Out of the Fog and into the Future:
Directions of Public Relations, Theory Building, Research, and Practice

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Abstract: This Delphi study is about the future directions of public relations. International public-relations experts, scholars and practitioners, are asked about the relationship between theory and practice, as well as the impact of different disciplines, academic concepts, and theories on public relations. By looking at recent developments in public relations, different trends become obvious: The practical field, as well as public relations teaching, is drifting toward a management perspective. "Communication management" is a term that has been adopted heavily in recent years. The academic research, however, although still lacking theory building, tries to tie in to sociological theories. It looks as though public relations, on the one hand, tries to become more accepted in the management field and, on the other hand, claims its place in society. This study underlines both trends.

Keywords: Research methods; Delphi study; Public relations; Management; Organizational communication

Résumé : Cette étude Delphi porte sur les directions futures des relations publiques. Dans cette étude, on a demandé à des experts, chercheurs et praticiens internationaux en relations publiques leurs avis sur le rapport entre théorie et pratique ainsi que sur l’effet que divers disciplines, concepts et théories académiques ont sur les relations publiques. Parmi les développements récents en relations publiques, diverses tendances se démarquent. Par exemple, le côté pratique des relations publiques et leur enseignement adoptent de plus en plus un point de vue administratif. En effet, l’expression « administration de la communication » (« communication management ») se répand de plus en plus depuis quelques années. En même temps, la recherche académique, dont le développement de théories pertinentes présente encore des lacunes, essaie plutôt de recourir à des théories sociologiques. Il semble que les relations publiques tentent d’une part de se faire accepter dans le secteur administratif et d’autre part de se faire une place dans la société en général. Cette étude souligne les deux tendances.
“Public Relations is a piece of some whole. The challenge is to continue to search to discover the whole and public relations’ place in it” (Heath, 2006, p. 110). This is the conclusion Robert Heath draws in his thoughtful overview of current research directions in the academic field of public relations entitled “Onward into more fog.” Let us lift some of this fog and discover how scholars and practitioners see the future of public relations theory, research, and practice. This article provides the reader with opinions scholars and practitioners gave in a Delphi study conducted in 2005 and 2006.

The research questions that should be answered are the following: What do the experts think about the role of academic theories and methods in public relations (PR) practice? Which disciplines will have an impact on public relations’ basic processes? Which theories and academic concepts will become more important for practical issues? The study links to questions of the use of academic theories and concepts in public relations practice (Cornelissen, 2000), the European Delphi on public relations conducted in 1999/2000 (van Ruler, Verčič, Bütschi, & Flodin, 2004; Verčič, van Ruler, Bütschi, & Flodin, 2001), and to other Delphi studies in the field of PR (Boynton, 2006; Synnot & McKie, 1997; Watson, 2008).

Further on, the article deals with the question of the status of the academic field. Recent developments indicate that the field is drifting more strongly toward a management orientation. Firstly, public relations is more often termed “relationship management” (Ledingham, 2006; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000) and “communication management”: European departments; new master’s programs such as that at the University of Leipzig, Germany; and an academic European journal (Journal of Communication Management) are termed in this way. Secondly, results of the Delphi study by van Ruler et al. (2004) show that European scholars and practitioners see a management function at the core of the discipline. However, this tendency to bind public relations to a management framework that fosters a doctrine of quantification, measurement, and control has been criticized (Nothhaft & Wehmeier, 2007; Wehmeier, 2006). In fact, scholars such as Pal & Dutta (2008) question the entire management orientation. Using a postcolonial perspective, they are interested in interrupting the modernist approach to public relations that—in their opinion—privileges a management discourse. Dutta (2009) emphasizes a type of scholarship that resists those management discourses; he is interested in founding an activist scholarship, which means that the scholar is part of a movement working against hegemonic frameworks.

