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The evolution of public relations research –an overview

Abstract

The field of public relations is often misunderstood, due to its hybridity, complexity and competing perspectives within the field of scholarship. This essay, which is based on extensive engagement with literature conducted over decades of teaching and researching the subject, outlines the main schools of thought within the field. These are summarised as a) Excellence; b) Advocacy; c) Dialogue; and d) Critical and Cultural approaches. Each perspective reflects variations in understanding of the role of public relations in theory and practice, ranging from an idealised conceptualisation of the practitioner to a demonised view of the practice. It refers throughout to different attitudes to ethics found within these schools, as approaches to ethics provide insight into understandings of the role of public relations within society. The piece concludes with reflections on the growing engagement with promotional culture and emerging research directions.

Keywords
Excellence, rhetoric, critical theory, promotional culture, ethics.

1. Introduction

When I present to colleagues in the fields of cultural or communication studies I am frequently met with astonishment as I unpack the multiple perspectives that comprise the academic terrain of public relations. They have conceptualised public relations as monolithic and utterly toxic. Meanwhile, many scholars within public relations characterise it as a key force in the democratic process and a contributor to social good.

As I have written elsewhere (Fawkes, 2007, 2012 & 2015) this comprises a classic schism between the idealised and the demonised, or what Carl Jung called 'Persona' and 'Shadow.' Rather than revisit that theme, I set out the different schools of thought within public relations scholarship, to help elucidate the diverging foundations on which these approaches are built. The essay concludes with remarks concerning the shift from the study of public relations as a management discipline to a diver of promotional culture.

Throughout this narrative I examine the role of ethics in different approaches, as this constitutes the core of any profession's relationship with the society it claims to serve. Considering the competing views of ethics helps illuminate the lacunae between approaches to public relations.

My perspective is broadly that of a critical scholar, seeking to challenge assumptions and note where ideals have become normative, for example. But given that my aim here is to 'map' the field of scholarship, I will try and present the different positions from within those perspectives before offering a critical analysis, generally by scrutinising its ethical commitment.

Inevitably, my map will be partial and limited. To be clear: this paper offers an oversight of the main schools of thought, some commentary on professionalism and ethics (my main research interests) and an indication of an emerging trend in the literature. It cannot be comprehensive but offers some insights to those less familiar with the workings of this field of study.

While most of this paper concerns research outputs, it is worth briefly summarising the field of practice. Public relations and communication management (many practitioners and scholars prefer the latter term) has expanded throughout the past half century, broadly in line with the growth of consumerism and free market capitalism (Ewen, 1996). Other historians of the field such as Cutlip (1994) and L'Etang (2004), note the different origins in the USA and Europe, as practice emerged from private agencies and consultants in the US and from local government and other state bodies needing to communicate with citizens in the UK and mainland Europe.

Such differences may be blurred in today's fast changing world of digital communication and the increasing outsourcing of communication from central to agency based suppliers. Public relations in the UK has experienced considerable growth in the past decade (PRCA, 2016) and is now worth £13billion to the UK economy (from 9bn in 2013). They estimate there are 83 thousand practitioners in public relations, of whom less than half belong to the main professional bodies. In Australia, Macnamara (2012) points out, only 3, 000 practitioners belonged to the Australian professional body in 2009 out of an estimated 21, 000 potential members, a point made earlier by van Ruler (2005) regarding European representation. The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA) is the confederation of the world's major PR and communication management associations and institutions, representing 160,000 practitioners and academics around the world.

Public relations is unlicensed, in that anyone can practice, and in recent years many journalists have crossed 'to the dark side' (Addicott, 2018). PR workers now outnumber journalists, creating a power imbalance between the sources of information in a news-hungry age and the capacity to 'speak truth to power' (Greenslade, 2016).

While many still associate the field with publicity, it also comprises corporate communication, strategic communication planning and implementation, internal communication, investor relations and a plethora of sub-specialisms. There is common resistance to the term 'public relations' due to its pejorative connotations, with some preferring to identify themselves by their specialism –or even say they work in advertising (Thurlow, 2009). But this paper addresses broader issues affecting the field as a whole and I therefore use the term public relations as a loose term encompassing a range of non-sales related communication practices across commercial and not-for-profit organisations, particularly those involved in building and maintaining relationships with key groups.

