

# Four gaps in public relations scholarship and practice: The need for new approaches

**Jim Macnamara**

Jim Macnamara is Professor of Public Communication at the University of Technology, Sydney. He joined academia after a thirty-year career in professional communication practice spanning journalism, public relations, advertising and media research, and is the author of twelve scholarly and professional books.

## Abstract

*Contemporary scholarship recognises the importance of diversity and open ongoing construction and reconstruction of knowledge to remain current and relevant. However, content analysis of fourteen contemporary public relations prescribed texts and reference books supports claims of a Western, and particularly a North American, dominant paradigm and identifies four problematic gaps in contemporary public relations scholarship. This article argues that these require significant shifts in epistemology as they are limiting the efficacy of practice in the Second Media Age of interactive social media and social networks, the social relevance of the practice, the education of future generations of practitioners, and potentially stifling theory-building. Addressing these four gaps will offer increased potential for public relations to expand its remit, influence, and reputation within organisations and society—albeit in a reconfigured form responsive to the social, cultural and political environments in which it operates.*

---

## Introduction

While much has been written about the relative newness of public relations as a discipline and a field of study (Holtzhausen, 2007, p. 374), and there is continuing debate over whether it is a profession<sup>1</sup>, an industry, or an occupation (Bowen, 2007; Dozier, 1992; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006), a number of analyses identify that the field has developed a substantial body of theory as well as practice-orientated knowledge (Heath, 2005; Toth, 2007; Sririmesh & Verčič, 2009). However, a number of scholars claim that the body of knowledge is narrow philosophically, epistemologically, and culturally, and argue that it needs to be broadened. These claims are investigated in this article through a content analysis of a number of public relations texts. In particular, this analysis examines prescribed and recommended texts commonly used in Australia with a view to informing teaching, research, and practice.

## Literature review

Texts such *The Encyclopaedia of Public Relations* edited by Robert Heath (2005), *Public Relations Theory II*, edited by Carl Botan and Vincent Hazelton (2006), *The Future of Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* edited by Elizabeth Toth (2007), and *The Global Public Relations Handbook: Theory, Research and Practice* by Krishnamurthy Sriramesh and Dejan Verčič (2009), as well as a number of special

---

<sup>1</sup> This debate often hinges on whether public relations has an established body of knowledge, one of the requirements of a profession according to Wolf and de Bussy (2008, p. 2) and others.

editions of *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research*, outline a substantial body of public relations theory. It is noted that these texts and journals have presented and discussed a range of theories, including rhetorical, framing, persuasion, game theory, structuration, relational, feminist, and public diplomacy conceptualisations of public relations.

Nevertheless, a number of scholars claim that, because of its US beginnings and the rapid development of the US as an economic, political and cultural superpower, public relations literature has become and continues to be predominantly American. In particular, *Excellence Theory* has been identified by Magda Pieczka as the “dominant paradigm” of public relations internationally (1996, pp. 143-144; 2006, pp. 349-350), and it has come under fire from some critical scholars. Excellence Theory is not a single theory of public relations, but a body of theory that has coalesced since 1976 when the prominent US scholar, Jim Grunig, proposed his first models of public relations based on Thayer’s (1968) concept of synchronic (once or one-way) and diachronic (twice or two-way) communication.

Grunig & Hunt’s (1984) *Four Models* of public relations, which superseded Grunig’s original synchronic and diachronic models and became hallmarks of public relations theory in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, provided the basis of Excellence Theory, particularly the *two-way symmetrical model* which Grunig argues is a requirement of public relations excellence (Grunig & Grunig, 1992, p. 320). Over the years, Excellence Theory has incorporated a number of other theories, including *situational theory* of publics, originally developed by Jim Grunig in his 1966 journalism monograph, *The Role of Information in Economic Decision Making* (Grunig, 1966), and later expanded (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, 1992). Also Excellence Theory has incorporated *relational/relationships* theory (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 2001), elements of *strategic management* theory (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; L’Etang, 2008, p. 162; Steyn, 2007; Van Ruler & Verčič, 2005), and it has embraced some aspects of *rhetorical* and post-positivist *feminist* theory (L’Etang, 2008, p. 253).

Early criticisms of US and what has come to be seen as Grunigian public relations theory were voiced by Priscilla Murphy (1991) who argued that Grunig’s symmetrical model of communication was normative and rare or non-existent in practice. Drawing on game theory, Murphy proposed that, rather than 100 per cent cooperation or accommodation (symmetry) or 100 per cent persuasion (asymmetry), public relations is a mixed motive game in which the views and interests of the organisation are sometimes justifiably pursued, while on other occasions the views and interests of stakeholders need to be accommodated. Some scholars such as Linda Hagan (2007, p. 422) see the mixed motive model as a fifth model of public relations along with the Four Models developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984). However, Grunig has argued that Murphy’s mixed motive model “accurately describes the two-way symmetrical model as we originally conceptualised it”. He and his Excellence Theory co-researchers subsequently incorporated Murphy’s *mixed motive model* into the emerging body of Excellence Theory as “a combination of the two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical models” (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p. 309).

