

PRIA Academic Forum



12 October 2008

Freehills Lecture Theatre
Murdoch University
Western Australia



PRIA Academic Forum

12 October 2008
Murdoch University

Convenor: Kate Fitch, Murdoch University, k.fitch@murdoch.edu.au

Citations

Refereed papers from this forum will be published in a special issue of the *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal* in December 2008. Refereed papers are marked with an asterisk in the programme. Separate forum proceedings will not be published.

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Programme

Time	Activity	Presenters
0900	Welcome	Chris Smyth & Kate Fitch Murdoch University
0910	Session 1: Professional challenges	Chair: Kate Fitch
	Perceptions of professionalism: Practitioner reflections on the state of the Australian public relations industry*	Katharina Wolf & Nigel de Bussy Curtin University
	Becoming professional: Practitioners' reflections on CPD practices	Sarah Williams University of Wolverhampton, UK
	The role of research in PR practice: The other side of the story, from the developing world (Ghana)*	Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo Swinburne University of Technology & Kwesi Aggrey University of Education, Winneba, Ghana
1025	MORNING TEA	
1045	Session 2: Academic challenges	Chair: Anne Surma
	<i>Invited paper:</i> Surfacing the human	Christine Daymon Curtin University
	Achieving intended outcomes: The strategic construction of meaning in public relations practice	Melanie James University of Newcastle
1135	<i>Panel discussion:</i> What does the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) model announced by the Federal Government earlier this year mean for public relations scholars? What are the challenges facing public relations scholarship in the new era of university funding? A panel of senior researchers share their experiences across disciplines and countries.	Gail Phillips Murdoch University Stuart Allan University of Bournemouth Joy Chia University of South Australia
1235	LUNCH	
1325	<i>Session 3: Relationships and reputation</i>	Chair: Renae Desai
	<i>The business of relationships*</i>	Joy Chia University of South Australia
	<i>NGOs, identities, and religion: A case of split personalities?*</i>	Paul Adams & Nigel de Bussy Curtin University
	<i>Employee engagement in organisations' social capital. Does public relations have a role?*</i>	Joy Chia & Margaret Peters University of South Australia
1440	AFTERNOON TEA	
1500	<i>Session 4: Education and pedagogy</i>	Chair: Kate Fitch
	<i>Towards a generic skills learning model in public relations: Student perspectives on self-evaluation*</i>	Amisha Mehta & Robina Xavier Queensland University of Technology
	<i>PRIA National Education Committee: The revised accreditation guidelines</i>	Joy Chia University of South Australia & co- chair of PRIA National Education Committee
1600	<i>Close</i> <i>Transfer to Esplanade Hotel for PRIA Annual General Meeting</i>	

SESSION 1: PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES

Perceptions of professionalism: Practitioner reflections on the state of Australian public relations

This paper highlights Australian public relations practitioners' perceptions of the current state of their profession, based on a study conducted in late 2007/early 2008. Approximately half the respondents were non-members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), indicating that the representativeness of the peak professional body remains at best questionable.

This has implications for standards of practice, compliance with codes of ethics (Bowen, 2007) and, ultimately, the professionalisation of the field. Despite global efforts by professional associations to develop the public relations body of knowledge, enforce higher ethical standards, and encourage certification and accreditation – the three defining characteristics of a profession (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) – research results indicate that public relations in Australia continues to be regarded as a 'semi-profession' (Dozier, 1992).

Despite seeing some improvements, respondents reported a continued need to educate employers, management and the general public about the roles and responsibilities of public relations. Concerns were also raised about the ability of professional bodies – specifically the PRIA - to handle ethical issues and misconduct, in order to protect the standing and reputation of the field.

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Becoming professional: Practitioners' reflections on CPD practices

This phenomenological study addresses the issue of continuing professional development (CPD) in public relations practice. Through a series of twelve qualitative interviews, the author considers the views of practitioners currently engaged in CPD and asks whether informants' perceptions of their professionalism are influenced by their participation in CPD schemes.

