

PART 2

Public relations theories and concepts

There is no one unifying 'public relations theory'. This part aims to address the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that public relations as an interdisciplinary subject draws upon. This section will demonstrate that public relations is multifaceted and can be interpreted through a number of relevant theoretical perspectives. Where possible, theories are applied to practice through case study examples. Chapters 8 and 9 highlight the key theoretical discussions: they take us from theories that describe how a profession ought to behave (normative theories) through to alternative theoretical approaches drawn from critical theory, the rhetorical perspective, feminism and postmodernism. New research directions for public relations are also highlighted in Chapter 9. Chapter 10 introduces our first 'concept': public relations as planned communication, in which public relations is presented as a process for achieving organisational objectives. Continuing the planning theme, Chapter 11 discusses the role of research and evaluation in the public relations process. Chapter 12 introduces an important concept around which there is an emerging debate: the nature of audiences, publics or stakeholders. There is sometimes confusion around the concepts of image, reputation and identity. Chapter 13 attempts to unpack this confusion as well as firmly identify these concepts as important to understanding public relations within a corporate context. Drawing mainly on theories of social psychology, Chapter 14 aims to demonstrate that the concepts of persuasion and propaganda must be defined and applied in helping us to recognise when public relations is used responsibly and when it is not. Finally, the ethical issues raised by public relations and its role in society inevitably leads to a discussion of ethics and professionalism, which is found in Chapter 15.

CHAPTER 8

Public relations theories – an applied overview: systems theories



Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe the evolution of public relations as an academic discipline
- describe and evaluate the main principles of system theory
- contrast different theoretical approaches to 'publics'
- consider different theoretical views of the role of the public relations practitioner
- consider how changes in technology and society have challenged these concepts
- describe and evaluate the main principles of relationship theory.

Structure

- Communications theories: laying the foundations
- Systems theories: emergence of public relations research
- Extending the systemic view
- Public relations as relationship management
- Changes abroad: shifts in society and technology

Introduction

Public relations theory and practice have traditionally been closely linked. Systems theory, which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as public relations education was established and was initially the dominant approach to public relations theory, took the view that theory development should improve practice first and foremost. This approach has had a significant influence on the nature of academic thought around public relations, particularly in the United States where many of the earliest university courses in public relations were started. In addition, and because of the wider influence of US-based academic journals, theoretical approaches in the international academic community have often followed this mindset.

This chapter will examine the major approaches to public relations in the systems tradition, the criticism that has led to major revisions in this theory and the evolutions in understanding the operations and concepts surrounding public relations practitioners and the publics they seek to reach. In particular, it will describe the shift of public relations academics' focus from systems theory, with its emphasis on situations, to relationship theory, with its emphasis on communication as the key to relationship management.

Communications theories: laying the foundations

Theories about how PR strategies and tactics work originated in university schools of management and communication, where the first PR courses were taught. Management was one home to PR courses, because PR as a profession is part of the management of organisations. Communications schools were the other, because effective communication forms the basis of good relationship management, a process that lies at the heart of effective PR (Grunig 1992).

Definition: Theory comprises a set of propositions or ideas used to explain phenomena, i.e. objects and events we can observe. Familiar theories include the theory of gravity or of evolution.

Definition: Normative theory refers to the ideal of how a profession such as PR should be practised.

Early communication theories were relatively simple, focusing on the actual process of one-way

persuasive communication and consisting of the following concepts, sometimes abbreviated to SMCRE:

- **Sender** – transmitting the message
- **Message** – what is being communicated
- **Channel** – the means by which the message is sent
- **Receiver** – the target for receiving the message
- **Effect** – the results, if any, of the communication.

Shannon and Weaver's (1949) theory of communication formed the foundation for modern theories of communication. The only problems arising in this model are:

- *technical*, when the channel malfunctions or alters the message
- *semantic*, when the meaning of the message differs between sender and receiver
- *influence* problems, when the desired persuasive effect does not occur.

Shannon and Weaver, however, leave out two fundamental influences on the communication process: human beings and the environment. To compensate, subsequent models (Harrison 2000) included the following:



PICTURE 8.1 This chapter will look at the evolution of public relations theory and its application in a range of social and political environments. Mass movements (Tiananmen Square protest, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 2004/5 Ukrainian elections – see Chapter 5) were all influenced by communication techniques. (Source: © Peter Turnley/Corbis.)

- *noise* – interference from the external environment that may distort the message
- *feedback* – from the receiver to the sender, which may modify future messages.

Shannon and Weaver's basic model is linear, even when the feedback loop is introduced. This does not necessarily reflect reality, where senders and receivers are capable of playing equal roles in the communications process. Reflecting this parity, Osgood and Schramm proposed a model that reflected a circular communications process, with each participant playing the role of encoding and decoding messages (Mc Quail and Windahl 1993). Finally, and in a theoretical development particularly relevant to PR, Westley and McLean introduced an additional role into the mix – that of the 'gatekeeper', who is positioned between the sender and the receiver of a message and may alter the original message before it reaches its intended recipient (Windahl and Signitzer 1992). Not only does this model allow for the role of PR practitioners as intermediaries between an organisation and its publics, but it also accommodates the role of the mass media, which filters the multitude of messages from organisations and individuals trying to attract the attention of readers, listeners and viewers (see Box 8.1).

Outcomes of communication: the active receiver

Communication theories began by focusing on persuasion as the outcome of communication. However, other outcomes, including informing or instructing individuals, or reinforcing ideas and behaviours, have been taken into account more recently. All outcomes demand an active receiver – that is, someone who actively absorbs and responds to the message, either by allowing themselves to be persuaded (see

Chapter 14, page 271), by accepting and acting on an instruction or by absorbing the information given to them and making an appropriate decision about how to use it.

As many PR practitioners recognise, generating an active reception for a particular message presents perhaps the biggest challenge to the sender. Unfortunately, the sender's control over the reception of the message is limited, for a number of reasons:

- *Source or sender characteristics* may influence the acceptance and value of the message.
- *Receiver personality characteristics* also affect message acceptance and the level of active response.
- *Context* – both the social environment in which the receiver lives (for example, as an employee, an activist or a family group) and the relationship between source and receiver affect the acceptance and interpretation of a message.
- *Message content* is interpreted differently by different people – the original meaning intended by the sender may not be the receiver's interpretation, because of differences in personality, personal background and environment.

The channel may influence the way in which the message is assimilated and the degree to which it is absorbed. Research is fragmented in terms of rules about how media selection might impact effectiveness of communication, but does seem to point to different mechanics of message reception depending on the media used (see Figure 8.1, overleaf).

Despite these difficulties, research has provided guidance on making persuasive communications more effective. If receivers agree with you, for example, presenting arguments supporting their views is likely to have the greatest impact. Presenting both sides of an argument may help if the receiver opposes your message or if the receiver is well-educated. It is also helpful in preventing a change of mind should

box 8.1

Theory in practice

Noise and feedback

If your local supermarket is trying to promote a new organic food range to its customers, it might decide to post flyers to the surrounding neighbourhood, highlighting the taste and benefits of the organic food on offer. If that were all you read about the new range, you might feel very enthusiastic about trying a few of the items. However, if, simultaneously, your local paper carries a story about a local scandal where organic farms had been found to be using chemicals, you might regard the claims of the supermarket flyer with a bit more suspicion. This would be an example of environmental 'noise'. Likewise, if the supermarket received complaints from customers saying the products were not as tasty as they'd expected, the supermarket might decide to put more emphasis on the health and environmental benefits of buying organic food, rather than taste, in future promotional activities. This would be an example of 'feedback'.

