Delphi 2.0: A reappraisal of Delphi method for public relations research

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Public relations is oft-presented as "unseen" (Cutlip, 1994; Coombs & Holladay, 2013) and "complex" (Gregory & Watson, 2008). It is thus especially open to qualitative research to understand the less-obvious answers to questions that are, in themselves, not clearly explicated. There are several effective means for examining uncharted territory in public relations, but one that is perhaps underutilized in research of the field is the Delphi technique. The purpose of this paper is to introduce, analyze, and explain the Delphi and its evolution as it applies to public relations—with a particular focus on assisting those in the industry who are not aware of or have not used the Delphi. The paper will propose that this form of qualitative research also has some quantitative application, and that it has a place in the canon of public relations and communication research in the Web 2.0 social media era in a modified, updated form.

Developed around 1960, the Delphi has since been used by scholars and forecasters as an early exploration into complex issues or domains. Taylor (1978, cited in McKinnon *et al*, 2001) identifies it as "tool used by policymakers to forecast and make plans for the future" (p. 558). For these reasons, the Delphi also is useful for exploring a variety of issues in public relations. In the past two decades, the method has been employed for research in public relations on at least a dozen occasions (including by the authors of this paper). Aside from some explanation within these studies, however, the public relations literature has little discussion about the technique and its possible applications or implications for research in the field. No article can be found in the field's body of knowledge that focuses solely on explanation and critique of the method itself.

In this paper, the authors dissect the Delphi method, exploring the most appropriate situations for using a Delphi and identifying the benefits and potential pitfalls of different aspects or applications of the method. We review the development of the Delphi method from its early, paper-based roots to the Internet era which offers new tools for increasing the number of respondents and "speeding up" its process. The paper has been fashioned through a literature review of similar articles on Delphi studies in other domains, as well as an examination of recent studies that have been conducted to advance issues in public relations.

1. Qualitative research in public relations

When conducting formal research, it is important to find the method that best addresses the demands of the given study. If research looks into an established domain with concrete variables and hypotheses, surveys or experiments can be used. However, if a topic is highly complex, loosely defined, or investigated in a natural setting, qualitative methods can be more appropriate (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) wrote that qualitative research is a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (p. 3). Qualitative approaches are now used often in communication research, where "many central research issues cannot be adequately examined through the kinds of questions that are posed by hypothetical deductive methods and addressed with quantifiable answers" (Jensen, 1991, p. 1).

In using qualitative methods, researchers must satisfy the expectations of science (Anderson, 2010) and reduce biases that sometimes exist toward "soft scientists" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 7). It has been argued, though, that qualitative research can have great strengths. Marchel and

Owens (2007) explained that some criticisms of qualitative methodology "stem from limited understanding of the standards of judgment applied to the research … What quantitative researchers refer to as the validity and reliability of research, qualitative researchers reframe as the credibility and trustworthiness of research claims" (p. 304).

When sufficient rigor is applied, qualitative inquiries are increasingly seen as significant additions to social science—even more than can be achieved through quantitative research (Madill & Gough, 2008). Ponterotto (2010) explained that researcher and participants act as "co-investigators, thus leveling the power hierarchy common to many quantitative designs" (p. 583). This is a particularly relevant factor in the application of Delphi method to complex questions in public relations. The research framework and direction can be revised as data emerges through the process (Anderson, 2010), in contrast to quantitative approaches that often force participants to respond to predesigned and inflexible instruments. In entering a natural setting, the researcher can show interest in participants' life experiences and thus can suspend "previously held conceptions and stereotypes" (Ponterotto, 2010, p. 583).

The public relations arena is naturally dynamic and characterized by ambiguous human relationships (Elmer, 2007). Stakeholders are constantly shifting, the Internet creates a forum fraught with uncertainty, and issues can arise from any place at any time (Sirkin *et al,* 2008). This is especially true when crossing national borders into an expanding realm of contextualized environments (Molleda & Moreno, 2006; Wehmeier, 2006). Building relationships in and across cultures requires sensitivity, and the cultural construct is difficult to define and operationalize for

research (Sriramesh, 2007). Such circumstances require phenomenological interpretations that maintain a richness of meaning and accurately portray the situation being examined.

