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PR's early response to the "information superhighway": the IPRA narrative

Abstract

Before the Internet, social media and search engine optimisation, there was the "information superhighway" and the "Megachip age" in the 1980s. This paper, drawing on the archive of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), reviews early discussion and adoption of innovative technology by practitioners through the application of historical method. It finds they were slow to appreciate the benefits of technical advances in communication and held doggedly to print-based models of mediated communication. Practitioners and thought leaders did not foresee that information would be available to more people through ICT developments. Practice responses, developed by reference to Rogers' Diffusion Theory, were in three categories (in descending order of frequency) of Ignorers, Cautious/Sense-makers and Modernists/Adopters.

Keywords

Diffusion, information superhighway, IPRA, public relations, technology adoption

1. Introduction

Using historical method, this paper studies 20 years (1977 to 1996) of practitioner attitudes toward the opportunities and problems of information and communication technology (ICT) 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. The scan of IPRA's archive has also included its conferences and World Public Relations Congresses in the same period, although these files are less complete than those for the publications. A relevant organizational discussion paper, called a Gold Paper, is also considered.

IPRA, formed in 1955, was the most international public relations organisation in its access to current academic and professional views in the 20-year period from mid-1970s, when ICT was in a distant background, to the mid-1990s when the application of the Internet to public relations was becoming established.

The paper uses a timeline-based narrative to chronicle and analyse the attitudes of PR practitioners in IPRA membership as they developed, with themes elicited through coding to show specific attitudes. The analytical framework is based on Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation theory,

first published in 1962. The paper also considers why some authors overlooked the impact of ICT, using both diffusion theory and other coding 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). 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 information technology (ICT). Although this study was planned for a 20-year period from 1977 to 1996, it effectively began with an edition from 1981.

Over this 16-year period, there was evidence of growing awareness of the changes offered by new telecommunications technologies but considerable doubt initially 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 the Internet (Wilson, 1996). As will be shown, the response to the opportunities offered by ICT for innovation in public relations practice did not follow the model offered by Diffusion of Innovation theory. A comparison will be made between the categories of adopters proposed by Rogers and the IPRA experience.

2. 1980s

The scan of IPRA Review starts with an article by a pioneer 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 (IPRA, 1995). Matrat effectively ran CERP, the European public relations confederation, for nearly two decades. He was considered to be the "father of public relations in France" (Boiry, 1989, cited in Xifra, 2012) and became a dominant figure in the French-speaking world and in Spain forming a "European doctrine of public relations" in the early 1970s. In his "future of public relations" article of 1981, he made no mention of technology potentially affecting 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: 2), which was invaluable for the managements of organisations.

Having initially overlooked ICT, IPRA Review articles gradually referred to its potential benefits. These were mostly shaped in terms of new, expanded and faster techniques for communication in general. Ploman commented that ICT 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" (1982: 26). Information as a commodity would impact 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: 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 "over-communication" also appeared throughout the 1980s (Plank, 1983; Ford, 1984; McPhail, 1987).

In 1983, the first article linking ICT with public relations was written by Betsy Ann Plank, a leading US practitioner, and, at the time, working for Illinois Bell Telephone. [Plank was the first woman president of the Public Relations Society of America in 1973]. 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: 38). Plank added:

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: 37).

She cautioned: "While those sugar plums dance seductively in our heads" (ibid: 37), there were implications of the Information Age for society. Instant opinion feedback and polling, Plank wrote, would threaten "thoughtful time needed to nurture American genius for compromise and consensus" (ibid: 37). Other impacts prophesied were a return to cottage industries, an 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: 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: 22) and "a vast increase in the number of voices" (ibid: 23). There was to be growth in specialist journals and narrowcasting. Like Plank, he pointed to access to information "almost anywhere." Computers and fax machines will "get exactly the same message to many places at exactly the same time and almost immediately" (ibid: 23).

