

The Fork in the Road of Media and Communication Theory and Practice

Dr Jim Macnamara MA, PhD, FPRIA, FAMI, CPM, FAMEC

Abstract

Industry and professional studies show that public relations and corporate communication practitioners continue to not use research to plan and measure their activities in a majority of cases (Xavier, Patel & Johnston, 2004), despite evidence of management demand (Test Research, 2000). The reasons advanced for this, according to studies among practitioners are, primarily, lack of budget and lack of time to undertake research (Gaunt & Wright, 2004; Watson & Simmons, 2004; Public Relations Society of America, 2001; Institute of Public Relations and PR Consultants Association, UK, 2001). A number of researchers and scholars have challenged these findings, pointing out that low cost and even no-cost research methods are available but these are also not widely used (Lindenmann, 2005; Macnamara, 2005). This suggests that lack of budget and lack of time are excuses rather than reasons, and points to a need for further exploration of why the public relations and corporate communication sector continues to not use research. This paper argues that there are other more fundamental underlying factors that need to be recognised including a ‘fork in the road’ in the development of modern public relations and corporate communication practice that is a critical issue to address.

Background

Research for planning and evaluation has been widely discussed and recommended to practitioners (Baskin and Aronoff, 1983; Baskin, Aronoff & Lattimore, 1997; Broom and Dozier, 1990; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006; Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Macnamara, 1999; 2002; 2005; Noble, 1995; Noble and Watson, 1999; Watson and Noble, 2005).

Notwithstanding several decades of urging, “measuring the effectiveness of PR has proved almost as elusive as finding the Holy Grail”, John Pavlik (1987) commented – and studies show little has changed since his frustrated pronouncement (eg. Xavier, Patel & Johnston, 2004). Numerous studies show that, despite some heartening signs of a take-up of research for planning and measurement, there seems to be a roadblock. PR practitioners just don’t seem to want to or be able to measure.

The primary reasons advanced for the relative paucity of research used in planning and evaluation of PR and corporate communication are (a) cost and (b) lack of time (Gaunt & Wright, 2004; Watson & Simmons, 2004; Public Relations Society of America, 2001; Institute of Public Relations and PR Consultants Association, UK, 2001).

However, Walter Lindenmann (2005) and others including Macnamara (2005) have pointed out that there is a range of low cost and even no cost methods available to do some level of formative and summative research – such as use of secondary data; case studies; consultative and advisory groups; DIY (do it yourself) surveys and media analysis; omnibus survey questions and Web statistics on visits, inquiries and downloads.

The Evaluation *Toolkit*, originally produced by the Institute of Public Relations in the UK (Fairchild, 2001), now the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), and the Pyramid

Model of PR Research (Macnamara, 2002; 2005) both list a range of informal and formal methods of measuring public relations, a large number of which do not require any substantial budget or time.

Walter Lindenmann, Tom Watson and others have found in studies and in practice that these low cost or no cost and time efficient methods are also often not used in planning and evaluating communication programs. So the claim that lack of budget and lack of time are barriers to research are shown to be excuses.

Lack of demand can hardly be advanced as a valid reason. Based on the influence of W. Edwards Deming (1986) who is credited with founding the quality movement and adoption of performance measurement in management, Howard Dresner (1989) who pioneered Business Performance Management (BPM), and others, modern management today widely utilizes reporting systems based on measurement such as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Key Results Areas (KRAs), Balanced Score Cards developed by Robert Kaplan and David Norton in the 1990s (Fleisher & Mahaffy, 1997) dashboards, and seek Return on Investment (ROI) measures.

The naming of lack of budget, lack of time and lack of demand as what they are – excuses – in turn suggests that there are other more deep-seated reasons behind the industry's lack of research. How do we get past the apparent roadblock that is preventing practitioners doing what 10-15 years of professional and academic advice has urged them to do? A theory on the real underlying reasons for the industry's research-phobia and the route to negotiating this obstacle is advanced in the balance of this paper.

