

Priorities in public relations research: An international Delphi study

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Abstract

A Delphi study on the priorities for public relations research, conducted in 2007 amongst academics, practitioners and senior executives of professional and industry bodies in five continents, has ranked the ten most important topics for research and proposed the associated research questions. This is the first completed Delphi study into public relations research since Synnott and McKie (1997) which was itself a development of earlier studies of this type by McElreath (1980, 1989 and 1994). Some of the outcomes are comparable with the earlier studies; for instance, evaluation of public relations programmes ranks third in 2007 and was amongst the leaders in the Synnott and McKie (1997) study. After piloting, twenty six public relations topics were chosen. These were sent by email to the Delphi panel. After three rounds of intensive email debate, the Top Ten public relation research topics were in ranked order:

- 1) Public relations' role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation, and organisational functioning
- 2) The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital, managing key relationships and realising organisational advantage
- 3) The measurement and evaluation of public relations, both offline and online
- 4) Public relations as a fundamental management function
- 5) Professional skills in public relations; analysis of the industry's need for education
- 6) Research into standards of performance among PR professionals; the licensing of practitioners
- 7) Management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation
- 8) Ethics in public relations
- 9) Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries
- 10) Management of relationships

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Introduction

It is more than ten years since Synnott and McKie (1997) reported their Delphi study on public relations research priorities with an emphasis on international issues. Before that study, McElreath had used this approach in 1980 and 1989 in his papers, *Priority research questions for public relations in the 1980s* and ... *in the 1990s* to advise North American academic and practitioners. Synnott and McKie acknowledged McElreath's approach by basing their study on the results of his 1989 research. In the United Kingdom, White and Blamphin (1994) used a Delphi study to review the priorities for research into public relations practice there. It resulted in a list of sixteen topics. Since 1997, there has been an attempt to undertake a Delphi study into 'the parameters of public relations in Europe' (van Ruler et al., 2004) but it was not able to develop a research agenda nor did it find a common body of public relations knowledge in Europe (Raupp and van Ruler, 2006). The Delphi study methodology, which is discussed below, was chosen in this study of public relations priorities in the 'noughties' for comparability and consistency.

Academic research needs closer alignment with the interests of practice and the author noted Broom's comments about the need for more research and theory building in public relations:

Public relations is not so developed that we can draw a boundary around a body of knowledge and limit our enquiry to what is reported in public relations literature. Rather we are in the early stages of building theory that may some day provide a foundation for the emerging profession and its practice. (Broom 2006, p. 141)

Delphi studies

The Delphi study approach was, as noted above, chosen for comparability but another aim was to seek consensus or judgement on these issues (Beretta, 1996, Green et al., 1999). It allows the grouping and subsequent analysis of the ideas of experts in order to gain a closer understanding of issues that would not be offered by other qualitative or quantitative studies. The reasons for conducting a study using the Delphi method have been summarised by Dawson and Brucker (2001) as (a) there is no other group communication process than can elicit the same data; (b) the researcher can identify and access the 'experts' to discuss this problem; and (c) the researcher can forecast the type of results that may be obtained from these experts through the Delphi method (after Linstone and Turoff, 1975, and Ziglio, 1996).

The Delphi method has been used widely in business (Kaynak et al., 1994, Addison, 2003), nursing and healthcare (Jenkins and Smith, 2004, McKenna, 1994), and communications education (Smith, 1997). In public relations research, as noted earlier, there have been several major national and international studies using this method (McElreath, 1980, McElreath, 1989, McElreath and Blamphin, 1994, White and Blamphin, 1994, Synnott and McKie, 1997, van Ruler et al., 2004, Boynton, 2006).