Although this argument is criticized for just promoting the opposite of the neo-liberal perspective (Bentele & Wehmeier, 2009), it opens up the discussion about adequate scholarship in public relations and the status of the academic field of public relations. Is it an academic discipline? Is it an interdisciplinary field of research? Which methodology does it follow? Based on their research, van Ruler et al. (2004) state clearly that, in Europe, public relations is not accepted as an academic discipline in its own right. Perusal of programs at a master’s and doctoral level in Europe at the time the study was conducted (1999-2000) makes this
statement understandable—except in Great Britain, few programs in public relations existed. However, things are changing. The Bologna process (a process of convergence in European higher education), in addition to the ongoing need for PR practitioners, has led to new master’s programs in public relations, communication management, and organizational communication. Yet despite teaching public relations as an academic discipline, the domain or field is still debated.

**Theory building in public relations**

One reason for this debate is the lack of theory building in public relations. Insofar as theory building is one of the main goals of the scientific system (Luhmann 1992; Poser, 2001; van Fraassen, 1980), it is a pity that a recent content analysis of leading research journals again revealed a lack of theory building (Zoch, Collins, & Sisco, 2007). Citation analyses (Morton & Lin, 1995; Pasadeos, Renfro, & Hanily, 1999) indicate that in the 1990s, the predominant framework of public relations research was represented by the work of the Grunigs and their studies on excellence theory (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). This theory, however, is challenged by critical theorists (e.g., Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Dutta, in press; Roper, 2005), who claim that, for instance, power-control perspectives are not included in this approach. A look at handbooks of public relations (Bentele, Fröhlich, & Szyszka, 2008; Heath, 2001b) and anthologies devoted to PR theory (Botan & Hazleton, 2006a; Röttger, 2009) reveals huge diversity in public relations theory building. A seminal theoretical foundation for public relations still does not exist. However, taking into account that cultural and societal differences have a great impact on communication and the way organizations and publics act, this is not a big surprise. The field can be characterized by theoretical pluralism and theory competition (Spinner, 1968; Whitley, 1974).

The participants in this Delphi study had to reflect on most of the existing theories of public relations. In order to make the reader familiar with the general idea of these theories, they are presented briefly here. The symmetrical approach to public relations was promoted by Grunig & Hunt in their textbook *Managing Public Relations* in 1984. It states that public relations is not about persuading publics at all cost but about building dialogic relationships with publics. The situational theory of publics was also published in Grunig & Hunt (1984), and others followed that path (Anderson, 1992; Hamilton, 1992). This theory provides a framework for detecting whether a public is active, aware, latent, or not at all involved in the action of an organization. The excellence theory (Grunig & Grunig, 2008) builds upon both approaches. By extending the symmetric approach, the scholars argue that excellent public relations means fostering negotiation and compromise. This can only be achieved if the organization is willing to change its behaviour and if the public relations manager takes part in organizational decision-making.

Dialogue is at the heart of the consensus-oriented PR theory. Here Habermas’ theory of communicative action is applied to public relations discourse (Burkart, 2004).

The stakeholder theory is in origin an ethical theory of the firm (Freeman, 1984), but to the extent that it is about the relationship of corporations with their stakeholders, it often serves as a starting point for communication with publics.
Agenda building, in general, is about how the public agenda is influenced by professional communicators and especially about the relationship between public relations and journalism (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008; Berkowitz, 1987; Wehmeier, 2008b).

Open-systems theory approaches are used to model the relationship between organizations and environments. In public relations, these approaches are used to describe how public relations functions as an interface between the organization and the environment (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006; Long & Hazleton, 1987). Systems theory is also the core theory in Ronneberger & Rühl’s (1992) macro-level theory of public relations, which looks for a generic function of PR in society.

The rhetorical approach to public relations offers ideas on image repair and restoration (Benoit, 1997; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000), as well as on the link between persuasion strategies and meaning (Heath, 2001a; Heath & Frandsen, 2008).