Qualitative methods, therefore, are suitable for studying public relations. Broom and Dozier (1990) and Daymon and Holloway (2002/2011) asserted that there was an important place for qualitative research in public relations. More recently, Van Dyke (2005) stated that "qualitative methodology was best suited to reveal the meaning of communication processes, outcomes, and lived experiences" related to so many facets of the public relations environment and to effective management of public relations programs (p. 161).

2. The Delphi research technique

One qualitative method that promises effective investigation in certain situations is the Delphi technique—hereafter referred to as Delphi. The term *Delphi* refers to a town in ancient Greece from which Apollo's predictions were transmitted to futurists in the land. As a result, Delphi always has been associated with forecasting, and that continues today (Delbecq *et al*, 1975; Taylor, 1978; Uhl, 1983; Landeta, 2006)). The time frame for its origination varies from the late 1940s to the 1960s (Nielsen & Thangadurai, 2007), but scholars often attribute its source to the RAND Corporation (Landeta, 2006). From early RAND studies the Delphi gained a following which benefited from the celebrity of participants such as science fiction writers and futurists Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov (Woudenberg, 1991).

The purpose of the Delphi is to facilitate a discussion that elicits a broad range of responses among selected experts in a given domain or around a particular topic. Kennedy (2004) explained, “The Delphi method provides an opportunity for experts (panelists) to communicate their opinions and knowledge anonymously about a complex problem, to see how their evaluation of the issue aligns with others, and to change their opinions, if desired, after reconsideration of the findings of the group’s work” (p. 504).

Generally there is no one prescription for conducting a Delphi (Delbecq *et al*, 1975; Taylor, 1978; Tersine & Riggs, 1976). On the surface, it is a relatively simple method of research. The process works through a series of “rounds” or “waves” (Verčič *et al*, 2001, p. 375). Two is considered to be the minimum number of rounds and three seems to be the most effective number for producing the desired results—but this structure does not represent a rigid rule (Landeta, 2006; Linstone & Turoff, 1975). The process often begins with loosely structured, open-end questions or propositions and moves toward more quantifiable data or identifiable patterns through the combined input of the participants—but this, too, can be flexible. The goal is to move through the process until, as Verčič *et al* (2001) noted, the discussion shows consensus or it becomes clear that there is no consensus.

The Delphi seems especially conducive to group problem identification situations where there is a "lack of agreement or incomplete state of knowledge concerning either the nature of the problem or the components which must be included in a successful solution" (Delbecq *et al*, 1975, p. 5). Powell (2003) wrote that the Delphi “is useful for situations where individual judgments must be tapped and combined in order to address a lack of agreement or incomplete

state of knowledge" (p. 376). It also "is a method of structuring communication between a group of people who can provide valuable contributions in order to resolve a complex problem" (Landeta, 2006, p. 468).

However, in studies that rely on group participation, the very nature of socialization can create "process problems," as it were. Typical of these drawbacks is a *halo effect* that develops when one or two individuals dominate the conversation, (Kerr, 2009) or a *bandwagon* effect, when participants are intimidated into silence or mask real opinions to be seen as agreeing with the majority (Tersine & Riggs, 1976). A well conducted Delphi can ameliorate these flaws because the participants do not physically gather for the study (Kennedy, 2004). It becomes, in effect, a virtual focus group. Therefore, individual opinions are allowed to flourish in relative anonymity (Rowe, Wright, & Bolger, 1991).

Because the Delphi can serve as a forecasting technique, the method also tends to stay abreast of the most recent scientific and technological advances. Articles and books frequently lag behind actual research because of the time necessary for writing and printing. A Delphi study, by contrast, can provide more updated exchange of information than a literature search by drawing upon current knowledge and experiences of experts (Nielsen & Thangadurai, 2007) and rapidly reproducing it.