The popularity of this method arises because it can be conducted semi-anonymously amongst respondents who are geographically dispersed. For example, Synnott and McKie's 1997

study covered 13 nations in Asia-Pacific and van Ruler et al (2004) included between 22 and 25 European countries. A Delphi study typically has two or three rounds of contact with the experts in which comments are first elicited, then summarised and returned for further discussion. Until recently, most Delphi studies have been conducted by post or some other paper-based method (Kendall, 1996) and, latterly, by email. The use of email or internet-based methods has speeded up the process. Boynton (2006) reports use of the internet-based Survey Monkey software for a Delphi study on ethical decision making in public relations had shortened the distribution and response times. However, her 36% response rate from an expert panel was no better (and possibly worse) than the previously conventional mail or paper-based methodology. For example, Synnott and McKie (1997) had a response of 48% to their initial approach to panels, as did White and Blamphin (1994). van Ruler et al. (2004) using email as their communication tool, however, had a higher initial response rate of 84% although this had dropped to 62% in the final round. It appears that the selection of the panel and the initial approach may play an important role in gaining and maintaining high levels of continuing participation.

Methodology

The lessons from previous studies to be applied to this research were concerned with selecting, attracting and retaining the experts who would participate in the panel, and in constructing a study process that they saw offered value to them. Unlike some previous Delphi studies in public relations, this was aimed at a fully international audience. There was also another change, this time in the sample. Earlier studies had focused on academics and practitioners, but this study included the CEOs (or similar title) of public relations professional and industry bodies because of their overview of the whole sector and not just the issues that impinged on individual academic or professional respondents. The sample was also to be gender-balanced, reflecting the impact of women in public relations employment in developed nations. With these elements, triangulation was offered by employment, region and gender was in advance of earlier studies.

Following the lead of Synnott and McKie (1997), there were six stages in the study. Stage 1 was to pilot a set of 24 propositions on the Internet using the author's personal blog (weblog); Stage 2 was to invite academics, practitioners and industry leaders to participate in the study; Stage 3 was to send Round 1 of the research topic propositions to those who had accepted invitations and prepare a report; Stage 4 was to send the Round 2 propositions and follow up with a report on Round 2's responses and discussion; Stage 5 had the Round 3 propositions and report; Stage 6 was the distribution of the Final Report on the research topics and related research questions. This was distributed on July 30, 2007 to all those who had accepted the invitation to take part in the study. Slightly more than three months elapsed from the start of the study to its completion.

Stage 1 – Pre-testing of topics by blog posting

The Stage 1 pre-testing of proposition was posted on the author's blog on April 18. The link to the site's URL was sent to contacts in the public relations sector internationally, who were not to be invited to participate in the Delphi study, in order to stimulate responses. This approach was also undertaken to test the viability of blogs as research tools, a practice on which there is a

lack of literature. Readers of the blog, including any who came upon it as part of their trawling of the Internet, were asked to rank the topics from 1 (top priority) to 10 (tenth priority). There were sixteen responses from Australia, Canada, India, Ireland, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States. Respondents were practitioners, academics and industry leaders, who were employed in consultancies, government, universities, industry, not-for-profits and suppliers. Their ten ranked topics were:

Topics ranked by priority in blog pre-test

1. The impact of technology on public relations practice and theory
2. The measurement and evaluation of public relations, both offline and online
- 3= Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries
- 3= Management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation
- 5= Client understanding of public relations strategy and tactics
- 7= Research into standards of performance among public relations professionals; the licensing of practitioners
- 7= Professional skills in public relations; Analysis of the industry's need for education; Theories of practice
- 10= Strategic planning of public relations programmes
- 10= Quality of public relations services
- 10= Crisis management and communication; issues management

There were also recommendations for additional topics, of which the best supported were: 'Public relations' role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation, and organisational functioning'; and 'The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital, managing key relationships and realising organisational advantage'. These were added to Round 1 of the formal Delphi study.

Stage 2: Letter of invitation

A letter of invitation (Synnott and McKie, 1997) was sent by email to 44 public relations academics, practitioners and industry leaders in six international regions (Europe, North America, Central and South America, Africa, Asia and Australasia) on April 10, 2007. They had been chosen for their prominence in research, practice and as leaders of major industry bodies. Some were known by the author but all were chosen on the basis of their position and expertise, thus qualifying them as experts (Dawson and Brucker, 2001). The letter introduced the aim of the study, the research methodology and the commitment sought. Anonymous reporting of comments was emphasised. All were offered a choice of communication methods (email, fax, written or online communication – blog or forum). Some thirty one accepted the invitation (70.45 per cent) and all chose email communication. There was no response from Central and South America at this or any other stage of the study.