Public relations has been taught in higher education institutes (HEIs) since the 1960s in the USA and Australia and since the late 1980s/early 1990s in the UK and other parts of Europe. Delivery is usually from either a Business School or a Media and Communication Department (Tench & Fawkes, 2005). Recent research (Fawkes *et al.*, 2018) identified a lack of public relations education in Spain, which senior communicators felt contributed to the lack of understanding of the discipline in Spanish organisations.

Given the geographical location of public relations education for much of the past half century and its frequent delivery from Business Schools, it is not surprising that the dominant theoretical approaches originate in the USA and are organisation-centric. The following overview starts with the most successful theory, in terms of reach and influence, the Excellence Project.

2. Approaches to public relations

2.1. *Excellence*

The Excellence project, based in systems theory and developed in quantitative longitudinal studies (Grunig *et al.*, 1992 & 2007), seeks to measure the dimensions of best practice both in its country of origin (USA) and worldwide. Here the practitioner is primarily (though not exclusively) conceptualised as a boundary spanner, linking external publics to organisational strategic communications. The boundary spanner role is central to systems theory-based communication and the main focus is on the role of the practitioner in negotiation between the interest of key publics inside and outside the organisation. The organisation is the main unit of study and public relations is positioned as a management function, with aspirations to sit on the Board and advise the 'dominant coalition.' It sees the excellent communicator as the key player with access to internal stakeholders via the dominant coalition (such as the boardroom) and salient external stakeholders. White and Dozier explain how public relations practitioners interact with the organisations environment to "gather, select, and relay information from the environment to decision makers in the dominant coalition" (1992, p. 93). This role achieves its highest level in symmetric communication when the full range of negotiating and diplomatic skills is deployed to secure positive outcomes for all parties: "In the two-way symmetric model, practitioners serve as mediators between organisations and their publics. Their goal is mutual understanding between practitioners and their publics." (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 22). This level is also described as inherently ethical, with all other approaches being less ethical. The resonance of this statement can be seen in the UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) definition of public relations as: "The planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organisation and its publics" (1987). The historical model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), which describes public relations' evolution from propaganda, though publicity, and public information role to two-way dialogue, has come to dominate the literature (Pieczka & L'Etang, 2001) and is accorded the status of a paradigm (Botan & Hazleton, 2006).

2.1.1. Excellence and ethics

The ethical approach in Excellence tends to rely on structural issues, stating that public relations is only truly ethical when it is symmetrical: "it is difficult, if not impossible, to practice public relations in a way that is ethical and socially responsible using an asymmetrical model" (Grunig, 1992, p. 175).

Bowen offers a detailed Kantian perspective on excellence, finding that "ethics is a single excellent factor and the common underpinning of all factors that predict excellent public relations" (2007, p. 275). She concludes that "public relations is serving a larger and more ethically responsible role by communicating for the good of society, both for the benefit of specific groups and for the maintenance of society itself" (p. 279).

Overall, the project tends to focus on codes and idealised or excellent behaviour particularly regarding duty to client and society. The core texts referred to elsewhere may include a page or two on ethics at most but lack depth or detail, preferring to rely on codes for guidance. The image of the ethical boundary spanner contributing to 'social harmony' (Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995, p. 1) dominates the conceptualisation of public relations, informs attitudes to corporate social responsibility, issues management and many other aspects of the field. Parkinson (2001) suggests that the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) code of ethics is influenced by the Excellence model in its emphasis on symmetry and avoidance of persuasion.

Critical scholars first challenged the assumptions of the Excellence approach in the mid-1990s (L'Etang & Piezcka, 1996) and its limitations are well documented (e.g. Davis, 2016; Piezcka & L'Etang, 2001; Holtzhausen, 2012; Pfau & Wen, 2006; Moloney, 2006). They point

out that the Excellence approach is non-reflexive and treats the description of ideal communication as normative. They also note that in this schema, persuasion is either marginalised or demonised, rendering advocacy outside the realms of best practice. In response, Grunig (2001) accepted that not all ethical dialogue can be symmetrical, or there would be no room for debate. There was also a recognition that symmetrical communication amounted to a small percentage of actual practice, though much of the literature continues to emphasise the ideal over the real.