Following detailed analysis of the significant statements contained in the interview data, several common themes emerged which raise interesting questions for the individual practice of CPD in public relations, and also, the way in which CPD is both promoted and managed by professional bodies. The paper also examines the tensions between individual practitioner and professional body discourses on CPD and professionalism.

While this small-scale study is not representative of the state of continuous professional development across the entire PR industry, it provides a useful overview of practitioner views and sets CPD in the context of current debates on professionalism in public relations. A number of areas for further research are also identified; these include issues relating to the position of professional body policy towards CPD and the role of mentoring to effective CPD practice. Considering professionalisation discourses, the study further considers the role CPD might play in helping the public relations industry to professionalise, concluding that for this to happen, professional body policy must ensure that CPD assumes greater significance to practitioners.

Sarah Williams
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The role of research in PR practice: The other side of the story, from the developing world (Ghana)

Some leading PR scholars in Western developed countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK, have observed that the use of research by public relations practitioners is generally not encouraging. This view is supported by research findings from a number of countries (see, for example, Grunig (1992), Tymson & Lazar, 2006), Cutlip, Center & Broom (2006), Lindenmann (2003). On the contrary, there is hardly any literature on the subject matter in developing countries, and particularly Africa. At best, what we have is undocumented anecdotal support of the notion that research hardly gets attention in PR practice in developing countries.

This paper is a small step in the direction of addressing the imbalance in the literature relating to the use of research in PR in developing countries. In relation to the research-practice nexus, this paper seeks to answer two main questions: (1) what are the views of practitioners concerning the use of research in public relations practice? (2) Is PR practice in public enterprises in Ghana informed by research?

Data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire and the sample was drawn from a population consisting of government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) that were featured in Ghana's 2007 budget statement. The findings show that contrary to popular belief, public relations practice within the public/government sector in Ghana is informed by research and that practitioners report that their research activities are aimed at consensus.

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SESSION 2: ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

Surfacing the human in public relations research

Despite the increasing emphasis on qualitative approaches to the study of public relations, the subjective nature of the practice and profession continues to remain relatively opaque. It is rare to read research accounts of the experience of doing public relations, such as how the inevitable joys, triumphs, stresses and social nuances of the work place affect client relationships, or the creation and implementation of communications campaigns, and so on. Similarly, the frustrations, satisfactions or mundanity of being on the receiving end of public relations is scarcely researched even though all textbooks emphasise the value of understanding publics in depth. When human interaction is overlooked by researchers, public relations strategies and effects appear to be self-fabricating, inevitable and value-free. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for researchers to overlook their own subjectivities in relation to the research process, thus suppressing how the social shape and character of their data has been informed by factors such as their own expertise, presence and cultural position.

I will argue that, in future, researchers need to train both their research gaze and the articulation of their findings upon the people involved in doing, experiencing and investigating public relations. Without this, research is inevitably blinkered and therefore unlikely to uncover new, critical insights into public relations' role as a catalyst in the construction and negotiation of social reality.

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Achieving intended outcomes: The strategic construction of meaning in public relations practice

An initial review of 60 national award-winning Australian case studies indicates that, without exception, the public relations activity described aimed to construct new meanings amongst target publics. The public relations activity in each case was designed to change the meanings that existed before the implementation of that activity. This research takes a cultural studies approach and examines how public relations practitioners attempt to manage, influence or otherwise act in order to optimise the chances that the subjects of their public relations activities (i.e. publics, audiences) construct the intended meaning of the client or employing organisation rather than any other meaning.

The research will examine whether public relations seeks to operate in the space where meaning is created by the subjects of public relations activities. It is hypothesised by the researcher that through implementing a range of crafted processes and activities in this space, practitioners work to facilitate subjects constructing a particular meaning – i.e. subjects and public relations practitioners co-create meaning, and, from the perspective of the practitioner, hopefully the intended meaning of the client/organisation. The researcher further hypothesises that practitioners do this work with strategic intent, meaning that this work is undertaken to attain or maintain a desired position within a competitive environment, however this environment is defined. This research may show how meaning is both constructed and controlled in the context of public relations campaigns, and could shed light on the methods and processes used in the practice of public relations which could assist both practitioners and critics of public relations to better present their cases and pinpoint areas of concern.