Stage 3: Round 1 topics and report

For Round 1, those who had accepted the invitation to participate were emailed a letter

introducing the aims of the study. They were asked to consider twenty six topics and choose up to ten of them in a ranked order as to their importance for future research. The participants were also invited to comment on the topics and to propose other topics or research questions (RQs) which could be added to the study. As the study was being sent to a wide range of countries and cultures, a ‘middle way’ between academic and professional practice language was taken to frame the topics. An offer to explain terminology was made, as was the receipt of responses by audio file for those for whom English was not a first or familiar language. In the event, neither offer was taken up. Accompanying the letter was the Round 1 document which introduced the study, listed the 26 topics and included a grid table on which they could rank the topics by the letter denoting them and add comments and/or research questions. There was also space to add additional topics. The letter and Round 1 document were emailed on April 23, 2007 with a request for response by May 8, 2007. The topics disseminated for Round 1 were:

Topics – Round 1

- A. Public relations’ role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation, and organisational functioning
- B. Quality of public relations services
- C. Research into standards of performance among PR professionals; the licensing of practitioners
- D. Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries
- E. The measurement and evaluation of public relations, both offline and online
- F. Client understanding of public relations strategy and tactics
- G. Professional skills in public relations; Analysis of the industry’s need for education; Theories of practice
- H. Management of relationships
- I. The definition of public relations
- J. The impact of technology on public relations practice and theory
- K. The culture of public relations
- L. International issues in public relations; Intercultural public relations
- M. Public relations’ position as a fundamental management function; public relations as a profession
- N. The expectations of users of public relations; The client: consultancy/adviser interface
- O. Public relations’ role in organisational change
- P. The place of “word-of-mouth” and buzz marketing in public relations practice
- Q. Ethics in public relations
- R. Relations with the media
- S. The history of public relations
- T. Gender issues in public relations practice
- U. The role of PR in community/social responsibility programmes
- V. Management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation
- W. Crisis management and communication; issues management
- X. Political communication and advocacy (lobbying)
- Y. Social media and its role in public relations
- Z. The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital,

managing key relationships and realising organisational advantage

Responses were received from 27 of the 31 participants (87.1 percent) representing five of the six geographic regions with Europe producing most comments and Africa the least. There was a fairly even distribution between the three employment groups and genders.

Response – Round 1

Region		
Europe & UK	40.7%	
North America	22.2%	
Africa	3.7%	
Asia	14.8%	
Australasia	18.5%	
Work		
Academic	33.3%	
Practitioner	37.0%	
Professional Body	29.6%	
Gender		
Female	48.1%	
Male	51.9%	

The topics were ranked by the mean of their valid scores. The best supported three topics were (in rank order) A, Z and E. A and Z focus on the role of public relations in its contribution to organisations in (A) strategic decision-making and organisational functioning and (Z) the creation of value. The third ranked topic E, ‘measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online’ is an expected highly ranked topic as it has historic precedents as a first or second ranked topic in previous Delphi studies on public relations. (McElreath, 1980, 1989, White and Blamphin, 1994, Synnott and McKie, 1997)

The fourth ranked topic M, ‘public relations’ position as a fundamental management function; public relations as a profession’, could also be linked to topics A and Z. There was also comment that the ‘public relations as a profession’, was a separate topic. Topic G, ‘professional skills in public relations; analysis of the industry’s need for education; and theories of practice’, was fifth ranked and also commented on as being linked with topic C (seventh ranked). These were linked in the Round 2 propositions.

