Excellence Theory and its Critics: A literature review critiquing Grunig’s strategic management of public relations paradigm

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Abstract

Grunig’s Excellence Theory had dominated public relations academy for the past 30 years. In that time, the Anglo-American strategic management approach to communication management has been tested against emerging perspectives afforded by technological change, globalisation and the emergence of postcolonial and critical theoretical approaches. This review of recent literature however, sourced in peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2005 and 2016, suggests that public relations is too complex and fluid an activity to be summarised in a single approach and supports a broadening of the bases of public relations theory.

Key words: public relations, excellence theory
Introduction

Since the publication of Grunig and Hunt’s Four Models of Public Relations (1984), the Excellence Theory has dominated discussion of the theory and practice of public relations. This literature review of articles from peer-reviewed journals summarises a range of twenty first century views on Excellence Theory in relation to two-way symmetrical communication, cultural differences, the contribution to society, ethics and education in public relations.

Excellence Theory

Beyond championing the empowerment of the public relations function, clarifying communicator roles and describing the organisation of the communication function and its relationship to other management functions, Excellence Theory visually represents the idealised evolution of public relations from the early days of mass media to the hyper connectivity of the digital era. Whilst based on extensive research, the four models of communication evince an almost hypnotic simplicity (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p 22):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Type of communication</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Press agency or publicity</td>
<td>One-way communication</td>
<td>Uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audiences to behave as the organisation desires.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public information model</td>
<td>One-way communication</td>
<td>Uses press releases and other one-way communication techniques to distribute organisational information. The public relations practitioner is often referred to as the in-house journalist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-way asymmetrical model</td>
<td>Two-way communication (imbalanced)</td>
<td>Uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audiences to behave as the organisation desires. Does not use research to find out how stakeholders feel about the organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-way symmetrical communicatio n</td>
<td>Two-way communication</td>
<td>Uses communication to negotiate with the public, resolve conflict and promote mutual understanding and respect between the organisation and its stakeholders.</td>
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In his later work, Jim Grunig emphasised the distinctions between the symbolic, interpretative paradigm and the strategic, management paradigms (Grunig, 2014). The former is a messaging activity whose purpose is to make organisations look good in the media or to sell products, while the latter is a management activity that improves relationships between stakeholders and organisations (Grunig, 2014, p. 57).

The symbolic, interpretive paradigm strives to influence how publics interpret the behaviours of organisations after they occur, to secure the power of the decision makers, embodied in concepts of image, reputation, brand, impressions and identity. Practitioners who follow the interpretive paradigm emphasise messages, publicity, media relations and media effects, which they believe allow the organisation to buffer itself from its environment (Grunig, 2014, p. 57).

The strategic management, behavioural paradigm focuses on the participation of public relations executives in decision making so they can help manage the behaviour of
the organisation, rather than only interpret it to publics. This is a bridging activity designed to build relationships with stakeholders which emphasises two-way communication of many kinds to provide publics a voice in management decisions. It does not exclude traditional public relations activities, but broadens them to fit into a framework of environmental scanning, research and listening. As a result, messages reflect the informational needs of publics as well as the advocacy needs of the organisation (Grunig, 2014, p. 58).

As with any dominant framework, Excellence Theory has drawn its share of criticism. Firstly, two-way symmetrical communication is elusive, as Larissa Grunig herself admitted at the Public Relations Society of America’s International Conference in 2010:

The interactive nature of the social media, of the digital media, makes it more possible than it was in the 60s or 70s or 80s or 90s or even 2000 to have a two-way balanced dialogue with the public. Before that, we always talked about the importance of symmetrical balanced communication but try to find any organisations that did this successfully (Grunig and Grunig, 2011, p. 43).

The following sections report research findings that contest the viability of Excellence Theory under the headings of two-way symmetrical communication, cultural differences, the contribution to society, ethics and education in public relations.

Two-way symmetrical communication, dialogue and relationships

In all contemporary public relations theory, some level of two-way interaction is identified as an essential element, but practice often falls short of this ideal (Macnamara, 2009). Web-based services feature openness for collaboration and interactivity to enable a dialogic and collaborative approach. However, there is a substantial misalignment between applied public relations practices and what has been identified as ‘Excellence’ in contemporary public relations theory. In fact, key areas of public relations practice remain grounded in a control paradigm focused on one-way, top-down monologue (Macnamara, 2009, p 11).

