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Abstract

In this article I consider the importance of paradigmatic variety in the scholarly field of public relations. I reflect on the role that both conflict and cooperation between different paradigms play in the development of academic fields, and review definitions of public relations to examine the extent to which both are present in public relations scholarship. Based on this discussion, I consider the assumptions that underpin existing approaches to public relations in order to reveal the ways in which they are connected, as well as differentiated, along a series of continua. I conclude by proposing a new definition of public relations, as flow rather than organizational function, that can accommodate the range of research encompassed by these continua, thereby facilitating greater unity, inclusivity and, I would hope, dialogue in the field.

Keywords

academic field, habit of mind, paradigm, public relations

With this article, I propose a new formulation of the notion of public relations (PR). I argue that this is necessary because of the increasingly varied nature of PR research, with multiple paradigms employed by scholars to explain the characteristics and effects of PR. While the existence of multiple paradigms in a social scientific field is theoretically a sign of maturity, in practice the benefits of this variety may be harder to realize. First, excessive competition between paradigms may lead to an emphasis on the differences between the various approaches taken, rather than the connections between them. As a result, the potential for cross-fertilization between the different approaches is limited. Second, where one or two paradigms dominate, the ability of scholars to pursue

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other directions is limited. To counter these dynamics in PR, I reflect on the assumptions underpinning both functional¹ and non-functional approaches to PR in order to facilitate a different way of understanding the relationships between the different approaches, which highlights both similarities and differences. This process clarifies the requirement for a definition that is more inclusive than existing offerings. I conclude by offering a definition that may act as a starting point for further discussion.

I begin by reviewing the concept of paradigms, and the role played by definitions within paradigms, in scientific fields. I then reflect on the scholarly field of PR in light of this theoretical discussion before reading 'between the lines' of PR definitions to establish the assumptions that drive the different scholarly approaches that characterize the field. I propose a series of 'continua' as a way of understanding work in the field, allowing us to recognize coherence and difference between scholarly groups. Finally, I suggest a new definition of PR would add significant value to the field by creating a new starting point that validates all of the scholarly work in the field, rather than privileging only one or two perspectives.

Paradigms and scientific fields

Kuhn (1970: 1) conceptualizes paradigms within the context of the natural sciences as scientific achievements that comprise the foundational knowledge of a particular scientific community. They achieve this status on the basis of two characteristics: first, they are 'sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity' and second, they are 'sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems ... to resolve'. The existence of paradigms prompts a coherent body of scientific work that, in its assumptions and techniques, methods and evaluation, derives from the paradigmatic achievement. As this body of work evolves, the strength of the paradigm increases and develops into a disciplinary matrix (Kuhn, 1970) based on what Margolis (1993) calls 'habits of mind' or 'entrenched responses that ordinarily occur without conscious attention, and that even if noticed are hard to change' (1993: 7). Such responses facilitate the production of new practitioners and academics that perpetuate the paradigm and thereby build and reinforce the scholarly grouping and its jurisdiction. For example, if we know what PR 'is', then we can teach undergraduate and postgraduate courses in it, creating PR specialists who adopt a specific approach to their practice. We may offer doctoral programmes in the area; these students are schooled in existing knowledge, conduct further research in the context of the paradigm, and pursue an academic career founded on their achievements. The importance of paradigms, then, becomes more significant over time as they attract the intellectual and material resource required to conduct research and gradually produce a scientific community that appears cohesive.

Because paradigms take time to evolve, Kuhn argues that their existence is an indication of maturity in a particular community. Certainly the depth of understanding informed by foundational achievements can be impressive once a paradigm is at its height and may be used to justify the status of the research field as a significant academic discipline that merits investment in both research and teaching. In this sense, the perpetuation of a paradigm is materially useful to the researchers and institutions who invest in it. At the same time, however, paradigms exclude or devalue work that does not 'fit' with the

assumptions of foundational achievements. For this reason, Kuhn suggests paradigmatic research is work 'whose evolution has been too little studied but whose modern end products are obvious to all and oppressive to many' (1970: 20). The consequence is 'paradigm paralysis', or the inability of a community to change unless a fundamental shift in perspective takes place. In the natural sciences, such a fundamental shift requires a completely new perspective on the nature of the research object, and Kuhn gives many examples of foundational achievements that have completely reshaped the ways natural phenomena are understood, and consequently displaced previous paradigms.

Understanding paradigms as habits of mind helps explain why they tend towards stability rather than change. Habits of mind are difficult to break precisely because they trigger a powerful pattern of intuition that is internally coherent and largely invisible. However, Margolis (1993) argues that change is easier if there is paradigmatic variety in the field, which leads to these unconscious habits being revealed and discussed. Such discursive spaces allow the inherent variation in individual interpretations of these habits of mind to become visible, and open up avenues for new, revolutionary habits to emerge (Margolis, 1993).

Kuhn suggests that the natural sciences tend to be dominated by a single paradigm; consequently, paradigm shifts – changes in the dominant paradigm – are fundamental to the directions that research takes across the whole of the field. In contrast, social scientific fields such as PR are inherently multi-paradigmatic; competing schools of thought about the phenomena under investigation are inevitable given the constantly changing nature of the social world (Dogan, 2004). Because social sciences draw on external academic fields for inspiration, the origin of these paradigms lies frequently in other academic disciplines, creating a certain hybrid character for the fields in question and resulting in scholarly groups within the field that follow quite distinct and apparently incompatible disciplinary traditions (Dogan, 1996). This creates fragmentation, with the groups ostensibly connected by the object of research, but between whom 'there is not even confrontation, but careful mutual avoidance, a superb disregard on all sides' (Dogan, 2004: 11024). In this way, groups carve out space for themselves within which their own approach is justified.