Christopher Spicer notes with admiration the way in which the original Four Models have been tweaked, morphed and revised (2007, p. 28). It could be argued that a major strength of Excellence Theory is its flexibility and its evolution into a body of theory. On

the other hand, while welcoming the growing body of knowledge in public relations, a number of scholars have begun to question the dominance of Excellence Theory, arguing that (1) it is largely Western focussed and, specifically, American with ontological, axiological and epistemological assumptions grounded in US positivism, functionalism, and behaviourism which limits its application as a global theory; and (2) the dominance of Excellence Theory is stifling theory-building in public relations, either subsuming or marginalising alternative views. Following Pieczka's critique (1996) and those of Elwood (1995), criticisms of the dominant US paradigm and calls for greater pluralism and diversity in public relations theory and practice have been advanced by a number of European and New Zealand scholars, including Leitch and Neilson (2001), L'Etang and Pieczka (1996; 2006), McKie and Munshi (2005; 2007), and Motion and Leitch (1996).

For instance, Holtzhausen (2000), Holtzhausen and Voto (2002), and McKie (2008) have advocated a postmodern approach to public relations in place of the dominant US paradigm which critics claim is largely modernist and grounded in systems theory and social science approaches. Grunig has argued against such criticisms saying that many are based on misinterpretations (e.g. in Grunig, 2001 and Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002, pp. 309-329). However, the dominance of US-developed Excellence Theory is noted in a number of studies. For instance, in replicating a 1984 study of theory-building by public relations scholars based on analysis of articles published in *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research*<sup>2</sup> (Ferguson, 1984), Lynne Sallot and colleagues reported in 2003 that, while theory-building had expanded and broadened, Excellence/symmetrical theory was the most prevalent (Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones, 2003).

Given that plurality and diversity are recognised as important elements of contemporary knowledge construction, and growing recognition of the importance of knowledge and practice being grounded in local social and cultural environments (Sriramesh, 2004; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009), this study set out to explore the focus of public relations theory and knowledge-building in Australia. Specifically, this study focussed on commonly prescribed and recommended texts on public relations, as they comprise a primary site of scholarship and learning by future practitioners.

## Research questions

Because of claims that public relations theory and models of practice are predominantly American and lacking diversity and critical analysis, this study set out to explore:

1. the extent that American theories and models of public relations are taught in Australia as well as alternative theories and models;
2. the main communication and public relations theories informing contemporary scholarship in Australia;
3. the level of critical thinking and analysis in contemporary scholarly texts used; and
4. the main themes and issues addressed in public relations scholarship as identified in public relations texts and reference books used locally.

---

<sup>2</sup> Formerly *Public Relations Research Annual*.

## Methodology

Content analysis of 14 contemporary prescribed texts and reference books on public relations (defined as published between 2007 and 2010) was undertaken. Because the research questions related to “what” theories, models, themes and issues are discussed, and the extent of discussion about those variables (i.e. “how much”), quantitative content analysis was conducted. This used a two-level coding method based on a coding scheme established *a priori*, as recommended by content analysis scholars (Krippendorff, 2003; Krippendorff & Bock, 2009; Neuendorf 2002). At an initial open or *axial* level (Glaser, 1978; Punch, 1998, pp. 210-221), content of the texts was coded into 12 broad categories: communication theories; public relations theories and models; roles and fields of practice (e.g. media relations, public affairs, etc); activities and methods (e.g. publicity, publications, events, etc); history of public relations; case studies; research; country or region of primary focus; cross-cultural and multicultural focus; social media; ethics; and critical discussion of public relations. A second level of *in vivo* coding was then undertaken to identify the specific theories, models, areas of practice, activities, locales, and themes within the categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Punch, 1998, p. 205).

Coding was undertaken by two human coders. Much of the coding proceeded on the basis of exact word matching of the names of theories, models, and practices such as “press agency”, “two-way symmetrical”, “postmodern” etc. However, coding guidelines were established to maximise reliability and consistency. These provided synonyms and inclusive concepts for coding into categories such as <political economy = C. critical theory/discussion>; <press releases = C. publicity>; and <blog = C. Social media> (where “C” is the coding category). In addition, look-up tables were provided listing established communication, media, and public relations theories to assist in correct identification and categorisation of these by the coders. A list of 116 communication theories grouped under “seven traditions” was drawn from *Theories of Human Communication* (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, pp. xiii-xiv) and media/mass communication theories were identified using a table of 150 theories in Potter (2009, pp. 15-18). Public relations theories were identified largely based on the coders’ familiarity with the field, but Botan and Hazelton (2006), Heath (2005), L’Etang (2008) and several others texts were used as guides.

## Sample

A purposive sampling approach was used. The sampling frame was contemporary public relations texts defined as published between 2007 and 2010 that were either prescribed texts or recommended references in undergraduate and postgraduate public relations and related courses<sup>3</sup> at Australian universities as at December 2009. A Pearson Education (2009) survey of Australian public relations educators confirmed that at least six of the texts analysed were prescribed texts<sup>4</sup>. All of the texts were stocked in university-based bookshops as at December 2009, indicating that they are commonly used in public relations education. Three sample sub-sets were selected within this sampling frame. Because the primary focus was on Australian public

---

<sup>3</sup> Related courses included media writing and media relations.