The Fork in the Road

Communication theory and practice can be traced to many roots. Along with early studies of the effects of propaganda (eg. Lasswell, 1927), a noteworthy foundation was the Shannon and Weaver (1949) *Mathematical Theory of Communication* which formed the basis of Information Theory and led to several decades of thinking of communication as process of transmission or 'injection' of information and meaning into audiences.

As anyone with children, married, or living with a partner knows, what we try to communicate to even those closest to us is often not received the way we intend or mean. Nevertheless this view has persisted and proved resilient.

Marshall McLuhan (1964) made media power a central focus of communication thinking with his famous aphorism 'the medium is the message' (p. 7), referring to the technology and techniques of media, particularly television, being able to shape perception and thinking.

Mass manipulative views of the media advanced by Marx and Marxist thinkers took a similar view of mediated communication as being like a powerful drug that affected audiences who received it, albeit they focussed on the media as a channel used by political and capitalist institutions (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972; Adorno, 1991; Habermas, 1989; Marcuse, 1972).

Neo-Marxist thinking, such as Maxwell McCombs' and D. L. Shaw's (1977) influential 'agenda setting' theory continued the view that mass media and mass communication acted like hypodermic needles injecting information into receivers and changing their attitudes and even behaviours in direct and substantial ways.

Early transmission and injection views of mass communication were challenged by new thinking in the 1960s. Spurred by landmark research of Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld (1955) and Joseph Klapper (1960), we began to realize that audiences do not simply swallow information, or ‘mainline’ it like a drug, and that communication does not work en masse. Klapper and others found that much communication had **limited effects**, with the most likely impact being reinforcement of existing views rather than changing opinion or creating new attitudes and behaviours.

Psychology studies such as those of Leon Festinger (1957) and his theory of **cognitive dissonance** and the emerging field of **cultural studies** influenced by post-structuralist thinking raised further questions over the alleged power of media and mass communication. Roland Barthes’ (1977) famous adage ‘death of the author’ signalled an end to early naïve thinking that authors, whether they be novelists and poets or corporate authors producing advertising and publicity, have the power to create meaning in the minds of audiences. Barthes, of course, was not talking about killing authors, but about recognizing the power of audiences to filter information, decode it differently to what was intended by the author – what Umberto Eco (1965) called ‘aberrant decoding’ – use information for their own purposes, and at times reject information altogether.

New focus on **audience research** in the 1970s and 1980s emanating out of cultural studies led to a view that mass media and mass communication had limited and at times no effect.

More recent research has found that this limited or no effect view somewhat over-stated audience factors such as human agency – or under-stated the influence of media and communication – and this strand of thinking lost sway and has petered out to a large extent.

Drawing on all of these theories, including **political economy** thinking, **uses and gratifications theory** and other emerging views, a new way of thinking about mass media and communication evolved and gained widespread acceptance in the 1990s. This view, in summary, holds that the effects of mass media and communication are conditional and contextual – they depend on a wide range of factors. It is not possible to summarize this large body of research and knowledge here, but it is significant to note that most well-researched views on media and communication today conceive an **integrated model** where authors and audiences interact in a two-way process that is complex and variable in its outcomes.

This is the view of contemporary media and communication scholars and researchers. Diagram 1 illustrates the ‘fork in the road’ in which modern communication thinking and research have charted a course that deviates substantially from the early direct linear concept of communication.

Now let’s turn to media and communication practitioners.

Advertising began firmly rooted in early mass communication views of the media as powerful and its effects direct. However, the advertising industry, faced with John Wannamaker’s famous claim that “half of my advertising is wasted; the only trouble is I don’t know which half”, looked for explanations of why communication often did not have effects and, while coming from an applied practice background, turned to research and social science. For instance, modern advertising has drawn on psychology as well as cultural studies to inform its practices. Direct marketers have also embraced modern media and communication thinking, as have some specialist campaigns – for instance, health campaigns in the US that have applied an integrative theory of behaviour change such as the National

Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign which has drawn on social cognitive theory and health belief models, and the Health Communication-Behaviour Change Model (Rice & Atkin, 2002, pp. 434-435) which integrates media communication, face to face communication and community programs. While not occurring universally, modern advertising and marketing campaigns have turned away from early direct injection thinking.

