

## **How PR faced the challenge of the “information superhighway”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Before the Internet, social media and search engine optimisation, there was the “information superhighway” and the “Megachip age” in the 1980s. Although PR practitioners were slower than other communicators to recognise the potential of Internet and social media, there was some discussion thirty years ago.

Drawing on the archive of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), this paper reviews 21 papers of contemporary discussion over a 15 year period from 1981 to 1996 and draws lessons about the stages of adoption of innovative technology by practitioners.

The views of practitioners varied over time. In the initial period from 1981 to 1987 their attitudes ranged from advancing the potential for rapid international outreach (Plank, 1983; Hietpas, 1984) to gloom about deskilling (McPhail 1987) and the future irrelevance of public relations counselling (Pessalano, 1984).

From 1989 to 1996, as PR 1.0 (use of email) came in practice, there was less comment but continued concern that the faster information flow was leading to communication “dis-information” (Linning 1995). Only in 1996 was the term “Internet” introduced and lauded as beneficial development (Wilson, 1996).

Overall, public relations practitioners are portrayed as slow to understand the benefits of the rapid technical advances in communication and holding doggedly to models of mediated communication. They also failed to foresee that information would be available for more people through IT developments, rather than fewer. The very evident reticence displayed by the IPRA publications sample may indicate why the digital communications sector was able to form outside the purview of the public relations sector and became a competitor to it (Theaker, 2004; Earl & Waddington, 2012).

## How PR faced the challenge of the “information superhighway”

### Introduction

This paper is an initial study of historic practitioner attitudes towards the opportunities and problems of information technology (IT) as seen through the prism of one organisation, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), and its publication, titled initially as *IPRA Review* and, from 1986, *International Public Relations Review*. It is thus a limited view and sets the scene for further research from a broader base of archives and literature.

IPRA was chosen partly as a convenience sample by the author, as its archive (Watson, 2011) is held at Bournemouth University, but also because it is potentially the most internationally-operating public relations organisation in its access to current academic and professional views in the 20-year period from 1977 to 1996 when the application of IT and then the Internet to public relations became well-established.

The paper uses a timeline-based narrative to show the developing practice behaviours of the IPRA membership with themes elicited to show specific attitudes. It will also consider why several authors ignored the impact of IT when discussing the future of public relations during that period.

The first paper dates from 1981 (Matrat, 1981) and the last is 1996 (Wilson, 1996). Over this 15 year period, there is evidence of growing awareness of the changes offered by new telecommunications technology but there was considerable doubt as to their value for effective public relations. The changes were typified with grand titles such as Communication Revolution (Ploman, 1982), the Information Age (Plank, 1983), the Megachip Age (Hunter, 1984), Information Technology (McKeone, 1989), Digital / Information Superhighway (White & Blamphin 1995) and eventually as the Internet (Wilson, 1996). There were many ‘ages’ and ‘revolutions’ in a very short period.

### 1977-1981

The scan of *IPRA Review* starts with an article by one of the pioneers of European public relations, the Frenchman Lucien Matrat. He was responsible for IPRA’s Code of Athens statement on ethics in public relations practice adopted in 1965 and had remained at the heart of IPRA into the 1970s. Matrat effectively ran CERP, the European public relations organisation from outside Paris for nearly two decades (Xifra, 2012). In his “future of public relations” article of 1981, he made no mention that technology would potentially affect the theory and practice of public relations. His emphasis was that public relations was a trilogy: “a social policy, an analytical tool and a means of communication based on dialogue” (Matrat, 1981, p. 2) which was invaluable for the managements of organisations. From *IPRA Review*’s first publication in 1977 to Matrat’s article four years later, there were no articles on future public relations developments

or IT. Although the study was planned for a 20 year period from 1977 to 1996, it effectively began in 1981.

