

Public relations theory



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Public Relations (PR) is a multifaceted discipline that encompasses a variety of functions and techniques aimed at creating and maintaining awareness through an effective managerial practice. Cheney and Christensen (2006, pp. 100-101) propose a comprehensive phenomenology of PR: “ Born as a defensive profession in the late nineteenth century [...] biased by studies of propaganda [...] has been attuned largely to one-way advocacy for specific private interests to this day, and has struggled to gain both academic legitimacy and ethical credibility”. The technologic developments of the recent decades disrupted the classic PR approach, placing communication and mutual dialogue at the heart of organisational discourse. As Rhee (2004) notes, in the past few years relationship building and management of relationships with publics emerged as key interest. In general, this trend accentuates the importance of managerial ability to assess PR versatile responsibilities.

Literature generated an ensemble of public relations theories, each presenting legitimate elements of discussion. This essay articulates that management recognition of PR practice cannot be merely achieved through a classic theoretical approach. Instead, PR shall be appreciated in its entirety: a variety of tasks, which serves core functions in the form of a structured discipline, developed through a systemic approach. In addition, such recognition is ultimately reciprocal. Management shall comprehend PR potential through understanding its dynamics, whilst practice shall validate its essentiality to organisations. As noted by Macnamara (1997), theory building is crucial to developing professionalism in public relations. In

general, the unresolved academic diatribe, the lack of measurement systems and specialised education challenge PR recognition as a discipline.

The narrative's failure in proposing a definition of PR further complicates the buying-in process for non-practitioners. Grunig and Hunt (1984) define PR as the management of communication between an organisation and its publics. The postulate equates PR to communication, neglecting a broader function. Similarly, the Institute of Public Relations (IPR, 1991) broadens the concept as "the sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organisation and its publics". Jenkins (1992) complements the adjectives "deliberate and planned" to connote the relational aim of PR, however, both definitions disregard a systemic scenario. As noted by scholars (Dozier et al., 1995), these minimalistic presuppositions historically affected PR role and perception. In 1992, Grunig revises PR definition as "the management of an organisation's communication function", as such, proposing a metonymy.

PR is demarcated by one of its purposes, which is at the same time identified as an organisational priority. Similarly, a public vote launched by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA, 2012) revealed practitioners' preference for PR defined as a "strategic communication process". In parallel, the subtended PR relationship with external parties, according to Cutlip, Centre, and Broom (2006), is traditionally causal and utilitarian. In their view, PR is a management function that pursues mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and "the various publics on whom its success or failure depends" (2006, p. 5). Intrinsically, communication denotes but does not epitomise the entire spectrum of PR responsibilities. Communication is a

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PR core function, traditionally achieved in the form of external “ publicity, promotion, marketing, and public support” (Dozier et al., 1995).

Communication refers to a variety of internal and external stakeholders (including shareholders, customers, employees, community, media, government, and the broad public).

The practice utilises a diversity of channels, each requiring specific expertise (among which media, publications, advertisement, websites, events, and sponsorships). In this sense, a review of Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) public relations models could facilitate non-practitioners’ understanding of PR functions. Components of the four archetypes could be identified in routine PR, helping organisations value the available communication opportunities in a broader context. In general terms, PR’s main attribute is its universally relational nature rather than the communication centrality. Definitions are frequently simplistic or reductive, generally inadequate to describe and consequently value the variety of PR key functions. As noted by scholars (Dozier et al., 1995), narrative and practice equally need to “ achieve a model of excellent PR and distinguish that model from other typical ways in which PR is practiced”. The goal is defining PR discipline as a set of professional and managerial abilities embedded into a system.

Subsequently, the discipline encompasses external and internal communication, branding, reputation management, corporate and public affairs, community relations, crisis management, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), counseling, research, and benchmarking as part of a comprehensive strategic and systemic approach in support to organisational goals.

The World Assembly of Public Relations Associations (1978) proposes a conceptualisation of PR as: “ the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organisational leaders, and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation and the public interest”. This statement introduces fundamental functions to PR: proactive research, awareness on evolving environment, planning, consultancy, and recognition of mutual interests. PR embodies the relational nature of organisations, volatile by definition, hence implies specialised skills-sets and appropriate methodology. This framework profiles PR as a discipline and, consequently, essential managerial practice, yet subtends a sort of independency from or complementarity to organisations’ operations.