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SESSION 3: RELATIONSHIPS AND REPUTATION

The business of relationships

Public relations is a profession where successful relationships are developed, maintained and effectively managed. This paper suggests that amidst the flurry of relational exchanges, personal context or perspective is important to successful business exchanges making client-consultant relationships vibrant, dynamic and meaningful. Through a qualitative study of consultant-client exchanges an interpretive approach facilitates understanding and provides insight into delicate relational exchanges that take place within the business of managing public relations programs and activities. Four types of relationships emerged, some successful, some unsuccessful, some appearing to be successful, and others breaking down as relationships become strained and difficult to manage.

The paper suggests that within deadlines, demands and business pressures there is considerable opportunity to value relationships and develop long-term partnerships; however, realising relational potential does not seem to be at the forefront of practitioners' business planning. The theoretical context of these relationships is explored within interpersonal theory and complexity theory as the emergence of relational theory gains significance in public relations scholarship.

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NGOs, identities, and religion: A case of split personalities?

The past two decades have seen considerable worldwide growth in the size and influence of NGOs (non-government organisations). Some 3,451 NGOs were listed as having consultative status by the United Nations in 2007. Using a more relaxed definition of 'NGO', some commentators have estimated the number of such organisations an order of magnitude higher (Mathews 1997). One explanation for the expansion of the sector is that NGOs meet societal needs which corporations and governments either cannot or will not, thus circumventing problems inherent to both profit maximisation and bureaucratic structures (Seibel and Anheier 1990).

It is therefore ironic that many NGOs, established as a necessary alternative to commercial enterprises, are increasingly run on corporate lines (James 1997). This trend is especially apparent in the corporate identities leading NGOs develop and project to their stakeholders through the deployment of strategic communication programs. This paper presents a comparative case study of the Australian arms of two well known international NGOs, both operating in the same sector (humanitarian aid). One of the organisations in question is religiously-based, the other is secular in nature. The study found that the RNGO (religiously-based non-government organisation) deliberately downplays its religious identity in order to succeed in an increasingly secular Australian social environment. The implications for organisational identity and identification in the NGO sector are discussed. To some extent it appears inevitable that NGOs must cultivate a split personality to achieve their goals, creating both ethical and practical dilemmas for their public relations advisers.

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Employee engagement in organisations' social capital. Does public relations have a role?

This paper presents initial findings of a pilot study of financial institutions that investigates whether employees of these organisations, or those seeking employment in such organisations, identify with and are committed to organisations' social capital goals. The study, a work in progress, undertakes an in-depth qualitative analysis and case study of two organisations, one in Canada and one in Australia, committed to funding community projects as part of their social capital investment. This paper begins to unravel some of the findings of the Canadian research that also included a participatory observation component with Chief Executives Officers, Vice Presidents and Board members of credit unions.

Following Bourdieu (1986), social capital in the context of this paper refers to the investment of an organisation in community programs where employee involvement is central to the success of these programs. Through an interpretive analysis, the paper provides some initial insights to employee-community engagement and suggests that the public relations role in realising organisations' social goals and objectives is subtle; a team approach is required to be successful.

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SESSION 4: EDUCATION & PEDAGOGY

Towards a generic skills learning model in public relations: Student perspectives on self-evaluation

Public relations educators and employers have long recognised the importance of technical skills including writing and campaign planning. Although technical and managerial skills are essential to practice and valued by employers, generic skills and capabilities including problem-solving, critical analysis, creative thinking, and self-evaluation are equally relevant. Generic skills are valued highly by employers (Clifford, 1999), governments (DEST, 2004), and educators (McWilliam, 2008), and advocated by accrediting professional bodies throughout the world (Anderson, 1999; Hon, Fitzpatrick & Hall, 2004). Support for generic skills comes at a time when educational specialists are also calling for different “sorts” of education and training tailored to a new generation of students (McWilliam, 2008). Within this context of change and curriculum renewal, there is a need to first examine the student perspective on generic skills.