## **1980s**

Having initially ignored IT, *IPRA* articles gradually referred to its potential benefits. These were mostly shaped in terms of new, expanded and faster techniques for communication in general. Ploman (1982) commented that IT would lead to greater convergence and integration of services and “the collection and transfer of information (which would) become an industry and trade in its own right” (ibid, p. 26). Information as a commodity would impact on the market economy and form new professions “that serve as information brokers (consultancy firms, film sales agents, news agencies) and whose activities consist of the collection, sometimes also the production and sale of information” (ibid, p. 25). These are areas of economic activity associated with public relations but Ploman did not overtly link them to the discipline. Indeed, he warned of a threat to the individual from control of information and its manipulation by large technologically-strong organisations. The themes of information control and of “over-communication” also appeared throughout the 1980s (Plank, 1983, Ford, 1984, McPhail, 1987)

In 1983, the first article that linked IT with public relations was written by Betsy Ann Plank, a leading US practitioner and, at the time, working for the Illinois Bell Telephone company. She placed public relations at the heart of the Information Age: “The public relations profession is uniquely qualified to be a catalyst, a steward, an architect in that enterprise (in improving the value and quality of life as the Information Age impacts on society)” (Plank 1983, p. 38). Adding that:

We are a creative, resourceful breed. We public relations professionals will capture the new communications technologies and make them our own. They are a candy store for us – exciting, rewarding, with promise to help improve our craft and productivity, expand our effectiveness, influence and income (ibid, p. 37).

She added notes of caution: “While those sugar plums dance seductively in our heads”, there are implications of the Information Age for society. Instant opinion feedback and polling would threaten “thoughtful time needed to nurture American genius for compromise and consensus” (ibid, p. 37). Other impacts foretold were a return to cottage industries, information deficit for poor people, overload in an information-intensive society and effects upon privacy.

In the same year, the US public relations commentator and author Philip Lesly, in the first of two “future of public relations” articles in *IPRA Review* in a three year period, echoed Plank’s modernist future:

An important determinant of the future of public relations, of course, will be the rush of new technology that affects communication (Lesly, 1983, p. 22)

He particularly identified the role of broadcast technologies. Satellite and cable transmission of radio and television “will get many distant people to understand the same viewpoint” (ibid, p. 22) and “a vast increase in the number of voices” (ibid, p. 23). There was to be growth in specialist journals and narrowcasting. Like Plank, he said that information would be available “almost anywhere”. Computers and fax will “get exactly the same message to many places at exactly the same time and almost immediately” (ibid, p. 23).

Lesly also predicted incorrectly (as did many others) “that vast volumes of paper ... will be reduced” (p. 23). However, mail and courier costs would fall and costs of electronic transmissions would be low.

All of this had monumental importance for public relations, said Lesly. The nature of publics that practitioners must deal with, the extent of the influences affecting the human climate, the number and nature of the channels, the principles of communication and persuasion and relationships with governments, clients and media were being transformed rapidly.

Hietpas (1984), then developing a programme for communications/PR professionals at College of St Thomas in St Paul, Minnesota, identified seven trends expected to arise from new communication technology such as the merging of telecommunications, computer and office equipment. These were:

1. New opportunities to reach external audiences;
2. The ‘de-massification’ of the media was creating new publications and channels on television;
3. Greater accuracy and creativity, because time will be saved on processing of text, spelling etc, which gives more time for creativity;
4. The development of artificial intelligence, via heuristic programming;
5. The evolution of the electronic cottage that promotes working from home but may lead to “dehumanisation of communication” (p. 24);
6. Greater understanding between nations, notably by teleconferencing, data transfer and video conferencing;
7. Potential for improved internal communications with employees; using video programmes, electronic blackboards and teleconferencing.

Echoing Plank (1983), he also issued a rallying call to the public relations sector:

We have the opportunity to assume the role of leaders in this fascinating communications environment. The age we live in – the information/knowledge age – is certainly the most significant in human history (Hietpas, 1985, p. 25).