Such groups are inherently competitive, since the more 'space' one can lay claim to, the greater the resources one may attract (e.g. in the form of research time, students and funding). However, this competition is not a win-lose process: Dogan (2004) argues that it is competition between these groups that generates progress in the field through the accumulation of knowledge about a particular phenomenon. The advent of one paradigm does not result in the complete displacement of others, as in the natural sciences, but adds to the overall understanding of the research object through its interaction with other perspectives. Moreover, this interaction may also result in points of connection, as well as conflict, being discovered. As Dogan (1996: 298) notes, scholarly development also derives from hybridization of different approaches within the field: 'All sciences ... have made progress ... by internal differentiation *and* cross-stimulation among emergent specialities' (emphasis added).

Dogan's arguments are particularly useful when considering the nature of disciplinary development in the social sciences. However, they assume a perpetually level playing field, where all paradigmatic voices are equally heard and where no single paradigm emerges to dominate the field. In emergent fields, where the primary task is to establish

clear territorial boundaries in order to secure resources and claim status and legitimacy (Pfeffer, 1993), the dominance of one perspective may be inevitable, at least initially. While this may result in an easily identifiable field that lends itself to the institutional processes of the Academy, it may also mean that variety in the field takes time to develop (Cannella and Paetzold, 1994) because it would limit the possibilities for competition, leaving only very small territories for 'alternative' definitions to claim and perpetuating their marginalization. It would also slow the degree of hybridization in the field, equally crucial to academic progress. Given these tendencies, it is important that academics in social scientific fields *consciously* nourish paradigmatic variety rather than suppress it, promote equitably shared academic space, and encourage interaction between paradigms, rather than separation.

One way of detecting the variety present in a field is through the definitions given to the object of research by different scholarly groups. A definition not only defines the object of research, but also implies a set of 'rules' that establish appropriate empirical tools, statements of research problems, and evaluations of solutions to those problems for the group of scholars loyal to the paradigmatic assumptions that underpin it (Hoyningen-Huene, 1993; Kuhn, 1970). These rules communicate and reinforce those assumptions across a range of different academic outlets, including textbooks, journal articles, monographs and technical (practice) publications where there must be some explicit articulation of the field and its jurisdiction (Kuhn's 'disciplinary matrix'). In the process of becoming habits of mind, they acquire a certain symbolic power, in that they become normalized to the extent that their underlying assumptions and partisan nature go unrecognized for those that depend on them (Arndt, 1985; Bourdieu, 1988; Kuhn, 1970). 'Normal' science becomes that which is executed and assessed in terms compatible with the definition, while '[t]hose unwilling or unable to accommodate their work to it must proceed in isolation or attach themselves to some other group' (Kuhn, 1970: 19).

In this sense, definitions discipline academics to contribute to that which is valued, rather than that which is not, thus building a common body of knowledge and implicit 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980). They are part of the competitive struggle between paradigms: in constructing and populating this 'regime', academics are able to argue that no other approach addresses their area of work adequately. In multi-paradigmatic social scientific fields such as PR, therefore, definitions serve to separate scholarly groups and should prompt productive competition between them. Simultaneously, and given that they are interested in different aspects of the same phenomenon, there should also be commonalities across definitions that apply to the majority of these groups. Indeed, Plaschka and Welch (1990) argue that such convergence is part of the process of emergence for new academic fields. In Dogan's (2004) ideal world, therefore, and in the context of a new academic field, one might expect that multiple definitions of the field exist, varying in their mutual compatibility but demonstrating principles that are applicable across the field. However, in a situation where one paradigm dominates, this variety and openness may be jeopardized. First, the definitions that adhere to the dominant paradigm are likely to circulate more extensively than others. Second, because of the relative lack of interaction between this and alternative paradigms, it is also less likely that new definitions will emerge on the basis of commonalities across all the field's various scholarly groups, because there is little impetus for dominant groups to make space for, or

connect with, different views. As a result, definitions of the research object will tend to privilege the dominant perspective, potentially presenting ontological difficulties for those challenging this paradigm, and perpetuating their marginalization.

In light of these theoretical arguments, I take the position in this article that the way we define PR, and the variety of definitions we can observe, are fundamental to the future development of this field. In the following section, I review the current range of research in the field and consider the conflict and commonalities that exist between these approaches. I then reflect on the definitions used to underpin them, exploring in particular the implications of the pervasive emphasis on PR as an organizational function. I suggest that existing definitions are inadequate because they marginalize perspectives that do not wish to privilege the status of organizations, thereby limiting the ability of the field to both foster variety and develop radical new ways of understanding PR as it develops.

Public relations: A contested field?

For some time, scholars have argued that the prevalence of a functional paradigm in PR research has produced a static field where limited space exists for voices that advocate other perspectives and, consequently, the pace of evolution is slow (e.g. Cheney and Christiansen, 2001; Munshi and McKie, 2001). More recently, however, others have argued the variety is increasing and a number of academics have attempted to categorize the various contributions to the field. The most common analytical division is between functionalist approaches and non-functional work that focuses on the role of PR in society from a variety of different perspectives. Often, these bodies of work are articulated as separate entities. Aldoory (2005), for example, argues that management paradigms of PR (Grunig, 1992; Kim and Ni, 2010) contrast with the rhetorical paradigm (Heath et al., 2009), the postmodern paradigm (Holtzhausen, 2011) and the feminist paradigm (Grunig et al., 2000; Grunig et al., 2001), all of which she sees as evolving schools of thought in the field, each approaching PR using a specific analytical lens. Botan and Taylor (2004) categorize PR research into functional and co-creational approaches, while Toth (2009, 2010; Toth and Heath, 1992) recently identified six paradigms in PR: crisis communication,² critical theory, feminism, rhetoric, strategic management and tactical (Toth, 2010). More broadly, Edwards and Hodges (2011) argue that there is a sociocultural 'turn' in PR scholarship, that differs from functional work in its attention to the 'socially constructed nature of practice, process and outcomes' (2011: 3), where power is an inherent focus of analysis. Such work is informed by postmodern, critical and postcolonial paradigms.