Nowadays the profession faces an increasingly competitive business scenario and a fragmented social context. The success of participatory media, web 2. 0 technologies, and the transformation of communication facilitate public relation evolution as a system and core organisational function. Recent trends on the industry reveal that corporate spend in the field maintains a steady growth. According to a private-equity firm (Veronhis Suhler Stevenson, 2012), communication spending is expected to grow 31 per cent by 2015. In the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), projected employment in PR is to rise of an impressive 21 percent by 2020. In general, as noted by Heath (2001: 8), PR is “ a relationship-building professional activity that adds value to organisations”, and figures demonstrate that the practice experiences a challenging yet encouraging time. Organisations are typically results and profit-oriented. PR requires in-

depth knowledge of the context as well of business operations, especially in key areas related to communication (Gordon, 2011). In this sense, public relations practitioners shall take advantage of their competence, whilst proving efficacy to meet organisation goals.

As such, the evolution of PR practice from discipline to system is fundamental to its full recognition. The rapport between PR and management is evolving. Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995) investigated the subject, identifying management in the form of a dominant coalition. In their study, communication excellence is universal: “ knowledge and expertise transcend particular public, organisational division, industry, type, or national setting”. Such excellence enables practitioners interpreting and extrapolating organisations’ priorities. Although an archetype is essential to direct the practice and facilitate comprehension, the concept is to be furthered. The model entails a separation between PR and general organisational effectiveness. The dominant coalition shall instead fully value the PR through understanding its potential, reach, and operational context. Broom’s (1982) PR professional’ roles of communicator, prescriber, facilitator, problem-solver, and technician shall be thus harmonised by a strategic goal-setting proficiency. Dozier (1992) noted that the analysis of public relations roles is the essential to understanding the practice. The scholar rationalised the profession into two essential roles: the manager, which “ provides expert prescription, problem-solving skills and outcomes”, and the technician, responsible for tasks or outputs.

As noted by Berger (2005), the profession shall evolve into a third role, the activist. This function accounts organisations’ power relations, attributing to

practitioners a place in the dominant coalition. In summary, PR as a practice shall conventionally include three functions: technical specialty in various tasks, managerial focus on outcomes, and the tactical ability to align such competencies to the overall strategy. Public relations managers therefore must be valued by and participate in the dominant coalition, “ if they are to favorably influence organisational choices, ideology, and practices” (Daugherty, 2001 cited in Berger, 2005). University research results (University of Southern California, 2012) validate this approach by highlighting that, to achieve its full potential, PR must be included in the dominant coalition. However, the process is reciprocal: a theoretical clarification of the disciplines’ core functions and related tasks enables management’ appreciation of PR, while PR’ definitive recognition and integration requires regulation, measurement, and evaluation.

Building on Macnamara’s (1997) analysis, the extent to which PR can realise its potential depends on the adoption of standards that meet the requirements of modern professional management. In addition, education and training are important to advancing the field (Pearce, 2011) and achieving legitimacy and recognition (L’Etang and Pieczka, 2006). Nowadays accreditation is mainly voluntary. Similarly, codes of conduct and ethics created by professional associations struggle to comprehend and enforce the vast subject. According to Weiner and Bartholomew (2006) common PR metrics mostly refer to single communication outputs, reflecting a superseded configuration. Frequently, tools like media releases and publications are considered outcomes rather than elements of a broader approach. Furthermore, the discipline cannot count on conventional

measurement and evaluation scales related to “ intangible relational assets” (Godfrey et al., 2009) such as reputation, loyalty, and trust (Wood and Jones, 1995). Objectives measurement, scientific key performance indicators (KPIs), and accreditation could legitimate a definitive PR recognition by organisations’ management.

Further to theory, evaluation, and measurement, the strategic role of PR lies in its ability to monitor, interpret, and execute programmes that take into account the internal and external context. “ PR has evolved from a tactical postscript to a strategic pacesetter” (Feil, 2012). In this sense, Hiebert (1988) pointed out that “ practitioners who ignore research will too be ignored”. As a result, PR recognition relies in its ability to explore new methods to promote organisations. Lastly, it is to be noted that PR entails skills acquired through practice and credentials, as well as a personal attitude that distinguish a manager and counselor from a technician. PR is strategic to organisations, although not traditionally regarded as core to their operations. In 1983, authors (Post et al.) found that PR had only a rudimentary involvement in strategic planning. Recent research (Moss et al., 2012) highlights that PR remains, generally, “ part of a broader communication function rather than a mainstream corporate function”.

However, the study positively notes that the profession increasingly embraces external issues involving “ significant operational and reputational consequences”. Typically, managers would value PR contribution to core business “ especially in its issues management guise” (Aldrich and Herker, 1977). The chronicle daily brings examples of public relation performances that positively or negatively affect organisations. In 2010, British Petroleum

(BP) oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico obsessively occupied worldwide news. The case highlights how disregarding PR roles and core crisis management functions could lead to additional reputational and financial losses. Secondly, it suggests that ownership of PR discipline, its relational functions and methods, is fundamental to its own success and recognition. The company's CEO statements, as indicated by Donoghue (2010), revealed a cynical corporate culture, "making BP almost synonymous with incompetence, arrogance, and irresponsibility".