Lesly also predicted incorrectly (as did many others) "vast volumes of paper ... will be reduced" (ibid: 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. 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:

1. New opportunities to reach external audiences;
2. The "de-massification" of the media was creating new publications and channels on television (ibid: 24);
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" (ibid: 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, 1984: 25).

The British public relations author and educator Sam Black was also forward-looking 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: 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: 26).

Black's comments were evidence that leaders of public relations organisations were seeking to move perception of practice away from the (dominant) media relations model towards a more professionalised image of the practitioner as counsellor. Thus, counselling could be the antidote to public relation activity being swamped by computer-generated dissemination of material to the media. Perhaps Black, like Seitel (later, Hunter, 1984), was 30 years ahead of his time with his warning.

The Orwellian year of 1984 brought the beginning of industry discussion and debate. In a report of the "Public Relations in the Megachip Age" symposium at the University of Florida (Hunter, 1984), a wide range of attitudes were reported: from deep gloom for the long-term future of public relations (John Pessolano), through 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 much the same way as nearly 30 years later the practice is trying to interpret the value of social media in its many platforms. The gloomy scenario was offered 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: 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" and help the public prepare for these "impact areas" (ibid: 11). "Society fears the uncontrollable deterioration of humanity's supremacy over events and public relations people are well situated to allay these fears" (ibid: 11).

Seitel, however, took a middle path and, according to Hunter's report of his address, "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: 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: 12).

3. Modernist

Bailey's modernist approach was one of the emerging themes in the IPRA publications: that of the liberating and democratising power of 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: 32), adding "with increased communication can come increased understanding among people" (ibid: 35).

Shortly after the Maisonrouge article, there were contributions by Newsom (1984) and Jackson (1984), the latter with a "future of public relations" title which did not discuss the impact of technology. Jackson focused on the importance of engagement between people and organisations in "a world changing as swiftly as ours" (Jackson, 1984: 14). Ford, the chairman of a technology company, however, expressed another theme that appeared several times during the full span of the articles being reviewed: information overload 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: 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: 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: 18).

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 but was 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: 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: 21).

In reviewing IPRA Review papers over the next five years to 1990, is notable that contributors seldom addressed the practical implications of information technology upon public relations practice or theory. Lesly in his second paper entitled "the future of public relations" discussed nine functions "that the public relations person should be expected to perform today" (1985: 15-16) but none were related to understanding and using new technology in the practice of public relations. All were sound advice, with emphasis on advice to management on stakeholder attitudes, trends, policy development and communication planning. Lesly's 'function' closest to linking with new technology was "utilising communication in all its facets ... to bring the organisation into confluence with the attitudes of the publics, rather than in conflict with them" (ibid: 16). The nine functions were followed with ten "guidelines that make effective communication possible" (ibid: 16).

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 ICT upon employment which would lead to more low-skilled jobs as skilled ones were replaced. Public relations was, however, not discussed in this context.

4. 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 US professors Douglas Newsom and 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 none considered the need for education to take account of new technologies. Newsom, 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" (1984: 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. However, he made no mention of the impact of new technologies on the future development of public relations education.

Hesse (1985) reported on 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 Master's 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: 6).

Sharpe, in discussing public relations as an emerging profession, did not refer to the impact of new technology at all, but wrote "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" (1986: 10). In a study of PR practice in the UK, Arber 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" (1986: 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" (Stonier, 1985: 9). 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: 9).

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

5. Analysis of engagement

The Diffusion of Innovation theory (Rogers, 1962 and subsequent editions) offers explanations for the introduction and explanation of innovations. It proposes that most people will become aware of innovations through media and are led by early adopters who influence opinion leaders. These leaders encourage opinion followers, which leads to the mass acceptance and use of the innovation. There are laggards and late adopters who are slow to acceptance of the innovation (Baran & Davis, 2000; DeFleur, 2010; McQuail, 2010). The theory, developed originally from rural extension campaigns, indicates a rising level of acceptance of innovation as each stage influences the subsequent part of the social or organisational system. So innovators (2.5%) influence early adopters (13.5%) and then the early majority (34%) to a peak of 50 per cent reach of acceptance. Early majority and late majority are of similar level (at around 34 per cent each). Laggards or late adopters make up the final 16 per cent (Rogers, 1962).