The very concept of open two-way communication in itself is problematical. Alexander Laskin called it into question as an unrealistic utopia or at best a normative and therefore misleading concept (Laskin, 2012, p 357). Symmetry of communication is not a binary Yes/No measurement, but is grounded in concepts of power and would be better evaluated along five proposed dimensions: from the organisation versus to the organisation; benefitting the organisation versus benefitting publics; technical activity versus management activity; reactive activity versus proactive activity; and short-term focus versus long-term focus (Laskin, 2012, p 365).

Moreover, the theories of person to person dialogue do not apply to the relationship between corporations and individual citizens. There is no mutuality when the participants do not share common goals and the communication is essentially rhetorical (Pieczka, 2011). Public relations’ normative interest in dialogue seems not to have translated into the development of expert dialogic tools or spaces in which public relations experts routinely use such tools. Despite the centrality of the relational approach in public relations scholarship, the concept is somewhat marginalised and actual examples of dialogic public relations are very difficult to find (Pieczka, 2011, p 116).

Despite increased capacity to engage directly with publics through social media, there is evidence that many organisations do not take advantage of the new technologies (Huang & Yang, 2015). Dialogic communication entails a certain level of risk and can lead to unpredictable outcomes. Other departments within an organisation, depending on its
characteristics and tolerance for risk, might not agree with the vision of public relations and hesitate to utilise the dialogue potential of digital media (Huang & Yang, 2015, p. 377).

A qualitative study of public relations practitioners’ day-to-day work in Queensland (Lane, 2014) found that being even-handed and non-partisan in dealing with stakeholders when working on behalf of corporations is difficult, if not actually impossible. In fact, two-way communication only existed in twin loops between organisations and their public relations practitioners, and between the public relations practitioners and the organisation’s stakeholders. It was found that questions of power play a significant role in determining the form and function of communication which could allow the stakeholders to have an impact on organisational behaviour, but the outcomes achieved had to benefit the employer (Lane, 2014, p 138).

Gutiérrez-García, Recalde and Piñera-Camacho (2015) describe dialogue as a multifaceted process comprised of multiple dimensions that lead to different degrees of involvement, which from a practical point of view call for differentiated management strategies in relation to stakeholders. They found that the dimensions of “listening” and “openness to the other” represent conflict of interests for management personnel who must be open to the demands and expectations of the organisation’s publics on the one hand, while the purpose of such “listening”, on the other hand, is to ensure the achievement of given objectives (p 747). They recommend that dialogic processes be further rooted in business culture, to build bridges with interest groups and to refine an ethical awareness and sense of responsibility to society (Gutiérrez-García, Recalde and Piñera-Camacho, 2015, p 751).

The Melbourne Mandate identifies building a culture of listening and engagement as one of three critical roles for public relations professionals (Gregory, 2015). The Mandate contains a proposition on how public relations professionals and professional bodies might better represent and promote their roles, identifying three critical roles for professionals: defining organisational character and values; building a culture of listening, engagement and reporting with integrity; and the fulfilment of responsibilities in ethics, citizenship and sustainability (Gregory, 2015, p 600). Listening appears to be the hardest part to achieve (Macnamara, 2016).

Theoretically at least, voice and communication are conceptualised as dialogic and are posited as fundamental for the functioning of society. Democracy is founded on the principle of vox populi, not only in the sense of speaking, but even more particularly in terms of being listened to (Macnamara, 2016, p 2).

Macnamara’s pilot study raises serious questions about the extent to which organisations listen to those who seek to engage with them, concluding that corporate communication is generally one-way. Other than for strategic planning and targeting purposes, organisations listen to stakeholders sporadically, often in tokenistic ways, and frequently not at all (Macnamara, 2016, p 8). The study suggests that organisations cannot effectively listen unless they have an architecture of listening or do the work of listening, and identifies cultural, structural, political and technological components to create this vital missing element in public communication and the public sphere (Macnamara, 2016, p 9).