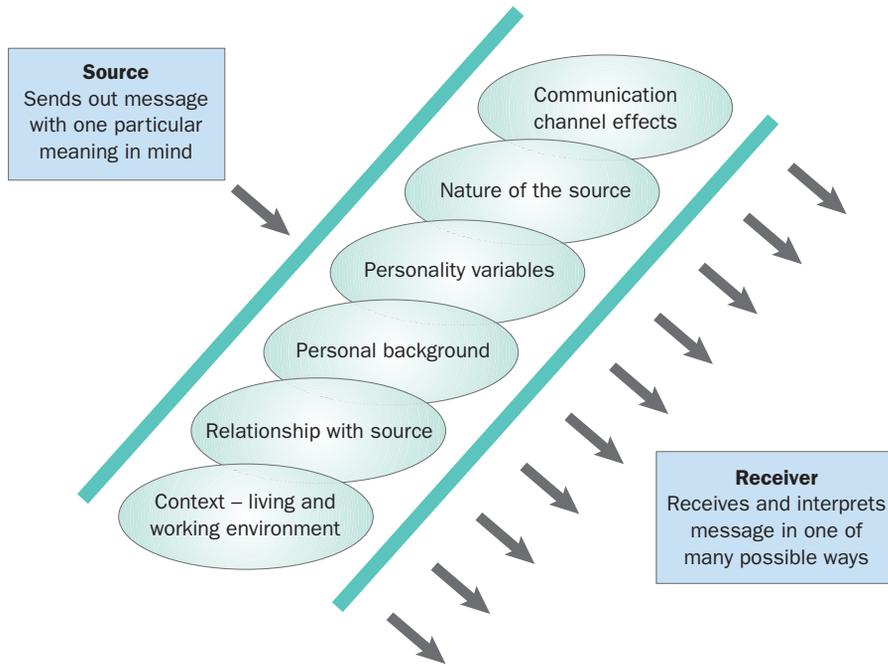


FIGURE 8.1 Influences on the active receiver

the receiver be presented with alternative arguments at a later date (Hovland et al. 1949). When presenting a two-sided argument, your argument should be balanced – obvious omissions on either side may make receivers suspicious (Lumsdaine and Janis 1953).

Communications theories continue to evolve but the principles above provided the underpinning for early theorising in PR. (See Think about 8.1.)

Systems theories: emergence of public relations research

For systems theorists, research begins with the practitioner working for the organisation, the organisation

carrying out PR or the situation in which the activity takes place. The main objective of PR is to develop and execute strategies and tactics that will benefit the organisation in a given context.

In 1984, two of the earliest systems theorists, James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, published *Managing Public Relations*, in which they presented a set of PR *typologies* based on observations of practice in the United States: press agency/publicist; public information; two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric communications (Grunig and Hunt 1984). While these models have been widely referenced since their initial inception by academics from all corners of the globe, it is worth noting that they are culturally specific and may not be relevant to PR practice in other countries (see Table 8.1).

think about 8.1 Communicating

Think of two occasions when you were trying to communicate to a friend or colleague, for example:

- 1 about your voting intentions, in a student or general election, or for a competition like *Pop Idol*
- 2 when you wanted them to take a message to another friend, lend you their phone or take notes in a lecture.

Did they understand what you wanted? If not, what were the factors causing confusion? How did you resolve the confusion?

Once they understood, did they comply with what you wanted, by (a) agreeing with your decision or (b) doing what you wanted? If so, why? If not, why not?

Feedback Think about your relationship with the individual, the differences and similarities in your respective social environments and the perceptions they may have of you. How would these have affected the situation? How does the nature of the request affect the communication and its outcome?

TABLE 8.1 Four models of public relations (source: adapted from Grunig and Hunt 1984: 22)

| Characteristic | Model | | | |
|----------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--|--|
| | Press agency/ publicity | Public information | Two-way asymmetric | Two-way symmetric |
| Purpose | Propaganda | Dissemination of information | Scientific persuasion | Mutual understanding |
| Nature of communication | One-way; complete truth not essential | One-way; truth important | Two-way; imbalanced effects | Two-way; balanced effects |
| Communication model | Source to receiver | Source to receiver | Source to receiver and feedback | Group to group and feedback |
| Nature of research | Little; 'counting house' | Little; readability, readership | Formative; evaluative of attitudes | Formative; evaluative of understanding |

Definition: *Typology* means identifying the different types of something, usually by working out the key elements that distinguish one kind of PR practitioner or activity, in this case, from another.

The purpose of press agency is to disseminate a particular point of view through the media and other channels. The communication is one-way: no dialogue with the intended audience is required and the main objective is to put forward one particular view of the world – which may or may not be completely truthful. Wartime communications from governments are a good example of propaganda (see also Chapter 14). Research is almost irrelevant for this type of communication: the nature of the audience is not important; message dissemination to as wide a range of outlets as possible is the main objective.

Public information is related to press agency, in that one-way information dissemination is the purpose of the activity, but it differs from press agency in that truth is fundamental. Central and local government departments often create information leaflets and make announcements to explain alterations to policies and processes that affect members of the public – for example, processes for claiming benefits or notifying the department of changes in personal circumstances that might affect their benefit entitlement. The information has to be accurate, true and specific – the main aim is to inform rather than persuade.

Two-way asymmetric communication is more commonly practised today than the first two models. This type of PR is rooted in persuasive communications (see Chapter 14) and aims to generate agreement between the organisation and its audiences by bringing them around to the organisation's way of thinking. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

such as Oxfam, Greenpeace and the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) practise this type of PR; the information they send out must be beyond reproach in order for them to retain their reputation and credibility and to persuade audiences to their way of thinking. Feedback from audiences is important in this model of communication, but it is used to adapt communications strategies to be more persuasive, not to alter the organisation's position. In line with the objectives of this communication, research here is used to measure attitudes in order to establish the degree of persuasive success achieved.

In two-way symmetric communication the aim is to generate mutual understanding – the two-way communications process should lead to changes in both the audience's *and* the organisation's position on an issue. Research for this type of PR does not just measure attitudes, but also investigates the understanding that has led to those attitudes, therefore establishing the quality of the dialogue taking place.

Searching for excellence

Grunig and his colleagues continued the quest to understand and improve PR with a three-country, long-term study of PR practice, in conjunction with the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), to establish what might be defined as 'excellence' in PR (Grunig 1992; Grunig et al. 2002). The 10-year study produced a four-level analysis of excellent PR:

- programme level (why, when and how individual communications programmes are implemented)
- departmental level (how the PR department operates and fits in with other departments and the organisation as a whole)

TABLE 8.2 Characteristics of 'excellent' public relations programmes (source: Grunig et al. 2002: 9)

| | |
|------------|---|
| I | Programme level |
| 1 | Managed strategically |
| II | Departmental level |
| 2 | A single or integrated public relations department |
| 3 | Separate function from marketing |
| 4 | Direct reporting relationship to senior management |
| 5 | Two-way symmetric model |
| 6 | Senior public relations person in the managerial role |
| 7 | Potential for excellent public relations, as indicated by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a knowledge of symmetric model b knowledge of managerial role c academic training in public relations d professionalism |
| 8 | Equal opportunity for men and women in public relations |
| III | Organisational level |
| 9 | Worldview for public relations in the organisation reflects the two-way symmetric model |
| 10 | Public relations director has power in or with the dominant coalition |
| 11 | Participative rather than authoritarian organisational culture |
| 12 | Symmetric system of internal communication |
| 13 | Organic rather than mechanical organisational structure |
| 14 | Turbulent, complex environment with pressure from activist groups |
| IV | Effects of excellent public relations |
| 15 | Programmes meet communications objectives |
| 16 | Reduces costs of regulation, pressure and litigation |
| 17 | Job satisfaction is high among employees |

- organisational level (understanding of, and respect given to, communications processes and audience feedback by the organisation and its staff)
- economic level (the tangible value provided by excellent PR to the organisation, in terms of happy external and internal audiences).

Table 8.2 illustrates the factors that characterise excellent PR practice.

At the heart of the theory is the following proposition from Grunig (1992: 6) about PR effectiveness:

Public relations contributes to organisational effectiveness when it helps reconcile the organisation's goals with the expectations of its strategic constituencies. This contribution has monetary value to the organisation. Public relations contributes to effectiveness by building quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies. Public relations is most likely to contribute to effectiveness when the senior public relations manager is a member of the dominant coalition where he or she is able to shape the organisation's goals and to help determine which external publics are most strategic.

According to the study, two-way symmetric communication practices are a keystone for excellent PR,

although the authors recognise that in practice, a mix of asymmetric and symmetric approaches is often used. Moreover, the study is based on western principles of PR practice; in other cultural environments different factors are likely to underpin excellence (see Chapter 7).

Critiques of the normative models

The symmetric and asymmetric communication models in particular have stimulated a large body of research into how PR is practised. While evidence suggests that it is associated with ethical and effective communications practices (Grunig 1992), critics have also argued that it is an idealistic model, which misrepresents the communications process in reality, where vested interests dictate the nature of PR practice and rarely encourage a truly balanced communications process (L'Etang 1996).