The British public relations author and educator Sam Black was more pragmatic in his discussion of global trends in public relations (Black, 1984). While noting the potential power of

“the rapid development of electronics in the field of communication (ibid, p. 26), he argued that it was the counsel of practitioners that would be most valued.

I have little doubt that a computer could be programmed to produce public relations programmes to meet most situations but I do not think we have much to fear from competition from computers if we fulfil our advisory and counselling role” (ibid, p.26).

He developed this case by calling for practitioners to “keep abreast of all the latest developments” (ibid, p. 30), adding:

If we regard ourselves as communicators only we shall be undoubtedly restricted to the function of message carriers, but if by our wise counsel we justify our claim to be part of the management team then I foresee an exciting and profitable future for us and all our colleagues in the coming years of challenge and opportunity (ibid, p. 30).

The Orwellian year of 1984 also brought the beginning of industry discussion and debate. In a report of a “Public Relations in the Megachip Age” symposium at the University of Florida (Hunter, 1984), a wide range of attitudes were reported: from gloom about the long-term future of public relations (John Pessolano), through Sam Black-type pragmatism (Fraser Seitel) and caution (Paul Ritt) to modernist positivity (John Bailey). It demonstrated that public relations in the USA, at least, was going through a ‘sense-making’ process in the same way as nearly 30 years later the practice is trying to interpret to value of social media in its many platforms.

A gloomy scenario was offered, with some irony, by Pessolano, a public relations counsellor:

(By) the year 2010 [25 years hence] public relations no longer existed. We had reached this deplorable state of affairs by overconfidence, apathy and mediocrity. Public relations people have abdicated government relations to lawyers, research to marketing, and most routine functions to management consultants. Our professional societies were either dead or on their last legs – a bleak picture indeed (Hunter, 1984, p. 12)

In the cautious central position of this discussion, Ritt of the telecommunications company GTE Laboratories, advised that public relations practitioners needed to manage the effects of technological change by understanding the “fear-causing attributes of technology” (ibid, p. 11) and help the public prepare for these “impact areas” (ibid, p.11). “Society fears the uncontrollable deterioration of humanity’s supremacy over events and public relations people are well situated to allay these fears” (ibid, p. 11).

Seitel took a middle path and, quoting from Hunter’s report, “maintains that public relations is still a personal consulting relationship and will remain so. He is excited by the future, asserting that with the new technology, new competition, and new pressures, public relations will become even more indispensable to management” (ibid, p. 13).

Bailey of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) was more upbeat and claimed that the Megachip Age would provide “voices and networks for millions which will make them stronger in future” (ibid, p. 12).

## **Modernist**

Bailey’s modernist approach was an emerging theme in the IPRA publications: that of the liberating and democratising power of the information technology. It had been stated earlier by Plank (1983) and Hietpas (1984) and was again offered to the journal’s readership by Maisonrouge, an IBM staffer, who claimed higher and democracy-enhancing values: “information is not only power; it also the raw material of truth, beauty, creativity, innovation, productivity, competitiveness and freedom” (Maisonrouge, 1984, p. 32), adding that “with increased communication can come increased understanding among people” (p. 35). There was some evidence that it was being challenged by other authors.

Shortly after the Maisonrouge article, Jackson (1984)’s paper titled “the future of public relations” did not discuss the impact of technology. He focused on the importance of engagement between people and organisations in “a world changing as swiftly as ours” (ibid, p. 14).

Ford, the chairman of a technology company, however, expressed another theme that appeared several times during the 15-year period: that of “information overload” that will confuse people through the sheer volume of messages targeted at them directly and indirectly. Ford’s paper was titled aggressively as “Talk is too cheap – Information fallout pollutes communication” (Ford, 1984, p. 16). He opened his critique with an (unsourced) reference from historian Daniel Boorstin that people were suffering from a disease called ‘overcommunication’.