Postmodern theory, the complexity approach, and the power-control perspective are inspired by critical sociological thinking and developments in life sciences. While postmodernism in public relations often questions neo-liberal management doctrines and argues for a pluralism of worldviews (Holtzhausen, 2002), the power-control perspective is influenced by sociologists such as Habermas and Foucault (Motion & Leitch, 2009). The application of complexity theory in public relations deals with questions of the manageability of communication in turbulent environments (Nothhaft & Wehmeier, 2007).

Method
The goal of most Delphi studies is to “obtain the most reliable consensus of opinion of a group of experts” (Linstone & Turoff, 1975, p. 10) to apply in directing future tasks. The method is often used to reduce uncertainty in problematic or highly complex fields. The data are gathered through a series of questionnaires interspersed with controlled and anonymous feedback (Häder & Häder, 2000). Two main suppositions are central: firstly, the judgment of a group is claimed as superior to judgments of individuals; secondly, the multilevel process of opinion-forming is preferred as more valid than the single-level process (Häder, 2002).

As Delphi is still a young method, its research design is only standardized roughly. Most of the studies differ in three ways: firstly, the use of open and closed questions; secondly, the number of questionnaires; and thirdly, the number and selection of participating experts. Meta-analysis of Delphi studies (Häder & Häder, 2000) shows that huge Delphis rarely use open questions, while small studies (up to 25 participants) often start with closed questions in order to open the room for arguments. A consensus is often established after the second questionnaire. The number of experts varies: huge Delphi studies have had more than 3,000 participants. However, many scholars prefer a maximum of 30 participants. Duffield’s (1993) analysis demonstrates that comparable results were produced from two Delphi studies on the same topic but with different numbers of experts (16 and 34). The selection of experts is one of the major problems, as experts need to have not only knowledge, but also influence in changing procedures and structures in the relevant field (Duffield, 1993).

As the selection of experts is the most critical part of the method, this study—with slight modifications due to the analyzed field—follows Schukies (1978),
who recommends three criteria, at least two of which should be fulfilled: first, the selected person has published academically in the area that is analyzed or at least holds an academic degree in the field; second, the person is involved in committees or associations that are related to the field’s development; and third, the person has practical experience in the field, is able to form the future of the field, and has published about the field and/or uses research techniques in practice (an advanced version of Schön’s [1983] reflective practitioner).

The scholars that participated in this study are well known in the international community and/or in their national communities; most of them have an outstanding national and/or international publishing record. The practitioners all have an academic degree and years of work experience in the field, and they are applying academic research in their daily praxis.

Inclusion of scholars from one country of each continent was desired. With a view to a general, basic understanding of public relations in practice and research, it was necessary to look for countries that have at least some common cultural ground. Having only few contacts in most of the selected countries, South Africa (Africa), Singapore (Asia), Australia and New Zealand (Australia and New Zealand), the U.S.A. (North America), Brazil (South America), and Germany (Europe) were finally chosen. More than 80 scholars and practitioners were asked to participate. Over 50 agreed; however, only 32 answered the first round (second wave: 29). Unfortunately, all six of those selected from South Africa—the first ones who agreed to participate—did not answer at all. The people contacted in Brazil also did not participate. In the first round, 21 of the participants were academic and 11 stemmed from the practical field, so unfortunately the ratio of academics to practitioners was 2:1 and not 50:50. The gender ratio is 18 females to 14 males. Twelve participants came from the U.S.A., 9 from Germany, 8 from Australia and New Zealand, and 3 from Singapore. The number of participants involved was similar to other Delphi studies in the field (Boynton, 2006; van Ruler et al., 2004; Watson, 2008), with the exception of Wakefield’s (2000) study, which included far more participants.