For example, Cheney and Christensen (2001: 181) argue that Grunig's research is based on self-reports by managers and should therefore be treated with caution. The idea of symmetric communications also obscures the networks of power and influence that shape these practices, as exemplified, for example, by organisations' pre-selection of target publics and topics for dialogue:

Public relations scholars no longer can pretend that dialogue, symmetry and responsiveness are values and practices that concern only the actors involved in the resolution of specific corporate issues. Not only do we need to ask, on an ongoing basis, who is representing whose interests, we also need to look at the broader implications for conflict resolutions between organisations and their stakeholders.

The sentiments of Cheney and Christensen are borne out by many critical scholars, who argue that the social and environmental context of PR can only lead to a profession that is defined by corporate interests. Others, looking either at specific areas of PR activity such as publics or approaches, have adapted the asymmetric and symmetric models in light of what they see as incomplete or inadequate theorisation.

Pieczka (1996) offers an in-depth analysis of the theoretical foundations for systems theories, and Grunig's excellence theory in particular. She points out that the degree of influence that these normative approaches have had should prompt thoughtful investigation into the assumptions that underpin them. Her conclusion is that, while the theory of excellence in itself is well-constructed, it does contain some contradictions. For example, two-way communications advocates openness, dialogue and inclusion – and yet PR practitioners are assumed to be most effective when they are part of an elite, the dominant coalition. She also suggests that the excellence study's research questions, which defined 'effective' PR in terms of organisational benefits, led to a self-fulfilling prophecy that presents two-way communications as most effective and therefore most desirable. For those that do not adopt this view or operate according to its principles, there is an implication of failure. Clearly, this cannot be assumed in, for example, cross-cultural models of PR where cultural influences change the nature of PR practice to suit a particular context.

For Grunig, critiques of his work – and particularly of the idealism inherent in symmetric PR – provided the impetus to reformulate the model, in an effort to improve its relevance to PR practice (Grunig 2001). This new 'mixed motive' model reconceptualises the concepts of asymmetric and symmetric PR, reflecting the dynamics of PR practice and the mixed methods observed in organisations in past research (Dozier et al. 1995). It also attempts to accommodate the range of outcomes of PR practices in light of various contingency factors.

The model builds on concepts from *game theory*, originally developed to study situations of conflict and cooperation. Murphy (1991) argued that game

theory allows us to understand how PR strategies are framed in the light of the interests of various publics balancing the interests of the organisation. In turn, this helps us understand the basic types of outcome of PR activities, in particular how compromise is reached between organisations and their publics – that is, how the two sets of interests are balanced in the communications process.

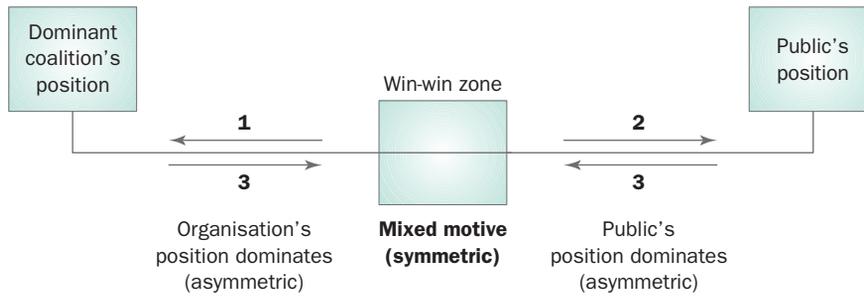
Definition: *Game theory* is based on observations about negotiation and compromise that demonstrate that many conflicts are based on the zero-sum principle, whereby for someone to win, their opponent has to lose. Win-win outcomes are the result of compromise and mutually satisfactory negotiation.

Practitioners often develop strategies and define goals based on the need to reach a compromise with audiences – for example, persuading 18–30 year olds of the value of an iPod. These are non-zero-sum games, where opportunities exist for all parties to get something out of the negotiations (in this case, the seller gets the money, while the buyer gets a portable music collection). Grunig and his colleagues extended this idea of non-zero-sum situations, where organisations follow their own interests in the light of the interests of other parties, to complete their new model of communications (Figure 8.2).

While Grunig (2001) retains the term 'symmetrical' to describe the model, what is presented is a continuum. At each extreme, asymmetric communications are practised either in the interests only of the organisation or only of the public. In the centre of the continuum, called the win-win zone, mixed motive communications is practised, where the organisation and its publics enter into a dialogue of enlightened self-interest, characterised by negotiation, persuasion and compromise (Figure 8.2, overleaf). This mixed motive communication is equated with symmetric communication by Grunig (2001).

Grunig argues that this continuum of two-way communication more accurately reflects the contingencies that dictate communications practices in an organisation – where, for example, asymmetric communication may be the norm for some issues, but mixed motive models may be practised for those less critical to the organisation's survival. Extending the model, Plowman (1998) further examined the specific strategies that underpinned each approach. He found seven different types of tactic:

- 1 contending (I win, you lose)
- 2 collaborating (win-win)
- 3 compromising (50–50 split)
- 4 avoiding (lose-lose)



| Type of practice | Explanation |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1 Pure asymmetry model | Communication used to dominate public, accept dominant coalition's position |
| 2 Pure cooperation model | Communication used to convince dominant coalition to cave in to public's position |
| 3 Two-way model | Communication used to move public, dominant coalition or both to acceptable 'win-win' zone |

FIGURE 8.2 New model of symmetry as two-way practices (source: Dozier et al. 1995)

- 5 accommodating (lose–win)
- 6 unconditionally constructive (strategic reconciliation)
- 7 win–win or no deal (where either both win or no deal is struck).

Contending and avoiding strategies were used for asymmetric communications in the organisation's interests, while at the other end of the continuum, the strategies used were accommodating and compromising. In the win–win window, strategies included cooperation, being unconditionally constructive, and win–win or no deal. Plowman found not only that these tactics were effective in resolving particular crises, but also that the greater the role of PR in solving organisational problems, the more likely it was to be represented at senior management level and have greater power and influence in the organisation – two of the key factors associated with excellent PR.

Interestingly, while the new model may well represent practice in organisations more effectively in that it avoids prescription of a single model of practice as the 'ideal', Grunig does not attempt to address the critical school's assertion that the PR process is inherently imbalanced. The relative frequency of asymmetric communication in the interests of the public as compared to options that favour the organisation, for example, is not addressed, even though a significant imbalance would cast into question the model's claim to 'provide an ideal combination of a positive and a normative theory' (Grunig 2001: 26). Instead, Grunig leaves deconstruction of PR practice to other authors, whose views are outlined elsewhere in this

chapter and book. (See Think about 8.2 and Mini case study 8.1.)

Publics in public relations

Grunig and Repper (1992) emphasise that, in order for PR to be respected and used effectively by senior managers, it must operate strategically – in a way that delivers real value to the organisation and helps it achieve its business goals. To do this, they argue, practitioners should do research into the characteristics of their target audiences, so that they can better understand how they might relate and respond to the organisation's communications. Based on relevant characteristics, PR practitioners can then segment target audiences and tailor communications activities more effectively.

The basic segmentation proposed by Grunig and Repper is 'active' versus 'passive' publics. Active publics seek out information and respond to organisational initiatives. They are therefore more likely to affect the organisation. Passive publics are those that do not proactively want to engage with the organisation. Some publics may be 'latent', or publics-in-waiting, only becoming active when they are prompted by a particular stimulus. PR practitioners need to know what stimulus will trigger a reaction among these publics so that they can use the right communications at the right time. (This description of what practitioners should and should not do is a good example of normative theory.)

In terms of identifying the types of issue that might trigger a public reaction, Grunig offers a situational

think about 8.2 Negotiating an evening out

When you and your friends are discussing where to spend your Friday night, how do you decide?

- Does one person dominate the decision and everyone else has to go along with it?
- Do you try and meet everyone's interests, perhaps by splitting up initially and then meeting up later?
- Does it get too complicated so you give up all trying to go out together and go your separate ways instead?
- Do some people happily give up their ideas and go along with the others?
- Do some people give up their ideas for now and instead do them at a later date?
- Do you either all go out together or not go out at all?

How does the option you chose fit with Plowman's negotiation tactics? Could you negotiate it differently? What stops you doing so?