As we hungrily embrace more and more technology to create and disseminate more and more information, to more and more people simultaneously, are we not in danger of losing our bearings as to whether we have anything worthwhile to say? (ibid, p. 17)

Ford argued that communication effectiveness could be improved by the work of public relations advisers: “Counsel us in more effective use of this bonanza of communication conduits. Help us develop a more self-controlled approach in what we say and how, when and where” (ibid, p. 18). Ford did not, however, suggest how this could be enacted.

In the 1984 Arthur W. Page Lecture, Douglas Hearle of Hill & Knowlton made one of the first attempts to alert the US public relations sector to the practice changes that would be wrought by electronically-based communication. In particular, he advised against reliance on print-based communication and in favour of new techniques of preparing material for electronic media. Public relations needed to make a “steady effort to resist letting a print orientation dominate how communications are handled” (Hearle, 1984, p. 21).

Thus, in public relations in this country it is still not always reflexive to consider electronic communications. Print still holds first claim to the affections of more than a few practitioners, and some have to be dragged kicking and screaming into dealing with broadcast communications. Even then, the temptation very often is to adapt material created for print to television or radio. But even electronic print – telexes for instance – call for a different approach to effective writing simply because of the economics of the medium.

The process of changing to reflect the advances in communications as we move away from, or at least reduce our dependence upon, print media is slow but it is taking place (ibid, p. 21).

Hearle concluded his speech by calling for greater intellectual effort to go into message content which “must be every bit as imaginative and innovative as the means of delivery” (ibid, p. 21).

In reviewing *IPRA Review* papers over the next five years from 1985 to 1989, is notable that contributors seldom addressed the practical implications of IT upon public relations. Lesly (1985) in his second paper entitled “the future of public relations” discussed nine functions “that the public relations person should be expected to perform today” (pp. 15-16) but none were related to understanding and using new technology in the practice of public relations. All were sound advice and the closest to link with new technology were “utilising communication in all its facets ... to bring the organisation into confluence with the attitudes of the publics, rather than in conflict with them.” (p. 16). The nine functions were followed with ten “guidelines that make effective communication possible”. None was linked by Lesly to technology that enabled wider dissemination or direct contact.

McPhail (1987) contributed an article with the encouraging title of “the impact of the computer age on the public relations field” but concentrated on the impact of computers, robotics and other IT upon employment which, he argued, would lead to more low-skilled jobs as skilled ones are replaced. Public relations was, however, not discussed in this context.

## **Education**

In the period from 1983 to 1986, several articles discussed public relations education, the impact of information technology and current public relations practices. Authors included Douglas Newsom, Melvin Sharpe and the Commission on Graduate Study in Public Relations.

Articles in *IPRA Review* 8(3) in 1984 discussed the progress of PR education in the UK, Canada and Germany but did not review the need for education to take account of new technologies. Newsom (1984), in discussing international perspectives in public relations education in the US, obliquely referred to technological factors: “When modern technology shrunk the world to an inter-dependent community, the need for nations to affect the

international climate of public opinion became an imperative” (ibid, p. 30). Sharpe (1985) in his article on public relations education’s needs and advancement reviewed the body of knowledge in public relations, professional skills, understanding of business and management and of research techniques. He made no mention of the impact of new technologies on the future development of public relations education.

Hesse (1985) described the *Report of the Commission on Graduate Study in Public Relations*, which had been established by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) to prepare a recommended curriculum for graduate public relations degrees. Included in the Commission membership were well-known academics and practitioners including William Ehling, James Grunig, Frank Kalupa and Betsy Ann Plank. There was no direct reference to technology’s impact, only a recommended course (unit) for a Masters programme:

**Public Relations Programming and Production** (3 semester hours): Advanced programming and writing as well as production, as these procedures relate to contemporary media (for example, commercial or in-house radio, television and cable systems, electronic mail, direct broadcast satellites, electronic newspapers, teleconferencing). Given the technology of information delivery, which accelerates at an alarming pace, graduate program planners may want to expand this segment into two courses (ibid, p. 6).