This divisions between these paradigms are emphasized when those who adopt a non-functional approach position themselves in opposition to functional work, reinforcing difference rather than commonality. For example, much of the research presented in the 2010 *Sage Handbook of Public Relations* (Heath, 2010a) contests functional PR theory; most of these writers position their view explicitly in terms of a reassessment or reconsideration of 'Excellence'³ principles, reflecting an assumption of distance or, more extremely, incompatibility between their views and functional approaches (e.g. Leitch and Motion, 2010; McKie, 2010). However, on closer inspection the apparent division between different approaches becomes blurred and connections between these different

approaches are revealed. For example, Toth suggests that all six of the paradigms she identifies are linked via a focus on the 'relationship worldview of public relations', which focuses on relationships between organizations and their publics (Toth, 2010: 719). Taylor (2010) argues that functional (informational) and co-creational (rhetorical/symbolic) approaches to PR are equally important partners in the creation of civil society through PR, 'where people, groups and organizations have the desire and agency to make their community/society/world a better place to live' (Taylor, 2010: 7). Heath (2010b) proposes a three-way typology of work drawing on Mead's (1934) ideas of 'Mind', 'Self' and 'Society', where 'mind' articulates PR as a 'social and organizational force', 'self' focuses on work that analyses the identities of practitioners and the people with which they engage, and 'society' is focused on the 'complex relationships by which interests and self-interests are enacted through structures, functions and shared meanings' (Heath, 2010b: 2). Scholarship grouped in this way is connected by a focus on the interactions between structures of PR (e.g. as organizational process) and its environment, and the shared meaning that is developed as a result (e.g. Coombs and Holladay, 2007). This is contrasted with the importance of PR functions and processes that drive functional research, but that Heath argues is part of the same overall picture – because these very processes themselves create meaning as part of PR work.

These connections are also evident in the inescapable understanding of PR as an organizational function that marks the whole of the field. The prevalence of this is most visible in the definitions of PR that circulate in the field, many of which have emerged from within the functional paradigm.⁴ A longstanding definition is Grunig and Hunt's very broad characterization of PR as 'the management of communication between an organization and its publics' (1984: 6). Grunig (1992) argues that this definition allows for differences in practice between practitioners in different contexts, but still includes important elements, such as the management of communication and the focus on external relationships. Other definitions focus on 'ideal' communications practices: two-way communications and building positive relationships between organizations and their publics. Some include its strategic importance to organizations and recognize its influence on reputation (Grunig and Grunig, 2000; Hutton, 1999). White and Mazur (White and Mazur, 1996: 11), for example offer a definition based on the goals of PR: 'To influence the behavior of groups of people in relation to each other.' Cutlip et al. (2000: 6) focus more strongly on relationships per se and suggest: 'Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.' Coombs and Holladay (2007) take this one step further by recognizing the intertwined nature of relationships across multiple stakeholders in a complex environment, a context in which PR becomes 'the management of mutually influential relationships within a web of stakeholder and organizational relationships' (2007: 26).

Because the focus on PR as an organizational function is so strong, it is evident in approaches to PR that do not align themselves with functional work. Thus, Aldoory (2005) presents a 're-conceived feminist paradigm' for PR research and applies it to the normative research object of organization–public relationships, generating valuable new perspectives on the dynamics of gender, power and diversity associated with them. Gilpin and Murphy (2008) fundamentally challenge the ideas of functional PR theory by

introducing complexity theory, thereby complicating the notions of linearity and stability that characterize functional work – focusing, for example, on media relations, crisis management, or the boundary spanning role of PR, all major specialisms in functional work. Similarly, Luoma-Aho (2009) applies Putnam's ideas of social capital to organizational relationships, while Falkheimer (2009) applies Giddens's work to explore the role of PR as an expert system of communication in relation to the institutions for which it works. Even the strongest critical scholars define PR as a 'discourse technology of social governance' (Weaver et al., 2006: 8) and 'the strategic attempt to control the agenda of public discussion and the terms in which discussion takes place' (2006: 17), where organizations (political or commercial) are the actors deploying PR.

While these are perfectly valid foci, the adherence to the organizational context reflects the influence of the functional paradigm even on researchers that have made conscious efforts to expand PR scholarship beyond what they see as a relatively limited area. The organizational domain remains the locus of PR, even when the focus is on the effects of PR in society, or the effects of the discourses it puts into circulation on individuals situated beyond the organization. This is perhaps not surprising; as with all paradigms, the emphasis on PR as a function of formally structured organizations is productive in that it has produced a highly coherent regime of 'truth' in the field. Within it, research questions circulate in the form of a closed logical loop: If PR is an organizational function, we should ask what role it plays; if we ask what role it plays, we should also ask whether it is successful in this role; if we ask about success, we need benchmarks, which should logically derive from organizational objectives, because this is where PR is located; if we ask about organizational objectives, we should find out how PR practitioners influence them, because this will explain and influence their success; if we ask about practitioners' influence, we need to find out more about how they work in organizations – and so on. In turn, this paradigm is logically linked to generating benefits for practitioners, because it offers them distinct advantages: it positions them as strategic advisors to the organization; it articulates how and why they may contribute to organizational effectiveness; and it positions reputation as a core organizational asset, making some kind of managed communication essential. This in turn reinforces the validity of the functional paradigm in a virtuous circle of legitimacy (Kuhn, 1970).