Is there one person who tends to be the 'peacemaker' and finds a compromise? How much do you all rely on that person? What would happen if they were not there?

mini case study 8.1

Symmetric and asymmetric communication practices on the web

Symmetric communication

Non-governmental organisations have to communicate effectively with their stakeholders and take their views into account if they want to ensure long-term support for their causes. Symmetric, two-way communications are therefore particularly important for them. A good example of this in practice on the web is the Oxfam site, www.oxfam.org.uk. The site is focused on ensuring visitors receive as much information as possible about the organisation and its activities, while offering plenty of opportunity for feedback and contact. It includes:

- aims and objectives of the organisation
- annual reports and evaluations of its activities
- a summary of the different processes used by Oxfam to evaluate its activities in light of these objectives
- frequently asked questions and answers, divided into sections according to areas of most common interest
- updates and headline articles on the most current activities with which Oxfam is involved and progress reports for longer running projects
- press releases and other communications, reports and reviews released by Oxfam
- educational materials relating to Oxfam's aims and objectives
- further opportunities to contact the organisation by post, email or telephone.

Asymmetric communication

Unlike examples of symmetric communications, which are less common, multiple examples of asymmetric

communication can be found in all sorts of organisations. For example, Nokia, the global mobile phone manufacturer, is focused on engaging with its community of users, but in a more limited way. The company's Code of Conduct (www.nokia.com/nokia/0,8764,1108,00.html) addresses all major areas of corporate social responsibility: the environment, human rights, ethics and legal limitations, and workplace practices including discrimination and fair trading practices. It also addresses health concerns about mobile phone use, highlighting the fact that it supports research in this area and that findings so far indicate no health risk from mobile phones.

It is clear that the company acknowledges the concerns of its community of stakeholders in the twenty-first century. However, the vast majority of its website is focused on the benefits of its products for its customers, rather than asking users what they think of the company and opening itself up for change in response to their views. The website gives the impression that the image it presents of a responsible company should be sufficient to address whatever concerns people may have.

For those who do have questions to ask the company, there is little opportunity for direct dialogue. While the media can give feedback on the press section of the website using a pre-structured questionnaire, and employees benefit from internal communications, it is not immediately obvious what options other groups have to voice their opinions to the company or ask questions and get direct answers.

theory of publics, which divides up active and passive audiences according to the types of issue that might trigger a response (Grunig 1983). He identified four basic types of public:

- 1 *All-issue publics* – active on all issues. Often, these types of people are very focused on injustices carried out by or through organisations. They might be equally angered by deforestation, child labour, animal testing and nuclear weapons – and take action against companies involved in any one of these things.
- 2 *Apathetic publics* – inattentive on all issues. These people are generally not aware of, or are unconcerned by, events in their environment. They are self-focused and they are highly unlikely to take part in any action – from petitions to demonstrations – to make their views heard.
- 3 *Single-issue publics* – active on one issue in a specific area. These people might have decided to put all their energies into one cause, such as supporting refugees and asylum seekers for example, and to be very active but just in this one area.
- 4 *Hot-issue publics* – active on one issue that has a high profile and broad societal application (such as domestic violence). Often, these people seize on a theme that is receiving attention in the media (for example, the rights of fathers in cases of family separation and divorce) and will be very active on this one area, but only for a relatively short period of time.

See Think about 8.3.

More recent research on publics argues for a change in how publics are conceived by practitioners and theorists. Leitch and Neilson (2001) criticise the situational theory of publics on a number of levels:

- It assumes that ‘publics’ only come into being once the organisation decides to target them.
- It assumes that publics are equal partners with organisations once the relationship exists.
- It does not acknowledge the presence of power in the relationship.

This is like saying that your favourite clothing retailer did not believe you existed until you reached the age where you could shop there and that you had exactly the same power as managers to influence how the company operates. If you protested against their working practices in developing countries, for example, you would be given a fair hearing and treated as if your interests were as important as the interests of shareholders and management in making a profit. Clearly, this would be an incorrect assumption.

Other researchers point out that the concept of a ‘single-issue’ public, with whom the organisation can communicate on a relatively one-dimensional basis, does not equate to reality. Instead, they recognise that individuals relate to organisations on a number of issues and each of those issues may give rise to a different image of the organisation. Moffit’s (1994) research revealed that individuals simultaneously hold a range of images of an organisation, some of which may be contradictory, and that they shift between these images almost instantaneously, often within the space of a conversation. Moreover, she also revealed that many of the factors determining these images were not related to the organisation and were out of its control (see also Chapter 13). Cozier and Witmer (2001) argue that the situational theory of publics treats individuals as ‘possessions’ of the organisation, and does not account for individual motives, rationalities and meaning systems that underpin the way they relate to it. They argue that these processes, as well as the influencing

think about 8.3 Issues

Consider the following issues:

- legislation to prevent cruelty to pets
- abuse of old people cared for in nursing homes
- new housing developments on a local school playing field
- child labour practices in developing countries
- threat to raise student tuition fees.

Take the two issues that you feel most and least strongly about. Why do you feel like this about these issues? What are the factors driving your active or passive response?

Now think about what kinds of communication might prompt you to take action on the issue you feel most strongly about. What kind of support would you be prepared to give to the issue? Why?

Feedback Think about the forms of support that you might offer (e.g. time, money, attendance at a demonstration). Also ask yourself why you choose one form of support over another. What is the limit of your involvement?

mini case study 8.2

Using the web to understand users

One website that recognises the multiple interests of its users and successfully presents an ‘electronic meeting place’ for them is www.nzgirl.co.nz. The site offers its users a sense of community, the opportunity to participate in multiple publics, and thereby builds

multiple relationships with them. Electronic communications are producing a shift towards individual, interactive, relationship-based PR strategies.

Source: Motion 2001

factors that lie outside the organisation’s control, are fundamental to understanding the nature and development of publics. This is even more acute in an age of new media, where the internet moderates individual relationships with organisations (see Mini case study 8.2 and Think about 8.4).

Hallahan (2000) argues for a completely different basis for segmentation of publics that he believes better reflects reality. In his view, the situational theory of publics overemphasises active publics at the expense of inactive groups, who may still be important constituents for the organisation. To address this, he proposes a typology of publics based on knowledge and involvement:

- aware publics (high knowledge – low involvement)
- active publics (high knowledge – high involvement)
- aroused publics (low knowledge – high involvement)
- inactive publics (low knowledge – low involvement)
- non-publics (no knowledge – no involvement).

Hallahan’s analysis emphasises the role of both knowledge and involvement with an issue or organisation before activism takes place. Individuals may be involved – that is, perceive a particular issue as relevant to them – but unless they have knowledge of the issue they are unlikely to become active. Similarly, if neither knowledge nor involvement is high, then inactive publics are unlikely to move to any of the other categories of public and will remain passive.

Hallahan applies these typologies to strategies for communicating that organisations might adopt. If two-way symmetric communication is the ideal, as systems theory suggests, then active publics are the most likely group to be able to match the organisation’s formal communications efforts and structures, simply because they are likely to be organised, have a spokesperson or some kind of leadership and proactively approach the organisation. Aware and aroused publics are less likely to be organised, but individuals within these groups may require the organisation to respond reactively to approaches made by them – or the organisation may need to seek out these groups in order to engage in two-way discussions with them. Finally, inactive publics are unlikely to make any attempts to engage with the organisation, although the organisation itself may want to establish positive relationships with them, since they are often large and long-term groups of constituents. In this case, the onus is on the organisation to develop communications that stand out and engage these inherently passive groups, presenting specific challenges to PR practitioners.

These critiques may leave you thinking that practitioners will have a hard time targeting anyone with any accuracy. It certainly complicates the picture in a number of ways. First, the idea of a single ‘public’ with a single perception of the organisation is incorrect. Therefore the basis of many communications campaigns may be ineffectual. Hallahan’s typology may help improve the effectiveness of different strategies by basing them on the levels of knowledge and involvement that

think about 8.4 Images

To understand Moffitt’s findings, consider your own position. If you work part time, what is your image of the company you work for *from the point of view of an employee*. How do you feel about the company *as a customer*? And what do your friends say about the company? Does their opinion affect the way you feel about the company when you are talking to them?

Now think about how your company thinks about its audiences. Does it treat them as one group or does it differentiate between smaller groups or individuals? What criteria does it use to do that? How effective is that differentiation?

Feedback How do you reconcile any contradictions in the way you think about the company? Do you find it straightforward and natural that you might have a different relationship with it once you are ‘in the door’ as compared to when you are not working?

