

Published in "Public Relations Review" 38(5), 2012, 807-809
which should be cited to refer to this work

Overview of the “state of the field”

David McKie^{a,*}, Anne Gregory^b, Diana Ingenhoff^c

^a Management Communication Department, University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240, New Zealand

^b Centre for Public Relations Studies, Leeds Business School, Leeds Metropolitan University, 25 Queen Square, Leeds, LS2 8AF, United Kingdom

^c Organisational Communication and Communication Management, University of Fribourg, Switzerland

1. Introduction

It has been fascinating to edit a special issue with the agenda-setting title of the “state of the field.” We were initially curious to see what kind of submissions arrived, and, given the relatively high attrition rate, which ones would survive the reviewing process. We cannot claim with certainty that only the fittest did survive. We give grateful thanks to the many, previously unknown to us, reviewers who did such sterling work and often gave up time in holiday periods to respond with detailed feedback. If anyone reading this seeks to help shape the field, then we strongly advise two sets of actions: firstly, get keywords for your expertise into your publications; and, secondly, be accessible as a *Public Relations Review* reviewer.

What is obvious in an overview of the papers that were submitted to the special issue is the broad range of issues and themes that are occupying the academy in public relations: from concerns about research methodology to the clash of the newly dominant nations and traditional western values and ways of working. This is a sign of healthy diversity. There is another interpretation however, and one that might be seen as a paradox rather than a contradiction. Public relations and specifically public relations scholarship and research, is still unsure of itself – of its jurisdiction and role. While a number of themes were identifiable, it is difficult to pick out a direction of travel. Furthermore, it was surprising to see that many of the issues which concern the practice are still addressed obliquely or not addressed at all in a special issue titled the “state of the field”. For example the issues faced by practitioners in a globalized world and the links between public relations in and for organizations and in society which go beyond the narrow constraints of CSR. Nonetheless, the papers in this special issue do give us a broad sweep of some of the concerns of the field.

In one way, the special issue was clearly not without bias. Many contributors had a head start by addressing a similar theme in the International PR Conference held at the Open University of Catalonia in Barcelona in early July, 2011. That strongly international conference featured participants from 25 nations and covered a wider range of contemporary concerns. Indeed, one of the most visible features of papers at that conference was how many were concerned with issues of nationality, especially branding and cultural diplomacy. In addition, there was a strong focus on cross-national aspects. We see this as a likely area of continuing interest and predict many more contestations between national branding that is mainly derived from advertising and marketing – and extending to smaller entities as in Anholt's (2007) *Competitive Identity: The New Brand*

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 7 8384197; +64 7 838 4358.
E-mail address: dmckie@mngt.waikato.ac.nz (D. McKie).

Management for Nations, Cities, and Regions – to the detriment of public relations, which seeks more ongoing stakeholder involvement and relationship building.

Rasmussen and Merckelsen's "The New Public Relations of States: How Nation Branding Practices Affect the Security Function of Public Diplomacy?" contributes to the debate on the role of public relations. Using the case of the Danish government response to the so-called Cartoon Crisis, they examined commonalities and tensions between nation branding and public diplomacy efforts. They conclude that national security aspects will diminish with a shift from the public relations of states to the marketing of states.

Developing public relations aspects capable of augmenting the field's contribution in more radical fashion, Xifra and McKie's "From Realpolitik to Noopolitik: The Public Relations of (Stateless) Nations in an Information Age" offers an unusual combination of soft power, Castellsian network theory, and noopolitik (influenced early on by U.S. military research), to highlight the innovative paradiplomacy of the Government of Catalonia. Their innovative adaptation of ideas from disparate sources opens innovative pathways to ethical and non-violent development for traditional nation states and stateless nations alike. This theoretical fusion, and the examples of its enactment, redeploys traditional uses of public relations by nations in directions more fitted to contemporary global conditions and less biased in favor of the already powerful. In the end it is unfortunate that many of the other public relations and nation papers either failed to make the cut, or had authors who were unable to complete the revisions in time. Certainly, as editors, we foresee an increase in both the range and depth of future work in the public relations of nations arena and look to contribute to this ourselves.

The Barcelona conference advantage did bring a number of submissions from Catalonia and Spain and some of these appear in the issue. Marca and Matilla's "The Accountability Gap in PR Practices: The Use of Preliminary and Evaluative Research: International Operating Conditions and the Spanish Case" looked at the significant area of return on investment (ROI). The authors sought to add to sparse research into Spanish conditions in the light of international findings. In finding discrepancies between the Spanish study and other countries, they added original field research to both the national and international literature.

A second Spanish study also used fieldwork. However, Estanyol's "Marketing, public relations, and how Web 2.0 is changing their relationship: A qualitative assessment of PR consultancies operating in Spain," moves from the quantitative and the traditional to the qualitative and recent social media developments. Significantly, she found that Spanish practitioners were optimistic about the new possibilities and saw themselves as having relevant expertise and gaining recognition for how they were adapting to the new challenges. Estanyol's research uncovered little evidence of doom and gloom about the contemporary situation as her practitioner interviews were extremely positive about the opportunities that Web.2.0 offered for gaining status for the profession in Spain. This study too was embedded in international findings from Latin America to New Zealand and also gave an up-to-date account of that familiar topic, the relations between marketing and public relations.

