

Public relations as a scientific discipline essay

[Business](#), [Marketing](#)



Introduction

" In order to become established as a respected independent academic discipline, public relations should focus on applied scientific research that is useful to practice."

This paper upholds this view and will further expound on the premises which warrant attention to strengthening the scientific applications of both qualitative and quantitative research in Public Relations (PR) to make it a more rigid and independent academic discipline. The framework by which the author sees the statement is within the positive view of public relations eventually acquiring a more legitimate status among the fields of sciences. It also emphasizes the importance of applied research to make the valuable role of PR be distinguished among various disciplines.

The weaknesses of public relations as a discipline have been cited by several practitioners way back the 1980's. (Macnamara, 1997) James Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) mentioned in their work, " Managing Public Relations" that most of the PR practitioners " still prefer to fly by the seat of their pants' and use their hypotheses than apply intellectual process to tackle the issue and problems of public relations." (Ibid.) Judy Van Slyke, a PR educator, made a comparison of public relations and a model of " immature and ineffective science." She concluded that there are great similarities among the two. (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) In a 1986 study, Professor James Bissland noted that the quality of PR research has not improved much even when there were greater evaluation studies. (Walker, 1997) John Pavlik (1987) also likened PR researches' effectiveness to that of the " elusiveness of the search for the Holy Grail." Dr. Walter Lindenmann (1990) of Ketchum Public Relations'

hallmark research also concluded that “majority of PR research was untailed and colloquial instead of being formal, precise and scientific.” The professional also commented that researches were conducted not in the framework of a researcher but more of a PR person. So much is still the same even when we ushered into the new century.

Research Dilemma: Weaknesses of PR Researches

The heart of the discipline is also its Achille’s heel, so to speak. This is because the very nature of the subject of public relations is very hard to concretize. According to Chia (2006), most scholars have attempted to define public relations and its relationships with other disciplines and studies. Most of the indicators are qualitative concepts and they surmised that a prior qualifications of the related PR concepts need to be institutionalized so as to secure the generally accepted and clear definitions of PR concepts in order to effectively measure them. (Coombs & Holaday, 2001)

Most PR professionals assume that PR is inherently vague and that it cannot have a mechanism that could work with precision and predictability, the two major standards of scientific research. (Scaife, 2004) Even when they want to assure their clients of positive results, they do not know exactly how to measure their successes. Hence, naturally, there is very much uncertainty in all public relations initiatives. (Dozier, 1990)

For instance, how can PR professionals attest to their scientific efficacy? As ever, the debate between considering public relations as an art or as a science hinges on two basic queries: 1.) Has PR as a discipline emerged with a standardized and generally-accepted steps and practices? 2.) Are these steps and practices valid and reliable? Is there a predictive value in each of

these PR researches and studies, with basic and strong support of quantitative and/or statistical data with the greatest degree of precision? (Turney, 2009)

This basically reflects the strengths and weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative researches in public relations. Both types rely on objectivity, whether in surveying the public or in applying statistical measures and conforming to the traditional qualitative methods or methodologies.

Quantitative research often apply methods of the physical sciences which aim to ensure objectivity, reliability and generalizability. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) The strengths of this primary type of research lies in its ability to contextualize the public relations more thoroughly by submerging itself into the subject matter i. e. cultural immersion or direct contact with people under the study. (Ibid.) It also enables the researcher to derive rich, specific information that defines the overall perspective of the participants. While qualitative research focuses on the processes per se, quantitative research focuses on the correlations among variables. (Ibid.) However, this type of research is derailed by data collection and its research evaluation consumes so much time and efforts. Some of the methods in qualitative public relations research are also not yet widely accepted within the academic circles. (Ibid.) Congruently, the strengths of the quantitative research as applied in PR related studies are its generalized, reliable, quantified data. (Gaunt & Wright, 2004) Its instruments often yield comparable output with baseline information and which are appropriate for PR's needs assessments or evaluations purposes. However, the quantitative research falls short of actual measurement. This is because the PR concepts, which are inherently

human elements and which are hard to quantify, are taken out of their natural contexts in order for them to be fully measured statistically or scientifically. (Ibid.) In other words, this process decontextualize human behaviors or attitudes.