In applying Diffusion Theory to analysis of an historical discussion of innovation has advantages and disadvantages. The benefits are that the process of adoption of ICT in public relations can be compared with a long-established theory. There were innovators and early adopters, to use Rogers' terminology, but the innovation diffusion processes were not completed in the 20-year period under review. The disbenefits of diffusion theory are that it does not take account of resistance to change and doubt about the value of innovation. As has been found in this study, although leaders of public relation practice expressed their views through the IPRA publications, few were innovators or early adopters (Plank, 1983; Hearle, 1984; Hunter, 1984). Only Hearle's article addressed practice implications. Most other articles were engaged 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). Using the lens of this theory of diffusion might therefore imply that there was no process of innovation taking place, or a very limited one.

In the nine years from 1987 to 1996, there were only four articles in *International Public Relations Review* (formerly *IPRA Review*) that addressed ICT and public relations. Two gave practical advice (McKeone, 1989, and Wilson, 1996) and so played an encouraging early adopter role; the 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 in using information technology (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 ICT 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: 30). It had continued to invest in technology in the intervening decade but was yet to see the industry undertake similar investment:

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: 28).

The applications for PR practice at this consultancy in 1989 were "word processors and electronic mail for distributing information" (ibid: 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 agency and client 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: 29). Unlike earlier commentators (Black, 1984; Seitel, in Hunter, 1984) who proposed that ICT would free practitioners for higher counselling skills, McKeone's case for ICT/IT was, like Hearle (1984) that it enabled speedier media relations, a reversion to the dominant practice model.

McKeone's consultancy found that the rapid expansion of IT in PR activities demanded ever-increasing computer storage. "PR professionals will soon be needing the gigabytes (millions of kilobytes) that optical storage offers" (ibid: 30). The company had a network of 35 terminals which linked to central servers and offered extensive training on their use. Although this consultancy appears to be an exemplar of this time, there is little evidence that its investment in IT for public relations purposes was typical, as McKeone's comments on the slow uptake of IT indicated. However, he was positive about its future increased use:

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: 31).

6. Internet

After this article, practical discussion of ICT and IT drops from the IPRA publication's editorial offering for seven years and is revived by another early adopter-practitioner who introduces the term "Internet" for the first time. 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. By 1996, the Internet and World Wide Web was being introduced to the PR audience but no mention was made of the potential of social media. Websites were positioned by Wilson as marketing tools and the Internet was 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" (1996: 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 (ibid: 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. Wilson commented: "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: 13).

McKeone (1989) and Wilson (1996) returned ICT/IT to practical importance and reinforced the modernist benefits of the technology for public relations, as advocated earlier in Plank (1983), Hearle (1984) and Hunter (1984). Linning (1995), however, reverted to the information overload theme of a decade before (notably expressed by Ford, 1984) and identified the potential for "anonymous and malicious" material being posted on the Internet (Linning, 1995: 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: 14).

Linning concluded his article by calling for "public relations to define its role in the digital neighbourhood in the public interest" (ibid: 16).

The final IPRA publication reviewed was a public relations research priorities benchmark study (White & Blamphin, 1995). It demonstrated that, amongst knowledgeable practitioners, the impact of ICT on public relations was an important research issue. They reported outcomes of an international Delphi study in an International Public Relations Review Academic supplement to the journal under the heading of "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: 4).

This indicated, again, that after more than more 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: 4).

7. Conferences and Congresses

Being an international organization, IPRA held a full range of events, ranging from Council and Boards for executive decision-making through annual conferences and seminars to the regular biennial World Public Relations Congresses. It is a limitation of this research that the archives do not hold all addresses and presentations to these events. This deficit has restricted analysis mainly to titles of presentations and conference/seminar sessions across the 20 years being assessed.

