led to the identification of two different forms of this communication, distinguished by whether or not responses were made by both organisations and stakeholders. The data indicated interviewees perceived that their lack of control over which of these processes was undertaken in the two-way communication in their work caused them to experience tension. The public relations practitioners expressed clear preferences for making responses to communication received but this was not always sanctioned or supported by their employers. In addition, there was nothing public relations practitioners could do if either the organisation or its stakeholders decided to withdraw from the communication before a mutually-agreed decision was reached. In addition, interviewees described how they sometimes felt conflicted when complying with their employer’s instructions to initiate two-way communication with stakeholders when those instructions were at odds with their own inclinations (professional and/or personal) not to do so. Other
significant attributes of the implementation of this communication were found to be participant expectations that they could control when it started and ended; what topics were covered; and who could be involved. Participants were also shown to have negative perceptions of each other, and to be unwilling to self-disclose and put themselves at risk. Each of these characteristics challenges the precepts of normative dialogue as proposed in the literature. For example, in dialogue there is shared understanding and agreement between participants of when communication begins and ends, and what it covers. Participants in dialogue trust each other and accept that they need to respect those whose perspectives differ from their own.

The next round of analysis considered the third element of dialogue – its outcome – in relation to the conduct of two-way communication in public relations. Three types of outcome were identified in the data, all relating to changes made to organisational behaviour. The first was that there was no change to organisational behaviour. The second was that the organisation made changes to the strategies and tactics it adopted on the way to achieving the objectives it had already determined it wished to achieve. The interviewees involved in achieving this type of outcome believed it resulted in mutual benefits for the organisations and stakeholders involved, although the validity of this conclusion was challenged on occasion by the overwhelming imperative of achieving organisational benefit. The benefits to stakeholders were seen to occur within constraints and limits determined by the organisations involved. The third type of outcome was the co-creation of organisational goals and objectives by organisations and stakeholders. This was found to only have occurred once in the 82 examples of two-way communication in public relations provided by interviewees.

The first two types of outcome again challenged the relevance of dialogue to the practice of two-way communication in public relations. Although it could be argued that achieving these outcomes relied on organisations and stakeholders increasing their understanding of each other, interviewees clearly believed that such understanding was merely a stepping stone en route to achieving organisational benefit. This contradicts the characteristics of the outcome of dialogue, which achieves mutual understanding and acceptance, leading to mutually-beneficial decisions. It also challenged the prescriptive requirement that in dialogue, decisions are made as a result of the communication. The interviewees perceived that those outcomes that demonstrated that organisations made concessions to the ways in which they achieved their predetermined decisions on goals and objectives to accommodate stakeholder preferences showed that the benefits from two-way communication were mutual. While these changes made the achievement of organisational objectives less problematic for
stakeholders, the question of whether this demonstrates that those stakeholders actually benefitted is debatable. Certainly the interviewees felt that allowing the stakeholders to have an impact on organisational behaviour was to the stakeholders’ benefit, but this impact was permitted to occur within parameters determined by the organisation. Finally, interviewees were unanimous in agreeing that the outcomes they achieved from two-way communication had to benefit their employer. There was no possibility that this would not be the case, although they expressed clear preferences for finding outcomes that could also be seen as benefitting stakeholders (to whatever extent). Such constraints and limitations demonstrate a further challenge to the appropriateness of applying the label ‘dialogue’ to the two-way communication carried out in public relations.

The third type of outcome from the examples of two-way communication provided by public relations practitioners provided the closest match to the prescriptive descriptions of dialogue identified in the literature. This single example showed how an organisation and its stakeholders used two-way communication to better understand each other's perceptions of the need to undertake a project, before moving on to agree on the specifics of that project. The decisions made as a result of this two-way communication allowed both the organisation and its stakeholders to achieve benefits. This example showed how two-way communication can be used in reality to make decisions that are not only mutually-acceptable but mutually-beneficial. However, the unique nature of this example meant further conclusions were difficult to draw.

**Discussion**

The conclusions drawn from the data analysis meant that the three subsidiary research questions posed at the beginning of this paper could now be answered.

**What are the public relations practitioner perspectives on the characteristics of the motivation, implementation, and outcome of two-way communication in public relations?**

The characteristics of each of the individual elements of two-way communication in public relations were shown to differ significantly from those of dialogue. They also resulted in the public relations practitioners involved experiencing tensions in the implementation of two-way communication in their work. The conclusion of the analysis was therefore that the practitioner perspectives on the motivations of organisations, their stakeholders, and the public relations practitioners themselves to enter into two-way communication in their work; how that communication was
implemented; and the outcomes that resulted, varied considerably from the precepts of dialogue. These practitioner perspectives are summarised in Table 2.

**TABLE 2: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC RELATIONS (DERIVED FROM THE RESEARCH DATA)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>Organisations</th>
<th>Public relations practitioners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivation</strong></td>
<td>To benefit themselves.</td>
<td>To benefit themselves.</td>
<td>To fulfil their professional obligations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implementation</strong></td>
<td>Seeking to control what is talked about, when, and with whom.</td>
<td>Seeking to control what is talked about, when, and with whom.</td>
<td>To balance the competing expectations of the other participants within the parameters decided on by their employer/client.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>To get what they want.</td>
<td>To get what they want.</td>
<td>To always benefit organisations, and to benefit stakeholders if possible.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data provided by public relations practitioners in this research clearly indicated that their perceptions of the characteristics of the two-way communication in which they were involved in their work differed significantly from those of dialogue. However, the interviewees were all quite certain that this two-way communication, especially when it included the making of responses by both the organisations and stakeholders involved, was important to their work. This therefore suggests that public relations practitioners have developed a pragmatic understanding of two-way communication that allows them to reconcile their understanding of its nature with the requirements of their job as organisational employees.