Nevertheless, this is the model which informs most curricula around the world and many codes of conduct globally (Parkinson, 2001). For many decades it was the sole body of theory taught in public relations courses so its influence is considerable. This is obviously testament to its salience, but as others have pointed out (Holtzhausen, L'Etang, Moloney), it is popular with pro-PR voices because it glorifies their contribution to democracy, and social progress and avoids awkward discussion of its involvement with historical or contemporary propaganda.

The problem remains that many practitioners see themselves as working in behalf of a client, as advocates.

2.2. *Advocacy*

This model recognises that public relations often plays a more asymmetrical or persuasive role than is encompassed by the boundary spanner. One view locates this approach in marketplace theory (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006), which argues that all organisations are entitled to have a voice: "Marketplace theory is predicated, first on the existence of an objective 'truth' that will emerge from a cacophony of voices promoting various interests; second on a marketplace in which all citizens have the right –and perhaps the means– to be both heard and informed; and third, on the rational ability of people to discern 'truth'" (Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 4). It is strongly USA-based, citing the First Amendment as inspiration, as well as social responsibility theory. The problems with the 'objectivity' of truth (despite the inverted commas) are not explored. A more thorough approach to advocacy is based on rhetorical theory (Heath, 2001; Toth & Heath, 1992) and addresses the role of persuasion in communication, dating back to Aristotle and strongly linked to concepts of democracy. The communicator uses words and symbols to influence the perceptions of others, with varying outcomes. The roles of speaker, audience, the choice of message and the dynamics and characteristics of each provides the focus of study.

2.2.1. Advocacy ethics

The ethical outlook of the first advocacy model is fairly uncritical of the workings and morality of the free market, especially as presented by Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, but does recognise the need for constraints within the marketplace and suggests that these should involve awareness of factors such as access, process, truth and disclosure (Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 3). This is where debates about the ethical nature of withholding information detrimental to client's interests is often located.

Writers on ethics from the rhetorical perspective such as Pearson, Heath, Sullivan and Toth have examined the ethics of persuasion at depth. Heath (2007) explores the tension between the symmetry proposed as the basis of ethics in the excellence approach and the ethical aspects of advocacy, noting Grunig's (2001) acceptance that not all ethical dialogue can be symmetrical, or there would be no room for debate. Rather, argues Heath, ethical advocacy requires equal access to the structures and platforms of debate. Edgett (2002) proposes ten principles for ethical advocacy, while Baker and Martinson's (2002) suggest five principles, which they call the TARES test (for Truthfulness, Authenticity, Respect, and Social Responsibility) both drawing on Aristotelian virtue ethics. This approach addresses the personality of the communicator and asks them to reflect on their own motives and

behaviours. While this approach does not always recognise power imbalances (L'Etang, 2006) there is more nuanced engagement with the complexity of public relations ethics.

2.3. *Dialogue*

Relationship management approaches centre on the role of public relations professionals in negotiating a complex set of relationships inside and outside client / employer organisations (Ledingham & Bruning, 2001). Relationship management draws on a variety of theoretical disciplines to identify the elements that make up a positive relationship, such as; control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship and communal relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Unlike some of the organisation–centred perspective of systems theory approaches to public relations, it takes the standpoint of the publics (Leitch & Neilson, 2001). Jahansoozi (2006) suggests that this is partially due to cultural and technological shifts which have empowered publics and facilitated international dialogue and/or coalitions. In recent years there has been growing attention to the power of dialogue in public relations theory and practice.

For example, Day *et al.* (2001) reiterate the importance of dialogic communication as the emerging theme in public relations theory for the 21st century, a view shared by Grunig (2001), suggesting some convergence between these approaches. However, Piezcka (2010) points out that while the move towards dialogue is promising, genuine dialogic engagement requires the willingness to change and there is less evidence of that. Indeed, Macnamara (2016) suggests that regardless of the theoretical positions outlined above, most practice involves much more talking than listening. In recent years, research has concentrated more on dialogue than relationship management, but both have been subsumed under the functionalist umbrella of the Excellence project.

2.3.1. Dialogic ethics

Kent and Taylor (2002, p. 22) propose that dialogue is "one of the most ethical forms of communication and... one of the central means of separating truth from falsehood." Curtin and Boynton (2001) explore the application of Habermas' discourse ethics to public relations, in particular the attempt to construct procedures to enable all participants to communicate equally. However, as Curtin and Boynton point out, this disbars advocacy approaches and requires rational application of procedural rules which are more likely to be observed in theory than practice. More profound, philosophical engagement with dialogue and communication ethics can be found in Arnett (Arnett & Cooren, 2018).