<sup>4</sup> More than six could be prescribed texts as not all PR educators completed the Pearson Education (2009) survey.

relations texts, all available Australian texts in this sampling frame were selected. Seven texts were found within this population. In addition, because many Australian and other Asia Pacific universities use international texts, leading contemporary international public relations texts and reference books were included in the study. These included the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of *Cutlip & Center's effective public relations* (Broom, 2009) and the 2010 edition of Wilcox and Cameron's *Public relations strategies and tactics*, current editions of two of the most widely used public relations texts globally. Two other contemporary international texts were also included (see Table 1). The third sample sub-set included three books which specifically address the conceptual questions framing this study—public relations theory (range and scale of discussion), Western versus non-Western focus, and critical analysis. The latest review of Excellence Theory, an edited volume by Toth (2007), the latest critical text by L'Etang (2008), and a widely cited text specifically focussed on international and cross-cultural public relations (Curtin & Gaither, 2007) were found within the sampling frame and selected for analysis. The full sample is shown in Table 1.

*Table 1 Sample list of public relations texts analysed*

<b>Author/s</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Publisher</b>
Broom, G.	2009	<i>Cutlip &amp; Center's effective public relations</i> (10 <sup>th</sup> ed.)	Pearson Education
Chia, J. & Synnott, G. (Eds.)	2009	<i>Introduction to public relations: From theory to practice</i>	Oxford University Press, Melbourne
Curtin, P., & Gaither, T.	2007	<i>International public relations: Negotiating culture, identity and power</i>	Sage (US & London)
Franklin, B., Hogan, M., Langley, Q., Mosdell, N., & Pill, E.	2009	<i>Key concepts in public relations</i>	Sage (US & London)
Guth, D., & Marsh, C.	2007	<i>Public relations: A values-driven approach</i> (3 <sup>rd</sup> ed.)	Pearson Education
Harrison, K.	2008	<i>Strategic public relations: A practical guide to success</i>	Century Consulting Group, Perth
Johnston, J., & Zawawi, C.	2009	<i>Public relations: Theory and practice</i> (3 <sup>rd</sup> ed.).	Allen & Unwin, Sydney
L'Etang, J.	2008	<i>Public relations: Concepts, practice and critique</i>	Sage (London & US)
Mahoney, J.	2008	<i>Public relations writing in Australia</i>	Oxford University Press, Melbourne
Sheehan, M., & Xavier, R.	2009	<i>Public relations campaigns</i>	Oxford University Press, Melbourne
Stanton, R.	2007	<i>Media relations</i>	Oxford University Press, Melbourne
Toth, E. (Ed.)	2007	<i>The future of excellence in public relations and communication management</i>	Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, NJ.
Tymson, C., Lazar, P., & Lazar, R. (Eds.)	2008	<i>The new Australian and New Zealand public relations manual</i> (5 <sup>th</sup> ed.)	Tymson Communications,

## Limitations

The content analysed did not comprise a census of contemporary public relations texts and reference books available in Australia. Also it did not include scholarly journals which are other major sites of contemporary theory and research, as recognised by Jelen (2008) and Sallot et al. (2006). It is recognised that public relations educators and students in Australia access local and international scholarly journals, so the content analysed in this study is not the total domain of their exposure to public relations theory. However, this study analysed a substantial sample of contemporary public relations literature (2007–2010) which represents a primary site of learning and informing practice.

## Data analysis

From the 14 texts and reference books, 5,934 pages of textual content were analysed (indexes and reference lists were excluded from the analysis). Content was categorised in one paragraph units (approximately 8–10 lines, or 0.2 of a page). Double coding of content was used where it related to more than one category. Data analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel which was sufficient for the sum, percentage and ranking calculations required.

## Findings

In the total of almost 6,000 pages analysed, 1,006.7 pages (16.96% of total text content) was devoted to theory. This was comprised of 313.1 pages devoted to broad human communication theories and 693.6 pages devoted to public relations theories. However, if Toth's almost 600-page edited volume fully devoted to Excellence Theory is excluded from the sample, only 477.4 pages are devoted to theory—both human communication and public relations theory (8.95% of text content). This is comprised of 231.3 pages devoted to broad human communication theories and 246.1 pages devoted to public relations theories.

The most discussed human communication theory, by far, was *systems theory*, explained and analysed in 51.7 pages of public relations text and reference book content. This included *basic systems theory* with several texts focussed on the early Shannon and Weaver (1949) *mathematical model of communication* and failing to mention other more advanced forms of systems theory. Only one Australian public relations text discusses cybernetics (Chia & Synnott, 2009). In US texts studied, Broom (2009) discusses cybernetics in a lengthy (20-page) section on systems theory and is an example of a focus of systems theory in US public relations.