3. The Delphi in public relations

Given that the Delphi is about problem solving and negotiation, the method can be particularly useful for public relations practitioners and scholars. The Delphi, noted Nielsen and Thangadurai (2007), is "well-suited to comprehensive investigation of complex environments characterized by uncertainty…. Unlike research questions best answered by quantitative methods which are essentially about counts and measures of things, the Delphi method encourages in-depth communication about the nature of things to provide answers to research questions aimed at the what, how, where, and when" (p. 151). As this "nature of things" faced by public relations practitioners and scholars certainly seems to be in a rather constant state of flux, it would thus seem useful for examining such things through the Delphi. Duke (2009) considered that "the method seems well-suited for public relations because it enables researchers to collect opinions from a select group of highly qualified practitioners who work at competing organizations in a wide geographic area" (p. 321).

The Delphi has not enjoyed widespread use in public relations, and it arguably is not well known today particularly among younger scholars and practitioners. However, it has been employed occasionally to gain a sense of priorities and perspectives in the field. McElreath seems to be the first and perhaps most prolific Delphi researcher over the years. In 1980, he engaged the method to study research priorities in North America, and nearly a decade later he replicated that study (McElreath 1980, 1989). Blamphin (1990) then used the Delphi to explore the value of focus groups in public relations research and practice; then White and Blamphin (1994) conducted a priority study for the United Kingdom which helped identify sixteen topics of importance. Sheng's (1995) Delphi analyzed the issues behind multicultural public relations. Wakefield (1997) then extended that thinking when he tested the Grunig (1992) principles of excellence in

public relations in a 21-nation Delphi on effective management in the global arena. At the same time, Synnott and McKie (1997) published a Delphi on public relations research priorities, also emphasizing international issues. They acknowledged McElreath's approach by basing their research on his 1989 study. McKinnon, Tedesco and Lauder's (2001) small-scale research into "an overview of public relations in American politics" (p.557) in the late 1990s was published as a chapter in Heath's (2001) *Handbook of Public Relations*.

Verčič *et al* (2001) ended the 20th century with a three-year study that compared basic worldviews of public relations in European nations. As the authors stated, "The article confronts a U.S.-based definition of public relations as relationship management with a European view that … argues also for a reflective paradigm that is concerned with publics and the public sphere; not only with relational (which can in principle be private), but also with public consequences of organizational behavior" (p. 373). White (2002) used the Delphi for a study of public affairs research priorities for the European Centre for Public Affairs, but it drew a limited number of responses as the panel was selected from a database. van Ruler *et al* (2004) used email as the interactive method in a Delphi study which ultimately failed to achieve consensus. The study had a high initial response rate of 84%, but dropped to 62% in the final round.

In the past decade, Delphi studies in public relations have evolved away from traditional print-based methods of application into the realm of social media technologies. Boynton (2006), for example, reported that use of the Survey Monkey software for a Delphi study on ethical decision making in public relations had shortened distribution and response times. Watson (2007, 2008) subsequently conducted a Delphi of senior public relations panelists from around the world to

assess global priorities in the field, to identify gaps between academic research and the prerogatives of practitioners, and to classify research topics that could use funding. His study was particularly significant because it represented two major shifts in the way Delphis can be conducted. First, instead of progressing from the typically recommended open-end format to more objective, coded assessments, his Delphi asked for rankings in the first two rounds and then moved to open-end comments in the final round. Second, he took advantage of new technologies by creating a blog site specifically to seek participants and proceed through the study. As a result of this blog-site interaction, Watson's (2007, 2008) study was completed more quickly than conventional Delphi studies (less than four months); and so, like those of van Ruler *et al* (2004) and Boynton (2006), his study showed potential benefits of using social media to produce contemporaneous results. Kerr (2009) likewise commented that the "use of email as a Delphi tool quickens the process from months to weeks" (p. 127) and therefore aids the momentum and retention of group participation.