The strength of this internal coherence means that contesting the primacy of the organization is an action that equates to 'heretical discourse' (Bourdieu, 1991): removing this foundation stone has the potential to pull down the whole structure. Consequently, what seems to happen is that non-functional research agendas are progressed regardless, but without challenging this fundamental ontology. What is challenged is the privileging of organizational *interests*, but not the organizational *site*. I suggest that this perpetuates both the privileged status of organizations per se in the field and continues the ontological marginalization of alternative forms of PR – ultimately limiting the imagination with which we can approach our topic.

How might we resolve this in order to ensure the broadest and most fruitful development of the field? One solution, following Dogan (2004), may be to actively pursue a greater variety of definitions in the field, grounded in different paradigms that more actively challenge the dominant functional approach and might thereby foster productive conflict. A second option is to take a completely different starting point for the definition

of PR that avoids privileging any single perspective, but instead focuses on creating space for – and thereby validating – the full range of research that comprises the field. The latter is the option I explore in the remainder of this article. In the next section, I consider some of the main assumptions that underpin different approaches to scholarship in the field, with the aim of establishing connections between them, rather than reinforcing division. This provides the foundation for a new definition, which I propose and explain in the concluding part of the article.

Paradigmatic assumptions of the field

I sketch here some of the paradigmatic assumptions that underpin the scholarly approaches currently found in PR. This is not the first attempt to outline meta-theoretical assumptions of PR research. Vasquez and Taylor (2001: 335–7), for example, set out ontological assumptions about the field (it is an emergent field, research and practice are inextricably intertwined, and it is moving from a mass communication to a relationship orientation), epistemological assumptions about the field (it is multi-method and the focus is on relationships); and axiological assumptions about the field (PR research and practice make valuable contributions to society and the increasingly complex social context will increase this value). However their engagement is with the assumptions about the scholarly field per se, not the research within it. Here, I address the latter. The first three assumptions I present underpin functional scholarship; the final three underpin non-functional work. The discussion is not exhaustive – particularly where the non-functional research is concerned – and much more could be said about the unspoken norms that drive research of all types in PR. Nonetheless, this initial attempt to make these assumptions explicit allows the construction of ‘continua’ that connect scholarly groupings in the field on different levels. This, I argue, is the ontological reality of the field; conflict may exist, and may be productive, but the fact that all research is multifaceted means that different approaches can be conceptualized along a range of dimensions that connect them. If that is so, then we need a definition of PR that recognizes and validates the most important dimensions relevant to the overall field, not just the dimensions that privilege one or two groups within it.

Assumption 1: The organizational context is the most important one for the study of PR

The emphasis on PR as a means of realizing organizational interests in functional approaches means that they prioritize formally constituted organizations as sites of PR practice; PR itself becomes understood as a clearly delineated organizational role or department. This ontology prompts questions about how PR is executed within organizations, and what the formal departmental role consists of. Thus, a wide range of research focuses on PR planning, campaign analysis and evaluation. Significant work has also been conducted on the operational roles of practitioners as communications technicians, with a tactical focus on execution (for example, writing press releases, selling news stories in to journalists, compiling research data), and communications managers, who have a more strategic perspective of communication (for example, developing

and implementing policy in light of organizational objectives, analysing external factors and interpreting them in light of the organization's objective) (Berkowitz and Hristodoulakis, 1999; Broom and Dozier, 1986; Grunig et al., 2002; Kelleher, 2001; Pasadeos et al., 1999; Terry, 2001; Vasquez and Taylor, 2001).

The emphasis on PR as an organizational function has also raised questions about the challenges of existing within organizations, where territory and resources must be constantly defended. Questions about the danger of encroachment (Lauzen, 1992), the ability to influence senior management and be included in senior decision-making (Grunig and Grunig, 2000; Grunig et al., 2002), the importance of networking and social capital (see, e.g. Hogg and Doolan, 1999; Moss et al., 2000; Plowman, 1998) and the factors that affect exclusion from these processes (Reber and Berger, 2006) are all considered. This work is functional in that it is designed to investigate how PR practitioners might gain more power for the function within the organization by extending their knowledge beyond communications (Smudde and Courtright, 2010).

Assumption 2: Effective PR equates to 'well-managed' communications in light of organizational interests, and particularly reputation

The 'Excellence' study coordinated by James Grunig and his colleagues (Grunig, 1992; Sallot et al., 2003) during the 1980s and 1990s underpins much of the work focused on the 'effectiveness' of PR. The following quote from the published results of the study illustrates the manner in which organizational imperatives frame the notion of successful, or 'effective' PR:

Public relations contributes to organizational effectiveness when it helps reconcile the organization's goals with the expectations of its strategic constituencies. This contribution has monetary value to the organization. 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 organization's goals and to help determine which external publics are most strategic. (Grunig, 1992: 86).

The quote illustrates the tendency to present an idealized position for PR as a strategic, rather than tactical practice, because this affords greater power and influence to practitioners within the organization. Effectiveness, then, can only be achieved through alignment with organizational goals, but an effective practitioner should also be able to influence those goals through their contact with senior management, an argument that privileges formal organizational hierarchies in western-style organizations and simultaneously values the managerial role for PR above the communications technician (Hodges and McGrath, 2011; McKie and Munshi, 2007). The assumption is reflected in normative models of campaign planning, for example, that begin with an assessment of organizational objectives and evaluate campaigns in light of those objectives (see, e.g. Gregory, 2000), as well as in explorations of the role of communications in reputation management, a principle that underpins many specialist areas of PR scholarship such as crisis management and media relations (e.g. Bailey, 2006; Coombs, 2007; Hallahan, 2001).