In a very different context, that of Western capitalist depredation of indigenous lands in India, Dutta (2014) criticises public relations practices that act as a mouthpiece for dominant coalitions and calls for a framework of listening through collaboration (Dutta, 2014, p 26). Listening is capable of creating a transformative space for subaltern rationalities that resist the large-scale dominance of market rationalities, instead offering lessons about alternative forms of economic, social and political organising that are much needed against the backdrop of contemporary crises of inequalities and environmental degradation (Dutta, 2014, p 29).
The ultimate end of two-way communication is to build and maintain relationships with key publics. "We have discovered on this long journey of investigation that relationships are more central to excellence in public relations than we might have acknowledged when that project began in 1985". Relationships ideally are built on trust, commitment, a sense of loyalty and for the long haul (Grunig and Grunig, 2011, p. 42), but are business relationships with mutuality of control are not easily achieved.

Firstly, mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and publics are not genuinely possible because there can never be a personal relationship with an organisation (Coombs and Holladay, 2015). Although the interactive potential and widening use of social media have resulted in talk about "joining the conversation", and while social media has facilitated greatly the ability of organisations and individuals to act as both senders and receivers, organisations do not have the resources to cultivate and maintain relationships "for their own sake" (Coombs & Holladay, 2015, p 692).

Brand loyalty, described as 'intimacy at a distance' and 'the illusion of intimacy' - a kind of media creation, much like following celebrities online - has been redefined as 'parasocial interaction'; throwing into question whether the goal of adding value to the organisation is genuinely achievable. Discussions of mutuality in relationships, especially in terms of mutual influence, often seem distorted from the reality of the research or the practice (Coombs & Holladay, 2015, p 694).

The discipline of public relations, according to Magda Pieczka (2011), deals in communication, but does not deal with "relationships". Relationship management - understood as communication activity producing cognitive and affective outcomes, measured as openness, trust, involvement and commitment - is another technique of managing the soft, symbolic boundary of social responsibility, which can only be enacted within a tolerant, peaceful, deliberative democracy (Pieczka, 2011, p 111).

Cultural differences

The original Excellence Theory research was conducted in English-speaking counties and then replicated in Slovenia (Verčič, 1996), giving credence to the notion that its principles of strategic management might be applied as best practice around the globe. Grunig (2003) acknowledged that the Excellence Theory has to be applied differently in different markets, taking into account differences in culture, political systems, economic systems, level of development, media systems and the extent of activism (Grunig, 2003, p. 41). There are many reasons, however, why Excellence Theory does not travel easily across national and cultural borders.

Symmetry and two-way dialogue are closely linked with the notion that power is distributed and exercised between multiple groups that aspire to and achieve equilibrium (Gregory & Halff, 2013). There are inherent inequalities in the spread of globalisation however, and one way of dealing with the complexities is to impose order and certainty by simplifying, accepting and perhaps enforcing convergence across time, space and cultures. Converging public relations to a single tradition amounts to hegemony, that is, the domination without physical coercion through the widespread acceptance of a particular ideology and associated practices, at the expense of local cultural norms.

This convergence takes the form of multinationals transferring their own philosophies and personnel into new territories to conduct public relations in their traditional way. In the profession of public relations, consultancies are assisting the drive to hegemony by standardising their approaches and practices irrespective of the cultures within which they operate, and make good money in doing so. Based on Anglo-American business principles, the Excellence Theory has remained the principal hegemonic disciplinary matrix in public relations (Gregory & Halff, 2013, p 419).
For example, when the US embargo was lifted in 1994, major multinational companies went into Vietnam, adapting their existing public relations capabilities and practices to suit business conditions and activities in Vietnam, and transferring knowledge to local employees (Doan and Bolowol 2014). Public relations in Vietnam is considered still “in its infancy” and largely misunderstood as “guest relations”. The foremost characteristic of Asian public relations is the power of interpersonal relationships. When compared with ideals predominantly derived from the West that are considered universal and best practice for all contexts, the Vietnamese context then appears less sophisticated and even unethical (Doan and Bolowol, 2014, p 486).