Since Watson's (2007, 2008) study, there has been a (relative) flowering of the use of the Delphi method, with subsequent publication of studies by Duke (2009), Kerr (2009), Wehmeier (2009), Tkalac Verčič *et al* (2012) and Zerfass *et al* (2012). All of these investigations have used email and internet communication for participant interaction, which has helped to significantly speed up the research process.

4. The Delphi process

Sheng (1995) explained that the ultimate objective of a Delphi study is "for panelists to work toward consensus by sharing and reconsidering reasoned opinions with regard to comments, objections, and arguments offered by other panelists" (pp. 99-100). However, Delphi studies can be useful even if consensus cannot be achieved, as long as the "holdouts" (those who continue to disagree with the majority) are given an adequate vehicle for voicing their continued rationale (Rowe *et al*, 1991). Those outlying opinions should then be represented somehow in the final report (Pill, 1971). According to Delbecq *et al* (1975), a study of this type can last up to two years, although public relations studies in the past decade (referred to above) are typically completed in a three- to six-month period.

As mentioned earlier, there is no universally accepted definition of the Delphi technique (Sackman, 1974) and no prescribed rules or procedures for incorporating the method into any given study (Evans, 1997; Keeney *et al***,** 2006). The Delphi is applied in many different ways, some of which only slightly resemble the original process developed by the RAND Corporation (Goldschmidt, 1975).

With that said, however, it does seem that a fairly typical pattern has evolved for Delphi studies (Powell, 2003). In early usage of the method, Delbecq *et al* (1975) outlined ten different steps, but generally the process has since been reduced to six main elements or considerations: (1) selection of the participants and solicitation of their involvement; (2) determination of the number of rounds needed for the study; (3) development of the various instruments; (4) responses and participation as the study progresses; (5) analysis of data from the various rounds; and (6) preparation of a final report. Each of these phases or considerations is explained below:

Selection of panelists

After the main research question is conceptualized and the Delphi is determined as the best method for investigating that question, the selection of panelists begins. Panel members should be experts selected according to five criteria: (a) a basic knowledge of the problem area; (b) a performance record (expert status) in the particular area under study; (c) potential objective and rational judgment; (d) availability for participation until completion of the study; and (e) a commitment to the time and effort necessary to participate effectively (Tersine & Riggs, 1976). To maintain continuity of participation and responses, "researchers need to consider whether those who are being selected as 'experts' will be prepared to engage in a study that may take much more time and effort than quantitative surveys do" (Watson, 2008, p. 106). He recommended a formal invitation to these "experts" prior to the first round in order to develop loyalty to the study over time. Wehmeier (2009), however, found that despite such commitments toward participating in his international study, only 32 of 50 who agreed to take part completed even the first round. Mortality of participants is an issue to be discussed later in this paper.

In Delphi research, the number of panelists is not as important as their expertise (Linstone & Turoff, 1975). In fact, the first Delphi solicited the opinions of just seven experts on the subject of atomic warfare (Pill, 1971). All of the literature emphasizes this need for qualified experts, but it gives differing advice about the ideal size for a Delphi sample. Duke (2009) decided that a homogeneous group of ten to fifteen respondents "probably was an appropriate number [that] would offer good results" (p. 322), and therefore completed her study with fourteen participants. Kerr (2009) also desired a homogeneous background (educators) and involved eleven

participants in her study. By contrast, McKinnon *et al* (2001) undertook their investigation with just seven participants and were satisfied with the outcomes. Wehmeier (2009) emulated the research of Boynton (2006) and Watson (2008) by targeting thirty experts, commenting that "many scholars prefer a maximum of 30 participants" (p.268). The Zerfass *et al* (2012) two-stage study on social media similarly relied on 32 experts (Fink & Fuchs, 2012).