Topics related to ICT/IT specifically are limited, with greater emphasis on mass communication technology such as the expansion of television, aided by satellite transmission, which led to several mentions of the impact of 'the Global Village' and similar phrases referring to dissemination of information at conferences in 1977, 1983, 1984, and 1988. It was not until the mid-1980s that the term 'communication technologies' was used and 1992 when 'IT' was applied to a conference session in Hong Kong. The 'Information Superhighway' was headlined for their first time in 1995 (Kuala Lumpur) and 'Internet' in 1997 (Harare). The conceptualisation of public relations practice, as influenced by these technology developments, was mostly connected to media relations, dissemination of information and improved cross-cultural understanding arising from greater information flows. Only the 1983 IPRA President Göran Sjöberg, in a speech in Cairo, pointed to benefits for the development of public relations practice as a counselling activity. He spoke of a future of 'flexible professionalism' in which practitioners "will switch from being tactical to strategic advisors" to "prepare, foresee penetrating changes in the new, truly important powerhouse: the Global Village" (Sjöberg, 1983: 5).

'Information overload' was also an issue of concern in a report presented at IPRA's 1985 World Conference in Amsterdam. The report, *Between People and Power*, was a study of

public relations trends. It argued that there were three trends related to information and related technologies: 1) the paradox of offering more opportunity to individuals, but without control, "for one can import a revolution with communication" (IPRA/NGPR, 1985: 7); 2) that information of basic importance to society had become so specialised that an "information elite" (ibid: 7) of specialist interpreters has been formed; and 3) "the increasing number of media, their radius of action and their diversification of contents confront the public with an overload of information (ibid: 8). This latter trend challenged practitioners with complex ethical issues about their ability to balance the interests of their "information superiors" and publics, and called for them to have greater knowledge of those publics.

8. Discussion and conclusions

Because this study has focused primarily on one organisation's publications and events, there are limitations to the generalizability of research outcomes. IPRA, however, was the longest established and most extensive international public relations body over the 20-year period from 1977 to 1996 and was at the zenith of its membership of senior practitioners with between 750 and 1000 personal members from up to 60 countries (Watson, 2011). 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 compromise between the narrowness of the publication sample and the internationality of its readers, many with access to the evolving information technology. The data drawn from analysis of conferences and congresses largely franks the trends identified in the publications.

IPRA was considered as the most appropriate organization to chronicle attitudes among PR practitioners, leaders and academics because it had been existence for 20 years by the mid-1970s and had a diverse international membership of senior professionals. An alternative analysis might have been drawn from the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). However, it was formed initially in the U.S. in 1970 with its membership concentrated in mid-level employment in business organizations. It was focused, at that time and for three subsequent decades, on internal and employee communications. The first European branch (UK) was not established until 1979 and it was not until 1984 that a Europe/Africa region was formed (IABC, 2014). Thus, it was not considered to have the extensive international viewpoints that were offered by IPRA and its archives.

Some authors from Matrat (1981) onward 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-dominated international public relations consultancy business; Black and Matrat were both leading figures in IPRA and known around the world. Others were less prominent but had their views communicated world-wide through the publications.

Using coding to identify the central theme of each article, it became evident that three broad attitudes were expressed. The first and most frequent (nine articles) did not consider ICT's impact on public relations at all, notably in discussion of education; these are the "Ignorers". The second greatest frequency (seven) was for the view that ICT would have an unspecified impact on public relations practice; this attitude was a "Cautious, sense-making" view. The third most prominent discrete group (five) were "Early adopters" who extolled the benefits of the new technology and need for change in education, practices and capital expenditure.

An initial conclusion is that, as Hearle (1984) and McKeown (1989) indicated, public relations was rooted in its media relations practices and relationship with print media and so did not appreciate 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 onward. As publicity often relies on personalities and personal relationships between the media and practitioners, perhaps ICT was not seen as relevant until the mid- to late-1990s.

The next stage of this research would be to further test the taxonomy of Ignorers, Cautious Sense-Makers and Early 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 why educators so often overlooked the impact of ICT 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 was made.

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