Assumption 3: The standpoint from which PR is best understood is that of the organization; therefore, elements of the external context, such as 'publics', may be validly defined in relation to the organization's strategic communications interests

This third point assumes the superiority of the standpoint of the organization over alternative perspectives even when variability in the environment is acknowledged. Cutlip et al. (2000: 240–6), for example, propose an open systems theory of PR, where practitioners act as change managers, spanning the boundary between organizations and their publics; however, the sole objective of PR is to help organizations anticipate and adjust to their environments in order to avoid problems. Similarly, Ledingham and colleagues (2006, Ledingham and Bruning, 1998) articulate PR as relationship management to extend the understanding of organization–public interactions, but always with the purpose of creating more effective relationships in order to achieve organizational goals (Broom et al., 2000). Who, or what, is important in the environment is a judgment based on a strategic assessment carried out by the PR practitioner, from the perspective of the organization.

Specialist areas of PR scholarship, such as crisis management, media relations or online PR, also reflect this assumption in that they frequently advocate a strategic approach to audiences in order to use limited resources effectively, or ensure organizational messages appear in appropriate locations (Coombs and Holladay, 2010; Olson, 2001). For example, advocates of social media as a PR tool espouse its value on the basis of its ubiquity, popularity and potential for relationship-building with important audiences (Breakenridge, 2008; Demetrious, 2011; Phillips and Young, 2009). Similarly, contingency theorists assume a dynamic, context-dependent model of PR activity, where decisions remain led by the organization's needs and desires in light of that context at a particular time (Pang et al., 2010).

Assumption 4: PR is not solely defined by the formal organizational context; standpoints for understanding PR are many and varied

In non-functional scholarly groups, an increasing number of scholars now point out that understanding PR as an organizational function creates a 'blinkered' approach and prevents scholars and practitioners from recognizing the dynamics of the environment that disturb strategies defined only from the organization's standpoint. Academics differ in the degree to which they depart from the normative idea of PR as an organizational function first and foremost, with some more radical than others in this respect. For example, Holtzhausen's (2002, 2011) work adheres to the normative position, but is nonetheless challenging in her insistence that PR is best understood from a postmodern perspective, recognizing the multiple voices among organizational publics that challenge the primacy of organizational interests. Her work has opened up new theoretical possibilities for different types of practitioner roles, including that of the organizational activist, who promotes a more equitable relationship between organizations and their publics. The communitarian view of PR is also largely functional, in that the PR function resides

within organizations, but the identity and purpose of PR work is understood to incorporate benefits that are located in the community as well as in the organization (Leeper, 2001; Stark and Kruckeberg, 2001), and relates to PR's role as a means of creating communities and community cohesion (Luoma-Aho, 2009). More radically, Heath and his colleagues (e.g. Heath et al., 2009; Palenchar and Heath, 2007; Toth and Heath, 1992) have argued that PR's fundamentally rhetorical nature leads to an unequivocal role for the function as a means of achieving a 'fully functioning society' – a role that emphasizes the transformative potential of PR work for organizations as well as their audiences. Moreover, the fully functioning society thesis explicitly addresses the moral and social obligation on both PR and organizations to contribute to society in a positive way, as well as emphasizing the importance of research that highlights these possibilities and effects alongside the traditional focus on organizational benefits (Heath, 2001, 2006, 2011).

Others have contested the organizationally driven view of publics in PR scholarship, suggesting instead that a broader understanding of audience's lives, as determined by factors other than their relationship with the organization, is more appropriate and has greater explanatory power over what is essentially a mutual, rather than one-sided, process of meaning-making in communication that takes place over time, rather than in the short term (Cheney and Dionisopoulos, 1989; Heide, 2009; Leitch and Neilson, 2001; Moffitt, 1992). In a more specific context, but still with a view to generating knowledge for those using PR in organizations, Gilpin and Murphy (2008, 2010) have drawn on complexity theory to completely re-assess the assumptions underpinning a range of PR theory, bringing to the fore the fragmented and constantly changing organizational environment, redefining the organization as a node rather than a focal point in networks, and proposing new directions for research and practice in the area. This is echoed in Fredriksson's (2009) argument that Beck's work, and particularly his notion of reflexive modernity, is a useful way to decentralize the organization from PR theory and instead situate it in its historical context by theorizing the dialectical relationship between organizations, PR practitioners and the norms and values of their environments.

Hodges and McGrath (2011) argue for a disembedding of PR scholarship from the western, formal organizational context and draw on Latin American philosophy to argue that communication work may be consciously enacted through alternative locations in more fluid organizational structures rather through a 'communications officer' per se. Similarly, Cozier and Witmer (2001) and Falkheimer (2009) suggest that the work of Anthony Giddens is a means of locating PR as a form of expert system in a particular socio-historical context. The corresponding role of PR as a means of both reproduction and transformation for organizations and their audiences emphasizes cooperative sense-making in the particular environmental circumstances of a specific time/place, and allows research to move away from managerialist approaches to communication. From a different perspective, McKie and Munshi (2007) suggest that the scale of PR's influence, and the sophistication of its work, particularly in corporate contexts, makes it a powerful social force, and this opens up opportunities for practitioners to alter their self-perception and their understanding of the industry so that this social role may be taken more seriously. From their perspective, however, scholars need to reach well beyond the field's limited borders for new theoretical inspiration before these possibilities can be comprehensively addressed (McKie and Munshi, 2009).