Round 1 - Topics ranked by means

TOPIC	Mean priority (1	Number of
	= top priority;	respondents to
	10 = lowest)	topic /27
TOP 10 PRIORITIES		
A) Public relations’ role in	2.91	23
contributing to strategic		
decision-making, strategy		
development and realisation and		
organisational functioning		

Z) The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital; managing key relationships and realising organisational advantage	3.94	19
E) The measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online	4.05	19
M) Public relations' position as a fundamental management function; public relations as a profession	4.65	14
G) Professional skills in public relations; Analysis of the industry's need for education; Theories of practice	4.69	13
L) International issues in public relations; Intercultural public relations	5.63	8
C) Research into standards of performance among PR professionals; the licensing of practitioners	5.69	13
Q) Ethics in public relations	5.81	11
D) Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries	6	13
H) Management of relationships	6.22	9
11TH TO 20TH PRIORITIES		
J) The impact of technology on public relations practice and theory	6.25	12
V) Management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation	6.31	16
X) Political communication and advocacy (lobbying)	6.4	5
F) Client understanding of public relations strategy and tactics	6.43	7
B) Quality of public relations services	6.57	7
N) The expectations of users of public relations; The client: consultancy/adviser interface	6.75	8
U) The role of PR in community/social responsibility programmes	6.9	11
Y) Social media and its role in public relations	7.5	6
O) Public relations' role in organisational change	7.55	11
W) Crisis management and communication; issues management	8.17	6
OUTLIERS INCLUDING HIGH-SCORE, LOW RESPONSE TOPICS		
I) The definition of public	2.20	4

relations			
S) The history of public relations	4.5	2	
P) The place of "word-of-mouth" and buzz marketing in public relations practice	6.00	4	
K) The culture of public relations	7.67	3	
R) Relations with the media	7.67	3	
T) Gender issues in public relations practice	Nil	Nil	

The ranking the topics obtained gave clear priorities from first to eighth, but there was a tight cluster in ranking from ninth to seventeenth where those topics had a mean of between 6 and 6.9. It should be noted at this stage that topic J, 'the impact of technology on public relations theory and practice', which had topped the blog-based pre-test was only eleventh in the formal study. Some topics with high scores but few responses have been placed within an 'outliers' group. Only one topic, T 'Gender issues in public relations', elicited a nil response.

Stage 4: Round 2 propositions and report

Following Round 1's ranking of priorities, discussion of the topics and potential RQs, the initial twenty six topics were reduced to fifteen. Any topics with a mean ranking of above seven, and the low-response 'outlier' group were eliminated. Three topics (B, F and N) were merged into a single topic because of the similarity of their content. All topics were re-lettered, except for topic A, in the ranking order from Round 1. In this round, proposals for RQs arising from the Round 1 were included in the document that was circulated to all 31 original participants. They were again asked to rank topics from 1 (top priority) to 10 (tenth priority) and could propose additional topics and make comments on the topics and RQs.

Round 2 - Revised Topics ranked 1st to 10th

- A. Public relations role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation, and organisational function
- B. The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital; managing key relationships and realising organisational functioning
- C. The measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online
- D. Public relations' position as a fundamental management function
- E. Professional skills in public relations; Analysis of the industry's need for education; Theories of practice
- F. International issues in public relations; Intercultural public relations
- G. Research into standards of performance among PR professionals; the licensing of practitioners
- H. Ethics in public relations
- I. Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public

relations practice; discipline boundaries
 J. Management of relationships

Topics ranked 11th to 15th

- K. The impact of technology on public relations practice and theory
- L. Management of corporate reputation; management of reputation
- M. Political communication and advocacy (lobbying)
- N. Client/employer understanding of public relations (Replacing Round 1 topics B, F and N)
- O. The role of public relations in community/social responsibility programmes

New Topics, proposed from Round 1

- The personal/organisational influence model and its correlation with stakeholder relationship management
- The relationship between public diplomacy and public relations
- The role of public relations in society – what does it mean that “PR serves democracy” or that “public relations is an essential element in a democratic society”?
- Further development of theories of publics
- Proof of the two-way symmetrical model in operation

Round 2 was circulated by email on May 22 for response by June 5. There were responses from 24 experts (77.4 percent), compared with 27 in the first round. There were responses from five out of six geographic regions, with Europe again producing most comments and Africa the least. In terms of the work situation of respondents, there was a slightly strengthened response from practitioners by +4.7% with an almost matching –4.6% fall from executives leading professional bodies. The level of response from academics is unchanged, but the balance between genders changes to slightly favour females, the dominant group in industry employment.