2.4. *Critical and cultural approaches*

Critical approaches, including postmodernism, political economy and, at the outer reaches, propaganda studies, are sceptical of the PR role. L'Etang summarises this grouping as "an interdisciplinary approach which seeks to define assumptions which are taken–for–granted with a view to challenging their source and legitimacy" (2005, p. 521). Critical writers scrutinise the power dynamics of organizations and their publics and often reveal persistent involvement of PR practitioners in propaganda and deception, past and present. While the previously covered models share an optimistic view of how public relations can or does contribute to democracy and what Seib and Fitzpatrick (1995) called 'social harmony,' this view is not universal. Critical appraisal of the role of propaganda in historical and modern public relations has been discussed by several writers (L'Etang, 2004; Weaver *et al.*, 2006; Moloney, 2006; Fawkes, 2008 & 2009) and is explored in depth in the Routledge *Handbook of Critical Public Relations* (L'Etang, 2016).

Much criticism draws on the propaganda model developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) and Chomsky's (2002) suggestion that 'free' press can be manipulated to serve governmental and business interests above others by a variety of means, such as controlling

access and by framing debates to reflect the views of the dominant forces in society rather than dissenting minorities. The role of public relations in shaping political, military and corporate communications, not just publicity, is seen as inherently propagandist. Traditionally scholars who study propaganda concentrate on its wartime application, including the 2003 war in Iraq (Taylor, 2003), but in past decades the concept of propaganda has been expanded to include advertising and public relations' role in economic propaganda (*ibid*).

Curry Jansen (2016) divides critics into two groups: insider and outsider. Outsider critics (Miller & Dinan, 2008; Stauber & Rampton, 2004) tend not to have experience in practice and view corporate and other forms of public relations in a somewhat crude and utterly malign monolith. They particularly highlight the distortions these cause to the democratic process, such as the creation by PR firms of 'artificial' grass roots campaigns, which they term 'astroturfing,' or the planting of questions in press conferences by PR staff masquerading as journalists, as well as the systematic campaigns of distortion or suppression allegedly undertaken in the campaign to win the 'climate change' debate, or recent elections and referenda.

There is also a group of internal critics, public relations scholars who take a critical perspective but continue to teach and sometimes practice within the field, such as Pieczka, L'Etang, Moloney, Weaver, Pfau, Holtzhausen and McKie, all cited above. They have rejected the normative influence of the Excellence approach, argued for greater reflexivity, accepted the role of propaganda in the formation of public relations, and reached outside the field to bring aspects of postmodernism and even quantum physics into discussion of public relations. Holtzhausen points out that

> Postmodern theories urge public relations practitioners to acknowledge the political nature of their activities and to be aware of the power relations inherent in everyday practice… Instead of claiming objectivity, practitioners are forced to choose which side they are on (2000, p. 110).

McKie (2001) also calls for wider engagement with post modernism and chaos theory to evolve more meaningful paradigms for understanding public relations: 'without robust self-criticism and self-questioning of its frameworks of power, public relations will deserve to retain its bad name' (p. 79). These scholars have also expanded the theoretical resources for public relations by examining the relationship between public relations and various proponents of social theory (Ihlen, Fredriksson & Ruler, 2009). There is general agreement among critical scholars that public relations needs to engage with a wider range of theory to develop a greater understanding of its role in society.

2.4.1. Critical ethics

Some of these writers have addressed ethical issues: L'Etang (2003) raises serious reservations about the proposal to nominate the public relations function as the 'ethical conscience' of the organisation, given the lack of moral philosophy in the educational or training backgrounds of most practitioners. "An important question to ask is whether the public relations practitioner is qualified to be 'an ethical guardian.' This claim is questionable" (p. 64). Moloney (2006) and Fawkes and Moloney (2008) argue for resources to be made available to all communicative parties to redress imbalances of access to the main channels of communication. Breit and Demetrious (2010) look at narrative theory as a means for understanding the ethical choices practitioners make, having demonstrated that most existing approaches to public relations ethics are promotional aspects of the 'professional project' rather than engagement with ethical struggle. Waeraas (2009) looks at public relations ethics from a Weberian perspective, suggesting that public relations enhances the 'charismatic legitimation of organisations' (p. 312) through engaging the emotional order of

the times: "Because of the decline of the rational order, organisations do not want to be perceived as rational machine bureaucracies but rather as entities with exceptional and attractive corporate personalities" (p. 313).