In the evolutionary struggle for publication on the state of the field, the strongest theme in terms of submission numbers was undoubtedly the changing relations between advertising, marketing, and public relations and not just on the promotion of nations. Beyond featuring in work on national branding and public relations, a number of very different articles converged around this theme and it is clearly of interest in the practice and in the theory. Smith's "Public Relations Identity and the Stakeholder–Organization Relationship: A Revised Theoretical Position for Public Relations Scholarship" revisited more recent forms of integrated marketing communication (IMG) in more positive fashion than usual in the public relations literature. He also recommends revising the literature on relationships to create a distinctive public relations positioning in the vital arena of stakeholder–organization relationships. Smith, like Estanyol, also discerns value in how social media can differentiate public relations as a field. This question of how to differentiate the field from marketing has a spectre that has been haunting the field in fresh ways over the last decade. In his less positive take on IMG and marketing's colonization of relationship building, James Hutton, in chapters in both *Handbooks of Public Relations* (Hutton, 2001; Hutton, 2010), situated our field as having to struggle for survival against marketing theorists, especially Philip Kotler, who aimed "to include or subsume much or all of public relations" (Hutton, 2010, p. 509).

In "Renegotiating the Terms of Engagement: Public Relations, Marketing, and Contemporary Challenges," McKie and Willis attempt to put some of the latest incarnations of the same specter of obliteration to rest in a different fashion. They update Hutton's fear by reviewing recent marketing publications, and, at times, find cause to rally with Hutton's "call to arms" to defend public relations against "old" and unreconstituted marketing imperialism. Nevertheless, they find lessons for public relations to learn from the latest work by Kotler and other marketing figures, and combine them with the rich public relations material on complexity theory. Rather surprisingly, after their combative start, McKie and Willis conclude with their own call to learn from the "new" marketing and to look for ways for academics in both fields to renegotiate their terms of engagement rather than just re-fighting tired territorial contests.

What emerged as the second largest theme in the special issue submissions, was the state of crisis communication. Pang's article "State of crisis consultancy in Singapore: Exploration of the expertise, experience and expediency of consultants in public relations agencies," displayed the natural internationality of much work on crisis. Writing from Singapore, Pang deployed many of the well-known U.S. names but wrote that his study was inspired by Frandsen and Johansen's (2008) Danish study. As with the Spanish study of the accountability gap, Pang's research contributes to the substantial growth of national plotting of international phenomena. His work was also evidence of a trend whereby a number of Asian scholars in public relations are not just immersed in U.S. scholarship but open to European and other international literature. Other

submissions from Asia – on both ethics and media relations – were also distinctive in taking a strong cross-cultural approach as was a submission on Latin America.

Ethics featured in a number of conference papers but only one made it through to the special issue. In discussing this, the editors reached a consensus that ethical considerations are at an interesting moment in the public relations field. Much of the traditional work has faltered with the advent of social media and the new challenges of Web2.0. At the same time, new work that takes on board the need for more current theory is still not very visible. Fawkes' article here "Saints and Sinners: Competing Identities in Public Relations Ethics" revitalizes thinking in the field by the introduction of Jungian perspectives. Her innovative approach allows a refreshing approach that avoids the usual damning judgements in favor of opening new avenues in considering the "shadow" side of public relations.

In "Public Relations and Community: A Persistent Covenant," Valentini, Kruckeberg, and Starck join the growing movement for a more socially responsive public relations. In strongly asserting the need for change, Valentini et al. critique the old paradigm. They also draw from Kruckeberg and Starck's seminal work on reconstructing community theory and see the time as ripe for a revival. In "Fringe Public Relations: How Activism Moves Critical PR Toward the Mainstream," Coombs and Holladay track the larger shift of critical theory from the margin and the gradual decay of the edifice of excellence theory and traditional paradigms that fail to acknowledge power differences. They connect the slow fall of organization-centric efforts with the associated re-assessment of activism and activists by the field. Without rose-tinted spectacles, they chart the acknowledgement of the positive aspects of the change, and welcome the interlinked potential in the alliance of activists with critical theorists.

While their ending is not pessimistic, Coombs and Holladay conclude that a window of opportunity does exist but that it may not last for long. The state of the field is not dissimilar: once-dominant factions still have points to make; new writers have probably the best conditions for emergence ever because of the growth in new book publishers and journals; and many scholars simply continue to do quality work outside of any groupings. The field is in productive flux and it is still hard to see where it will go. We hope that you, like us, find that more exciting than frustrating.

References

- Anholt, S. (2007). *Competitive identity: The new brand management for nations, cities, and regions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hutton, J. (2001). Defining the relationship between public relations and marketing. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* (pp. 205–214). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hutton, J. (2010). Defining the relationship between public relations and marketing: Public relations' most important challenge. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *SAGE handbook of public relations* (pp. 509–521). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.