In public relations, it is appropriate and perhaps desirable to capitalize on the experience of both scholars and practitioners (Pavlik, 1987). Scholars understand the theories and principles that enhance performance in the field, but many do not understand the day-to-day realities of the practice. Professionals are immersed in the daily challenges but often do not grasp the theoretical principles behind effective practice; they are then reduced to "trial by error" judgments that can be inefficient at best and costly at worst in international circumstances. Thus recognizing the strengths and weakness of these two sources, a combination of scholarly opinions and daily experiences is the best way to develop useful theories for future practice. In addition to these sources, Watson's (2008) international study on industry priorities included CEOs (or similar title) of public relations associations "because of their overview of the whole sector and not just the issues that impinged on individual academic or professional respondents" (p. 107).

The desired experts for a Delphi can be chosen through a "snowball approach" (Newman, 1994). This means that a few are selected and asked if they would be willing to participate. They are then asked to produce names of others whom they view as experts in the field. Often, several lists of experts are obtained this way and the best potential panelists are those whose names appear on more than one of the lists (Delbecq *et al*, 1975). Once the final list is produced, the

people on the list are contacted and asked to participate. In the public relations field, however, most Delphi studies have been constructed through direct invitation of experts, with relatively minimal snowball recruitment.

Completion and analysis of rounds

After participants are selected, the initial questionnaire is developed and sent to them. The distribution of this instrument is called the first round. Delbecq *et al* (1975) distinguished between two types of first-round instruments in a Delphi. The typical format has one broad set of propositions or questions that allows the participants to lead the study into different subcategories and variables through their responses. This is the open-end approach mentioned above. The alternate design can "approximate survey research, where variables are already developed and concern is only with refinement and movement toward consensus concerning the relative importance of individual variables" (Delbecq *et al,* 1975, p. 90). This is the more structured, closed-end format. No matter which format is used, the first-round questionnaire seeks responses from each participant so as to have data by which to proceed to the subsequent rounds. Once the initial responses are returned, they are transcribed and coded, and then analyzed for majority opinions and outliers that can be incorporated into a second instrument.

The second round of the Delphi can begin when the second instrument is sent to the respondents for processing and further comment. This instrument usually is developed through an approach that Pill (1971) referred to as "the method of summated ratings" (p. 61). Delbecq *et al* (1975) also recommended this approach. The instrument usually contains closed-end, declarative statements that reflect first-round responses—often as close to the actual wording of that initial

participant feedback as possible. Attached to the right of each statement typically are Likert scales with five points—strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree (these are the summated ratings described by Pill (1971). Sometimes seven-point scales are used for greater clarity or detail. Respondents are asked to read each statement and mark the point on the scale that most represents their opinion about that statement. Accompanying each statement and scale is space for the panelists to give additional comments to explain their reasoning. Through this process, the participants can react to each other's opinions and ideas—with the researcher acting as a sort of scribe and moderator as each response is gathered. In creating and analyzing this second-round instrument, as always throughout the study, the researcher should be careful not to infuse his or her own biases into the process (Landeta, 2006).

The objectives for the first and second rounds are somewhat different. The first round instrument remains open-ended to allow for the broadest possible diversity of responses without losing control over the information sought. The second round, by contrast, provides a closed-end format where ranges of opinions and feelings can be corralled into a more objective format.

Another important difference is that in the second round, instead of responding solely to propositions from the researcher, the panelists are now "communicating" with each other. This Delphi pattern satisfies Agar's (1986) assertion that qualitative data should emerge from the respondents themselves to maintain the holism and richness of the phenomenon being studied. At the point when the respondents receive the second instrument, this discussion process emerges among the experts in the study, wherein they can really respond to what their colleagues have collectively fed back to the researcher about the relevant questions and issues.

When the second-round responses are returned, the researcher can transcribe the comments and review the Likert data to seek patterns from the combined scales. The researcher assesses the convergence of majority opinions as well as the strengths and breadth of any dissent. Outcomes can range from simple histograms that showed the dispersion and the means for each statement, to ANOVAs to explore for differences in opinions based on gender, location, and status. Statistically significant differences would not be appropriate with such small sample sizes, but it often is possible to find patterns of opinions within the different demographic groups. Literature suggests that mode and median are appropriate descriptive statistics as means can tend to overreact to extreme outlier responses (Hung, Altschuld & Lee, 2008).