The next most discussed communication theory was *persuasion* theory, including both specific sociopsychological theories and persuasion generally (44.8 pages), followed by *sociocultural* theory (34.2 pages). However, 24 pages of the latter were in one book—the specialist Curtin and Gaither (2007) text devoted to international public relations. Apart from this text, sociocultural theories receive little attention in public relation texts and reference books despite being a major area of contemporary focus in communication. The next most frequently discussed human communication theories

related to *audience* (demographics, psychographics, reception theory, agency, etc) (21.5 pages), *agenda setting/framing* (21.3 pages), and *rhetoric* (12.7 pages).

In public relations theory, *Excellence Theory*, including the two-way symmetrical model of communication, is dominant with 187.5 pages of discussion. However, 175 of these are contained in one text—the Toth (2007) edited volume devoted to reviewing and discussing the future of Excellence Theory. If Toth’s tribute to Excellence Theory is excluded and only more general public relations texts and reference books are analysed, Excellence Theory features, somewhat surprisingly, in only 12.5 pages of discussion in 13 texts totalling 5,335 pages (0.23%). This correlates with the research of Jelen who found only one article and a low word count overall focussed on Excellence/symmetrical communication in her content analysis of public relations journals (2008, p. 49). Jelen explained this apparent paradox by identifying a high volume of mentions of the name Grunig which she noted is largely synonymous with Excellence Theory. The following findings further contextualise Excellence Theory in the literature.

After Excellence Theory, the next most discussed public relations theory in the 14 texts analysed is *systems theory* of public relations, including public relations in the context of strategic management systems (90 pages). This affirms a predominance of American positivist, functionalist and behaviourist concepts of public relations which are foundational to Excellence Theory according to critics (e.g. L’Etang, 2008; Pieczka, 1996)—although it should be noted that Jim Grunig disputes this modernist interpretation (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p. 328). The main public relations theories discussed in the texts are listed in Table 2.

*Table 2 Public relations theories most discussed in public relations texts*

<b>Public relations theories</b>	<b>No. of pages of discussion</b>
Excellence theory	187.5
Systems theory	90.0
Relational/relationships theory	51.0
Stakeholder and publics theory	45.8
Situational theory	41.6
Strategic communication theory	31.0
Corporate social responsibility	29.2
Negotiation and conflict management	27.0
Grunig’s Four Models	24.1
Organisational activist theory (Holtzhausen)	24.0

It is noted that situational and relational theories have been incorporated into Excellence Theory. However, they were analysed separately when discussed specifically without reference to other aspects of Excellence Theory. It is also noted that situational theory relates to publics; however “stakeholder and publics theory” was coded separately when texts discussed stakeholders and publics generally and did not mention Situational Theory of Publics.

Interestingly, while Grunig’s Four Models feature only as the 9<sup>th</sup> most discussed area of public relations theory in the total sample, with 24.1 pages of discussion, they are more prominently discussed in general public relations texts, excluding the Toth volume

devoted to Excellence Theory. Excluding Toth (2007), the Four Models are the 5<sup>th</sup> most discussed public relations theory, which suggests that some general public relations texts are out of date, remaining focussed on the Four Models when Excellence Theory has moved on to a convergence of asymmetric and symmetric models into a *mixed motive model* and incorporated a number of other theories.

A wide range of other communication and media theories are discussed in public relations texts and reference books, including *semiotics*, the *public sphere*, *hierarchy of effects*, Maslow's *hierarchy of needs*, *social learning*, *social exchange*, *elaboration likelihood*, *cognitive dissonance*, *uses and gratifications* theory, *media effects*, *two-step and n-step flow* models, *diffusion* theory, *encoding and decoding*, *spiral of silence*, *medium* theory, *complexity* theory, and *networking* theory. Other public relations theories discussed include public relations as *propaganda* and "spin" (mostly arguing to the contrary); the *Circuit of Culture* model presented by Curtin and Gaither (2007); *postmodern* theory of public relations; *dialogic* theory; *contingency* theory; and *co-orientation*. However, in many cases only one paragraph is devoted to describing theories other than the dominant paradigm, which suggests a degree of tokenism and dogmatism in public relations theories and models.

Despite being texts and reference books for undergraduate and postgraduate university courses, the total proportion of content devoted to theory is relatively small—under 17 per cent of total content, and less than 9 per cent if Toth's large volume on Excellence Theory is excluded. Among Australian public relations texts and reference books, Chia and Synnott (2009) contains the most theory, with 55 pages principally devoted to theoretical explanation and analysis (13.5%). This is less than specialist theoretically-focussed analyses such as L'Etang (2008) and Toth (2007), but more than most general public relations text books. A number of other Australian texts contain less than 20 pages discussing theory (5–10% of their content). This refutes claims noted by Byrne (2008) that university courses are overly theoretical and not practical. A highly practical focus in public relations textbooks is shown in the following analysis of the roles/fields of practice and specific methods and activities that comprise public relations.