Even in Italy, public relations does not contribute much to the strategic management of organisations (Valentini & Sriramesh, 2014). The Romans used different public relations tactics to persuade and negotiate with the regions they conquered; the quest to control publics through public relations techniques was a central concern of fifteenth-century Italian political thinkers and rulers, including Machiavelli; and the papacy coined the word propaganda in the seventeenth century to denote the noble activity of spreading the faith, with none of todays’ negative connotations (Valentini & Sriramesh, 2014, p 4). Despite this rich history, modern public relations in Italy has its origins in the administration of Mussolini (Muzi Falconi, 2009) and until the early 1980s, public relations in Italy mostly consisted of activities that supported marketing or helped bolster a company's image and reputation.

Valentini & Sriramesh’s study found that public relations activities in Italy are still predominantly technician-oriented, although indications of strategic management are visible among the more senior practitioners of corporations and non-profits. Whereas practitioners professed symmetrical communication as a vital need for strategic management, few practiced it, suggesting that it is more normative than positive. Interpersonal and informal relations, which are often depicted as not being strategic, could actually enable public relations practitioners to be more flexible based on cultural conditions (Valentini & Sriramesh, 2014, p 12).

In fact, Garcia (2015) draws parallels between clientelism in Southern Europe and guanxi in China. The two are not the same - the former can be explained by a lack of social capital, whereas the latter is an inheritance of Confucianism - but they share higher power distance levels and are more collectivistic than individualistic (Hofstede, 2001). As a consequence, there are a number of shared characteristics in the public relations profession of both regions: the minor status as a discipline, the deficit of professionalism, the focus on media relations, the emphasis on personal relationships and the important role of government relations. Not surprisingly, the majority of companies practice asymmetrical public relations (Garcia, 2015, p 802).

Propaganda does not have the negative connotations in Chinese culture that it does in the English-speaking world. Confucian societies, in fact, consider communication a low priority compared with decisive corporate action, and public relations is often held in low esteem (Halff, 2012). As a result of globalisation, tertiary institutions in many ‘Asian tiger’ countries have begun to incorporate public relations into their undergraduate social science and/or business curricula. Because of the comparative recency of public relations as a business function in Asian economies, these courses are often based on Western curriculum design standards (e.g. Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006).

Focus groups over seven years with students from Confucian societies identified themes that are easily understood as demarcations of their cultural identities. Confucianism is a normative model of society based on the understanding that each individual’s behaviour is expected to contribute ultimately to the establishment of an ideal society. Individuals are expected to engage in a constant effort to cultivate themselves and improve their many relationships, thereby improving the harmonious balance in society. Students did not ascribe their difficulty in relating to ‘Western’ case studies to their
Confucian socialisation, but found that relational thinking that is so prevalent in Confucian cultures is missing. (Halff, 2012, p 49).

**Contribution to society**

The notion of public relations contributing to the fabric of society is heavily contested in the public sphere and under-researched by the academy, because the organisation - not society - is its prevalent level of analysis, as inspired by the Excellence Theory (Halff and Gregory, 2015). Strategic management of the organisation is not often compatible with the benefit of the wider society.

However, public relations, when it involves multiple stakeholders in dialogue, can have macro-social relevance, but only in a market economy in a pluralist society where the government sphere does not dominate information flow, public debate and market power. These conditions often form the context for public relations in the West, but rarely, for example, in any part of Asia (Halff and Gregory, 2015, p 723).

Quite unlike those of the US and Europe, the historiographies of public relations in Asia-Pacific and South Asia locate the origins of the profession at the emergence of the governance expert systems during nation building (Halff & Gregory, 2014).

If the three competing institutional orders in society are political democracy, capitalism and state bureaucracy, then the three expert systems in which public relations takes place are the civic, the corporate and the governance systems whose institutional logic is, respectively, participation, profitability and power (p. 398). On one hand, public relations reproduces the expert system’s own logic - participation in the civic, profitability in the corporate and power in governance - while on the other hand, it enables adaptation and the shifting of relationships (disembedding) between the three expert systems (Halff & Gregory, 2014, p 398).