The focus beyond the role of PR as a function of organizations has also prompted explorations of the logic of the occupational field, including the construction and justification of professional tasks (Pieczka, 2002), the importance of the professional project in generating parameters for practice (Edwards, 2010c), and the culture of the profession (Edwards, 2011; Hodges, 2006; Sriramesh and Vercic, 2011). This work contrasts with functional role-related analyses in that it articulates the logic of PR practice in terms of the territorial and jurisdictional concerns that shape its professional project. The work has led to valuable insights into the rationale for practitioner roles and behaviour, the work of professional associations and the discourses that surround the occupation. Some academics have focused in particular on the ways in which aspects of PR occupational culture can 'other', or indeed fully exclude, practitioners who do not 'fit' the traditional practitioner identity (Edwards, 2010b; Pompper, 2005b; Vardeman-Winter and Tindall, 2010; Waymer, 2010).

Assumption 5: PR is shaped by the cultures and societies in which it operates. The effects of PR work must therefore be measured in social and cultural terms, as well as in terms of organizational interests

Assumption five underpins research that draws on theories of political economy, meaning-making, culture and identity to illustrate how PR is fundamentally embedded in the social and organizational cultures in which practitioners work. These sociocultural contexts both produce and are produced by PR, in multifaceted ways (e.g. Aldoory, 2005; Curtin and Gaither, 2007; Edwards and Hodges, 2011; Heath, 2006; L'Etang, 2011; McKie and Munshi, 2007). This work involves exploring the enactment of social contexts that takes place through PR, as well as revealing the neoliberal, raced and gendered values embedded in organizationally driven approaches to PR – which are generally unacknowledged in functional work – and proposing other ways of approaching the occupation and its activities.

For example, Taylor's (2010) use of civil society theory explicates a largely benevolent role for PR as a means of information and meaning distribution, through which social capital can be created and societies become more cohesive, even as different voices compete and clash in social space. Critical scholars adopting a political economy perspective of PR engage with it as a structural source of economic and political power, arguing that its close links with government and economic elites both generate and perpetuate structures of domination (Cottle, 2003; Manning, 2001; Miller and Dinan, 2000, 2007; Moloney, 2006). Discursive analyses of PR work often address similar issues, but examine the ways in which meaning is produced through PR practice that may disempower publics, to the advantage of governments and corporate (Demetrious, 2011; Henderson, 2005). Motion and Leitch (2009), for example, draw on Foucault to propose a greater focus on the work done by practitioners as active agents in the process of knowledge and 'truth' production, transforming discourse and changing sociocultural practice in the process. Feminist, critical race and postcolonial scholars take specific issue with these effects in relation to women and other marginalized communities (Aldoory, 2005, 2007). Rakow and Nastasia (2009), for example, argue that a radical feminist theory of PR is overdue; such a theory would focus on the effects of PR as institutional discourses that shape the experiences of women in their exclusion from loci of

patriarchal power, while at the same time co-opting them into the perpetuation of patriarchy itself. Pompper (2005a) and Edwards (2010c, 2011) have argued in similar fashion for greater consideration of the racialized nature of the profession as well as the racialization that the profession perpetuates across social contexts. Postcolonial scholars place more emphasis on the ways in which communication driven by transnational companies (TNCs) and western governments extend patterns of neo-colonial domination based on inequitable distributions of global trade and political power that divide North and South, East and West, the global rich and the global poor (Dutta and Pal, 2010; McKie and Galloway, 2007; Shome and Hedge, 2002). They emphasize the Othering of 'publics' that neoliberal logic makes irrelevant, and the degree to which 'Other' knowledge is devalued and voices are silenced in communications processes as a result (Bardhan, 2003; Dutta, 2009; Dutta and Pal, 2010; Munshi, 2005; Munshi and Kurian, 2005; Pal and Dutta, 2008; Weaver, 2010).

The focus on culture has also prompted work focused on the mutually constitutive effects of PR and the cultural environment in which it operates. The work of Hodges (2011), for example, illustrates how the specific cultural context of Mexico City influences the ways in which PR practitioners construct their professional identity and carry out their tasks. Similarly, albeit from a more normative standpoint, Molleda (2001; Molleda and Moreno, 2006; Molleda et al., 2003) has argued that political and cultural dynamics in Latin American countries generate particular expectations of organizations that need to be accommodated by PR practitioners, while Sriramesh (Sriramesh, 1992, 1999, 2002; Sriramesh and Vercic, 1995) has been influential in establishing the importance of cultural contexts for work conducted in the functional paradigm. Drawing on the Cultural Studies tradition in the UK, Curtin and Gaither (2007) propose the circuit of culture (Du Gay et al., 1997) as a theoretical model that may be applied to international PR, arguing that PR is active in all moments of the circuit: production, consumption, representation, identity and regulation.

Assumption 6: Public relations is value-driven rather than value-neutral; it has the potential to engender both power and resistance

The critical nature of much non-functional work also takes a clear position on the values associated with PR, rejecting the apparent neutrality of functional PR research and demanding more active and politically aware scholarship. For example, scholars writing from a political economy perspective make it their business to reveal the domination that PR produces both as a result of its links with elite economic and political structures and its increasing ability to control the media (Davies, 2008; McChesney, 1999, 2000; Mickey, 2002; Miller and Dinan, 2007). McKie and Munshi (2007) have articulated this need for activism in terms of the duty of scholarship to expand the possibilities available to PR by driving change in organizational behaviour and reinforcing the importance of contributing to society on a local, national and global level. Postcolonial theorists encourage research that makes space for otherwise ignored voices (e.g. Pal and Dutta, 2008). Weaver (2010) draws on *kaupapa Maori* to emphasize the need to operationalize research in more participatory ways, embedding a more democratic approach in the research process itself rather than maintaining a methodological distance from these principles.

