RESEARCH PRIORITIES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS:
OUTCOMES OF AN INTERNATIONAL DELPHI STUDY

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Abstract

This Delphi study reviewed the research priorities for public relations research on an international scale. The study itself was the first to be completed since Synnott and McKie in 1997, which was based on earlier studies in the United States by McElreath (1980, 1989 & 1994). The role of public relations in the strategic operation of organisations, and the creation of value by public relations through social capital and relationships, were ranked as the top two priorities. Some outcomes were comparable with earlier studies; for instance, evaluation of public relations programmes ranked third in this study and was also among the leaders in the most recent similar study. Only 'management of relation-ships' was wholly new. The findings set important directives for the next decade of research, ensuring that students, academics, professional bodies, and other researchers spend their research resources wisely by targeting the areas which are most needed by the discipline.

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Introduction

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

The Delphi study methodology, which is discussed below, was chosen in this study of public relations priorities in the 'noughties' for comparability and consistency. Wakefield, in discussing his Delphi study of international public relations commented that the purpose of a Delphi study is "not to discover all the answers, but to start a discussion on where a field is now and where it should be going" (Wakefield in Moss & Ver?i?, 2000, p.195). Wakefield also comments (2000) that this method is appropriate to widely dispersed experts, as is the case in this study. An outcome of this study will be to set directions for the next decade of research that ensure students, academics, professional bodies, and other researchers spend their research resources wisely by targeting the areas which are most needed by the discipline.

Delphi studies

The Delphi study approach was, as noted above, chosen primarily for comparability, but another aim was to seek consensus or judgement on the issues (Beretta, 1996; Green, James, Hughes & Williams, 1999). Delphi methodology "is well accepted across many disciplines" (Hung, Altschuld & Lee 2008, p.191) and allows the grouping and subsequent analysis of the ideas of experts in order to gain a closer or more analytical understanding of issues that would not be offered by other qualitative or quantitative studies. The reasons for conducting a study using the Delphi method have been summarised by Dawson and Brucker (2001) as (a) there is no other group communication process that can elicit the same data; (b) the researcher can identify and access the 'experts' to discuss this problem; and (c) the researcher can forecast the type of results that may be obtained from these experts through the Delphi method (after Linstone & Turoff, 1975; Ziglio, 1996). There are methodological critiques of the Delphi which some see as unscientific and producing poor quality outcomes "representing the lowest common denominator" (Powell, 2003, p. 377) which are the obverse of a "group communication process designed to obtain a consensus of opinion from a group of experts" (Hung et al 2008, p.191). The Delphi's benefits of flexibility and simplicity may also be its disadvantages, unless implementation is rigorous (Hung et al, 2008).

The Delphi method has been used widely in business (Kaynak, Bloom & Liebold, 1994; Addison, 2003), nursing and healthcare (Jenkins & Smith, 2004; McKenna, 1994), and communication education (Smith, 1997). In public relations research, as noted earlier, there have been several major national and international studies using this method (McElreath, 1980; McElreath, 1989;

McElreath & Blamphin, 1994; White & Blamphin, 1994; Synnott & McKie, 1997; van Ruler et al., 2004; Boynton, 2006, Wakefield, 2000, Watson, 2008).

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

Research questions

Arising from the literature of previous studies, and allowing comparability, two research questions are posed.

- What are the priorities for research into public relations?
- How do they compare with earlier studies?

Methodology

The lessons from previous studies to be applied to this research were concerned with selecting, attracting and retaining the experts who would participate in the panel, and in constructing a study process that they saw offered value to them. Unlike previous Delphi studies in public relations, this was aimed at a fully international audience. There was also another change, this time in the sample. Earlier studies had focused on academics and practitioners, but this study included the CEOs (or similar title) of public relations professional and industry bodies because of their overview of the whole sector rather than just the issues that impinged on individual academic or professional respondents. The sample was also to be gender-balanced, reflecting the impact of women in public relations employment in developed nations. With these
elements, triangulation was offered by employment, region and gender that was in advance of earlier studies. The eventual gender balance was almost equal.
Following the lead of Synnott and McKie (1997), there were six stages in the study. Slightly more than three months elapsed from the start of the study to its completion. Stage 1 piloted a set of 24 propositions on the Internet using the author's personal blog, www.dummyspit.wordpress.com; Stage 2 was to invite academics, practitioners and industry leaders to participate in the study; Stage 3 was to send Round 1 of the research topic propositions to those who had accepted

invitations and prepare a report; Stage 4 was to send the Round 2 propositions and follow up with a report on Round 2's responses and discussion; Stage 5 had the Round 3 propositions and report; Stage 6 was the distribution of the Final Report on the research topics and related research questions. This was distributed on July 30, 2007 to all those who had accepted the invitation to take part in the study.