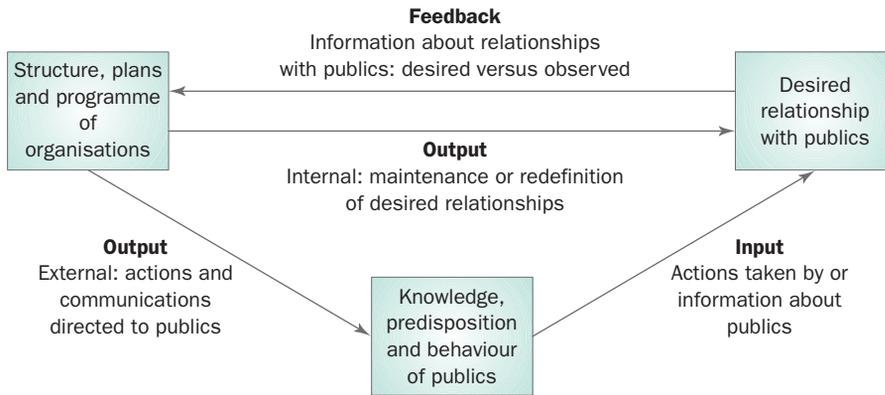


FIGURE 8.3 Open systems model of public relations (source: Cutlip, Scott M., Center, Allen H., Broom, Glen M., *Effective Public Relations, 8th Edition*, © 2000, p. 244. Adapted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.)

an audience has in relation to a campaign. Second, the impact of a campaign may be watered down due to external factors – practitioners need to account for this in their planning and evaluation. Organisations need to understand and acknowledge the fluidity of relationships for individuals and find a way of relating to them in spite of this ‘moving target’ dynamic.

Moffitt (1994) suggests that the solution is to address publics in the context of their relationship with the organisation, rather than on an issues basis – for example, as consumers, employees, members of an activist group, or suppliers to the company. Then, within these groups, she suggests organisations research the issues relevant to those people and the range of positions on the issues that they might take. Similarly, Leitch and Neilson (2001) suggest that publics be conceptualised as people who share ‘zones of meaning’ in relation to an organisation. They may belong to more than one ‘zone of meaning’ and the combination of these multiple ‘zones’ will define their relationship with the organisation. For example, a mature university student might also be a parent of a young student and a member of the student council; each of these would be a zone of meaning and the combination of all three produces that individual’s relationship with the university. The task for PR practitioners is to establish which zones are relevant and how they might combine to create different relationships with the organisation (Motion and Leitch 1996).

Open systems

Acknowledging the importance of publics and their actions, Cutlip et al. (2000) have proposed an open systems theory of PR.

Open systems are systems that take their environment into account and change their business activities accordingly. Closed systems do not adapt to external

conditions. Cutlip and his colleagues suggest that PR should view itself as part of an open system. It should help the organisation to monitor relevant environmental influences and adapt its activities accordingly, as well as encouraging changes in the external environment that will help the organisation. In this model, two-way symmetric communications and strategic monitoring of the environment are fundamental to good PR practice.

This approach has distinct advantages for practitioners:

- It positions them as strategic advisors to the organisation and therefore gives them access to senior managers and more power to influence organisational activities.
- It limits the potential for crises, since environmental scanning allows the practitioner to anticipate difficulties and take early corrective action.
- It also ensures that PR makes a significant contribution to organisational effectiveness.

Figure 8.3 shows the model of open systems PR. See also Mini case study 8.3.

Extending the systemic view

Beyond North America: cultural issues

As more researchers outside North America entered the field, they tested Grunig and Hunt’s typologies and found that country culture has a significant impact on the practice of PR (see Chapter 7). Practitioners use cultural norms and expectations to shape their approach to communication and these play a large part in determining the effectiveness of tactics and strategies. The ability of PR practitioners to

mini case study 8.3

Greenpeace – an open system

For environmental activists, clear communication with the right people at the right time is essential for getting their message across. An organisation like Greenpeace is a classic example of an open-system organisation. Campaign planners have to take into account views from external parties in order to ensure that they develop appropriate and effective communications for the cause they serve. These are just some of the people whose views Greenpeace needs to take into account when deciding which campaigns to execute and how to execute them:

- *biologists and environmental scientists* – to determine which plants, animals or environmental features are in most need of help, as well as to gather useful facts and figures for campaigns
- *its membership* – to determine which causes will generate most support, based on audience inter-

ests, as well as which causes would alienate members and therefore need to be avoided

- *public opinion polls* – in order to establish what the public already knows about current or planned Greenpeace campaigns and where more education is required
- *government and policy makers* – to understand what kind of information, in terms of content and presentation, they need to take Greenpeace's position into account when making policy
- *people who are directly affected by Greenpeace campaigns* – for example, whaling communities that might lose their livelihoods if whaling were completely banned. The strongest campaigns need to present alternative options for such people to survive and maintain their living standards.

target their audiences effectively is influenced by factors such as:

- extent of technology use, such as the internet, and its availability to individuals at home or work
- preference for face-to-face or electronic communication
- importance of hierarchy and power
- demographics
- split between urban and rural populations.

Sriramesh and Verčić (1995) developed a model for investigating international public relations (IPR) practices, taking into account environmental variables, including:

- infrastructure (political, economic, legal, activism)
- culture (societal and organisational)
- media characteristics (mass media, level of control, media outreach, media access).

Most international studies have taken at least some of these variables into account. Sriramesh (1992) found that the country culture of India, in particular its emphasis on relative power and hierarchy of individuals, resulted in a dominant management culture where managerial decisions were directive rather than consultative. This led to PR departments whose primary function was press agency – promoting the organisation in a positive light. Two-way communication was not on the agenda. Bardhan (2003) also found the assumptions of western PR models were incongruent with traditional Indian views of relationships and PR. His respondents did not acknowledge the possibility of symmetry in their relationships and

viewed power differentials as normal, rather than a limiting factor. Similarly, Holtzhausen et al. (2003) found that the symmetric/asymmetric dichotomy was not applied by South African PR practitioners and that in fact culture-specific models of practice were based on the requirements of the environment. Rhee (2002) found that the excellence theory of PR did explain South Korean best practice, but that it was also enhanced by collectivist approaches to the work (a recognition of the community role of PR), as well as by elements of Confucianism including a long-term orientation and the importance of status as an organising principle for activity.

Grunig et al. (1995) compared models of PR in Greece, India, Taiwan and the USA and found two models in addition to the original four-way typologies:

- the 'personal influence' model, where the practitioner focuses on developing personal relationships with individuals who are central or highly influential to the success of the organisation
- the 'cultural interpreter' model, which refers to the role carried out by native PR practitioners in multinational companies, who are often consulted about local cultural norms and practices.

The personal influence model has since been recognised in a number of studies. For example, Sriramesh et al. (1999) found that the personal influence model of PR played a large part in determining PR practice in India, South Korea and Japan, and that cultural norms associated with this model were part of the PR mix. Park (2003) found that the

personal influence model of PR was significant in South Korean practice, and that old-style, ‘publicity’ roles for PR were most common. In this context, two-way communications were slow to develop.

In one of few studies on the impact of the social and economic climate on PR practice, Molleda (2000) found that economic, social and political circumstances in Latin America resulted in expectations that organisations would contribute to the development of society; consequently, the PR practitioner has a strong role as both change agent and conscience of the organisation (see Chapter 3 for further discussion).

In an exploratory study, van Ruler et al. (2004) identified four characteristics of European PR:

- managerial
- operational
- reflective
- educational.

Managerial and operational characteristics were closely aligned with the US-derived technical and managerial roles of PR, although they were regarded as equally important in organisations, rather than being designated ‘strategic’ or ‘tactical’. More specific to Europe were the reflective and educational characteristics. Reflective is concerned with ‘organisational standards, values and views and aimed at the development of mission and organisational strategies’. This is done through analysing relevant societal values, views and standpoints and discussing their implications with members of the organisation. Educational is concerned with ‘the mentality and behaviour of the members of the organisation by facilitating them to communicate, and aimed at internal public groups’. This is done by helping all members of the organisation to communicate with, and respond effectively to, society (van Ruler et al. 2004: 54). See Think about 8.5.

Public relations as relationship management

An important emerging perspective in the systems family of approaches puts the actual relationship of an organisation with its publics at the centre of PR activity. Maintaining and improving that relationship is the objective of PR. This means that strategies and tactics should always be assessed in terms of their effect on the relationship between an organisation and its publics, rather than, for example, the benefits they provide for the organisation.

The focus on relationships broadens the perspectives used to formulate PR strategies and tactics, but also by definition requires greater involvement from organisations. This is not as simple as it sounds – involvement means genuine dialogue, which in itself can be challenging. For example, Kent and Taylor (2002) point out that dialogue in practice frequently fails to meet the expectations of those taking part. The outcomes of dialogue may not be what was desired, and dialogue itself requires disclosure of information that may make the owner of that information vulnerable. Practitioners pressing for greater interaction with publics must recognise, explain and manage these potential risks for organisations as well as for the publics they interact with. See Box 8.2.