As well as those who argue for greater recognition of the dominance produced by PR, others focus on the fluidity of communication and its effects (Edwards, 2010a), situating PR at the interface between many loci rather than prioritizing a transactional, mechanical view of communication. This location decouples PR from dominant institutions and recognizes the potential for those resisting the imposition of particular values, attitudes or practices to use PR to disseminate their knowledge rather than simply accept others' version of the world (Demetrious, 2006). Some scholars take this further and locate the power of PR in the process of transformation that communication prompts. Bardhan (2010), for example, uses the theoretical framework of third culture building to propose the notion of a transcultural practitioner, at ease in multiple cultural locations and who can therefore overcome the divisive 'Self/Other' dichotomy that characterizes much international PR theory and practice. This ability to approach different forms of knowledge and experience without judgment produces the potential for transformative communication, which may affect the practitioner as much as those with whom they engage.

These latter three assumptions connect many of the research endeavours that are, at face value, quite different in their approach to the field (e.g. postmodernism/postcolonialism, critical political economic approaches/cultural approaches). They challenge the wisdom of scholarship that focuses purely on the organizational context and objectives for PR work, and prompt a sociocultural orientation in research (Bardhan and Weaver, 2010; Dozier and Lauzen, 2000; McKie and Munshi, 2009; Shome and Hedge, 2002). Certainly, this has widened the field and opened up new research directions. As outlined above, scholars are now approaching PR in new ways: it has become a means of social connection, a source of resistance, a structured system of domination or a means of agentic reflexivity. Its own values and purpose are being questioned, quite apart from those it serves. Thus, it is fair to argue that these different assumptions connect multiple schools of thought across non-functional work in the overall scholarly field.

Reconceptualizing the field

These assumptions illustrate the differences between functional and non-functional approaches to PR research, but also allow us to consider connections between them. To do this, I propose that, rather than conceptualizing different scholarly groups only in opposition to each other, we understand them as having positions on a series of continua that address different ontological characteristics of PR. The continua shown here are not exhaustive, but are derived from the emphases that emerge from the assumptions listed above (Table 1).

The notion of continua rather than categories makes space for the 'grey' area between the extremes in each scholarly group; different approaches to PR research can be located at different points on each one. Thus, a critical theory drawing on political economy may tend to emphasize a rather static sociocultural context in their analysis, define PR in terms of its organizational function but position it as part of an expert system, conceptualize PR as soaked in bias, and understand PR practitioners as passive rather than active. On the other hand, a complexity approach to PR may emphasize the organizational context, but conceptualize the environment for PR as fluid, understand PR as part of a flow of communication, and have as its objective the intention to benefit practice. Research

that might be regarded as strictly functional may emphasize the organizational context and adopt an oppositional understanding of PR, but can also recognize practitioners as active agents, producing knowledge that shapes audiences' perceptions of the organization. In this sense, all research draws on dimensions of understanding shared with others in the field, to a greater or lesser extent.

Understanding research approaches in this way allows us to see the variety both within individual scholarly groups as well as across the field. In turn, this throws into relief the limitations of definitions that continually draw us back to the organizational context, since they cannot address many of the dimensions of research being conducted in the field. Instead, I suggest that we need a definition that is broad enough to accommodate these different approaches. I am not suggesting a new definition will transform the field; the point is that the field *is transformed*; it does not deal only with organizations and it is time that the definition of PR reflected this. Correspondingly, a new definition must be heretical, in the sense that it must decouple PR from the organizational context, but without sacrificing the possibility of analyses that do want to privilege that perspective, and without precluding analyses that are not located in that space. To this end, I propose a definition that builds on previous work where I have emphasized the importance of understanding PR as implicated in Appadurai's (1996) global cultural flows (Edwards, 2010a), as well as conceptualizing PR as 'a locus of trans-actions that produce emergent social and cultural meanings' (Edwards and Hodges, 2011: 4). As a heretical idea, designed to alter the 'habits of mind' that currently define our practice in the scholarly field, it should be understood as a starting point that may prompt discussion and debate.

I define PR as the flow of purposive communication produced on behalf of individuals, formally constituted and informally constituted groups, through their continuous trans-actions with other social entities. It has social, cultural, political and economic effects at local, national and global levels. This definition has a number of key elements. First, I define PR as a *flow* of communication. The notion of flow is drawn from Appadurai's (1996) conceptualization of cultural flows, comprising the aggregate of individual acts of a particular kind (in Appadurai's conceptualization – finance, media

Table 1. Continua of underlying assumptions in PR research

PR as value-free	PR as inherently biased
PR passively communicates knowledge	PR actively produces knowledge
Objective to benefit practice	Objective to analyse and critique practice
PR as transactional communication	PR as a flow of communication
PR as oppositional	PR as mutually transformative
Context for PR is static	Context for PR is fluid
PR is an element of managerial systems within organizations	PR is an element of political/expert/cultural systems that extend beyond organizational boundaries
PR practitioners as passive agents in the communications process	PR practitioners as active agents in the communications process
Organizational context is central to the analysis	Sociocultural context is central to the analysis

work, ideological statements, immigration and emigration – and here, PR practices). This aggregate is inseparable from the acts themselves, which create the flow as they are enacted, and merge with other acts to become part of a greater movement. Thus, PR may be understood as *both* an aggregate, *and* a particular practice. The notion of flow captures the dynamic nature of PR and reinforces its temporal and spatial dimensions. It also captures the notion that the people who participate in the flow are implicated in the direction it takes. That direction is not necessarily visible to those whose acts create it, but it forms and shapes their practice nonetheless. More likely to be visible are the various ways in which PR flow(s) interact with other global cultural flows to change the social, cultural, political and economic context – including that of the organization.