Western models of public relations can be said to be predominantly corporatist. They assume a unidirectional history in which countries aspire towards a generalisation of that set of principles, the Excellence Theory, which can be assumed to be best practice. Europeans see public relations as having a more comprehensive societal role and there is a different – more holistic, less situational – conceptualisation than in the US of public or publics (p. 400).

In Asia, the corporate system is held in check and framed by the government expert system. In all Asian-Pacific countries – albeit to varying degrees – industry and economy are traditionally strongly influenced by, if not part of, government and administration. Public relations requires and reproduces the institutional logic of power (Halff & Gregory, 2014, p 404).

The vision of the Global Alliance of Public Relations and Communication Management is to advance the profession by enhancing the role and value of public relations to organisations and to global society at large (Global Alliance, 2016). This does entail proposing the same teleological system for all. The development of more inclusive public relations models, in Asia-Pacific or elsewhere, will require thorough research of individual nations anchored in the relevant, rather than universalist, intellectual and epistemological territories (Halff & Gregory, 2014, p 405).

To counter these arguments of the cultural colonialism inherent in the Excellence Theory, Australian public relations presents distinctive differences (Sheehan and Turnbull, 2013). While it is often asserted that the dominant research paradigm regarding public relations history and practice in Australia has been USA-centric, the drive to communicate, and how it is used as a conscious form of persuasion and public information, is rooted in different historical, religious, cultural and economic development within different countries.
and regions at different times (Sheehan & Turnbull, 2013, p 37). The study’s case studies illustrate how one global, convergent approach to public relations practice is difficult to maintain and that one practice model is not necessarily appropriate in all circumstances (p 44). Not only is an understanding of cultural, political climate and communication barriers essential in public relations practiced internationally, it is clear that public relations academics are moving away from the US-centric model of public relations history and practice (Sheehan & Turnbull, 2013, p 45).

This is not equally the case, however, where economic conditions exclude a culture from the dominant coalition. Communicative inequalities are intrinsic to the perpetuation of material inequalities in the developing world, according to Mohan Jyoti Dutta (2014). He describes how UK-based Vedanta Aluminium’s bauxite mining project in the Niyamgiri Hills of Odisha, India, usurped the land of the Dongria Kondh indigenous community, through obfuscation of its real intentions and deliberately erasing participatory opportunities for joint decision-making (Dutta, 2014, p 24). Communication, constituted professionally within the organisational structures of transnational capital, is conceived of as an instrument for exerting, reproducing and further consolidating the power of transnational capital, working to reproduce the inequalities of participation that underlie contemporary globalisation processes (Dutta, 2014, p 30).

Not only does public relations not contribute to society, according to Dutta (2012), but professionally constituted communication is an instrument for exerting, reproducing and further consolidating the power of transnational capital, working to reproduce inequalities of representation. Paradoxically, the language of participation, engagement, dialogue and democracy are often catalysed toward undemocratic ends, to subvert opportunities for participation and representation of subaltern communities (Dutta, 2012, p 29).

**Ethics**

The situation in which organisations align themselves with civic communities only when it is rational and profitable to do so has been described as pathological by Alisdair Maclntyre (2007), who recommends virtue ethics as a contemporary alternative to outdated professional codes of ethics. Good corporate citizenship is not just what suits the organisation’s strategy. ‘Another moral fiction - and perhaps the most culturally powerful of them all - is embodied in the claims to effectiveness and hence to authority made by that central character of the modern social drama, the bureaucratic manager’ (Maclntyre, 2007, p. 139).

Without a defined social purpose, underpinned by moral virtues of thought and behaviour, ideas of corporate citizenship and attempts to do the right thing are unstable concepts. (Mackey, 2014, p 137). It is the practitioner’s role to help the corporation find and shape the virtues of its character in order to respond to appropriate public expectations. The public relations person’s role is to search for and find the existing public interest of the citizens with which to align the activities of their organisation (Mackey, 2014, p 141).

Public relations as a form of public communication is associated with special responsibilities to society. These responsibilities stem for the need to practice ethical communication and the concomitant emphasis on two-way communication and dialogue in the public arena (Coombs and Holladay, 2015).