The most discussed aspects of public relations overall are its various roles and fields of practice, to which 1,902.7 pages of total public relations text and reference book content are devoted (32.06%). Within the broad field of public relations, *publicity and media relations* is by far the most discussed role or specific field of practice (411.5 pages—almost 7% of the total content of the 14 texts). The next most discussed role and specific field of practice is *cross-cultural and global communication* (175 pages). However, most of this discussion (116 pages) is contained in just two books—Curtin and Gaither's specialist text on international public relations and Toth's edited volume which includes several chapters discussing international application of Excellence Theory. Most of the 80 pages discussing international public relations and cross-cultural communication in Toth (2007) advocate the application of Excellence Theory as a general global theory of public relations and include little critical analysis of the theory or the practices it informs. The main roles and specific fields of practice discussed in public relations texts are listed in Table 3.

*Table 3 Public relations roles/fields of practice most discussed in public relations texts*

<b>Public relations roles/fields of practice</b>	<b>No. of pages of discussion</b>
Publicity and media relations	411.5
Cross-cultural and global communication	175.0
Crisis communication	163.1
Government relations/public affairs	159.8
Marketing/integrated marketing communication	156.4
NGO communication	110.3
Internal/employee communication	108.3
Community relations	101.0
Issues management	83.5
Shareholder/investor relations	67.3

Specific public relations methods and activities are discussed in 1,319 pages (22.23% of total public relations text and reference book content). The most discussed methods and activities are listed in Table 4.

*Table 4 Public relations activities most discussed in public relations texts*

<b>Public relations activities</b>	<b>No. of pages of discussion</b>
Strategic planning	249.0
Research for evaluation	211.3
Media relations	182.0
Writing	169.8
Web/internet communication	148.5
Formative research	74.0
Events	69.0
Speeches and presentations	60.3
Publications (incl. newsletters, annual reports)	52.0
Sponsorship	30.6

In addition to discussion of the roles or fields of practice comprising public relations and the specific activities undertaken, a number of major themes were analysed in the second level of coding. Eight key themes were analysed across the 14 texts and reference books as shown in Table 5.

*Table 5 Main focus of public relations texts and reference books, including international public relations and critical texts*

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Pages</b>	<b>% of total</b>
Case studies	469.0	7.90
Critical analysis	443.5	7.47
Research	337.9	5.69
Public relations industry structure & professionalisation	205.8	3.47
Ethics	187.0	3.15
Legal / regulatory issues	146.4	2.47
public relations history	133.0	2.24
New/social media	65.3	1.10

Table 5 illustrates that a major focus of public relations texts and reference books is *case studies*. Excluding Toth's edited volume on Excellence Theory, which contains mostly theoretical discussion, more pages are devoted to case studies than to theory. One 660-page text analysed contained 113.5 pages devoted to case studies (17.2% of the text)—albeit this text was very low on theory with only 18 pages of theoretical discussion (2.7% of the text). Most public relations textbooks contain 30–60 pages of case studies. This further refutes claims that public relations texts and reference books are highly theoretical and remote from practice. Furthermore, it shows that public relations texts and reference books broadly align with the needs of practitioners as explored by Byrne (2008) who, as part of doctoral research, found that practitioners rate media relations, publicity, corporate communication, issues and crisis management, writing, and event management as their most important roles and activities (p. 23).

At face value, these findings also suggest that critical analysis is a major feature of public relations texts and reference books. However, while showing existence of a critical perspective in texts, this apparent finding is distorted because almost all of the critical analysis identified is contained in two texts—L'Etang's self-professed critique and Curtin and Gaither's alternative views and models presented in their text on international public relations (2007). Table 6 shows the focus of public relations texts and reference books with these two specifically critical texts removed, and this is far more representative of the focus of public relations texts and reference books generally.

Table 6 Main focus of mainstream public relations texts and reference books

Issue	Pages	% of total
Case studies	416.0	7.69
Research	319.9	5.91
public relations industry structure & professionalisation	194.8	3.60
Ethics	145.0	2.68
Legal/regulatory issues	137.4	2.54
Public relations history	131.0	2.45
Critical analysis	63.5	1.17
New / social media	60.3	1.11

Analysis across 12 general public relations texts and reference books (i.e. excluding L’Etang’s critique of Western/US models and theories of public relations and Curtin and Gaither’s alternative models for international public relations) shows only 63.5 pages of critical analysis—just 1.17% of these 12 public relations texts and reference books. Even much of this, while raising critical issues, is defensive—for example, in most discussion of public relations positioned as propaganda or “spin”, public relations texts predominantly focus on presenting a contrary argument. In other than the few texts specifically framed within critical theory, analysis shows that there is very little critical thinking and analysis in public relations texts and reference books. In the main, public relations texts focus on normative and often idealised models of public relations and discuss the practice in a celebratory and advocacy tone. For instance, despite its many merits as a contemporary public relations text, the introduction to Chia and Synnott (2009) opens with the laudatory sentence:

These are inspiring times for public relations educators, practitioners, and students because the public relations profession is starting to be recognised for the significant contribution it makes to organisations, the community, and to society as a whole. (Chia, 2009, p. 4)

Noting criticisms of public relations, the author dismisses these, saying “the media often portray public relations as spin, hype, and propaganda but this is an outdated view and no longer appropriate to or reflective of contemporary practice” (Chia, 2009, p. 4).