Response – Round 2

Region	Round 2	Round 1
Europe	41.7%	40.7%
North America	20.8%	22.2%
Africa	4.2%	3.7%
Asia	12.5%	14.8%
Australasia	20.8%	18.5%
Work		
Academic	33.3%	33.3%
Practitioner	41.7%	37.0%
Professional Body	25.0%	29.6%
Gender		
Female	54.2%	48.1%
Male	45.8%	51.9%

No topic had a nil response, unlike Round 1. There were clear priorities from first to eleventh with a statistically insignificant step of 0.03% between tenth and eleventh rank. Broadly, the ranking of topics set after Round 1 remained stable, although not without debate as to whether some topics can be merged. The strongest topics were A, ‘public relations’ role in contributing to

strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation, and organisational functioning’ and B, ‘the value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital; managing key relationships and realising organisational advantage’. There was discussion as to whether these should be merged. The third ranked topic C, ‘measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online’ was an expectedly high ranked topic, as discussed in Round 1.

Round 2 - Topics ranked by means (with Round 1 mean in brackets)

TOPIC	Mean priority (1 = top priority; 10 = lowest)	Number of respondents to topic /23
TOP 10 PRIORITIES		
A) Public relations’ role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation and organisational functioning	2.43 (2.91)	22
B) The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital; managing key relationships and realising organisational advantage	3.50 (3.94)	21
C) The measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online	4.24 (4.05)	17
D) Public relations’ position as a fundamental management function	4.38 (4.65)	16
E) Professional skills in public relations; Analysis of the industry’s need for education; Theories of practice	4.67 (4.69)	18
G) Research into standards of performance among PR professionals; the licensing of practitioners	5.83 (5.69)	15
L) Management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation	6.00 (6.31)	11
H) Ethics in public relations	6.19 (5.81)	18
I) Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries	6.19 (6.00)	16
J) Management of relationships	6.42 (6.22)	12
11TH TO 15TH PRIORITIES		
N) Client/employer understanding of public relations *	6.71 (6.43)	14
K) The impact of technology on public relations practice and theory	6.86 (6.25)	14
O) The role of PR in community/social responsibility programmes	7.00 (6.90)	4

F) International issues in public relations; Intercultural public relations	7.38 (5.63)	16	
M) Political communication and advocacy (lobbying)	7.57 (6.4)	7	

* This proposition was reformulated after Round 1. The mean comparison for Round 1 is based on the former topic F: “Client understanding of public relations strategy and tactics.”

The main change in the ranking of topics was that topic F ‘international issues in public relations; intercultural public relations’, fell from sixth to fourteenth, and thus out of the Top Ten. The main riser was topic L, ‘management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation’, which rose from twelfth to seventh, although its mean ranking only changed from 6.31 to 6.00. In the eleventh to fifteenth rankings, topic N, ‘client/employer understanding of public relations’, which was reformulated after Round 1, rose from fourteenth to eleventh. It marginally missed the Top Ten by 0.03 per cent. As the sample of twenty four is small, this could be arguably considered as equal tenth. One of the unexpected aspects of the survey has been that the topic K, ‘the impact of technology on public relations practice and theory’, remained stubbornly just outside the Top Ten at eleventh in Round 1 and twelfth in Round 2, despite being topped ranked in the blog pilot and attracting widespread comment and discussion in practitioner media. There were fewer new topics added than in Round 1, and some of those sought greater clarity in existing topics or proposed new RQs within topics.

Stage 5 – Round 3 propositions

As the rankings from Round 1 to Round 2 were relatively stable and so indicated consensus, the participants were asked to comment on the RQs for Round 3, rather than again rank the propositions. A letter, the report on Round 2 and the Round 3 propositions were disseminated on June 21 for return by July 11. As there were minor changes to the RQs between Round 3 and the final report, these will be displayed under Stage 6 – Final Report. Some 16 participants (51.6 per cent of the original acceptances) commented on Round 3, some in considerable detail.