**How do these characteristics relate to those of dialogue?**

The differences between the characteristics of the individual elements of dialogue and those of two-way communication in public relations were identified and discussed in the preceding Analysis section. The relationships between the characteristics of two-way public relations communication and dialogue are summarised in Table 3.

In summary, two-way public relations communication differs from dialogue because it is used as a tool to benefit organisations by avoiding or minimising stakeholder objections to organisational decisions. Thus it takes place within a number of constraints or boundaries decided on by the organisation in order to help it achieve its goals and objectives.
What does this reveal about the alleged difficulties and/or impossibility of conducting dialogue in public relations?

The characteristics of dialogue differ markedly from those of the two-way communication identified in the data provided by public relations practitioners. These differences give insights into reasons why dialogue might be difficult – if not impossible – for public relations practitioners to undertake. Primarily this is because the conduct of dialogue requires certain specific attitudes and behaviours from all participants, and these are beyond the control of public relations practitioners. For example, organisations and/or stakeholders might decide not to be truthful in their interactions, or be unwilling to engage with those whose opinions they find offensive or inappropriate. Public relations practitioners would not necessarily be able to change such attitudes and behaviours, which are antithetical to dialogue.

In addition, comments made by interviewees show that public relations practitioners are attempting to fulfil their perceived fiduciary duty to their employer. This requires them to conduct two-way communication in their work that benefits their employer. Seeking benefits for stakeholders is only attempted once this outcome has been obtained. Again this shows why dialogue might be difficult to undertake. Finally, in most of the examples provided in this research, it was the organisations involved who controlled the way in which two-way communication was undertaken. For these organisations there would appear to be little advantage in changing from this pragmatic form of communication to dialogue. Undertaking dialogue would require these organisations to postpone making decisions until they...
were able to incorporate input from stakeholders whose opinion they did not necessarily value, and whose requirements might not suit the organisational agenda.

This suggests that questions of power play a significant role in determining the form and function of communication in public relations. In most of the examples given in the research, organisations had the power not to undertake dialogue. These organisations exerted their power over the conduct of two-way communication so that it assisted them in achieving their goals and objectives. Where stakeholders were perceived to have some power – for example, the power to disrupt organisational progress through complaints and objections – then organisations used two-way communication to determine where to make tactical concessions to avoid or resolve issues. Ultimately, the organisations that employed the public relations practitioners interviewed had the power to decide how they wanted those employees to behave, and what resources they would provide to facilitate this behaviour. Therefore the conclusion of this research is that dialogue has little relevance to the practice of public relations because it does not allow public relations practitioners to meet organisations' expectations and requirements, and organisations have power and control over the situation.

Conclusions

The conclusion of this research is that public relations practitioners do not – and indeed cannot – undertake dialogue. Dialogue is a specific type of two-way communication characterised by the positive perceptions participants have of each other, and of the form and function of the communication in which they are involved. These positive characteristics are revealed in the motivations participants have for joining in dialogue, the way in which the two-way communication is carried out, and the outcomes that result. Undertaking communication that displays these positive, ideal characteristics is beyond the scope of contemporary public relations practitioners. This is because dialogue in public relations would require all participants – organisations, their stakeholders, and public relations practitioners – to come to the table in a spirit of mutual respect, with no pre-existing agendas, and with a willingness and ability to respond positively to any and all suggestions made. Public relations practitioners' experiences of two-way communication show that it most often takes place under the control of organisations who use it to orchestrate outcomes that best help them achieve their pre-determined goals and objectives. Stakeholders also are seen to perceive two-way public relations communication as an arena in which they battle for control over organisational decisions. Stakeholders are positioned by organisations and public relations practitioners (to a certain extent) as presenting problems or obstructions to organisational
progress, rather than being partners in developing decisions. These attitudes and perspectives mean that any two-way communication occurring between these participants cannot demonstrate the normative, ideal characteristics of dialogue.

The disjuncture between the ideal of dialogue and the reality of two-way communication in public relations exists because of the issues of power between participants. The interviewees in the research for this paper believed organisations generally have the most power in public relations interactions. They observed that organisations often perceived dialogue negatively, as a barrier to the achievement of strategic imperatives. Without sanctions from more powerful participants, the public relations practitioners believed there was no reason for organisations to choose to undertake dialogue. Therefore while powerful organisations feel there is more to lose from entering into dialogue than they might gain from participation, it is unlikely that dialogue will be a significant part of public relations practice.

Instead, public relations practitioners have developed a highly practical approach to two-way communication in their work. Public relations practitioners use two-way communication to find ways to meet as many participant expectations as possible within parameters set by the organisation involved. In other words, public relations practitioners use two-way communication to identify what is acceptable and not acceptable to participants, within organisational boundaries of tolerance. The organisation determines what is negotiable and what is non-negotiable in their decision-making. Public relations practitioners then use two-way communication with stakeholders to avoid potential issues, or to find resolutions to issues that do occur. The conduct of this two-way communication is characterised by tensions between participants as they seek to resolve questions of power over organisational decisions.

The importance of power to the conduct of dialogue in public relations is an important aspect to be explored further in future research. Similarly, there might be other factors that were not investigated in this research, such as the impact of organisational culture and/or practitioner experience on the conduct of dialogue in public relations. It would certainly be worthwhile to undertake research on the conduct of dialogue in public relations with a larger group of participants, and to expand the sample to include organisational representatives and community/stakeholder members. However, the research in this paper has taken a step toward articulating an empirical perspective on dialogue in public relations, and thus added to developing a dialogic theory of public relations.
References