Ferguson (1984) was the first to put forward the notion of relationship as a central focus for PR. During the 1990s, the concept of relationships was investigated more fully and the first comprehensive book discussing the area was published in 2000, by Ledingham and Bruning.

Broom et al. (2000) draw on a range of relationship theories, including interpersonal communication, psychotherapy, interpersonal relationships and systems theory. Drawing together the most useful findings, they put forward a tentative framework for

think about 8.5

Cross-cultural communication

Cultural constraints are important considerations for multinational corporations when implementing global communications programmes. Using the example of an organisation launching a new chocolate bar, what economic, cultural and political factors might need to be considered when putting together a PR campaign for the following countries:

- United Kingdom
- Brazil
- India
- Australia

Feedback Consider factors such as the availability of technology in the campaign, consumers’ disposable income, health issues, governmental restrictions, social responsibility considerations. Be specific, don’t just list generic headings.

**box
8.2**
Theory in practice
Putting relationships first

The relationship perspective of PR does not require an organisation to give up its interests when deciding how to conduct its PR. But it does mean that wider thinking is required about how those objectives might be achieved. For example, if a computer manufacturer is faced with price increases from its suppliers, ultimately it is going to have to pass on some of those costs to its customers. Without a relationship perspective of communications, the company might decide to increase the cost of its products at short notice, announce it in a press release on the day of the increase and explain little about the conditions that led to the need to raise prices. This could alienate customers, who might feel that their needs and interests are being ignored by the company – after all, they might also be facing a tough economic climate.

A relationship perspective would prompt practitioners to moderate the impact of the price rise on customer opinions by working out what needs to be done to ensure they do not feel aggrieved. The resulting strategy might give six months' notice of the price rise, a full explanation of the reasons behind it, and perhaps offer a senior member of staff for interviews on the topic, rather than just sending out a dry press release that is open to misinterpretation. Customers would then have more complete information and better understand the company's position. They could assess and plan for the change more effectively and would feel that the company has taken their situation into account in its decision.

defining organisational–public relationships (Figure 8.4), based on the following principles:

- Relationships are characterised by *interdependence*: parties to the relationship adapt in order to pursue a particular function in the relationship.
- Relationships represent *exchanges or transfers* of information, energy or resources; the attributes of these exchanges represent and define the relationship.
- Relationships have *antecedents and consequences* that must be taken into account when analysing them; organisation–public relationships therefore have specific antecedents (histories) and consequences (effects or results).

The centrality of communication to the conduct of relationships is unequivocal. Communication is the means by which adaptation is communicated and occurs and movement of resources is operationalised. The communication process should therefore be the starting point for an analysis of organisation–public relationships.

More recently, Ledingham (2003: 190) proposed the following theory of relationship management for PR (see Box 8.3, overleaf):

Effectively managing organisational–public relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organisations and publics.

Because relationships are so complex, a relationship view of PR offers many different perspectives from which to examine the discipline. Factors that affect all

relationships, such as their history, the background of the people or organisations involved and the social context of the relationship, to name just three, can be analysed in a PR context. For example, Ledingham et al. (1999) investigated the effect of time on organisation–public relationships using a survey of 404 residential telephone customers. They found that it was a significant factor in respondents' perceptions of trust, openness, involvement, investment and commitment to the relationship on the part of the organisation and also influenced the propensity of the customer to stay in or leave the relationship.

One problem with early formulations of the relationship perspective is that no single tool existed to measure the health of relationships with specific publics. Recognising this, Huang (2001) developed a cross-cultural scale for measuring public perceptions of organisations based on five dimensions of relationships:

- control mutuality
- trust
- relational satisfaction and relational commitment
- *renqing* ('favour')
- *mianzi* ('face').

Definition: *Renqing* (favour) refers to a set of social norms based on the exchange of gifts and support, by which one must abide to get along well with others in Chinese society.

Definition: *Mianzi* (face) refers to face, or face work – the process of impression management, or presenting oneself in an advantageous light, in order to expand or enhance human networks (Huang 2001: 69).

**box
8.3**
Theory in practice
Fourteen conclusions on the organisation–public relationship

Drawing on the literature around PR and relationship management, Ledingham (2003) draws 14 conclusions about the organisation–public relationship:

- 1 Organisation–public relationships are transactional. *For example, your relationship with your university is based on the fact that you pay fees and they teach you – it is an exchange.*
- 2 The relationships are dynamic: they change over time. *As you progress through the degree you may do a placement year, which limits your contact with the university for that year and changes the way you view it when you return.*
- 3 They are goal oriented. *The university wants your fees; you want to successfully complete a degree.*
- 4 Organisation–public relationships have antecedents and consequences and can be analysed in terms of relationship quality, maintenance strategies, relationship type and actors in the relationship. *You might have had a poor induction week experience, which started you off on the wrong foot with the department you are studying with (antecedent); your tutor is hard to get hold of so you find it difficult to find anyone to discuss your issues with (maintenance strategy); the tutor regards you as a student first and foremost rather than an individual – and vice versa (relationship type); the staff might be great, but you might not get on with the people on your course (actors in the relationship).*
- 5 They are driven by the perceived needs and wants of interacting organisations and publics. *Your tutors might start out in the relationship assuming that you want to work hard and want to succeed; you might assume that they are there to support you and help you to succeed.*
- 6 The continuation of organisation–public relationships is dependent on the degree to which expectations are met. *If the subject is not what you expected, you may leave; if you do not submit, or fail, assignments, the university may ask you to leave.*
- 7 Those expectations are expressed in interactions between organisations and publics. *University prospectuses, websites, letters, course documentation and conversations between tutors and students all set these expectations.*
- 8 Such relationships involve communication, but communication is not the sole instrument of relationship building. *Your participation in classes, as well as your written work and conversations with other students and staff, all go towards building your image and relationship with tutors and the university.*
- 9 These relationships are impacted by relational history, the nature of the transaction, the frequency of exchange, and reciprocity. *The more often you visit the students union or local student bars and clubs, the more people you are likely to meet and the closer you may feel to the university and student community.*
- 10 Organisation–public relationships can be described by type (personal, professional, community, symbolic and behavioural) independent of the perceptions of those relationships. *A student–course relationship might be described as professional (given that it is underpinned by a financial transaction and clear exchange of commitment) or personal (given that it is also underpinned by your own enthusiasm for the subject and your friendships with fellow students).*
- 11 The proper focus of the domain of PR is relationships, not communication. *Prospectuses that deliver information about courses might get you to enrol in a degree – but you will not feel truly committed until you experience a positive induction week, when events that appeal to your own interests and needs take place, you meet your tutors one to one and you are acknowledged as an individual.*
- 12 Communication alone cannot sustain long-term relationships in the absence of supportive organisational behaviour. *If your department says it will deliver outstanding teaching but then your tutor is not a good teacher, you will stop going to the tutorials.*
- 13 Effective management of organisation–public relationships supports mutual understanding and benefit. *If your expectations and those of the course lecturers are the same, then the relationship between you is likely to run extremely smoothly and result in a positive outcome for both parties; if not, one will likely end up feeling dissatisfied and may withdraw from the relationship.*
- 14 The relationship perspective is applicable throughout the PR process and with regard to all PR techniques.

Practitioner roles

Practitioner roles have been a major focus for theory development within the systemic perspective. Broom and Smith (1979) proposed five practitioner role models: problem-solving process facilitators; expert prescribers; communication process facilitators; technical services providers and acceptant legitimisers. These were later simplified by Broom and Dozier (1986), who defined two basic roles for the PR practitioner:

- the communications *technician*, who focuses on tactical matters such as writing, event management and media management
- the communications *manager*, who has a more strategic communication perspective and will normally create overall strategy, take and analyse client briefings and deal with issues and crises.

These roles have been confirmed in subsequent research. For example, Terry (2001) analysed lobbyists' stories of their jobs and found a clear separation between those who enacted the technician role and those who enacted the manager role. She also found evidence of all five of Broom and Smith's (1979) typologies in the lobbyists' narrations. Kelleher (2001) also found that managers spent significantly more time communicating orally than technicians, and that, with the exception of email, technicians spent significantly more time using traditional written communication.

Dozier and Broom (1995) updated their initial study and showed that gender indirectly affected the role of practitioners (Figure 8.4). Thus, men are more likely to have been longer with the organisation (tenure) and have more professional experience. The longer the tenure: the greater the professional experience; the longer the professional experience, the more likely it is that a practitioner has a managerial rather than a technician role; and the higher the salary.