However, this does not generalize the discipline (if we can liberally call it) does not have the ability to submit itself to particular scientific and statistical proceses. It also does not necessarily mean that PR results are totally unpredictable. As it is, PR is becoming more informational, more quantitative, and more relibale than before. However, it will have to perenially deal with its social aspects' unpredictability and contrariness since it deals primarily with human beings. (Macnamara, 1992)

In this line, we must really emphasize the very nature of the discipline of public relations in order to acquaint ourselves more clearly of the paradigm and orientations used in analyzing public relation concepts and phenomena or events. (Leichty, 1998) As we find ways to strengthen the functions of science in the disicpline of PR, especially in its research foundations, the query on the proper status of public relations as an art or a science is significant. It will aid in the emphasis of the fundamental operating principles, dynamics and outcomes of PR researches. Sadly, there is still a contention among scholars whether PR is an art or a science. (Dozier, 1984)

The multidisciplinary nature of public relations is a primary challenge in PR evaluation. As we all know, public relations is constantly linked with various fields such as public affairs, corporate communications, marketing, advertising, corproate social responsibility, etc. It is also composed of

different subsets like media relations, community relations, employee relations, government agencies linkages, investor relations, among others. As it is widely practiced, PR also comes out in various channels and it uses a wide range of communication channels that includes publicity, publications, Web sites, sponsorships, audio-visual and video programs, events, etc., in order to bring their messages to the target audiences. (Ibid.)

The Missing Link: Applied Research

In applied research, the practitioners try to solve a certain problem and seek the real answers to specific questions. (Daymon & Holloway, 2010) Hence, applied research emphasizes practical problem solving. This type of research also has a predictive value. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005)

At present, public relations is evidently far from being a dynamic discipline all on its own as it shares its role with marketing, communications, corporate management, organizational strategy, and many other fields. (Macnamara, 2002) It is also interesting to note that most PR researchers are mostly interested with their short-term research, specifically the influences of marketing and communications in its practice. On several grounds, the research was tied up in trying to justify the public relations investments with management or stakeholders in order to show the effectiveness of PR more than the other fields such as marketing or advertising. (Ibid.)

Another important problem is the limited use of evaluation methods in applied research. (Pohl & Vandeventer, 2001) While PR professionals both formal and informal methods to evaluate their effectiveness (Jude, 1990), it is unclear how their reporting of public relations success measures up to actual achievement of organizational outcomes.

Public relations evaluation programs have a distinct role in showing accountability and effectiveness. PR professionals can choose from various methods and systems to illustrate their efficacy. A historic line of global research shows that PR practitioners were not able to completely use the diverse yet available applied research methods.

While most PR scholars consider the measurement and evaluation as emergent practices in the field, the reporting of PR success versus real achievement is vague. In a large scale worldwide study of 1, 040 PR practitioners over some 25 countries, Gaunt and Wright (2004) affirmed the limited effectiveness of the research evaluation methods and media evaluation in evaluating PR outcomes. The report indicated that the major barriers to exact measurement were the following: costs, lack of research expertise and questionable reliability and validity of results.

Cost, as the number one barrier, is expressed in terms of both time and money and time. However, further researches can consolidate the solutions in order to overcome this problem. Some technologies, systems, methods, and techniques are present and they can help solve, even partially, the need of the PR researchers for more effective instruments for measurements in evaluation.

According to Sofer (1982), academics must be concerned with the real and applied contributions of their works to the dynamic field of PR and the professional applications and practices that it undergoes. However, this does not mean that the researchers will leave their solid groundings in the scientific research process and that they must always measure to a standard validity and reliability. (Ibid.) These measures must also be the fruits of

selective and careful representations of the indicators of PR, which are inherently hard to measure or be quantified. (Macnamara, 1992) As the scholars agreed, a discipline should be ideally understood as a particular practice, with laws and systems that show which propositions are correct and which are incorrect, within that specific discourse. (Lyotard, 1984)

Conclusion

Since public relations is multi disciplinary, there is really a need to strengthen its concepts and definitions and how these concepts are to be measured. A prior qualifications of the related PR concepts need to be institutionalized so as to secure the generally accepted and clear definitions of PR concepts in order to effectively measure them. (Coombs & Holaday, 2001)

Both types rely on objectivity, whether in surveying the public or in applying statistical measures and conforming to the traditional qualitative methods or methodologies. However, they have several problems and weaknesses as a firm scientific process. However, this does not generalize that public relations does not have the ability to submit itself to particular scientific and statistical processes. It also does not necessarily mean that PR results are totally unpredictable. As it is, PR is becoming more informational, more quantitative, and more reliable than before. However, it will have to perennially deal with its social aspects' unpredictability and contrariness since it deals primarily with human beings. (Macnamara, 1992)

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