Sharpe (1986), discussing public relations as an emerging profession, did not refer to the impact of new technology at all, but wrote that “the complexity of communications and of the public relations function makes it clear that an interdisciplinary, professional education is needed for the training of future practitioners” (ibid, p.10). In a study of PR practice in the UK, Arber (1986) did not mention or find discussion of the impact of technology, other than an oblique reference to “the practice of public relations is changing its emphasis to meet demands of a turbulent environment” (p. 40).

Perhaps most surprising of all, and contemporaneous to the *IPRA Review* sample, was the organisation’s *Gold Paper no.5: The Communicative society - a new era in human history* (Stonier, 1985). It summarised Plank’s (1983) article:

Among the new opportunities cited by Ms Plank is the new media technology. Video had become a booming business in the 1980s and represents a new opportunity for the PR profession. The same will hold true later in the decade for data bases, expert systems and for computer software of all sorts. Increasingly the clients will either be smaller independent companies or small units of large companies.” This will be the result of flattening of organization hierarchies. “... large PR firms may find it wise to re-examine their own structures as they move deeper into an information age” (ibid, p. 9).



So much for the Gold Paper's title claim of a "new era in human history" – and public relations' part in it – IT was overlooked as a key trend for the "new era" and dismissed in little more than a sentence of summarised thoughts from a two-year-old journal article.

## **Engaged**

By the mid-late 1980s public relations, as evidenced by *IPRA Review*, has engaged with the impact of information technology mostly peripherally (Ploman, 1982; Lesly, 1983; Hietpas, 1984; Black, 1984; Maisonrouge, 1984; Ford, 1984; Lesly, 1985;) or not at all (Matrat 1981, Jackson, 1984; Newsom, 1984; Hesse, 1985; Sharpe, 1985; Arber, 1986; Sharpe, 1986; Stonier, 1986; McPhail, 1987). Only three journal articles (Plank, 1983, Hearle 1984; Hunter, 1984) attempted to discuss the impact upon public relations, with only Hearle's discussion in 1984 addressing practice implications.

Much more recent discussion (Earl & Waddington, 2012; Theaker, 2004) shows that public relations worldwide continued to lag behind the developments in IT and digital media. Francis Ingham, director-general of the Public Relations Consultants Association in the UK was quoted recently as saying: "the very fact that the media as we knew has changed so quickly has caught both communication people and brands on the hop. One of the main difficulties the public relations industry faces is that we have got used to communicating mainly via print and have been doing it for so long" (Earl & Waddington, 2012, p. 36). Comparison with Hearle's advice to practitioners 28 years (Hearle, 1984) earlier shows that public relations may have been unable to move on from the 'custom and practice' of press-based media relations on which its heritage is based (Watson 2012).

In the nine years from 1987 to 1996, there were only four articles in *International Public Relations Review* (formerly *IPRA Review*) that addressed IT and public relations. Two gave practical advice (McKeone, 1989; Wilson, 1996); others considered information overload (Linning, 1995) and public relations research priorities (White & Blamphin, 1995).

McKeone, a UK practitioner, shared the experience of his London-based consultancy's use of IT to manage information and establish new services, such as media evaluation. The firm, which appears to have been a UK pioneer in the use of IT for public relations had installed its first two personal computers in 1978 (at a cost of £20,000 – "a veritable fortune for a 'gimmick'", McKeone, 1989, p. 30). It had continued to invest in technology in the intervening decade but had yet to see the industry undertake investment in IT.

The term 'Information Technology' (IT) contains the word 'information', yet the public relations industry has been surprisingly slow to use it. Public relations consultancies with no word-processing capabilities still exist, and there are many in-house public relations departments that have to use computer systems that are of little or no use to them.

Over the last few years, however, computer based information services have become available that have given the industry a range of research, communication, and information management tools that have become very useful – too useful even for ostriches (ibid, p. 28).