Unquestionably, a different approach would not have changed the dramatic consequences of the disaster. However, introducing a balanced communication through trained spokespersons could have reduced the credibility costs faced by BP. In parallel, Jørgensen (2010) evaluates the subsequent use of social media and other one-way information channels, finding that BP failed in achieving sympathy. In summary, BP undervalued the mutual aim of PR relational function. Paraphrasing Coombs and Holladay (2007, pp. 124-125), an organisation shall understand and anticipate the values, sensitivity, and concerns of its stakeholders to effectively build connections. The concerted analysis of the opportunities offered by PR and the appropriate fulfilment of its core competencies could benefit organisations during a crisis. As noted by O'Connor (2001, p. 54): "as the nexus between company identity and reputation, the public relations function can help interweave a stabilising process across the full range of corporate audiences on whom a successful reputation depends".

In 2011 the Australian Southwestern Airline unsuccessfully tested an uncovered skylight which caused an aircraft technical failure. As a reaction

to potential losses, the company proactively grounded its entire fleet for complete inspection. The airline demonstrated to value safety, customers' concerns, and transparency of key issues, thus achieving public empathy (Rodriguez, 2011). The lesson learnt is that PR discipline, when valued as strategic management tool, can properly operate in a firm's interest (Moss et al., 2012) responding to environmental requirements. In support to this view, Bennett and Kottasz's (2000) research found that PR practitioners " have taken on board the concept and practice of reputation management as an activity separate and distinct from general public relations work". The reciprocity of PR and its inclusion as core organisational function, supported by management, helps organisations meet their goals. Several case studies exemplify how strategic synergy between corporate goals and PR expertise can produce excellent outcomes.

Banco Popular, for example, engaged in an innovative enterprise by rewording a popular song (Feil, 2012; JWT, 2012), producing extraordinary image and reputation returns. In 2011, Rayovac, a battery manufacturer, capitalised the pick of a historic snowstorm forcing population home (Marshable, 2011) with the launch of a virtual snowball fight game. The initiative caught broad public attention via social media, generating enviable returns on image. Similarly, in Germany, McDonald's asked public to create a burger recipe using an online resource. The campaign exceeded its promotional scope, resulting in reputational and financial profits (Leight, 2010). Union Insurance goal was attracting customers to their product, part of a price-sensitive customer niche. Their PR campaign involved creating of a squad to combat irresponsible road behaviours. In no time squad' actions

caught broad attention, successfully meeting organisation's brand promotion expectations (Young, 2011). These cases substantiate the importance of relating PR outcomes to desired business and organisational goals (Lindenmann's, 1993).

Once the discipline is clarified through theory, Public relations is to contribute to organisational effectiveness when managed strategically and integral to organisation's core processes (Grunig et al., 2002). As indicated by scholars, (Grunig et al., 2002, p. 263) " PR operates as an adaptive subsystem which synergises relations in response to internal and external environmental pressures". Briefly, PR practitioners are professionals that remit strategic functions: " interpret external and internal environments, represent the organisation" (Gregory, 2011), thus bringing ' monetary value' to organisations (Grunig et al., 2002). In general, theory postulates a universal excellence of PR practice per se. Consequently PR competency enables practitioners to develop unique products, techniques, and tools tailored at organisational objectives, culture, and constituencies. Therefore, PR excellence is best expressed in relation to an organisation and when appropriately embedded within its strategic constituencies. Reference to this, Robinson (2011) advises that PR functions are crucial to organisations " to build relationships, establish credibility, enhance reputation, sell more products, promote an important cause or issue, position an organisation as an employer of choice, and grow profits".

In this sense, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Assembly's official statement on Public Relations (1982) presents a comprehensive overview of the practice core functions, built on its managerial and systemic

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nature. Moss and DeSanto (2011, p. 12) disapprove the extensive narrative, although they cannot deny it serves as a valuable reference for non-practitioners comprehension. In conclusion, PR practice, once based on a conventional theoretical framework, shall be enforced and advanced to be fully valued as tactical by management. PR theory can highlight the positivity of the practice by itself, but has to be furthered to fully embrace its dynamics, as well as the organisational context that it is aimed to serve. The link between theory and practice is achieved through strategic management and planning at different organisational levels. Such strategic coordination leads to management appreciation of the practice, which, ideally, constitutes the baseline to excellence for both the profession and the organisation.