Due to the programming of the online questionnaire, no differentiation between academic experts and experts from praxis was possible. Taking into account that only 11 practitioners participated, especially in this group, meaningful findings from differentiating the two groups would have been unlikely. Furthermore, the study cannot in any way claim to be global; it is bounded to a Western and democratic culture, and even in this more or less homogenous culture, there is room for different interpretations and for semantic inconsistencies. While in Germany communication scholars have no problem terming their theorizing and research “scientific,” some of the English speaking scholars prefer the term “academic,” because “scientific” seems to be reserved for the natural and mathematical sciences only.

While some Delphi studies work with open questions first to gather opinions about the topics in the words of the participants, this Delphi worked with given statements that could be agreed with or not on a scale from 1 to 3 or 1 to 5. In most of the cases, participants were given two further choices: first, they could choose “cannot answer”; second, they were invited to add new statements or cat-
egories. If more than two participants demanded a new and similar statement or category, this was added to the questionnaire in the second round. The Delphi study was pre-tested by four experts in the field from the U.S.A., Germany, and New Zealand. The pre-test indicated that there should be fewer open questions and more given statements that could be agreed with or disagreed with. Further on, the pre-test showed that national differences exist, although only experts from Western countries were involved. For example, there is no substantial academic field of organizational communication in Germany. Organizational communication is often used as a synonym for public relations (Wehmeier, 2008a). Based on the comments of the experts, the questionnaire was modified slightly before the first round started.

Results
Most of the participants consider a public relations and organizational-communication practice that is based widely on academic theories and methods to be desirable (25 agree, 3 disagree, 4 cannot answer) and possible (23 agree, 6 disagree, 3 cannot answer). Taking this as a starting point, the following results concentrate on 1) the relationship between academic theory building and public relations practice; 2) the general orientation of public relations research; 3) the impact of different disciplines on public relations practice; and 4) the future impact of specific theories on practice.

Relationship of academic theory building and public relations practice
In 1966 Edward Robinson characterized the public relations practitioner as “an applied social and behavioral scientist” (Robinson, 1966, p. 39). Robinson developed this ideal to foster research-based public relations practice. In order to sharpen this ideal, he developed an “investigative continuum” (p. 582) that ranges from intuition at one end to scientific research at the other. The route from intuition to scientific research starts with “reflective thinking,” in which the practitioner takes his or her time to lean back and think about what he or she has done and is doing. Robinson was certain that scientifically based practice is superior to practice that derives from intuition and experience. PR practitioners, Robinson was convinced, “must strive for” (p. 49) movement in this direction. However, since the 1960s, the role of science and academia in the world of praxis has often been challenged (Bonß & Hartmann, 1985; Horowitz, 1967), and new models of the relationship between science and practice have occurred. Cornelissen (2000) selected three models to describe this relationship. The “instrumental” model is represented by the ideal of Robinson. This linear model (Weiss, 1977) sticks to the belief of rationality—order through science and social engineering. The second is the “conceptual model.” In this model, academic knowledge does not provide technical expertise or better solutions for practice, but rather tries to enlighten practice by giving ideas, interpretive frames, and problem definitions. However, this model is still a one-way street from academia to practice. Cornelissen takes his third model from Beck & Bonß (1989); he terms it the “translation model.” In this model, there is no linear one-way street from academia to the fields of practice. Scientific concepts and results are not perceived and
used passively but altered, translated into the world of practice. In the practical use of scientific concepts, these concepts are altered; the academic world evaluates this use and, as a result, alters the concepts again. Both worlds are intertwined: “a process of transformation of knowledge is constantly in place” (Cornelissen, 2000, p. 321).

The questionnaire used in this study tries to reflect these models. Due to semantic problems, the term “scientific” was altered in the second round to “academic.” The general question was: In your opinion, which perception of the relationship between academia and practice is adequate for public relations?

**Figure 1**

**Relationship of academic theories and PR practice**

Academic theories...