Let us now turn to other areas of communication practice including journalism and where public relations and corporate communication are placed in this evolution of knowledge and social science.

Journalism evolved with a strong practical focus. In the main, journalists did not see it as their job to persuade or change audiences – indeed, it is still considered an anathema in many areas of journalism to depart from a public information model – the ‘provide the facts, let the public decide’ school of journalism thinking. While advertisers seek audience impact and effects, journalists to this day seek an independence from the messy, commercial world of audiences and their proclivities and seek to avoid responsibility for effects they might create (eg. in relation to violence, portrayals of gender, etc) – some say to the point of irresponsibility. Journalism has focussed on practice and media production and largely ignored the debate over media effects – whether direct or conditional.

Public relations began and established its foundations in early transmissional and direct effects thinking and continued its formational growth through the period of Neo-Marxist ‘agenda setting’ thinking. The practice also developed in a close relationship with journalism. Indeed, many if not most PR practitioners for many decades came from journalism.

THE FORK IN THE ROAD OF MEDIA & COMMUNICATION THEORY & PRACTICE

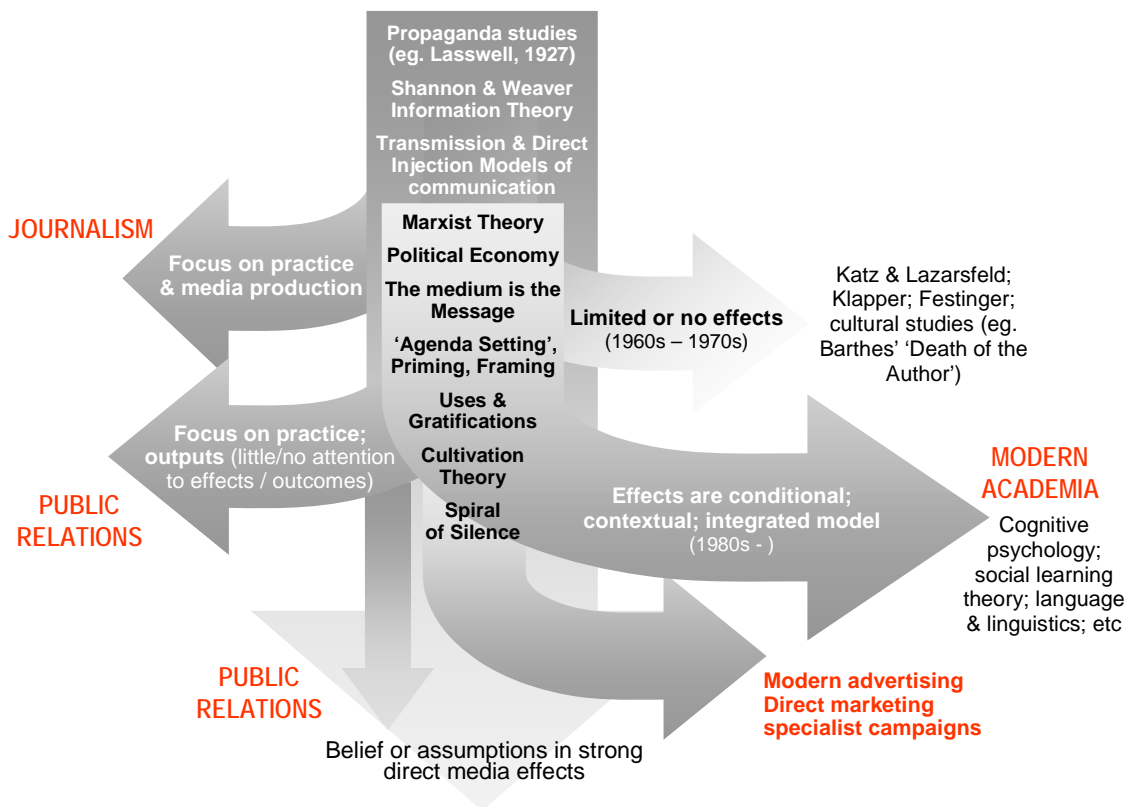


Diagram 1. The Fork in the Road of Media and Communication Theory and Practice. Macnamara, J. (2006).