As in the considerable amount of discussion about whether public relations is a profession, these statements reveal a widely-deployed advocacy in discussing public relations, blaming a marginal few or the media for negative perceptions that occur, and avoiding engagement in critical thinking and analysis of practices that warrant close examination in terms of power relations, equity, social capital, political economy, culture, social constructionism, and other theoretical frameworks.

Only *new/social media* receive less attention in the texts analysed. This is equally concerning, as social media have been identified by many scholars as a major revolution affecting the social, cultural and professional practices of public communication (Flew, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Macnamara, 2010; Nightingale & Dwyer, 2007) and a major area for focus in public relations (Breakenridge, 2008; Macnamara, 2010). The disparity between “Web/internet communication” discussed as a public relations method/activity in 148.5 pages and discussion of new/social media in just 65.3 pages (1.11% of total text and reference book content analysed) is caused by a primary focus in public relations textbooks on Web 1.0 and quite dated communication technologies.

For example, in a 21-page chapter on “PR and the internet” in Harrison (2008), more than half deals with email, Web sites (i.e. Web 1.0), extranets and intranets. Only 5 pages specifically discuss interactive social media. US textbooks are no better—for example the 2010 edition of Wilcox and Cameron’s widely used text contains a 28-page chapter titled “New technologies in public relations”, which discusses desktop publishing, online conferencing, facsimile, dictation, voice and audio news releases, cell phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and electronic blackboards. It also lists “new tech tools” as including presentation software such as Microsoft PowerPoint, Web searching, CD-ROM, the internet, intranets, Web sites, and calendar software such as Outlook. Only three and a half pages of this text focus on Web 2.0-based social media and this is mainly comprised of a list of social media such as wikis, blogs, and social networks. In another chapter on “Radio, television and the web”, Wilcox and Cameron (2010) devote one page to discussing podcasting, half a page to organisational Webcasts, and one and a half pages to blogs. Scant details are provided in these brief overviews. Even more problematically, in a 36-page chapter titled “Public Relations in the digital age” in Guth and Marsh (2007), no mention is made of Web 2.0 or social media at all, with all discussion focussed on one-way (Web 1.0) digital media such as Web sites and other now dated communication media such as CD-ROMs.

Social media are discussed in some contemporary Australian public relations texts, such as Chia and Synnott (2009). However, their chapter on new media contains some basic errors—for example, it describes Twitter as a new media “that allows short posts (up to 140 words)”<sup>5</sup>. Analysis shows a lack of up-to-date and detailed discussion on social media within public relations texts.

*Research* is extensively discussed in public relations texts and reference books. This seems paradoxical in light of the under-utilisation of research in public relations practice discussed by many authors (e.g. Watson & Simmons, 2004; Xavier, Patel & Johnston, 2004). However, most discussion of research in public relations texts is presented in specific chapters titled “research” or “evaluation”—or both. While there are some exceptions, such as Chia and Synnott (2009), where evaluation is discussed within chapters such as “Engaging with the media”, and Harrison (2008), where evaluation is discussed in chapters such as “Crisis communication”, research is most often segregated rather than integrated into discussion of public relations activities. This segregation of research rather than its integration into day-to-day public relations methods and activities may explain why research teaching does not align with research practice in public relations. Research is positioned as something separate from day-to-day public relations practice, and this approach also potentially means that students and practitioners can skip over research chapters.

Industry structure and professionalisation are widely discussed in public relations texts and reference books, including description of the size of the public relations industry in financial and employment terms, job titles and descriptions, salary ranges, public relations associations and institutes, development of continuing professional education, and other initiatives to gain professional status. Many public relations texts and reference books include very practical chapters containing advice on finding a job, as well as descriptions of the industry and its structure of consultancy firms and in-house

---

<sup>5</sup> Twitter is a microblogging open source Web 2.0 medium that allows posts of 140 characters (approximately 20–25 words).

departments and their various lines of reporting. This further illustrates the grounding of public relations texts and reference books in practice.

This analysis also shows that ethics is widely discussed, along with legal and regulatory issues and the history of public relations. However, despite wide discussion of ethics, only a few public relations texts provide practical tools for guiding practitioner behaviour. For instance, the Potter Box, TARES test, and other such aids are discussed in only two of the texts analysed. The public relations industry and academe seem to rely on moral philosophy and industry codes of practice that are voluntary and unenforceable.

## **Conclusions**

This analysis shows that, despite frequent claims of a gap between public relations academic scholarship and practice, public relations texts and reference books are strongly orientated to practice, with a major focus on case studies, extensive description of the various roles and fields of practice, and detailed discussion of day-to-day methods and activities. Furthermore, there is a strong focus on strategic planning which, aside from criticisms of being management-orientated and therefore asymmetrical, is commendable in moving public relations towards professionalism and focus on outcomes rather than short-term tactics.