The excellence study conducted by Grunig and his colleagues argued strongly for PR practitioners to

aspire to a managerial role rather than a technician role, since they are able to exert more power and influence among senior management and be more effective for the organisation if they operate from this more senior position (Grunig 1992; Grunig et al. 2002). As a result, a hierarchy has emerged between the two types of role, with managerial roles generally enjoying greater perceived value and status.

Feminists argue that frequently women occupy the communications technician role and if they do carry out the managerial role, they tend to double-task. The technician role has therefore become 'women's work' and been devalued because of social stereotypes associated with professions dominated by women (Creedon 1991). While they do not dispute the influence of managers, feminist researchers have argued that the technician role in itself is of value, is multifaceted and can include decision-making responsibilities (Creedon 1991; Grunig et al. 2001). Dozier and Broom (1995) do not dispute this view of the technician role, but argue that the managerial role will always be better rewarded, because of the strategic value it provides to the organisation. Given that a technician role does not have that inherent strategic content, they suggest it is unrealistic to expect organisations to reward it in the same way.

Lauzen and Dozier (1992) shed further light on the managerial function in their investigation of the manager role as the 'missing link' between environmental challenges and the nature of the PR function within an organisation. In a survey of practitioners, they found that environmental variability in the form of the range and changeability of publics was significantly more likely to result in a managerial type role enactment by the senior PR practitioner and greater organisational power for the PR function. PR practitioners, on the other hand, had less power the closer they were linked to marketing. In a separate study, they also found that an organisation which thought of itself as an open system, involving

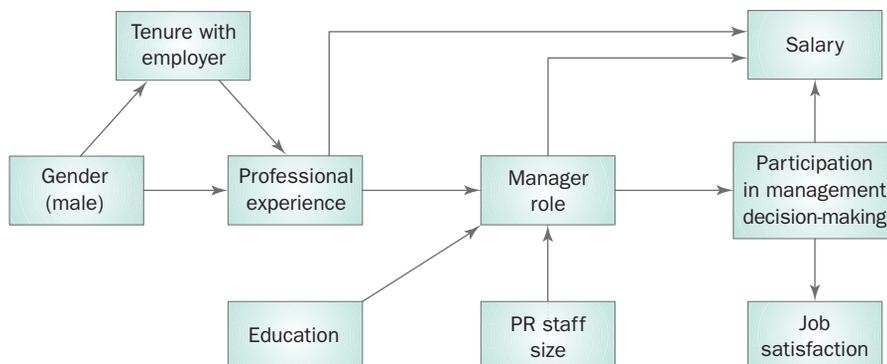


FIGURE 8.4 Interaction between gender, experience, education and managerial role (source: Dozier and Broom 1995: 16)

audiences in the development of issues management strategies, also increased the likelihood of managerial role enactment (Lauzen and Dozier 1994). Moss et al. (2000) also found that organisational factors affected the likelihood of a managerial role, including whether the organisation had a strong orientation to its stakeholders and whether PR could demonstrate financial and operational value to the organisation.

For example, if you work for a chemicals company like Monsanto, whose work can be controversial and is a regular target of sometimes violent protests, then your role is highly complex. You need to focus on building long-term reputation among customers and governments, persuading more general audiences that what you are doing will benefit communities around the world, and engage with activists to tackle and survive difficult situations in the short term. If, contrariwise, you work as a communications manager for a regional theatre, your job is likely to focus mainly on short-term promotion of upcoming productions. This is obviously much simpler and more tactical than working for Monsanto! However, if your role involved bidding for Arts Council or local authority grants, working with local communities or fighting closure threats, you would certainly be involved with strategic PR.

Moss et al. (2000), in a study of 10 leading UK companies, found that practitioners were only involved in strategic decision making beyond the communications area if they had a real understanding of business issues other than communications and had good relationships with senior management. PR is not yet seen as a strategic function in its own right and senior PR practitioners need to have a strong understanding of general business principles and practices if they are to be taken seriously by other managers. More recently, Moss et al. (2004) found that senior managers divided up their roles into five main areas:

- *monitor and evaluator* – organising and tracking PR work
- *trouble shooting/problem solver* – handling a range of internal and external challenges to the organisation
- *key policy and strategy advisor* – contributing to top management, including contributions to and advice given in regular briefings and senior management meetings
- *issues management expert* – intelligence gathering and analysis, monitoring external trends and recommending responses
- *communication technician* – executing technical tasks associated with the PR role (e.g. writing press releases for financial reporting periods).

While their research was exploratory, it did support findings in earlier studies. The authors suggest that

these five roles together reflect a more accurate picture of what it is to be a senior PR practitioner in today's organisations.

Changes abroad: shifts in society and technology

Grunig and Hunt's typologies dominated research throughout most of the 1980s. Towards the end of that decade, other researchers began to identify gaps in knowledge in the field that needed to be addressed in order to advance the academic discipline and the profession. However, the prompt for new research avenues was not solely internally driven. During the last decade of the twentieth century, important changes in society and technology meant that organisations were asked to account for their actions to a greater extent than ever before and this presented significant challenges to PR academics.

Technological advances

In the early 1990s, personal computers grew in number and became a staple element in most organisations' infrastructure. Improvements in usability also meant that people used computers at home for the first time, without needing specialist knowledge to operate them. The gradual spread of such a powerful technology infrastructure set the scene for further technological advances. They came thick and fast: by the mid-1990s, businesses were starting to use technology throughout their operations and connect with audiences in ways they had never dreamed of. The advent of the world wide web, with its global reach and instant communication, meant that business became more transparent; increasingly, organisations were expected to make information about themselves available to publics on the web. The web itself rapidly developed into a hugely popular consumer technology, connecting individuals to unprecedented quantities (and somewhat variable qualities) of information. It is often the first port of call for anyone looking for general information about a particular subject, including companies and their activities.

Rise of activism

Accompanying this technological revolution and the subsequent changes in business, a new type of activism emerged which challenged organisations' claim to legitimacy. While the early and mid-years of the twentieth century had been dominated by trade



PICTURE 8.2 Demonstrators at the Kyoto summit in Japan. (Source: Urban Thierry Corbis/Sygma.)

union activism, the 1980s saw an overall decline in the popularity and prevalence of unionism. This was replaced in the 1990s by a new breed of activist demonstrating against global capitalism. They led demonstrations at global governmental summits, national and international boycotts of individual companies and, as shareholders, made new demands for responsible business practices. Organisations choosing to ignore such demands faced the impact of worldwide campaigns against them, often conducted using that borderless, instantaneous communications technology, the web.

During the 1990s, Shell faced extremely damaging customer boycotts in Europe against its planned disposal of the Brent Spar oil platform in the North Sea. It was forced to change the decision and, subsequently, fundamentally changed its communications practices to make them more transparent and to avoid such events in the future. Global clothing brands such as Nike and Gap have also been taken to task by consumers because of the low pay and poor treatment of workers in countries and companies manufacturing their goods (Klein 2000) and have put in place ethical guidelines and minimum standards for suppliers as a result. (See Activity 8.1.)

activity 8.1

Website information

Conduct a web search for information about one of the following companies:

- Gap clothing
- Adidas
- Nokia
- The Body Shop

Apart from their own websites, how much information can you find out about them using the internet? Who writes this information? How wide ranging are the views on the companies?

Now look at their websites. How broad are they? How much information do they hold about the company's principles and values? What about possible objections to their activities? How are they addressed?

Feedback

You may find websites dedicated to attacking the reputation or practices of one of these companies. You may also find examples of good work taking place at a local level. See how much of this is reflected in the official website.

Combine different words with the name of the company to track down different types of information – for example, products, manufacture, ethics or community.

These developments have had a huge impact on the practice of PR. Practitioners now face unprecedented demands for transparency, must respond rapidly to demands for information that may come from anywhere in the world, and need to be agile enough to respond to crises as they occur, in order to contain and control their impact. The change has affected both the practice and content of PR. Ethical, honest communications are now a minimum requirement for organisations. PR practitioners are constantly challenged to act as advocates for audiences who want their views to be heard and taken into account.