I have explicitly articulated PR as a flow of *purposive* communication produced *on behalf of* individuals, formally constituted and informally constituted groups. This delineates PR from incidental organizational communication, not structured in advance with a particular outcome in mind. It also differentiates PR from journalism, though the close relationship between source and media channel (Croteau and Hoynes, 2001; Davies, 2008; Davis, 2002; Manning, 2001) means that these two fields clearly overlap in many places.

As the preceding discussion suggests, I regard the articulation of PR's origins as fundamental to the openness of the field. I propose three origins in this definition: individuals (e.g. celebrity PR); formally constituted organizations (the normative commercial, government or third sector organization of existing practice); and informally constituted groups (which are more fluid and may evolve in a range of different spaces and places: online, offline, locally or globally). Whether or not the PR function is formally constituted in these locations is a moot point: if it is, this could and perhaps should be a focus for investigation. If it isn't, finding out how those organizations or individuals manage to produce purposive communication on their own behalf, having the same or similar effects as formally structured PR, is of equal interest.

I draw on Dewey's work on trans-actions (Dewey and Bentley, 1949[1991]; Simpson, 2009) as a way of articulating the process of communication and transformation that emerges through PR as *continuous trans-actions with other entities*. I have argued elsewhere, with Caroline Hodges, that PR practitioners do not stand *outside* their work, but are themselves transformed by it through the trans-actions they engage in with other social entities (which may be social systems, individuals, groups, institutions or organizations) (Edwards and Hodges, 2011). These trans-actions are grounded in communication and allow PR to be conceptualized as a locus of continuously emerging change, rather than one side of a cause–effect dichotomy. This aligns with an understanding of PR as a flow of communication; it reinforces the inherent movement and spatio-temporal reality of PR. Moreover, Appadurai (1996) argues that it is precisely the *articulations* between his cultural flows that create change and evolution across global, national and local contexts. Public relations, of course, participates in trans-actions that are specifically designed to produce change through communication and, consequently, will be oriented towards articulations with other cultural flows in order to achieve that objective.

The final sentence of the definition explicitly acknowledges the breadth of PR's effects. It is left deliberately vague and no priority of context or level is advocated. As the above summary illustrates, the effects of PR are found in all the levels and locations

mentioned here but research has rarely examined the connections between them. In the interests of an inclusive, rather than exclusive, definition, I use the conjunction 'and' rather than 'or' in both lists, a choice based on my belief that PR scholarship should not be about an either/or choice of which level of analysis to use, but may be informed by the nature and effects of PR as flow in a range of different contexts simultaneously. At the same time, this reinforces the connections between current scholarly approaches – even those that seem most disparate. Thus, while looking beyond the field is crucial for inspiration, the proposed definition makes space for the hybridization within the field that should also inform our future.

Conclusion

In making visible some of the paradigmatic assumptions of PR scholarship in this article, and explaining why PR research cannot be neatly compartmentalized into different schools of thought, I hope to have illustrated why continuing to foster the umbilical cord that ties the definition of PR to organizational contexts is no longer a sensible way to proceed. Given the importance of paradigmatic variety, conflict and hybridization to the development of social scientific fields (Dogan, 1996), it is time to consider how we might use our ability to define PR in a way that better reflects the plurality of views in the field and creates a more balanced context for their interaction. In proposing a new definition my intention is to challenge existing 'habits of mind' that result in the separation of existing approaches, rather than dialogue between them, something that I suggest is only possible if we adopt a completely different starting point. If we begin by understanding PR as flow, then PR in organizations is a valid locus of analysis, since organizations (and their practitioners) are important social entities in the trans-actions that make up the flow. The relationship management perspective also sits well within this definition, since these relationships constitute PR's trans-actions. Similarly, investigations of PR's social and cultural effects, its history and its power, are all valid within the notion of flow, that allows researchers to transcend the organizational context and take analyses beyond any kind of boundary, recognizing the fluidity and evolution of PR over time and space. In sum, I present here a new 'object' to define the scholarly field. How it evolves is, of course, a matter that can only be determined through our own trans-actions with each other as part of a community committed to better understanding PR.

Notes

1. I recognize the fact that using the labels 'functional' and 'non-functional' is not ideal because it masks the variety of work that might be categorized under each rubric. Hence, I use these terms advisedly and primarily for analytical purposes; in the latter part of the article, in fact, I reject such categorizations by introducing the notion of continua as a means of connecting different research approaches, but the argument for doing this has first to be developed in the earlier part of the article, and the functional/non-functional rubric is useful here. Consequently, where they appear, the term 'functional research' indicates research that is driven by a systems theory approach and adheres to the conceptualizations and research questions that emerged in line with the focus of the excellence study. 'Non-functional' research indicates work that explicitly departs from this perspective. Neither categories are definitive and both include a wide range of different approaches. The terms should be understood in this sense.

2. It is perhaps questionable that crisis communication be regarded as a paradigm, since the assumptions that underpin it sit squarely in the functionalist tradition. However, Toth uses this moniker to describe this research emphasis, so I adopt it here.
3. 'Excellence' principles are those that underpin the extensive research undertaken by James Grunig and colleagues to establish the best practices of PR across national and international organizational contexts. They sit within the functional tradition, as defined in this article.
4. The definitions presented here were found through a purposive review of key textbooks, books and articles focused on PR. The purpose was not to present an exhaustive review of definitions, but to offer a sense of how the definitional 'landscape' is shaped. There were not very many new definitions offered by scholars working outside the functional paradigm. Within the functional paradigm, there were many versions of definitions with a clear evolution towards relationship orientation to PR over time, but with the same basic principles at their heart. I feel that the ones discussed here are a fair representation of the breadth of definitions in the field at the moment.

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