Normative and positivist codes of ethics that emphasise rationality, rules and procedures have also been questioned in recent decades by feminist, postcolonial and postmodern theorists who elevate the role of conscience instead (Fawkes, 2015). The main ground of public relations ethics derives from the Excellence school’s use of systems theory, which has a Kantian validity. Rhetorical scholars embrace virtue ethics which
highlights character and reflection rather than regulation, suggesting a negotiation between competing virtues as an ethical process not outcome, and locating ethics in the agent not the act. Essentially, public relations ethics has, like most professional ethics, tended to elevate externalised rationality above internalised guidance, relying on codes not conscience (Fawkes, 2015, p 727).

Depending on the jurisdiction, what is considered immoral or unethical might not be illegal, and moral virtues of thought and behaviour that meet the expectations of host communities should be more widely embraced (Holtzhausen, 2015).

Indeed, postmodernists argue there can never be a justification for moral codes or sets of ethical rules because they are all socially constructed and therefore serve some hidden purpose in society. Having a global code of ethics does not provide for the situational nature of public relations practice in different countries and, even more so, for the different institutional contexts of practice where each day ethical decisions are made (Holtzhausen, 2015, p. 771).

Education

In the realm of education, relying excessively on a US-based business academy model has caused public relations academics in Australia to ignore much richer work in surrounding disciplines such as social theory, rhetoric, organisational communication, and business and society (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2005). The economic realities of university provision require that programs must produce trained technicians, but a more interdisciplinary approach, moving beyond restrictive links to practice, would contribute to the professionalisation of public relations (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2005, p11).

Public diplomacy, which shares many historical and theoretical underpinnings with public relations and seems ideally suited to the information age and network society, might be a worthy alternative theory (Macnamara, 2012, p 313). The ‘new public diplomacy’ (Nye, 2010) complements the existing theoretical suite as it is already enshrined in postmodern models of PR such as communitarian, feminist, and sociocultural approaches (319).

The idea behind public diplomacy is not to assert the power of a state, but “instead, to harness the dialogue between different social collectives and their cultures in the hope of sharing meaning and understanding”. Public diplomacy today is based largely on the notion of soft power espoused by Joseph Nye, who explains soft power as “getting others to want the outcomes that you want – it co-opts people rather than coerces them” (Nye, 2010, p. 333). It does so in three key ways, according to Nye (2010a): first, daily communication, particularly involving interpersonal communication; second, strategic communication which typically involves mediated public communication; and third, “the development of lasting relationships” (Nye, 2010, p. 338).

Adopting a more trans-disciplinary approach could enrich the public relations paradigm, making it more effective, more societally-orientated, more ethical, and ultimately more publicly accepted (Macnamara, 2012, p 322).

Scholars have called for a codification of the various sources that have helped build the public relations body of knowledge, noting that as a professional practice and area of study, public relations scholarship could benefit from comparative research that closely ties theory and practice. (Jain, De Moya & Molleda, 2014). While issues management, risk communication, critical and cultural theories have been somewhat addressed, other fields such as fundraising, gender, ethnic issues, and social theories are still not examined from a theory development perspective, and there is a lack of research into activism and legal environment and regulations as contextual variables affecting international public relations practice (Jain, De Moya & Molleda, 2014, p. 597)
Employee engagement was identified as one of the top most pressing issues in European communication practice a decade ago (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006), but internal communication is increasingly being neglected in tertiary sector provision. Even if consultancy influence has subsumed that of in-house communicators, the reinstatement of internal communication in globally influential public relations education frameworks is necessary (Welch, 2015, p 401).

Corporate Social Responsibility may also be under-researched and neglected in public relations education, although it is clear that when organisations step beyond what is required by the law to adhere to higher standards of ethics, organisational outcomes such as employee motivation, productivity, turnover rates and absenteeism are positively influenced (Dhanesh, 2012, p. 45).