In response to these changes, the 1990s also saw a flurry of new perspectives in PR research. As the demands on the profession grew and the number of researchers also increased, different views of PR began to emerge. Researchers, particularly in the UK and Europe, began to question the validity of some of the assumptions of systemic research – for example, that PR's primary role is to help organisations be successful. Critical studies, rhetorical approaches, postmodern perspectives and feminist analyses all made their first strong appearances during this decade.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the main schools of thought contributing to the development of PR theory. Early theories were clearly grounded in systemic views, focused on helping practitioners both understand and execute their responsibilities more effectively. Over the past two decades, theory has since expanded to integrate a much wider range of perspectives.

While systemic views of PR still dominate theory building, the field in the twenty-first century looks

much more fragmented than at any time in its history. Some may argue that this does little to help the profession, serving only to confuse practitioners rather than provide the guidance they need in increasingly challenging environments. A different perspective, however, would argue that these developments are vital to the evolution and maturity of the profession. Alternative theoretical developments are discussed in the next chapter.

Bibliography

- Bardhan, N. (2003). 'Rupturing public relations meta-narratives: the example of India.' *Journal of Public Relations Research* **15**(3): 225–248.
- Broom, G.M. and D.M. Dozier (1986). 'Advancement for public relations role models'. *Public Relations Review* **12**(1): 37–56.
- Broom, G.M. and G.D. Smith (1979). 'Testing the practitioner's impact on clients'. *Public Relations Review* **5**(3): 47–59.
- Broom, G.M., S. Casey and J. Ritchey (2000). 'Concept and theory of organization-public relationships' in *Public Relations as Relationship Management*. L.A. Ledingham and S.D. Bruning. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cheney, G. and L.T. Christensen (2001). 'Public relations as contested terrain: A critical response' in *Handbook of Public Relations*. R. Heath (ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cozier, Z.R. and D.F. Witmer (2001). 'The development of a structuration analysis of new publics in an electronic environment' in *Handbook of Public Relations*. R. Heath (ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creedon, P. (1991). 'Public relations and "women's work": Toward a feminist analysis of public relations roles.' *Public Relations Research Annual* **3**: 67–84.
- Cutlip, S.M., A.H. Center and G.M. Broom (2000). *Effective Public Relations*, 8th edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Dozier, D.M. and G.M. Broom (1995). 'Evolution of the manager role in public relations practice'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **7**(1): 3–26.
- Dozier, D.M., J.E. Grunig and L.A. Gruning (1995). *Manager's Guide to Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ferguson, M.A. (1984). *Building Theory in Public Relations: Interorganizational relationships*. Gainesville, FL: Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.
- Grunig, J.E. (1983). 'Communications behaviors and attitudes of environmental publics: two studies'. *Journalism Monographs* **81**.
- Grunig, J.E. (1992). *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Grunig, J.E. (2001). 'Two-way symmetrical public relations: Past, present and future' in *Handbook of Public Relations*. R. Heath (ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Grunig, J.E. and T. Hunt (1984). *Managing Public Relations*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Grunig, J.E. and F.C. Repper (1992). 'Strategic management, publics and issues' in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*. J.E. Grunig. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Grunig, J.E., L. Grunig, K. Sriramesh, Y.H. Huang and A. Lyra (1995). 'Models of public relations in an international setting'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **7**(3): 163–186.
- Grunig, L.A., J.E. Grunig and D.M. Dozier (2002). *Excellent Public Relations and Effective Organizations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Grunig, L.A., E.L. Toth and L.C. Hon (2001). *Women in Public Relations*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Hallahan, K. (2000). 'Inactive publics: The forgotten publics in public relations'. *Public Relations Review* **26**(4): 499–515.
- Harrison, S. (2000). *Public Relations: An introduction*. London: Thomson Learning.
- Holtzhausen, D.R., B.K. Petersen and N.J. Tindall (2003). 'Exploding the myth of the symmetrical/asymmetrical dichotomy: public relations models in the new South Africa'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **15**(4): 305–341.
- Hovland, C.I., A.A. Lumsdaine and F.D. Sheffield (1949). 'The effect of presenting "one side" versus "both sides" in changing opinions on a controversial subject' in *Experiments on Mass Communication*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Huang, Y-H. (2001). 'OPRA: A cross-cultural, multiple-item scale for measuring organization-public relationships'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **13**(1): 61–90.
- Kelleher, T. (2001). 'Public relations roles and media choice'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **13**(4): 303–320.
- Kent, M.L. and M. Taylor (2002). 'Toward a dialogic theory of public relations'. *Public Relations Review* **28**: 21–37.
- Klein, N. (2000). *No Logo*. London: Flamingo.
- Lauzen, M.M. and D.M. Dozier (1992). 'The missing link: The public relations manager role as mediator of organisational environments and power consequences for the function'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **4**(4): 205–220.
- Lauzen, M.M. and D.M. Dozier (1994). 'Issues management mediation of linkages between environmental complexity and management of the public relations function'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **6**(3): 163–184.
- Ledingham, J.A. (2003). 'Explicating relationship management as a general theory of public relations'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **15**(2): 181–198.
- Ledingham, J.A. and S.D. Bruning (2000). *Public Relations as Relationship Management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ledingham, J.A., S.D. Bruning and L.J. Wilson (1999). 'Time as an indicator of the perceptions and behavior of members of a key public: Monitoring and predicting organization–public relationships'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **11**(2): 167–183.
- Leitch, S. and D. Neilson (2001). 'Bringing publics into public relations: New theoretical frameworks for practice' in *Handbook of Public Relations*. R. Heath (ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- L'Etang, J. (1996). 'Corporate responsibility and public relations ethics' in *Critical Perspectives in Public Relations*. J. L'Etang and M. Pieczka. London: International Thomson Business Press.
- Lumsdaine, A.A. and I.L. Janis (1953). 'Resistance to "counterpropaganda" produced by one-sided and two-sided "propaganda" presentations'. *Public Opinion Quarterly* **17**(3): 311–318.
- McQuail, D. and S. Windahl (1993). *Communication Models for the Study of Mass Communication*. London: Longman.
- Moffitt, M.A. (1994). 'Collapsing and integrating concepts of public and image into a new theory'. *Public Relations Review* **20**(2): 159–170.
- Molleda, J.C. (2000). 'International paradigms: The Latin American school of public relations'. *Journalism Studies* **2**(4): 513–530.
- Moss, D., G. Warnaby and A. Newman (2000). 'Public relations practitioner role enactment at the senior management level within UK companies'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **12**(4): 277–307.
- Moss, D., A. Newman and B. DeSanto (2004). 'Defining and redefining the core elements of management in public relations/corporate communications context: What do communication managers do?' Paper presented at the 11th International Public Relations Research Symposium, Lake Bled, Slovenia.
- Motion, J. (2001). 'Electronic relationships: Interactivity, internet branding and the public sphere'. *Journal of Communication Management* **5**(3): 217–230.
- Motion, J. and S. Leitch (1996). 'A discursive perspective from New Zealand: Another world view'. *Public Relations Review* **22**(3): 297–310.
- Murphy, P. (1991). 'The limits of symmetry: A game theory approach to symmetric and asymmetric public relations' in *Public Relations Research Annual*. J.E. Grunig and L.A. Grunig. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Park, J. (2003). 'Discrepancy between Korean government and corporate practitioners regarding professional standards in public relations: A co-orientation approach'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **15**(3): 249–275.
- Pieczka, M. (1996). 'Paradigms, systems theory and public relations' in *Critical Perspectives in Public Relations*. J. L'Etang and M. Pieczka. London: International Thomson Business Press.
- Plowman, K.D. (1998). 'Power in conflict for public relations'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **10**(4): 237–261.
- Rhee, Y. (2002). 'Global public relations: A cross-cultural study of the excellence theory in South Korea'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **14**(3): 159–184.
- Shannon, C.E. and W. Weaver (1949). *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Sriramesh, K. (1992). 'Societal culture and public relations: Ethnographic evidence from India'. *Public Relations Review* **18**(2): 201–211.

- Sriramesh, K. and D. Verčić (1995). 'International public relations: A framework for future research'. *Journal of Communication Management* **6**(2): 103–117.
- Sriramesh, K., Y. Kim and M. Takasaki (1999). 'Public relations in three Asian cultures: An analysis'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **11**(4): 271–292.
- Terry, V. (2001). 'Lobbyists and their stories: Classic PR practitioner role models as functions of Burkean human motivations'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **13**(3): 235–264.
- van Ruler, B., D. Verčić, G. Butschi and B. Flodin (2004). 'A first look for parameters of public relations in Europe'. *Journal of Public Relations Research* **16**(1): 35–63.
- Windahl, S. and B. Signitzer (1992). *Using Communication Theory*. London: Sage.