- ≤...are scarcely relevant to PR practice
  - 1,69 round 1
  - 1,26 round 2

- ...need to be transformed to be used in daily practice
  - round 1
  - round 2

- ...offer certain concepts which are superior to practical theories (more deliberate and abstract)
  - round 1
  - round 2

- ...offer rational solutions to every practical problem
  - round 1
  - round 2

1. rd.: n = 32 (cannot answer: 0)
2. rd.: n = 29 (cannot answer: 2)

It is easy to recognize that the Delphi method has a slight tendency to strengthen the dominant opinion. The statement “academic theories are scarcely relevant to practice” that was agreed with by only a few participants in the first round was selected even less frequently in the second round (1.26 in the second round, after 1.69 in the first). The other statements that were selected in the first round often got even more acceptance in the second. (See Figure 1.) The statement that is most accepted is: “Theories have to be transformed to be used in daily practice.” The level of agreement rose from 4.19 in the first round to 4.41 in the second round (5 = I agree; 1 = I disagree). This finding underlines the view of Beck & Bonß (1989) and Cornelissen (2000) that the relationship between theory and practice is best characterized as an ongoing transformation process.

Looking at academic methods (see Figure 2), only a few participants say that they are scarcely relevant to PR practice (1.16 in the second round, after 1.59 in the first round). Support decreased in the second round for the statement that academic methods offer superior solutions to practical problems than does practical experience. A lot of participants agree with the opinion that academic methods...
share an equal importance compared with practical experience and intuitive methods, while most of the participants agree with the statement that academic methods are problem-solving intellectual tools that can optimize practice.

**Figure 2**

Relationship of academic methods and PR practice

To see how participants understand and define “theory,” participants were given four definitions of what a theory could be. In the first round, none of the four statements was supported strongly by the participants. There were a lot of comments on this question, for example, that it would be necessary to divide between nomothetic theories and ideographic theories. Postmodernists mentioned that all theories are subjective. One of the participants’ statements of what a theory could be, which seemed plausible, was then picked up, rephrased slightly, and added to the list. This statement gained the most support in the second round: “Theories are models that to a certain degree describe, explain and predict structures of reality.” A lot of participants agreed with this statement, the mean being 4.15 (5 = agree; 1 = disagree). Support for the other statements decreased in the second round.

**General orientation of public relations research**

Study of public relations research shows some evidence that the domain lacks theory building. Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones (2003), who followed the research of Ferguson (1984), analyzed the leading public relations journals to determine the proportion of theory building in public relations research. Although the proportion of theory building was small (19.8%), the authors saw a positive development in relation to Ferguson’s study that detected only 4.1 percent theory-oriented research. This optimistic outlook is supported in two ways: first, by the publication of a special issue and a special section of *Public Relations Review,*
published in 2005 (no. 4) and 2007 (no. 3), respectively, that were devoted mostly
to the use of sociological meta-theories for public relations theory building; sec-
ond, by the optimistic statements of Botan & Hazleton in their book Public
Relations Theory II (2006b). However, a recent content analysis of leading PR
journals and general communication journals gives no reason for euphoric state-
ments. Zoch, Collins, & Sisco (2007), who have studied research from 2001 to
2005, find that the proportion of theory-oriented research (approximately 20%)

has not changed since Sallot et al. conducted their study. In reporting these
results, it should be noted that none of the content analyses mentioned here define
what a theory is (see Figure 3). The researchers count only the number of articles
that claim to be theory driven or theory oriented.

Bearing this research in mind, the participants in this study were asked to
decide whether they think that public relations research should henceforth: a) pur-
sue more fundamental research (i.e., formulate middle-range and general theo-
ries); or b) be more practice or application oriented. It seems obvious that the
participants want public relations research to be more fundamental in the future
(see Table 1). In the second round, no participants wanted PR research to be more
application or practice oriented, with five of the participants agreeing that a bit
more practice orientation would be desirable. However, every second participant
wants PR research to be at least a bit more fundamental. The results of round one
were similar.