The PR applications current at this consultancy in 1989 were “word processors and electronic mail for distributing information” (ibid, p. 28); online PR information and mail distribution services, databases and spreadsheets for programme planning and monitoring; storage of documents; online research databases as used for monitoring media. Benefits included fast turn-around of material between the agency and clients in a crisis; and the monitoring of media in a crisis or a takeover. “Stories can also be filed with newspapers, magazines and freelancers using electronic mail” (ibid, p. 29).

McKeone’s consultancy was finding that the rapid expansion of IT in PR activities was demanding ever-increasing computer storage. “PR professionals will soon be needing the gigabytes (millions of kilobytes) that optical storage offers” (ibid, p. 30). The company had a network of 35 terminals which linked to central servers and extensive training on their use.

Although this consultancy was an exemplar at the time, there is little evidence that its investment IT for public relations purposes was typical as McKeone’s comments on the slow uptake of IT indicated. He was, however, positive about increased use in the future.

The public relations industry is discovering some of the things that information technology can offer them, and the process of discovery and change is accelerating. Some of the advantages which the public relations industry can gain from information technology can only be gleaned in an integrated environment, where several of the services are used together” (ibid, p. 31).

## **Internet**

After McKeone’s article, practical discussion of IT drops from the IPRA publication’s editorial offering for seven years and was revived by another practitioner who introduced the term “Internet” for the first time. In a largely self-promoting article, Wilson (1996) wrote about the transition of a Portland, Oregon agency (now part of Fleishmann-Hillard) from early email to setting up its own website and email address. By 1996, it was still introducing the Internet and World Wide Web to the PR audience; no mention was made of the potential of social media. Websites were positioned by Wilson as marketing tools and the Internet valued for dissemination of material to the media and for correspondence.

Wilson posed the question: “Why has the “Net” taken off so suddenly? After all, the history of the Internet and its underlying technology are more than 20 years old” (p. 11). He answered it by identifying three factors – the introduction of the first web browser (Mosaic),

falling costs of modems to enable online communication and the availability of low-cost PCs able to handle multi-media applications. All had arrived from 1993 onwards.

Few things have more profoundly affected the practice of public relations than the dawn of desktop computers, followed a few years later by the advent of instantaneous global communication. Now, however, the two forces have converged to create a revolution in public interaction based on digital electronic communications.

If this revolution can be described as a hurricane, its eye is certainly the Internet, although swirling around at gale force are other technologies and commercial propositions” (ibid, p. 10).

For this practitioner and his organisation, the Internet allowed them to create websites for clients, integrate advertising with public relations, direct mail and other marketing activities, and communicate with consumers. It was, thus, an integrated marketing communications tool. “As a means of distributing any form of intellectual property, i.e. anything that can be reduced to a digital form, it is unparalleled” (ibid, p. 13).

McKeone (1989) and Wilson (1996) returned IT to practical importance and reinforced the modernist benefits of the technology for public relations, as advocated earlier by Plank (1983), Hearle (1984) and Hunter (1984). Practitioners, as illustrated in this small sample, were only slightly behind the academy. A recent study (Yi & Ke, 2012) identified only five published research papers concerned with online or Internet-related public relations in the period from 1992 to 1996. Some articles must have been prescient, as 1992 is regarded as the year when the public (including public relations practitioners) gained access to the World Wide Web (Greenlaw & Hepp, 1999, cited in Yi & Ke, 2012).

Linning (1995), however, reverted to the information overload theme of a decade before (notably Ford, 1984) and identified the potential for “anonymous and malicious” material being posted on the Internet (ibid, p. 13).

Business sees the superhighway as a new advertising and sales medium ... This is fine if public relations practitioners simply aspire to be publicists and sales promoters. But if, as (UK PR pioneer) Tim Traverse-Healy has argued, public relations practice requires that three ingredients need to be present in our endeavours – truth, concern for the public and dialogue - the practitioners must take a wider perspective (ibid, p. 14).