Early public relations development missed or ignored radical limited effects theory (it was a notion too disconcerting to embrace) and, by the time the major advancements in psychology, cultural studies and post-structural thinking took hold, PR was already well-established as a practice and formulating its own growing body of theory.

Even though public relations has evolved to be much broader than ‘journalism for hire’ and press agency (notwithstanding that these variants of PR still exist), it has continued to focus on practice and, particularly, on the production of outputs. While modern academic thinking and research in media and communication departed substantially from the simplistic direct effects approach and made new discoveries about how people learn and exchange meaning (eg. social learning theory, social cognitive theory, social comparison, situational theory, semiotics, and an increasingly integrated view of how communication works), mainstream public relations continued down its practical path, or straight ahead based on outdated assumptions about the effects of communication.

Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney and Wise (2006) state “the transmission model is the more prevalent model of communication in society today” (p. 20).

Jim Grunig (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) observed that the dominant model of public relations practice has been the Public Information Model – an information processing approach that is focussed on outputs. Framed within this focus on outputs, public relations turned its back to a large extent on audience effects theory.

Xavier, Patel and Johnston (2004) reported that practitioners still evaluate *outputs* rather than outcomes. Cutlip, Center and Broom (2006) also identify a focus on outputs. Rice and Atkin (2002) note that many communication campaigns fail because fundamental theoretical aspects of communication are not understood. Murray and White (2004) report that public relations practitioners feel they have an intuitive sense of what works. They *assume* that public communication works.

This is the real reason for lack of commitment to measurement. Most PR practitioners do not proactively use research to measure, either for planning or for evaluation, because in their worldview they do not see it as relevant. When one focuses on and sees one’s job as producing outputs such as publicity, publications and events, measurement of effects that those outputs might or might not cause is an inconsequential downstream issue – it’s someone else’s concern. And, when one assumes that public communication causes effects, there is no imperative for research. Research is seen as an unnecessary enforced activity on those occasions when management’s predilection for numbers requires practitioners to prove what they believe they know intuitively.

In philosophical terms, public relations has remained structuralist, while modern societies and sophisticated views of communication are post-structuralist.

This fork in the road is not absolute or universal. There are progressive public relations and corporate communication practitioners who embrace modern communication and media knowledge and employ a research-based approach. There are many excellent universities teaching communication theory, media effects, audience reception studies, social learning theory, and so on.

But many courses for public relations through the 1980s and 1990s focussed on writing press releases, dealing with journalists, producing newsletters, making videos. In fact, several

universities still offer a range of undergraduate subjects in media *production* as a key component of communication and public relations degrees.

Professional development programs are heavily orientated to practical skills development. Very importantly, it needs to be recognized that a large proportion of practitioners transition to PR from other fields and do not have degrees in public relations or communication. As a result, a high proportion of practitioners have never heard of W. J. McGuire's (1968; 1985; 1989) stages of communication; Joseph Klapper's (1960) limited effects findings; Roland Barthes (1977) "death of the author"; Leon Festinger's (1957) Theory of Cognitive Dissonance; Umberto Eco's (1965 and 1981) theory of aberrant decoding; social cognitive theory – and some have not read and studied modern scholars in the public relations field.

A recent demonstration of the fork in the road of communication theory and practice is the approach to **new media** within public relations and corporate communication. A large part of the PR industry has not yet engaged in any substantial way with new media and concepts such as Web 2.0. Of those that have, the primary focus is how to *produce* Web sites, *produce* blogs, *produce* podcasts. Yet more outputs; more focus on process and practice. It is comparatively rare to find practitioners monitoring and analyzing the use, impact and effects of blogs, for instance, and it is rare to find them at the forefront of policy making and planning, advising their organizations on the implications of new media.