My own writing on ethics falls loosely into this camp as in Fawkes (2015) I deconstruct the approaches outlined above to show they have much in common with similar attempts in other professions to bolster professional status. Like others, I found a lack of engagement with philosophical or critical approaches to ethics, with an overreliance on utilitarian and deontological approaches, rather than engagement with feminist, postmodern or postcolonial approaches to ethics. Indeed, I have suggested that the inability to engage with persuasion and insistence on social value distorts serious debate on ethical dilemmas in public relations.

Like other scholars, I argue that public relations' ethics cannot be separated from its conceptualisation of society and this is the subject of the next section.

3. Notions of society

Discussion of public relations and society has become more complex and interesting in recent years. The traditional, functional approach was to define the social good of public relations as 'communication' (Bowen, 2010), a claim based in its commitment 'to mutual understandings between organisations and stakeholders' (McKie & Munshi, 2007, p. 102). However, as Heath (2010) has suggested, such claims require deeper engagement with ideas of society if public relations is to develop a sense of its role in democracy, agency and participative decision-making. The use of communication in anti-democratic campaigns and the debate about the post-truth society illustrate the challenges that communicators face when asserting their contribution to society.

Others have pointed out that globalisation has transformed concepts of publics which underpinned early theory in the field (Valentini, Kruckeberg & Starck, 2012) and called for stronger theorising of society. Taylor (2010) offers an overview of changing concepts of society in (primarily US) public relations scholarship, noting the shift from functionalist approaches which support organisational goals to co-creational theories (including rhetoric, relationship and dialogic theory) where the agency of publics is acknowledged and may be central. This upbeat overview is challenged by others (e.g. L'Etang, 2005; Moloney, 2006) who consider the insistence on public relations' social value is delusional and self-serving. New writing from a socio-cultural perspective (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011; Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Edwards & Hodges, 2011) represents an important shift for the field, as it begins to critique its own practice more deeply.

Scholars have also reached for larger concepts of society in which to locate public relations, such as the fully functioning society (Heath, 2006) or Ostrom's concept of 'commons' (Willis, 2012). While the ancient Greek concept of the *polis* is mentioned in some literature (e.g. Marsh, 2010), Bentele and Nothhaft's (2010) discussion of the polis and public relations is the deepest engagement with the concept, with the aim of re-configuring the public sphere from a European perspective. Their paper traces the evolution of social concepts, drawing on Hannah Arendt's (1958) discussion of the *polis*, or public space, and the *oikos*, or private household. I have also explored the potential of the concept of polis to frame the public relations function, as a meta-space embracing both organisations and the wider society and founded in notions of participation and social justice (Fawkes, 2016). Further illustration of the engagement with wider bodies of literature can be found in Ihlen *et al.* (2007) valuable application of Social Theory to public relations.

Sociologist Anne Cronin studies public relations from outside the field in order to elucidate its role in what she calls *public relations capitalism* (2018). Her position, that public relations deserves greater, more nuanced, scrutiny because of its importance to contemporary culture, echoes that of Davis (2013) and Jansen (2016). They write as media and cultural scholars but look more closely at the practices than did earlier critics, such as Stauber

and Rampton (2004). In particular, these emerging approaches do not study public relations as a management function, seeking to optimise relations between organisations and key publics but as a generator of promotional culture, the subject of the final section.

4. Promotional culture

Literature on the promotional aspects of our culture, including Wernick's (1991) *Promotional Culture* and Marshall's (2014) work on *Celebrity and Power*, interrogate what Fairchild (2007) calls the 'attention economy' in which selfies displace and replace much traditional discourse including many aspects of journalism and public relations.

Wernick suggests that promotion has culturally generalised as commodification has spread, as consumer goods production has industrialised, leading to the massive expansion of the sphere of circulation, and as competitive exchange relations have generally established themselves as an axial principle of social life (1991, p. 186).

Until recently, public relations was mentioned only in passing when considering promotional culture, and usually lumped in with marketing and advertising, with which it shares some characteristics but from which it is also wholly distinct.