Linning concluded by calling for “public relations to define its role in the digital neighbourhood in the public interest” (ibid, p. 16) but did not indicate how this role definition would be enacted or implemented. There was an implication that public relations practitioners can only view the Internet (which he also calls “digital neighbourhoods” (ibid, p. 16)) as a zone for publicity-type practices. This was a similar view to Wilson (1996) and Linning indicated that there was another higher form of public relations which could be conducted without reference to

the Internet, although both Hearle (1984) and McKeone (1989) had argued for or demonstrated the benefits of IT in public relations strategy and practice between six and eleven years earlier.

The final IPRA contribution was a public relations research priorities benchmark study (White & Blamphin, 1995). It demonstrated that, amongst knowledgeable practitioners, the impact of IT on public relations was an important research issue. They reported their international delphi study outcomes in an *International Public Relations Review Academic* supplement to the journal under the heading: The Impact of Technology on Public Relations:

A number of practitioners were concerned with “the advent of the digital superhighway/information superhighway.” There is need to:

- Research the impact on public relations of rapidly changing and developing information technology and
- Research how our business will take advantage of the information superhighway (ibid, p. 4).

This indicated, after more than 15 years of discussion in an international public relations body and its main publication, that “sense-making” of technological change was being sought, rather than guidance on best practice. In other comments to the delphi study, practitioners identified its importance: For example, “long term, this – technological advancement – could be a big issue” and “impact of technological change on the communication profession is underestimated” (ibid, p. 4).

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Because this study concentrates on one organisation’s publications, there are limitations in the generalizability of the outcomes. IPRA, however, was the sole international public relations body over the 15-year period and was at the zenith of its membership with between 750 and 1000 members from up to 60 countries (Watson, 2011). Wright (2006) said IPRA was a “relevant, resourceful, and influential professional association for senior-level, international public relations practitioners” (p. 184). Technologically-developed countries such as the US, UK, France, Germany and Australia all had significant numbers of senior, experienced practitioners in membership. There is thus a trade-off between the narrowness of the publication sample and the internationality and experience of its authors and readers, many of them with access to the evolving information technology.

Some authors from Matrat (1981) onwards were figures of national and international significance as thought leaders. In the US, Plank, Lesly, Newsom and Sharpe were well known in both practice and academia, Hearle was a considerable figure in the rapidly-growing, US-led international public relations consultancy business; Black and Matrat were both leading figures

in IPRA and known around the world. Others were less significant but had their views communicated world-wide.

Using a coding process to identify the central theme of each article, there were three broad attitudes expressed. The first and most frequent (nine articles) did not consider IT's impact on public relations at all, notably in discussion of education; these are the "Ignorers". The second group (seven) was that IT would have an unspecified impact on public relations practice; this was referred to earlier as "peripherally" and is a 'Cautious, Sense-making' view. The third discrete group (five) were 'Modernists/Adopters' who extolled the benefits of the new technology and need for change. Others were concerned about 'information overload' as an outcome of inevitable change.

An initial inclusion is that, as Hearle (1984) and McKeown (1989) suggested, public relations was so rooted in its media relations practices and relationship with print media that it was not able to see the opportunity offered by new technology. Watson (2012) has commented that evidence from the adoption of measurement and evaluation methods shows public relations was largely a publicity practice with a strong media relations bias from the 1950s onwards. As publicity often relies on personalities and personal relationships between the media and practitioners, perhaps IT was not seen as relevant until the mid to late 1990s.

The next stage of this research is to test the taxonomy of Ignorers, Cautious Sense-Makers and Modernist/Adopters to see whether it applied within other, nationally-based public relations and communications bodies such as IABC, CERP, PRSA and (C)IPR amongst others. It is a significant question to investigate as to why educators so overlooked the impact of IT upon the training and education of current and future practitioners. In IPRA and the *IPRA Review* there were constant discussions from the 1970s onwards about the development of international standards in public relations curricula (Watson, 2011), but little progress made.

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