Stage 1 – Pre-testing of topics by blog posting

The Stage 1 pre-testing of propositions was posted on the author's blog, Dummy Spit, on April 18 (http://dummyspit.wordpress.com/2007/04/18/what-are-the-priorities-for-future-public-relations-research/). Readers of the blog were asked to rank the topics from 1 (top priority) to 10 (tenth priority). There were sixteen responses from Australia, Canada, India, Ireland, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States. A prompting email was sent to a wide range of the author's industry contacts to stimulate response in addition to those who read the blog by choice or happenstance. Respondents, who were mostly recognised by the author or indicated their professional involvement, were practitioners, academics and industry leaders, who were employed in consultancies, government, universities, industry, not-for-profits and suppliers. Their twelve ranked topics are in Table 1 below:

TABLE 1: Topics ranked by priority in blog pre-test

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

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

Stage 2 - Letter of invitation

A letter of invitation (Synnott & McKie, 1997) was sent by email to 44 public relations academics, practitioners and industry leaders in six international regions (Europe, North America, Central and South America, Africa, Asia and Australasia) on April 10, 2007. They had been chosen for their prominence in research, practice and as leaders of major industry bodies. Some were known by the author but all were chosen on the basis of their position and expertise, thus qualifying them as experts (Dawson & Brucker, 2001). The letter introduced the aim of the study, the research methodology and the commitment sought. Anonymous reporting of comments was emphasised. All were offered a choice of communication methods (email, fax, written or online communication – blog or forum). Some 31 accepted the invitation (70.45 per cent) and all chose email communication. There was no response from three invitations sent to Central and South American contacts at this or any other stage of the study.

Stage 3 - Round 1 topics and report

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

Topics – Round 1

A. Public relations' role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation, and organisational functioning
B. Quality of public relations services
C. Research into standards of performance among PR professionals; the licensing of practitioners
D. Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries
E. The measurement and evaluation of public relations, both offline and online
F. Client understanding of public relations strategy and tactics
G. Professional skills in public relations; Analysis of the industry's need for education; Theories of practice
H. Management of relationships
I. The definition of public relations
J. The impact of technology on public relations practice and theory

K. The culture of public relations

L. International issues in public relations; Intercultural public relations

M. Public relations' position as a fundamental management function; public relations as a profession

N. The expectations of users of public relations; The client: consultancy/adviser interface

O. Public relations' role in organisational change

P. The place of "word-of-mouth" and buzz marketing in public relations practice

Q. Ethics in public relations

R. Relations with the media

S. The history of public relations

T. Gender issues in public relations practice

U. The role of PR in community/social responsibility programmes

V. Management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation

W. Crisis management and communication; issues management

X. Political communication and advocacy (lobbying)

Y. Social media and its role in public relations

Z. The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital, managing key relationships and realising organisational advantage

Responses (see Table 2, below) were received from 27 of the 31 participants (87.1 percent) representing five of the six geographic regions, with Europe producing most comments and Africa the least. There was a fairly even distribution between the three employment groups and genders.

TABLE 2: Response – Round 1

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

The topics were ranked by the mean of their valid scores (**See Table 3**). The best-supported three topics were (in rank order) A, Z and E. The first two, A and Z, both focus on the role of public relations in its contribution to organisations in (A) strategic decision-making and organisational functioning and (Z) the creation of value. The third-ranked topic, E, 'measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online' is an expected highly-ranked topic as it has historic precedents as a first or second ranked topic in previous Delphi studies of public relations (McElreath, 1980, 1989; White & Blamphin, 1994; Synnott & McKie, 1997). The fourth-ranked topic, M, 'public relations' position as a fundamental management function; public relations as a