Through the generic skill of self-evaluation, this study examines how approximately 200 students self-evaluated assignments and interpreted the differences between their self and a marker’s evaluation of performance. The results show strong support for self-evaluation techniques to be embedded in a multi-layered curriculum. The findings of this research are significant to public relations educators, practitioners and professional bodies as they have implications for course design and preparing students for lifelong learning and reflective practice. The findings will be used to develop an integrated learning model to be presented in later papers.

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PRESENTERS

Paul Adams graduated from Curtin University of Technology in 2007 with a double degree in Commerce, majoring in Public Relations with First Class Honours (and winning the Emerald Prize for Best Graduating Honours Student in the School of Marketing), and Social Sciences, majoring in Politics. Throughout his studies, Paul worked with a number of non-government organisations, such as World Vision Australia and the World Society for the Protection of Animals, as well as government departments including the Department of Agriculture and Food Western Australia and the Australian Bureau of Statistics. He has also held positions with leading student associations, specifically the Curtin Public Relations Student Chapter and Cbsplus. Since graduating, Paul has relocated to Sydney where he has started work as a Communications Specialist for ISS Facility Services, a facility management company with over 460,000 employees spread across 50 countries.

Kwesi Aggrey is an Assistant Lecturer at the Department of Communication and Media Studies, University of Education, Winneba in Ghana. For many years, before he undertook an M. Phil in Communication Studies at the University of Ghana, he was Administrative Secretary to the Vice Chancellor of the University of Education, Winneba. His research interests are in the use of research in public relations and development communication within the African context.

Professor Stuart Allan is Professor of Journalism at Bournemouth University, UK. To date he has published nine books, with three more appearing in 2009: the co-authored *Digital War Reporting* (Polity) and *Nanotechnology, Risk and Communication* (Palgrave), and the co-edited *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives* (Peter Lang). He is the founding editor of the 'Issues in Cultural and Media Studies' book series for Open University Press, and serves on the editorial boards of several peer-reviewed journals.

Kate Byrne works as a Principal Consultant for a private firm specialising in the provision of programme, project, and communication management consulting and training. Kate has recently finished writing her doctoral dissertation reporting on inquiry into areas of convergence and divergence among practitioner and academic perceptions of the public relations field in Australia, and she also has a First Class Honours degree in communication (specialising in public relations).

Dr Joy Chia is the Program Director of the postgraduate and undergraduate public relations programs at the University of South Australia. Joy is an active researcher currently supported by a Canadian Asian Pacific grant, exploring Canadian and Australian financial institutions social capital initiatives. Joy has published in international journals and presented at international conferences in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, Singapore and Slovenia. Joy is a Fellow of PRIA, past SA PRIA President and has been at the forefront of PRIA accreditation management and review within PRIA's National Education Committee.

Dr Christine Daymon is a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Marketing at Curtin University of Technology, Perth, and also a Reader in Communication and Management at Bournemouth University, UK. She holds a PhD from the University of Kent. In the UK, she has headed up masters and professional doctoral programs in corporate and internal communications, as well as supervised PhD students studying public relations. Christine is currently researching and writing about international PR, creativity and culture, and is also completing the second edition of a co-authored book for Routledge on qualitative research methods in public relations. Prior to becoming an academic, Christine worked in advertising, journalism, public relations and marketing in the UK, Germany, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand.

Dr Nigel de Bussy is Senior Lecturer and Course Coordinator for Public Relations in the School of Marketing, Curtin University of Technology, Perth. He holds a PhD from Curtin Business School and an MA from The Queen's College, Oxford. Nigel is a Fellow and past State President of the Public Relations Institute of Australia. Before joining Curtin, he spent more than a decade in public relations consultancy in the UK and Australia. Nigel's work has been published in the *Journal of Communication Management*, *Journal of Marketing Communications*, *International Journal of Advertising*, *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal* and he has presented at numerous international conferences. His current research interests include stakeholder management, corporate social responsibility and corporate reputation, and new media and public relations.

Melanie James is a Lecturer in Communication at the University of Newcastle, Australia. She coordinates public relations courses in the School of Design, Communication and Information Technology. Melanie is a member the Public Relations Institute of Australia. She is currently enrolled in a PhD program and her research interests include public relations strategy and public relations education.