This second-round analysis marks a critical point where the researcher determines how much consensus has been achieved. In any Delphi process, a third round of responses is certainly appropriate (Delbecq *et al*, 1975). Therefore, if the data show no significant consensus, it is typical to then send out the third set of questions based on the second-round feedback. This third instrument can contain either open-end or closed-end questions. The process can continue until consensus has been reached or it becomes apparent that consensus will not be achieved.

In quick summation, then, it is important to ensure that the conclusions of the study reflect the broadest possible range of expertise around the topic in question. These pooled judgments of so-called experts help to overcome the problems of potential personal bias of the researcher mentioned earlier (Agar, 1986; Landeta 2006). The Delphi also can overcome the difficulties brought into research from group socialization in an actual physical setting, as outlined by

Tersine and Riggs (1976), as well as the sheer impossibility of pulling together a dispersed group of participants—particularly in the case of an international study.

5. Limitations of the Delphi

Over the years, the Delphi technique has attracted some critics because of perceived and actual limitations. As Goldschmidt (1975) and Landeta (2006) have argued, however, the criticisms are not so much about the Delphi method itself as about its improper application by some researchers. Nevertheless, criticisms involve such potential weaknesses as improper selection of participants, mortality (panelists dropping out of the study between rounds), and inappropriate configuration of the first-round instrument. Another limitation is the potential for misunderstanding the instruments and responses due to language and cultural differences of the researcher and participants. Tkalac Verčič *et al* (2012) reported that despite sending all their Delphi study communications in English, they received responses to their first round in English, French and German across a four-month period, which indicates there may have been linguistic and cultural barriers to transcend.

The first weakness, poor panel selection, surfaces when "experts" selected for the study are not really experts. Thus, there is no guarantee that the opinions of the panelists will produce insightful or truly useful results. This could be problematic in some aspects of public relations. For example, when public relations is practiced on a global scale, it is possible to use a sample survey of officers in national associations (see Watson, 2008 for a recent example). If these

people have little experience outside of their own nations or cultures, involving them in a global study might become a case of what J. Grunig (1992) has referred to as “pooling ignorance.”

The second limitation involves research mortality, or participants dropping out before completion. Even when all of the respondents begin with honorable intentions, unforeseen changes in priorities, illnesses, or even deaths can occur over time. Such losses from round to round can skew the results (Babbie, 1989). Therefore, it is important to try to keep all participants committed until the end. This problem can surface in any research, but it can be a particular concern in a Delphi because, as Reiger (1986) and Landeta (2006) have explained, the length of time required to complete a Delphi can be anywhere from several weeks to months.

Some recent Delphi research discussed earlier in the paper suffered from a range of mortality problems. Duke (2009) and Kerr (2009), for example, suffered losses of two or three participants from original panels of fourteen or fifteen, whereas Wehmeier (2009) saw his participation rate tumble by 36 per cent in the first round and another six per cent in the second round. However, the study was completed with 29 members—still sufficient numbers for a Delphi. White (2002) obtained only a six per cent first round response rate from a large practitioner sample of 195, and another 25 percent from an academic sample of 36. Commenting on their own 2012 central European Delphi on social media, Zerfass and Linke wrote that “securing that all experts participate in all steps in the planned time was demanding” (A. Zerfass and A. Linke, personal correspondence, March 2013). Their approach called for the design of a study which would be appropriate for meeting the research objectives but also attractive for the experts to participate in.

The Zerfass *et al* (2012) study ended up retaining its thirty two experts through both rounds, which were conducted by email.