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

TABLE 3: Round 1 - Topics ranked by means

TOPIC	Mean priority (1 = top priority; 10 = lowest)	Number of respondents to topic /27
TOP 10 PRIORITIES		
A) Public relations' role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation and organisational functioning	2.91	23
Z) The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital; managing key relationships and realising organisational advantage	3.94	19
E) The measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online	4.05	19
M) Public relations' position as a fundamental management function; public relations as a profession	4.65	14
G) Professional skills in public relations; Analysis of the industry's need for education; Theories of practice	4.69	13
L) International issues in public relations; Intercultural public relations	5.63	8
C) Research into standards of performance among PR professionals; the licensing of practitioners	5.69	13
Q) Ethics in public relations	5.81	11
D) Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries	6	13
H) Management of relationships	6.22	9
11TH TO 20TH PRIORITIES		
J) The impact of technology on public relations practice and theory	6.25	12
V) Management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation	6.31	16
X) Political communication and	6.4	5

advocacy (lobbying)		
F) Client understanding of public relations strategy and tactics	6.43	7
B) Quality of public relations services	6.57	7
N) The expectations of users of public relations; The client: consultancy/adviser interface	6.75	8
U) The role of PR in community/social responsibility programmes	6.9	11
Y) Social media and its role in public relations	7.5	6
O) Public relations' role in organisational change	7.55	11
W) Crisis management and communication; issues management	8.17	6
OUTLIERS INCLUDING HIGH-SCORE, LOW RESPONSE TOPICS		
I) The definition of public relations	2.20	4
S) The history of public relations	4.5	2
P) The place of "word-of-mouth" and buzz marketing in public relations practice	6.00	4
K) The culture of public relations	7.67	3
R) Relations with the media	7.67	3
T) Gender issues in public relations practice	Nil	Nil

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

Stage 4 - Round 2 propositions and report

Following Round 1's ranking of priorities, discussion of the topics and potential RQs, the initial 26 topics were reduced to fifteen. Any topics with a mean ranking of above seven, and the low-response 'outlier' group, were eliminated. Three topics (B, F and N) were merged into a single topic because of the perceived similarity of their content. All topics were re-lettered, except topic A, in the ranking order from Round 1. In this round, proposals for new RQs arising from Round 1 were included in the document that was circulated to all 31 original participants. They were again asked to rank topics from 1 (top priority) to 10 (tenth priority) and could propose additional topics and make comments on the topics and RQs.

Round 2 - Revised Topics

Topics ranked 1st to 10th

A. Public relations role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation, and organisational function

B. The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital; managing key relationships and realising organisational functioning

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

D. Public relations' position as a fundamental management function

E. Professional skills in public relations; Analysis of the industry's need for education; Theories of practice

F. International issues in public relations; Intercultural public relations

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

H. Ethics in public relations

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

J. Management of relationships

Topics ranked 11th to 15th

K. The impact of technology on public relations practice and theory

L. Management of corporate reputation; management of reputation

M. Political communication and advocacy (lobbying)

N. Client/employer understanding of public relations (Replacing Round 1 topics B, F and N)

O. The role of public relations in community/social responsibility programmes

New Topics - proposed from Round 1

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

Round 2 was circulated by email on May 22 for response by June 5. There were responses from 24 experts (77.4%), compared with 27 in the first round (see Table 4, below). There were responses from five out of six geographic regions, with Europe again producing most comments and Africa the least. In terms of the work situation of respondents, there was a slightly strengthened response from practitioners by +4.7% with an almost matching –4.6% fall from executives leading professional bodies. The level of response from academics was unchanged, but the overall balance between genders changed to slightly favour females, the dominant group in industry employment.

TABLE 4: Response – Round 2

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

No topic had a nil response, unlike Round 1. There were clear priorities from first to eleventh with a statistically insignificant step of 0.03% between tenth and eleventh rank. Broadly, the ranking of topics set after Round 1 remained stable, although not without debate as to whether some topics could be merged. The strongest topics were A, 'public relations' role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation, and organisational functioning' and B, 'the value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital; managing key relationships and realising organisational advantage'. There was discussion as to whether these should be merged. The third-ranked topic, C, 'measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online' was an expectedly high-ranked topic, as discussed in Round 1.