This is surprising, as Edwards (2018) points out. Public relations work involves shaping, reflecting and communicating identity for organisations and individuals, and is in turn shaped by the professional identity both of the field and individual public relations practitioners (Fawkes, 2015). The role of public relations in generating pseudo-events and false narratives is well documented in Boorstin (2012/1961), Davies (2008), Stauber and Rampton (2004) and Davis (2013), though these writers are more attentive to cultural products than processes. The work of Curtin and Gaither (2007) in applying Du Gay's (1997) Circuit of Culture to public relations redresses this imbalance as they describe the work of public relations in each aspect of the circuit: production, regulation, consumption, representation and identity. These and other texts emphasise public relations' promotional aspects as part of a counter-narrative to the Excellence project outlined above.

New writing on public relations and promotional culture includes a detailed analysis of the promotional industries and their influence from Davis (2013), a sociological overview (Cronin, 2018) which considers public relations relationship with capitalism, and discussion of celebrity and PR (Fitch, 2017). The most comprehensive examination of public relations as a 'circulatory mechanism for culture' (Edwards, 2018, p. 46) is Lee Edwards book, *Understanding Public Relations: Theory, Culture and Society*. As she says, "Arguing that circulation processes deserve critical examination challenges the representation of public relations as a channel for communication that simply carries, rather than shapes, meaning" (Edwards, 2018, p. 32).

Edwards explores issues of power, discourse, democracy, race and class as they operate within and through public relations as a social actor, using a vast range of theoretical frameworks, including Bourdieu, Foucault and Du Gay, with appreciation of Latour and Habermas. The field is deeply conceptualised as a socio-cultural force building on earlier work (Edwards & Hodges 2011) but with concrete examples from practice to illustrate the operation of different theoretical approaches.

As I have suggested above, public relations cannot develop mature ethics without deeper engagement in its ideas of the society it operates within. Edwards suggests a socio-cultural 'turn' encourages examination of language and discourse as a form through which ethical – and unethical– relationships between groups are constructed, Moreover, "Paying attention to the promotional culture in which public relations thrives prompts ethical questions about the kind of world that we want to live in and public relations' role in constructing (or obstructing) it" (Edwards, 2018, p. 211-212).

5. Reflections and conclusion

This essay has set out some of the major themes in public relations scholarship over the past three or four decades. From the sustained and still thriving study of public relations as management function to newer, more critical engagement with promotional culture, it is clear that the field has generated a vast volume of research. An increasing variety of texts has emerged over time, moving away from the 'How To' books of the 1980s to the extensive list of research-based volumes in the *Routledge New Directions in Public Relations Research* series, edited by Kevin Moloney.

I have concentrated on the paradigms or research lenses of recent research rather than the objects, but it is worth pointing out that the exhaustive analysis of organisational communication which pioneered empirical research in public relations is now making way for considerations of history (Watson & Palgrave, 2015), gender (Daymon & Demetrious, 2016; Daymon & Surma, 2012; Fitch, 2016)) and race (Edwards, 2010) in the practice.

When I started teaching public relations in 1990, there was a very limited menu of teaching texts to choose from and most of the pedagogy was instructional rather than reflective. Over the decades of teaching, researching and writing, I have witnessed a flourishing of the field in depth and complexity. It is still dominated by functionalist approaches which has been adopted as the basis for research in many countries developing their public relations education and research agenda. There was a time when I was scornful of such research, because the societal aspects were so much more interesting, but I have mellowed and see the value of analysing actual practice as intended by practitioners, not just effects. I still believe the contradictions of practice are minimised by the desire to capture best practice. Experience as a practitioner myself and engagement in recent years with practitioners worldwide, suggests there is more reflexivity in the office than is sometimes visible in texts.

While there have been many challenges to the supremacy of the Excellence paradigm, scholars have failed to construct the Grand Unified Field Theory for public relations; it remains stubbornly resistant to categorisation. As Hutton (Hutton, 2010) predicted, marketing has been more successful in establishing its domain (and encroaching that of neighbouring occupations).

In conclusion, this essay has demonstrated that while there is no agreed world view, there are multiple, vibrant voices exploring public relations from the perspective most salient to those researchers and their audiences. In these changing and uncertain times, interdisciplinary research in communication is vital. Rather than despair, I think we should celebrate our hybridity.

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