Dr Rob Gill lectures in public relations at Swinburne University of Technology. Rob completed his doctorate in 2006 on the theme "Employer of Choice and building a positive Corporate Social Responsibility reputation for the Australian Financial Sector." Rob is a member of the Public Relations Institute of Australia and a graduate of the Corporate Public Affairs Institute residential program. He has more than 10 years' experience as a communication manager in the fields of finance, tourism and state government. Prior to this, Rob spent 15 years teaching in Australia and internationally.

Dr Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo is Associate Professor of Public Relations/Marketing and Head of Academic Group (Communications) at the Faculty of Higher Education, Swinburne University of Technology. His research interests include all aspects of public relations; the communication of change within organisational and larger societal settings; the impact of new communication technologies in both organisational and societal settings; epistemological issues in African communication research; and media use and agenda setting in African contexts. His current research involves an investigation into the adoption and use of information and communication technologies in Africa.

Amisha Mehta is a Lecturer in the School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. She is currently enrolled in her PhD and her research interests include organisational change, legitimacy and public relations education. In August 2008, Amisha Mehta and Robina Xavier received a citation from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council for contribution to student learning.

Associate Professor Gail Phillips teaches and researches in the area of broadcast journalism. She spent fourteen years working in commercial and public sector radio at local and national levels. Her experience in national programming includes Executive Producer of Radio National Breakfast, and Executive Producer for the 1994 Boyer Lecture series featuring Kerry Stokes. From 1994-1996 she was Manager of 720 ABC Perth, the ABC's Perth metropolitan station. She is co-author of *Australian Broadcast Journalism*, published by Oxford University Press (2002, 2006), and *Journalism Ethics at Work*, Pearson Longman (2005). Her areas of research interest include talkback radio, broadcast journalism, online journalism, journalism ethics, and broadcasting policy.

Dr Margaret Peters is the (Acting) Dean of Research and Research Education in the Division of Education Arts and Social Sciences at the University of South Australia. She is Director of the Research Centre for Gender Studies in the Hawke Research Institute, where she is also a key researcher. Her corpus of work involves organisational communication and behaviour, particularly as it relates to gendered practices. She is the co-editor of the 2008 Ashgate publication, *Sonic Synergies: Music, Identity, Technology, Community*.

Sarah Williams is a Senior Lecturer and Subject Co-ordinator for the degree in Public Relations at the University of Wolverhampton in the UK. She moved into academia four years ago following 15 years working in the UK PR industry for big name agencies such as McCann-Erickson as well as smaller, regional agency teams. Having managed her own busy PR department, she has a wealth of practical experience in PR strategy and management. Sarah is a member of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and sits on the organisation's academic conference committee. Sarah holds a Masters in Science with Distinction in Public Relations from the University of Stirling and her current research interests include PR in the public sphere, PR and professionalism and the relationship between PR and journalism.

Katharina Wolf is a Lecturer in Public Relations at Curtin University and the current Chairperson of PRIA Young Guns. Katharina worked in various communication roles in Germany, Spain and the UK before packing her trusted backpack for an overland journey of a lifetime, eventually making her way to Perth in 2005. She is an active member of the PRIA WA State Council and Vice Chairperson of the Young Professional Network WA (YPN). Katharina holds a First Class Honours degree in Media and Communication Studies & Spanish Studies from the University of Wolverhampton, a MA in Public Relations from Manchester Metropolitan University, and she is about to embark on further studies for a Doctor of Philosophy.

Robina Xavier is Acting Head of School and public relations course coordinator in the School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. Robina is also Deputy President of the Public Relations Institute of Australia and chair of its National Education Committee. She is currently enrolled in a PhD program and her research interests include crisis communication and public relations education. In August 2008, Robina Xavier and Amisha Mehta received a citation from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council for contribution to student learning.

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Thanks also to our Murdoch University public relations student volunteers for helping out on the day: Jess Eaton, Hanisha Ganwani, Shonyia Nair, Michelle Pickard, Angela Russell and Alex York.