TABLE 5: Round 2 - Topics ranked by means (with Round 1 mean in brackets)

TOPIC	Mean priority (1 = top priority; 10 = lowest)	Number of respondents to topic /23	
TOP 10 PRIORITIES			
A) Public relations' role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation and organisational functioning	2.43 (2.91)	22	
B) The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital; managing key relationships and realising organisational advantage	3.50 (3.94)	21	
C) The measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online	4.24 (4.05)	17	
D) Public relations' position as a fundamental management function	4.38 (4.65)	16	
E) Professional skills in public relations; Analysis of the industry's need for education; Theories of practice	4.67 (4.69)	18	

G) Research into standards of performance among PR professionals; the licensing of practitioners	5.83 (5.69)	15	
L) Management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation	6.00 (6.31)	11	
H) Ethics in public relations	6.19 (5.81)	18	
I) Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries	6.19 (6.00)	16	
J) Management of relationships	6.42 (6.22)	12	
11TH TO 15TH PRIORITIES			
N) Client/employer understanding of public relations *	6.71 (6.43)	14	
K) The impact of technology on public relations practice and theory	6.86 (6.25)	14	
O) The role of PR in community/social responsibility programmes	7.00 (6.90)	4	
F) International issues in public relations; Intercultural public relations	7.38 (5.63)	16	
M) Political communication, advocacy	7.57 (6.4)	7	

* Proposition N was reformulated after Round 1. The mean comparison for Round 1 is based on the former topic F: "Client understanding of public relations strategy and tactics."

The main change in the ranking of topics was that topic F, 'international issues in public relations; intercultural public relations', fell from sixth to fourteenth, and thus out of the Top Ten. The main riser was topic L, 'management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation', which rose from twelfth to seventh, although its mean ranking only changed from 6.31 to 6.00. In the eleventh to fifteenth rankings, topic N, 'client/employer understanding of public relations', which was reformulated after Round 1, rose from fourteenth to eleventh. It marginally missed the Top Ten by 0.03 per cent and could arguably be considered as equal tenth. One of the unexpected aspects of the survey was that the topic K, 'the impact of technology on public relations practice and theory', remained stubbornly just outside the Top Ten at eleventh in Round 1 and twelfth in Round 2, despite being top-ranked in the blog pilot and attracting widespread comment and discussion in practitioner media.

There were fewer new topics added than in Round 1, and some of those sought greater clarity in existing topics or proposed new RQs within topics.

Stage 5 – Round 3 propositions

As the rankings from Round 1 to Round 2 were relatively stable and so indicated consensus, the

participants were asked to comment on the RQs for Round 3, rather than again rank the propositions. A letter, the report on Round 2, and the Round 3 propositions were disseminated on June 21 for return by July 11. As there were minor changes to the RQs between Round 3 and the final report, these will be displayed under Stage 6 – Final Report. Some 16 participants (51.6% of the original acceptances) commented in Round 3, some in considerable detail. The range and depth of responses demonstrated the advantages the Delphi study, a qualitative technique such as "draws on the knowledge of experts without having to gather these experts in one place" (Wakefield, 2000, p.193).

Stage 6 – final report

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

A) Public relations' contribution to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation, and efficient operation of organisations
- How does public relations demonstrate its contribution to the formation of organisational strategy?
- Can public relations improve the quality of organisational decision and performance by practitioners acting as the link between the organisations and its stakeholders (i.e. as facilitators)?
- How can public relations leaders influence business decisions via timely involvement?
- Why do public relations practitioners get a seat at the 'top table' in some organisations and not at others? Is there a gender or sector bias?

B) The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital and managing key relationships
- What is 'value' in public relations? Is there a universal rubric or is it situational?
- How can value be best demonstrated in non-financial terms? Can intangible value be translated into measurable 'bottom-line' value?
- Can social capital be measured?
- Is there proof of the two-way symmetrical model in operation?

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

legislators) be monitored and measured?

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

E) Professional skills in public relations; analysis of the industry's need for education;
Practitioner:
- The creation of an international curricula and competency framework in professional and managerial skills for practitioners.
- What is the PR industry's commitment to the improvement of expertise?
- Should practitioner organisations and universities align educational qualifications to reduce confusion on competing qualifications or maintain separate educational routes for differing needs?
Undergraduate:
- What is the role of public relations education? Is it to prepare graduates for entry into the industry or to equip them to critique the industry and change it from within or both?
- What is the most appropriate model of academic: professional alignment in undergraduate courses to give students a broad academic and professional education that supports their entry into the industry as preferred employees?
- What is best practice in communicating the nature and content of public relations education to prospective employers?