Stage 6 – Final Report

The outcome of this study was the ranked, prioritised research topics and the related research questions. They are presented in the ranking order of the topics from first to tenth. It is notable that measurement and evaluation, sometimes expressed as ‘proof’ or ‘value’, appears in several of them, as well as the dedicated topic C, ‘the measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online’.

A) Public relations’ contribution to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation, and efficient operation of organisations

- How does public relations demonstrate its contribution to the formation of organisational strategy?
- Can public relations improve the quality of organisational decision and performance by practitioners acting as the link between the organisations and its stakeholders (i.e. as

facilitators)?

- How can public relations leaders influence business decisions via timely involvement?
- Why do public relations practitioners get a seat at the “top table” in some organisations and not at others? Is there a gender or sector bias?

B) The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital and managing key relationships

- What is “value” in public relations? Is there a universal rubric or is it situational?
- How can value be best demonstrated in non-financial terms? Can intangible value be translated into measurable “bottom-line” value?
- Can social capital be measured?
- Is there proof of the two-way symmetrical model in operation?

C) The measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online

- Following the CIPR’s statement on measurement and evaluation in 2005 [www.cipr.co.uk/research] and the range of papers published by the Institute for PR [www.instituteforpr.org/research], can an international policy on evaluation be developed to aid practitioner education and introduce best practice?
- How can the effect of public relations activity on attitude formation and behaviour be modelled and measured?
- What are the factors that affect or aid the widespread adoption of public relations measurement and evaluation methods?
- How can highly targeted communication to special, highly protected audiences (such as legislators) be monitored and measured?

D) Public relations as a fundamental management function

- How is public relations expressed as a management function? What is unique about it and what ‘fundamental’ contribution does it make?
- What is the theory and best practice in the structure and operation of public relations and communication operations?
- Management of the public relations function: What are the skills of senior PR managers? Are the working practices and long hours culture an excuse for poor management skills? Why are senior managers reluctant to undertake training?

E) Professional skills in public relations; analysis of the industry’s need for education;

Practitioner:

- The creation of an international curricula and competency framework in professional and managerial skills for practitioners.
- What is the PR industry’s commitment to the improvement of expertise?
- Should practitioner organisations and universities align educational qualifications to reduce confusion on competing qualifications or maintain separate educational routes for differing needs?

Undergraduate:

- What is the role of public relations education? Is it to prepare graduates for entry into the industry or to equip them to critique the industry and change it from within or both?
- What is the most appropriate model of academic: professional alignment in undergraduate

courses to give students a broad academic and professional education that supports their entry into the industry as preferred employees?

- What is best practice in communicating the nature and content of public relations education to prospective employers?

G) Research into standards of performance among PR professionals; the licensing of practitioners

- What is the role of professional associations and governments in regulating practices and licensing practitioners? Are there benefits and disadvantages of licensing?
- Can standards of practice be developed in order to create a QA or management standard similar to the Consultancy Management Standard developed by the UK's Public Relations Consultants Association?
- Could best practice standards be introduced for crisis management, internal communications, issues management, media relations and stakeholder engagement?

L) Management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation

- Can reputation be managed? If it can, is this a "job" for PR or a whole-of-organisation task?
- How can 'lost' or 'damaged' reputation be repaired? Is there a 'best practice' model that can be applied?
- Why do some organisations with a 'poor reputation' continue to thrive?
- There is much 'received wisdom' in reputation management – how can the links between a high-profile individual (e.g. a "superstar CEO") and the reputation of an organisation be proven?

H) Ethics in public relations

- Should a universal code of conduct for public relations practitioners be devised and implemented? How should the ethical behaviour of members be managed by professional bodies?
- How can ethics education of students be designed to aid their ethical practices when entering the workplace?
- How can public relations ethics change from an abstract concept to a daily habit? What are the barriers?
- How does public relations practice influence corporate governance? Or is it vice-versa?
- Ethics in online communication: What are the implications? Are new approaches needed?

I) Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries

- Is there a field of public relations and can it be defined? What is the unique purpose of public relations?
- Are the current boundaries untenable in the new communications environment?
- How does integrated communication work? Does it work (i.e. is it an effective strategic and tactical model)?
- How can public relations work with marketing for better results?
- How does public relations relate to human resources and change management?

J) Management of relationships

- Who is the 'owner' of the relationship: the PR professional or the business line? How can the "PR = relationship management" model be operationalised? Does current theory stand this test?
- How can the link between communication activity and intangibles such as relationship capital be measured?
- How can psychology and communication theory be integrated in implementing relationship management?
- What are the skills, competencies and attitudes needed to develop influence networks?

Discussion

With no comparable studies in the past decade, as the European Delphi study on public relations failed to find consensus (Raupp and van Ruler, 2006), the comparison of the 2007 study is with two reported ten and thirteen years earlier (White and Blamphin, 1994, Synnott and McKie, 1997). As one focused on the United Kingdom and the other on the Asia-Pacific region, there is an international range of views. The data from these studies on research priorities will be compared with this study in order to identify the continuing research issues as well as those which have entered the research agenda latterly and those which have departed.

White and Blamphin's study was undertaken amongst academics and practitioners in the UK. Some seventy eight experts were approached with a 48.7 per cent response rate to the first round and 34.6 per cent response to the second round. It was after the first round that 16 subject groupings were circulated for ranking by the Delphi group.

Synnott and McKie's research had a wider spread and drew thirty seven participants from thirteen countries in a deliberate effort to get a wider spread of cultural and economic development conditions. There were seven clusters of questions, of which one focused on 'major research trends in the field of public relations during the next 10 years' (Synnott and McKie, 1997, p. 270). It is from this data that comparisons are made. The benchmark for the comparison will be the final report ranking of topics from this study.

Only one topic is wholly new, as shown by this comparison. It is 'the management of relationships' (Topic J). Ranking of topics appearing in all three studies is widely varied, although the 'measurement and evaluation of public relations' (Topic C) is highly ranked by all three at third, first and first, whereas 'the impact of technology on public relations practice and theory' (Topic K) is much lower now than it was a decade ago when the potential for impact was looming, as opposed to the actuality of the present. Other topics in the Top Ten from all three studies are E, 'professional skills in public relations; analysis of the industry's need for education', G, 'research into standards of performance among PR professionals', and I, 'integration of public relations with other communication functions'; whilst Topic F, 'international issues in public relations; intercultural public relations' is at a similar lowly ranking to 1994 in the UK, although it was higher in Synnott and McKie's international study.

The topics omitted since 1994 include:

White and Blamphin's study

- The definition of public relations
- Strategic planning of public relations
- The image of public relations
- The impact of media content
- Gender issues in public relations practice
- Feature of the market for public relations practice

Synnott and McKie's study

- The development of suitable models for PR research and suitable techniques such as news content analysis, consumer trend forecasting, issues monitoring and tracking techniques, benchmarking, continuous monitoring, frame analysis, public decision-making models, etc

It is notable that discussions over 'what is public relations', 'the definition of public relations' and 'the image of public relations' have departed from the current research agenda, although topic I, considers 'the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries.' In responses to this topic, there was little sign of defensiveness about the boundaries of public relations. Another change since 1994 has been that research no longer is engaged with media relations and its monitoring (e.g. 'the impact of media content' and 'news content analysis'). Many of these issues have not been resolved, such as an international definition of public relations or gender issues in this discipline, but they are no longer either current or other issues have succeeded them.

Conclusions

By its nature, this research is intended as an outcome in itself by identifying the priorities for research into public relations. Over time, it can be repeated with similar methods and samples so that there is a rolling benchmark of the issues and topics. One of the drivers behind this research has been the increasingly demanding processes of bidding for funding of research that call for relevance and potential for implementation. By identifying these priorities, it is hoped that they will give legitimacy to bids from public relations researchers, who can demonstrate them as an international academic/practitioner benchmark in support of their proposals. Although this study used email as its communication tool, future research using a Delphi study or similar technique should again test the role of blogs and wikis as more dialogic methods of seeking answers to these research questions.

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