An inadequate first-round instrument also is potentially problematic, as mentioned earlier. Rowe *et al* (1991) criticized the "vast majority of studies" that used structured first-round instruments instead of open-ended questionnaires. They contended that the structured questionnaire does not necessarily guarantee a poor Delphi but it does limit the involvement of the panelists in constructing the parameters for study, thus possibly negating the very purpose for including experts in the Delphi. Counter to that argument, however, are the examples of studies by Synnott & McKie (1997) and Watson (2008), which successfully followed the outcomes of earlier Delphi studies (notably of McElreath, 1989) to construct a first wave of discussion based on more closed-end questions.

6. Criteria for evaluating a Delphi study

The Delphi is not generally intended to be a quantitative study, so constructs of validity and reliability seldom apply to it. However, the Delphi probably would be considered more valid than reliable, although it attempts to address both concerns. Whereas a case study is sufficient with one or two “units of observation,” the Delphi technique calls on the opinions of a larger number of experts. Thus, it comes closer than a case study to reflecting the “real meaning” of validity described by Babbie (1989). Most studies in the public relations field, for example, solicit the expertise of scholars and practitioners from many nations who are experienced with at least some extent of its theory and practice. The results of their combined expertise should be

highly useful for future practice. If the study instruments were designed properly, the number of respondents should contribute to the reliability of the exploration.

The Delphi technique also should have more validity than if a questionnaire were distributed among a random sample of practitioners with some type of public relations practice title. As indicated earlier, as well as in the Excellence Study (J. Grunig, 1992), the mere act of being placed in a certain position is no guarantee that the practitioner has learned the activity in an appropriate or useful manner. By contrast, because a Delphi attempts to gather known respondents who have widely acknowledged expertise, the combined responses should reflect the actual knowledge and experience desired for the subject being investigated.

7. Ethical and practical considerations

Any research project must adhere to certain ethical principles to preserve the dignity and privacy of the participants. In addition, there are practical considerations that affect the integrity of the data collected. Some of the main concerns with a Delphi include:

Anonymity and Confidentiality: One main ethical concern for participants of a study is that their involvement remains confidential. This consideration is particularly important in a Delphi study, because when certain panelists have the opportunity to know what other panelists are participating, their feelings about those known panelists could skew their responses. While the researcher obviously knows who is participating in the study, it also is important during the response gathering and analysis phases for her or him to find ways to separate the data from

specific panelists as much as possible, so interpretation of the data is not skewed by such knowledge of who responded in what way.

Voluntary Participation and Personal Harm: A major element of social research is that participation should be voluntary. Respondents should be instructed beforehand that any information or opinions they supply will be used for research purposes and publication. In addition, the researcher should always protect the individual responses, releasing information only as aggregate data.

Influence of the Researcher: Another concern in any research project is the ability to collect the data without undue influence on the data collected (Sheng, 1995). If the researcher influences the data in any way that may "lead" the respondents to similar opinions (a concept similar to "biasing" the questions in a survey), it will skew the results (Babbie, 1989). In presenting questions or propositions to panelists, it is important to include a variety of questions specifically intended to "challenge" each question presented.

8. Conclusion

Broom (2006) has commented that if the public relations industry is going to continue its advancement, the field cannot limit its inquiry or the methods it uses for such investigations. Public relations professionals typically perform their roles in social environments of great fluidity and complexity. In such circumstances, qualitative research, as exemplified by Delphi studies, often offers greater insights and depth of meaning than quantitative methodologies.

Although much less used than other forms of qualitative inquiry, Delphi studies are now aided by advances in communication technology to delve into issues of current importance to public relations with rapid turnaround through the dissemination and response phases (recognizing, of course, the need for deliberation in analysis of the data, as with any solid scholarly effort).

This paper has set out a case for more widespread use of the Delphi method, a method of research which can be applied across cultures and with various types of knowledge and expertise including academics, senior practitioners and public relations industry leaders. The thoughtful and knowledgeable discussion of these people can assist the field in developing both theory and practice in consensual manners that offer benefits to many who practice and conduct research in the field. While not without its limitations, the Delphi technique is one which, in situations of uncertainty that typically characterize relationships between organizations and stakeholders, has the potential for useful application to the public relations industry.

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