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

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

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

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

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

At the completion of two rounds the ranking, especially from First to Fifth, clearly sets out topics and RQs that relevance to academic, practitioners and professional bodies. It is a common agenda that will support bids for funding from government and commercial sources.

Discussion

With no comparable studies in the past decade, as the European Delphi study on public relations failed to find consensus (Raupp & van Ruler, 2006), the comparison of the 2007 study is with one undertaken 10 years earlier (Synnott & McKie, 1997). The data from the earlier study on research priorities is compared with this study in order to identify the continuing research issues as well as those which have entered the research agenda latterly and those which have departed. Synnott and McKie's research drew 37 participants from thirteen countries in a deliberate effort to get a wider spread of cultural and economic development conditions. There were seven clusters of questions, of which one focused on "major research trends in the field of public relations during the next 10 years" (Synnott & McKie, 1997, p. 270). It is from this data that comparisons are made.

TABLE 6: Final report - Topics ranked by means (Round 2) compared with Synnott and McKie (1997)

TOPIC	Rank	Synnott & McKie 1997
A) Public relations' role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and efficient operation of organisations	1	-
B) The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital and managing key relationships	2	=7 (in part)
C) The measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online	3	1
D) Public relations as a fundamental management function	4	=5 (in part)
E) Professional skills in public relations; analysis of the industry's need for education	5	=7 (in part)
G) Research into standards of performance among PR professionals; the licensing of practitioners	6	3
L) Management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation	7	=7 (in part)
H) Ethics in public relations	8	-
I) Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries	9	10
J) Management of relationships	10	-

(Note: Synnott and McKie (1997)'s data had equal rankings for two topics at =5 and three at =7)

 Three topics are wholly new, as shown by this comparison. They are 'public relations' role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and efficient operation of organisations' (Topic A), 'ethics in public relations' (Topic H) and 'the management of relationships' (Topic J). Ranking of topics appearing in both studies is widely varied, although the 'measurement and evaluation of public relations' (Topic C) is highly ranked by at third and first in the two studies. Other topics in the Top Ten from both studies are E, 'professional skills in public relations; analysis of the industry's need for education', G, 'research into standards of performance among PR professionals', and I, 'integration of public relations with other communication functions'. 'The impact of technology on public relations practice and theory' (Topic K) ranked fifth by the 1997 report when the potential for impact was looming, as opposed to the actuality of the present, when it has been ranked outside the Top Ten. Topic F, 'international issues in public relations; inter-cultural public relations' although outside the Top Ten in the current study was higher earlier at equal seventh. The topic omitted since 1994 was "the development of suitable models for PR research and suitable techniques such as news content analysis, consumer trend forecasting, issues monitoring and tracking techniques, bench-marking, continuous monitoring, frame analysis, public decision-making models, etc" (Synnott & McKie 1997, p.270).

It is notable that 'old favourite' topics, such as 'what is public relations', 'the definition of public

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

Conclusions

In comparing these results with Synnott & McKie (1997), seven of the topics appeared in the earlier study but not the No.1 ranked, 'The role of public relations in the strategic operation of organisations'. Synnott & McKie found that 'the measurement and evaluation of public relations' was top-ranked and it was ranked third in this study. Other rankings vary, as shown in the final table, but there is continuity in the research issues that need investigation. By its nature, this research is intended as an outcome in itself by identifying the priorities for research into public relations. Over time, it can be repeated with similar methods and samples so that there is a rolling benchmark of the issues and topics that contribute to developing the public relations body of knowledge (Broom, 2006). One of the drivers behind this research has been the increasingly demanding processes of bidding for funding of research that call for relevance and potential for implementation. By identifying these priorities, it is hoped that they will give legitimacy to bids from public relations researchers, who can demonstrate them as an international academic/practitioner benchmark in support of their proposals. Although this study used email as its communication tool, future research using a Delphi study or similar technique should again test the role of blogs and wikis as more dialogic methods of seeking answers to research questions like those of this study. Although a wide difference was found in ranking between blog respondents and the participants in the formally structured Delphi study, and that there was a skew towards an interest in technology in the blog-based pilot, this author considers that we should persist in trialling blogs and wikis as research tools in order to develop methodology that is more robust in delivering valid ranges of views.

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