The quest for more fundamental research is also reflected in preferred future
fields of research. Participants had to choose three possible answers to the ques-
tion of where PR research should place its focus in the future. The most selected
answer in the second round was “on the interaction between organizations and
Impact of disciplines

In 1974, a year before the first scholarly public relations journal started in the U.S.A., Carl Hundhausen shaped the contours of the academic discipline of public relations in Germany. In his article, Hundhausen tries to separate public relations from neighbouring disciplines such as sociology, psychology, mass communication, and advertising/marketing. Hundhausen identifies two core public relations tasks: communication and gaining or earning public trust. Keeping this in mind, one of my aims was to find out if the neighbouring disciplines remain the same. In the questionnaire, it was claimed that until now, PR theory formation has predominantly consisted of communicational (such as dialogue and information process theories), business (management and marketing theories), and sociological (organization and organizational communication theories) ideas. For two reasons, psychology was not mentioned here: firstly, there are no recent public relations theories relying on psychological expertise; secondly, I wanted to see if some of the participants would mention psychology as a discipline that should be added to the list. Participants were asked what they think about the influence of the abovementioned disciplines on contemporary academic PR theory building. They were also asked to say which disciplines will gain or lose impact on academic PR research in the future (the next 10 years; see Figure 4). As a result of comments in round one, the discipline “cultural studies” was added in round two; the results of this final round are shown in Figure 5.

Participants believe that all disciplines will gain importance for public relations research in the future. Not surprisingly, the leading discipline is communication; sociology is number two; Business is number three. The finding that sociology comes right after communication is somewhat surprising. Taking into account the general trend to frame public relations as communication management, the business discipline should have been in second place. This finding may,
however, reflect the need for theory building in PR, represented by the previously mentioned special issue and section of Public Relations Review devoted to sociological grand theories and their impact on PR theory. Furthermore, this result could also be biased by the selection of experts. One other minor surprise was that none of the participants suggested psychology—one of the central PR disciplines in the eyes of the domain’s founder, Edward L. Bernays—as an important discipline that should be added in the second round.

**Figure 4**

*Future PR research fields*

Where should PR research focus on in the future?

- Relations bw organizations and ext. publics: 27.1%
- Interaction bw organizations and society: 25%
- Relations bw org. and their members: 20.8%
- Significance of PR for society: 17.9%
- Other relationships: 5.2%
- Relations bw. members of diverse org.: 5.2%
- Relationships bw. organizations: 5.2%

1. rd.: n = 96 (32x3); 2. rd.: n = 84 (28x3) - in %

**Figure 5**

*Influence of disciplines on PR theory building*

Influence of disciplines on contemporary and future academic PR theory building (round 2)
In order to find out more about specific concepts that can be related to disciplines, participants were asked to give their opinion about the importance of academic concepts for PR practice (see Figure 6). The answers might explain, too, why business is rated lower than sociology. Although issues management and strategic management are seen as the most important concepts in the future, obviously it is the expected decrease of the marketing approach to PR practice that lowers the impact of the business domain. Another explanation for this phenomenon, however, might be that people say that the link to sociological reasoning and theorizing is important, but when it comes to basic concepts of public relations, the strategic dimension is dominant, because sociological concepts of public relations practice can rarely be found.

![Figure 6](importance_of_academic_concepts_for_PR_practice.png)

**Figure 6**

Importance of academic concepts for PR practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Today</th>
<th>Future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symmetrical marketing approach</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated com.</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues managem.</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic managem.</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>4.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Future impact of specific theories on practice**