Lastly, there is a disconnect between research and practice in public relations. In “Professionals are from Venus, scholars are from Mars”, van Ruler (2005) lamented the yawning gap between practitioners and academia. Professionals are reluctant to adopt scholarly work and can appear hostile to or dismissive of research, while scholars have not convinced industry of the value of their expert knowledge. In a survey among the communication managers of more than 500 companies in The Netherlands, three quarters of the respondents said that general knowledge and personality are the most important characteristics for a career in public relations. Detailed expert knowledge was not seen as important at all (van Ruler, 2005, p.167). More recent testimony confirms that academics are hired on the strength of their education, while practical experience is preferred for practitioners (Hocke-Mirzashvili & Hickerson, 2014).

Summary

The Excellence Theory holds that public relations contributes value to an organisation by developing and cultivating high-quality relationships with the strategic components of an organisation’s institutional environment and that the effectiveness of public relations practice can be evaluated by measuring the quality of these relationships (Grunig, 2003, p. 37-39). A summary of this paper’s findings follows each of the special characteristics of the Excellence Theory.

1. A strategic managerial role - training for both managerial and technical roles. Develop aspirations for strategic management. Bring the voices of publics into strategic decision making by researching and listening to publics before the decisions are made. Then strategically plan, administer and evaluate PR programs to communicate with these publics, so the organisation can build and maintain good, long-term relationships with them. This is not to de-emphasise writing and preparing materials for the media and for publications, writing speeches, working with the media and developing audio-visual material and websites. Excellent PR units, however, go further.

Research findings: The strategic managerial role is more beholden to the organisation than its publics and fails to represent a diversity of voices in strategic decision making. Research into those publics and especially listening to those publics is inadequate and long-term relationships are inevitably imbalanced in favour of the organisation.

2. Understanding of the organisation - Excellent public relations departments do not flourish in authoritarian cultures, mechanical structures, asymmetrical communication systems an organisation conditions that devalue women and minorities. Students should be encouraged, if not required, to study organisational sociology, psychology and communication, human resources management and the role and value of gender and racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity to an organisation and to society.

Research findings: Excellence theory underpins and perpetuates inequalities of power by extending corporate capitalism selectively through globalisation. By imposing its
monocultural and normative management model, it devalues national traditions, minorities and cultural differences, and subjects the wellbeing of society to corporate profitability. A broader range of postmodern and critical theories have been recommended to expand the body of knowledge for educational purposes.

3. Empowerment of the public relations function - empowerment is both a cause and an effect of professionalisation.

Professionalisation of public relations would more effectively be advanced by embracing ethical approaches more suited to the pluralist complexities of the twenty-first century and by empowering those publics presently excluded from engagement because of economic, and therefore communicative, disadvantage.

4. Integrated communication management - IMC programs typically emphasise advertising and marketing and relegate public relations to a technical support role. Increasingly, public relations departments are being given responsibility for advertising and the marketing communication activities.

There were no relevant articles in the literature review in regard to integrated communication management, so a discussion of how responsibilities are distributed in organisations lies outside of the scope of this paper.

5. Two-way and symmetrical communication

Research findings: Two-way symmetrical communication, dialogue and genuine relationships have been described as unachievable in practice. Despite the advent of enabling technologies, dialogue with and commitment to stakeholder groups in business is essentially instrumental, providing analysis and contributing to strategic planning. Where the company’s interest is profit-driven, the dialogue inevitably becomes normative, leading to debate over whether consequences of dialogue can really be considered for the common good.

6. Professionalism and knowledge - help professionals think and behave like scholars and researchers, searching for research-based knowledge.

The perennial quest for legitimacy in public relations is not assisted by the contrasting models of professionalism adhered to by scholars and practitioners. Furthermore, great bodies of research, including social theory, rhetoric, organisational communication and critical theories, lie outside the parameters of the Excellence approach.

As public relations evolves in synchrony with digital technologies and greater citizen demands for equitable participation, the knowledge and expertise requirements for professional practice grow by the day. Larissa Grunig said in her address to the PRSA, “So the field has come a long way and I would like to think that our theorising has moved right along with it,” (Grunig and Grunig, 2011, p. 43). The ideas canvassed in this literature review indicate that that educators and professionals need to move beyond the Excellence Theory in order to fulfil the present and future potential of the public relations industry.
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