However, four major gaps can be identified in public relations texts and reference books—and, therefore, potentially in public relations teaching and practice. First, despite a decade of increasing critical thinking, many public relations texts remain predominantly Western, grounded in positivism, functionalism, and systems theory, and dominated by US-centric theories and models of practice. Second, many public relations texts are largely devoid of critical analysis. Third, they are severely lacking in theoretical and practical engagement with social media. Fourth, research is mostly segregated as an “add on” rather than integrated into practices and activities.

While there are brief references to non-US theories and models and noteworthy non-US orientated chapters in some Australian texts, such as “Focus on Asian public relations management” in Chia and Synnott (2009), Australian authored texts do not reflect contemporary thinking in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa and even the nearby “New Zealand school” (L’Etang, 2008, p. 11), which increasingly challenges and seeks to broaden US-centric views. It is recognised that educators draw on journal articles, papers, Web sites, and other materials in their teaching and may introduce alternative ideas and theories through these. However, as prescribed and recommended texts constitute central reference points for many scholars and students, these findings warrant close consideration.

As part of a multicultural society located in the Asia Pacific region with practitioners increasingly working globally, Australian public relations teaching and practice should include more diverse perspectives. As Curtin and Gaither point out, “there’s much for public relations to learn about itself by stepping outside of comfort zones and its traditional knowledge base, provided largely by Western scholars and global public relations enterprises” (2007, p. 261).

## References

- Berger, A. (2000). *Media and communication research methods: An introduction to qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Botan, C. & Hazelton, V. (2006). *Public relations theory II*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bowen, S. (2007). The extent of ethics. In E. Toth (Ed.), *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management* (pp. 275-297). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Breakenridge, D. (2008). *PR 2.0: New media, new tools, new audiences*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press.
- Broom, G. (2009). *Cutlip & Center's effective public relations* (10th edn.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Byrne, K. (2008). The value of academia: Variance among academic and practitioner perspectives on the role of public relations practice. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 9, 17-34.
- Chia, J. (2009). Understanding twenty-first century public relations. In J. Chia & G. Synnott (Eds.), *An introduction to public relations: From theory to practice* (pp. 3-30). South Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Chia, J. & Synnott, G. (Eds.) (2009). *Introduction to public relations: From theory to practice*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Curtin, P. & Gaither, T. (2007). *International public relations: Negotiating culture, identity and power*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dozier, D. (1992). The organisational roles of communications and public relations practitioners. In J. Grunig (Ed.), *Excellence in public relations and communication management* (pp. 327-355). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Dozier, D., Grunig, L. & Grunig, J. (1995). *Manager's guide to excellence in public relations and communication management*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Elwood, W. (1995). *Public relations inquiry as rhetorical criticism*. Westport, CT: Praegar.
- Ferguson, M. (1984). *Building theory in public relations: Interorganisational relationships as public relations paradigm*. Paper presented to the conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Gainesville, FL.
- Flew, T. (2008). *New media: An introduction*. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Franklin, B., Hogan, M., Langley, Q., Mosdell, N. & Pill, E. (2009). *Key concepts in public relations*. London: Sage.
- Glaser, B. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Adline.
- Grunig, J. (1966). The role of information in economic decision making. *Journalism Monographs*, 3, 1-51.