The practice route down which public relations has travelled leads inevitably, as Jim Grunig (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) has said, to an industry of *technicians*. Skilled technicians though they might be, they seldom belong to or participate in senior management because processes and outputs, while necessary, are not the stuff that strategic management is concerned with.

In terms of professionalization, the long-standing debate over whether, when and how public relations becomes a profession, this 'fork in the road' view most closely aligns with the *Knowledge Model* of professionalism. Further, it adds to this model by suggesting that not only does a field have to develop and apply a body of theory and knowledge to become a profession, but that the theory underpinning its activities needs to be correct and valid as far as we can determine. The dominant model of public relations I have pointed to has a body of theory and knowledge, but much of it is outdated and, in some cases, wrong. It is not a lack of theory, but outdated and bad theory that is holding public relations back.

If one prefers to adopt a Status Model, Competition Model or Personality Model of professionalism, as Frank Ovaitt (2005) outlines (drawing on the work of Betteke van Ruler), the fork in the road view explains a number of things. Public relations has not gained the status it seeks because it has been heading down a road that it is tangential to mainstream management and communication theory. Competition, personality, ambition and enthusiasm, while commendable characteristics, are also possessed by celebrities, sports stars, models and cheerleaders.

Public relations has lost its way in its journey to reach profession status. It has taken a fork in the road that has led to craft; to technicianship; to industry.

To simply summarize the 'fork in the road' that this paper describes, public relations has evolved to be predominantly **intuitive**, **author-centric** and concerned primarily with producing **outputs**, whereas communication scholars, researchers and social scientists take an approach that is **scientific**, **audience-centric** and concerned with **outcomes**.

Communication As Seen by Scholars, Researchers and Social Scientists	Communication As Seen by Public Relations
Scientific (based on social science knowledge drawn from psychology, social learning, etc)	Intuitive
Audience-centric (what the target audience receives, understands and accepts)	Author-centric (what the author or organization wants to say)
Outcomes orientated (i.e. effects)	Outputs orientated (i.e. production & processes such as press releases, events, etc)

The Solution

The purpose of this critical view is not to be negative or condemn public relations, but to hopefully contribute to its rescue. The industry needs roadside assistance. What is the solution?

The answer lies in education and training. Universities have to play a lead role in ensuring that future graduates emerge with a sound, broad understanding of social sciences and, specifically, of communication and media theory. They need to teach communication practitioners about audiences and audience reception theory, about social cognitive theory and social learning theory, about media effects, about semiotics, and about modern models of public relations such as Two-Way Symmetric views (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This is the knowledge that underpins our work.

Universities are under pressure to teach *practical* skills that will help graduates get jobs and a corollary of focussing on practical skills is, in some cases, the subjugation of broad-based social sciences knowledge. David Gauntlett (2005) says in his latest book:

At both school and university level, media and communications studies is often taught as a subject of two halves – the ‘practical’ work (making media) on the one hand, and the ‘theory’ work (studying media) on the other. This dichotomy is often a source of frustration for both students and teachers and unhelpfully carves up the field (p. 179).

Unfortunately, some students are graduating with degrees in public relations, communication and advertising, knowing half the story. Many know how to write news releases, brochures, advertisements and scripts, work with producers and designers and arrange events – but have little or no understanding of what effects if any their work might produce within the groups that they target. Peter Drucker (1966) noted Six Pillars of Wisdom for management, one of which he proposed as the need to know “the theory of the business” you are in. It is questionable how many graduates in public communication today really know the theory of the business they are in – communication (as opposed to information dissemination). While ensuring their graduates are equipped for the workplace, universities must resist pressure to defocus from providing a sound theoretical grounding in communication and the social sciences.