It is not only disciplines and their concepts that are important for the development of a domain, but also “orienting strategies” and “unit theories” (Wagner & Berger, 1985). According to Wagner & Berger, orienting strategies are frames, perspectives, or meta-theories such as critical theory or functionalism. While meta-theories are very stable and rarely totally displaced, unit theories can be tested empirically and thereby falsified or at least evaluated. As this distinction is only vital for questions of progress and growth in the sciences, both categories have been put together in this study, because the aim of this Delphi study was to find out which meta-theories, theories, and models will gain impact in the future. Participants were asked to decide which theories or models they consider very important or not important for public relations practice in the future. The most selected theories or models that are believed to be relevant for public relations practice in the future are stakeholder theory, agenda building (including models of the relationship between PR and journalism, such as the intereffication3 approach), and the situational theory of publics (see Table 2). While the latter two
If one compares the perceived impact of theories on public relations practice today and the expected impact in the future, the picture is different. Here, complexity theory increases most, followed by stakeholder theory and the power control perspective. The impact of agenda building, which is number two in the future, stays the same, so in this case agenda building appears at the end of the ranking.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PR theories relevant to PR practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which of the following PR- or general communication theories and models are generally seen eminently relevant to PR practice? (5 = very important; 1 = not important)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Today</th>
<th>Future</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symmetrical PR theories</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational theory of publics</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellence theory</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agenda Building (PR-Journalism)</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open systems theory</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR as a functional social system</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodern theory</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder theory</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetoric theory</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity theory</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power-control perspective</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n = 26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More than 30 years after Carl Hundhausen defined the neighbouring disciplines and main tasks of the domain of public relations, things have changed. A new discipline frames public relations research, teaching, and practice: management. At the same time as the management orientation increases in public relations thinking, the marketing perspective seems to vanish or at least diminish. The increase of university programs titled “communication management” or similar and the increasing number of articles and books in this field are indicators of this development. Like other studies in the field (e.g., Watson, 2008), this study documents the decrease of the marketing perspective and the increase of the management approach by giving insights into the expectations of experts in the academic and practical field of public relations. The study highlights that issues management and strategic management seem to be the most important academic concepts for the future. Furthermore, stakeholder theory is seen as the most important theory to PR practice in the future. It is rather surprising then that sociology is seen as more important than the business domain for future academic theory building. However, this correlates with the finding that complexity theory, the power-control-perspective, and postmodern theory are among the top four climbers when...
current importance is compared with future importance. It also fits with the finding that the statement “PR research should henceforth focus on the interactions between organizations and society” is chosen most often as an expression of recommended future research directions.

Half of the participants want public relations research to be more fundamental. Only 5 out of 28 say that it should be a bit less fundamental, which also can be seen as an indicator of the importance of sociology for public relations theory building. In addition, it can be seen as an expression of the need for a “fully functioning society theory of public relations” (Heath, 2006, p. 96). Although neither properly explained in its roots nor developed as a testable construct on the level of empiricism, this theory looks like an all-inclusive catch-all to describe the role of PR in a fully functioning society (whatever that means!). In order to achieve such a theory, or any other theory that will be more than a systematically developed set of statements that prescribes how practice should work to be most efficient and effective, it seems necessary not to stand “at the edge of leading practice” (Kaplan, 1994, p. 258) in the way that some business scholars like to see themselves as doing. If theory has to be transformed to be of value for practice, then there is a distance between practice and theory. This distance, however, is not negative: it is a space that is useful in providing the freedom to observe, to think, to analyze, and to critique. In the words of the business scholar Freimann: “Scientific practice has to rely on its primary social functions: thinking, observing, analyzing. . . . Practice has to accept that academia has different goals than practice at first place. However, only practice has the privilege to act. And only practice sees opportunities in the local environments and organizational fields” (1994, pp. 20-21). There will always be a difference and a distance between academic reasoning and praxis, but this distinction can be very fruitful if both sides have an interest in transforming knowledge.

Notes
1. In the first article based on the results of the Delphi study, van Ruler and her colleagues (Vercič, van Ruler, Bütschi, & Flodin, 2001) showed that both “communication” and “management” are core terms in a definition of public relations.

2. In order to make the two rounds with different numbers of participants (32 and 28) comparable, it was necessary to use percentages.

3. The intereffication approach is a model that tries to describe the mutual relationships between public relations and journalism on the societal, organizational, and actor levels (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008; Wehmeier, 2008b).

References


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