- Grunig, J. (2001). Two-way symmetrical public relations: Past, present and future. In R. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* (pp. 11-30). London: Sage.
- Grunig, J. & Grunig, L. (1992). Models of public relations and communication. In J. Grunig (Ed.), *Excellence in public relations and communication management* (pp. 285-325). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Grunig, J. & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. Orlando, FL: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Grunig, L., Grunig J. & Dozier D. (2002). *Excellent organizations and effective organizations: A study of communication management in three countries*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Guth, D. & Marsh, C. (2007). *Public relations: A values-driven approach* (3rd edn.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.
- Hagan, L. (2007). For reputation's sake: Managing crisis communication. In E. Toth (Ed.), *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management: Challenges for the next generation* (pp. 413-440). Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Harrison, K. (2008). *Strategic public relations: A practical guide to success*. Perth: Century Consulting Group.
- Heath, R. (Ed.). (2005). *Encyclopaedia of public relations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: sage.
- Heath, R. (2005). Antecedent of modern public relations. In R. Heath (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of public relations* (pp. 32-36). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Holtzhausen, D. (2000). Postmodern values in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(1), 93-114.
- Holtzhausen, D. & Voto, R. (2002). Resistance from the margins: The postmodern public relations practitioner as organisational activist. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 14(1), 57-85.
- Holtzhausen, D. (2007). Activism. In E. Toth (Ed.), *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management* (pp. 357-379). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hon, L. & Grunig, J. (1999). Guidelines for measuring relationships in public relations. Institute for Public Relations. Retrieved November 21, 2007 from [http://www.instituteforpr.org/files/uploads/Guidelines\\_Measuring\\_Relationships.pdf](http://www.instituteforpr.org/files/uploads/Guidelines_Measuring_Relationships.pdf)
- Jelen, A. (2008). The nature of scholarly endeavours in public relations. In B. Van Ruler, A. Verčič, & D. Verčič (Eds.), *Public relations metrics: Research and evaluation* (pp.36-59). New York: Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Johnston, J. & Zawawi, C. (2009). *Public relations: Theory and practice* (3rd edn.). Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Krippendorff, K. (2003). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Krippendorff, K. & Bock, M. (2009). *The content analysis reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ledingham, J. & Bruning, S. (2001). *Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Leitch, S. & Neilson, D. (2001). Bringing publics into public relations: New theoretical frameworks for practice. In R. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* (pp. 127-138). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- L'Etang, J. (2008). *Public relations concepts, practice and critique*. London: Sage.
- L'Etang, J. & Pieczka, M. (1996). *Critical perspectives in public relations*. London: International Thomson Business Press.
- L'Etang, J. & Pieczka, M. (2006). *Public relations: Critical debates and contemporary practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Littlejohn, S. & Foss, K. (2008). *Theories of human communication* (9th edn.). Belmont, CA: Thomson-Wadsworth.
- Macnamara, J. (2010). *The 21<sup>st</sup> century media (r)evolution: Emergent communication practices*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Mahoney, J. (2008). *Public relations writing in Australia*. South Melbourne: Oxford.
- McKie, D. (2008). Postmodernism and PR. In J. L'Etang, *Public relations concepts, practice and critique* (pp. 259-260). London: Sage.
- McKie, D. & Munshi, D. (2005). Global public relations: A different perspective. *Public Relations Review*, 30(4).
- McKie, D. & Munshi, D. (2007). *Reconfiguring public relations: Equity, ecology and enterprise*. London: Routledge.
- Motion, J. & Leitch, S. (1996). A discursive perspective from New Zealand: Another world view. *Public Relations Review*, 22, 297-309.
- Murphy, P. (1991). Limits of symmetry. In J. Grunig & L. Grunig (Eds.), *Public relations research annual*, Vol. 3 (pp. 115-131). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Neuendorf, K. (2002). *The content analysis guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nightingale, V. & Dwyer, T. (Eds.). (2007). *New media worlds: Challenges for convergence*. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Pearson Education. (2009, November). Unpublished survey of Australian PR educators. Author.
- Philo, G. (2007). News content studies: Media group methods and discourse analysis: A comparison of approaches. In E. Devereaux (Ed.), *Media studies: Key issues and debates* (pp. 101-33). London: Sage.
- Pieczka, M. (1996). Paradigms systems theory and public relations. In J. L'Etang & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Critical perspectives in public relations* (pp. 124-156). London: International Thomson Business Press.

- Pieczka, M. (2006). Paradigms, systems theory and public relations. In J. L'Etang & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Public relations: Critical debates and contemporary practice* (pp. 331-358). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Potter, W. (2009). *Arguing for a general framework for mass media scholarship*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Punch, K. (1998). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. London: Sage.
- Sallot, L., Lyon, L., cost-Alzuru, C. & Jones, K. (2003). From aardvark to zebra: A new millennium analysis of theory development in public relations academic journals. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 15(1), 27-90.
- Shannon, C. & Weaver, W. (1949). *The mathematical theory of communication*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois.
- Sheehan, M. & Xavier, R. (2009). *Public relations campaigns*. South Melbourne: Oxford.
- Spicer, C. (2007). Collaborative advocacy and the creation of trust: Toward an understanding of stakeholder claims and risks. In E. Toth (Ed.), *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management: Challenges for the next generation* (pp. 27-40). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sriramesh, K. (2004). *Public relations in Asia: An anthology*. Singapore: Thomson.
- Sriramesh, K. & Verčič, D. (2009). *The global public relations handbook: Theory, research and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Stanton, R. (2007). *Media relations*. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Steyn, B. (2007). Contribution of public relations to organisational strategy formulation. In E. Toth (Ed.), *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management* (pp. 137-172). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Thayer, L. (1968). *Communication and communication system*. Homewood, IL: Irwin.
- Toth, E. (Ed.). (2007). *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Tymson, C., Lazar, P. & Lazar, R. (Eds.). (2008). *The new Australian and New Zealand public relations manual* (5th edn.). Sydney: Tymson Communications.
- Van Ruler, B. & Verčič, D. (2005). Reflective communication management: Future ways for public relations research. In P. Kalbfleisch (Ed.), *Communication yearbook*, 29 (pp. 239-273). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Watson, T. & Simmons, P. (2004). Public relations evaluation: Survey of Australian practitioners. In *Proceedings of the Australian New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA04) conference, University of Sydney, July*. Retrieved January 14, 2008, from <http://conferences.arts.usyd.edu.au/viewpaper.php?id=97&cf=3>
- Wilcox, D. & Cameron, G. (2010). *Public relations strategies and tactics* (9th edn.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Xavier, R., Johnston, K. & Patel, A. (2004). Are we really making a difference: the gap between outcomes and evaluation research in public relations campaigns. In *Proceedings of Australian New Zealand Communication Association conference, Sydney*,

7-9 July. Retrieved April 11, 2006, from  
<http://conferences.arts.usyd.edu.au/viewabstract.php?id=114&cf=3>