Professional institutes also have a key role to play and there is evidence that they need to lift their game considerably to be relevant in the future and fulfil their charter. With the exception of the Institute for Public Relations in the US which is a research institute publishing and promoting a wide range of research on highly relevant subjects and, to some extent the Chartered Institute of Public Relations in the UK, PR industry associations and institutes have focussed largely on getting members jobs and running workshops at which editors and

journalists typically launch tirades at PR practitioners and tell them what they need to do to get 10 paragraphs in *The Smithtown Weekly*¹.

There appears to be a need for a major review of public relations education and training, both within universities and the industry, to retrain practitioners and give them the knowledge that many of them have missed either because of career transition or the fork in the road of media and communication theory and practice.

Self-learning is a key requirement also. Many practitioners admit they do not read books or subscribe to professional publications. They do not have time, they say. Becoming a profession and gaining the respect they seek will require PR practitioners to commit to the level of ongoing self-directed learning that accountants, doctors and lawyers are required to do. Without it, they become out of date and irrelevant.

Critics can, with legitimacy, point out that there is nothing fundamentally new in this proposal for a revitalized focus on education and training. Many have been saying this for years. But perhaps the stark illustration of the fork in the road and how far public relations has ventured away from the large body of knowledge about media and communication that exists in cultural studies, psychology and other areas of the social sciences will spur a realization of the need for a new direction – a reorientation and reintegration within the social sciences.

Public relations has become siloed. Even worse, it has become ghettoed – not only in relation to disciplines such as business and management, but also within the social sciences.

Many studies suggest that public communication, including public relations and corporate and organizational communication, is vitally important in societies – and is perhaps even more so today with concerns over community alienation and loss of social capital (Putnam, 1995); claims of a ‘knowledge gap’ between the information rich and the information poor (Tichenor, Donohue and Olien, 1970; Donohue, Tichenor & Olien, 1975; Pan and Macleod, 1991; Gaziano, 1997); as well as rapidly changing and evolving ‘new media’ to understand and learn to use.

We are witnessing the beginning of a new era in public communication with new media as significant as, or even more significant than, the development of television. Web 2.0 applications, as they are called, such as blogs and collaborative Web sites like Wikipedia, YouTube, MySpace, Flickr, LinkedIn.com, Writely.com, Magnolia.com and others, represent a fundamental shift because they enable the long-held view that communication should be two-way. In Web 2.0 applications, the operative concepts are *conversations* and *communities*, occurring through online forums, chat rooms, blogs and collaborative Web sites. It is only a matter of time before we see Wikinews, a global collaborative news service, potentially dwarf CNN, the BBC and global wire services in content and subscribers. These new networks and Citizen Media are rewriting the rules of media relations, community relations and stakeholder communication. One-way media such as traditional newspapers, brochures, non-interactive Web sites and newsletters including static e-newsletters are side roads and, in some cases, dead-ends in communication.

¹ While anecdotal, this claim is based on 25 years experience in PR organisations by the author including holding positions of State and National President of the Public Relations Institute of Australia and a Councillor of the International Public Relations Association. Apologies if *The Smithtown Weekly* exists.

New routes to audiences are being constructed; new social networks are being built. We face a necessity and a great opportunity to chart a new course.

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Jim Macnamara is an internationally recognized authority on research for planning and measurement of communication with a 30-year career in media and public communication. After working as a journalist, as a consultant in leading PR firms and running his own consultancy for 13 years, in 1995 he established the Asia Pacific franchise of global media analysis firm, CARMA International and headed the company for 11 years before selling it to Media Monitors in early 2006. Jim is the author of 11 books as well as numerous professional and academic papers published internationally including in the *Journal of Communication Management* in the UK. He holds a BA in journalism, media studies and literary studies, an MA by research in media studies and a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in media research. A book based on his doctoral research was published by Palgrave Macmillan, London in September 2006. In 2005 he was appointed Adjunct Professor in Public Communication at the University of Technology Sydney and in 2007 was appointed to the university's academic staff as Professor of Public Communication. He also and serves on the education and training Advisory Board of the Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) in the UK.

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