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A metaphorical application of the concept 'paradigm' to the public relations domain

ABSTRACT

The aim of this conceptual analysis of Kuhn's paradigm theory was to explore whether the concept of paradigm could be applied to the public relations domain—specifically with regard to concepts such as dominant paradigm, paradigm debate, paradigm struggle and scientific revolution.

Based on the findings, the author suggests that the first three models of public relations are the *theory* that represents the origins of public relations as a (social) science; that the *dominant paradigm* of normal science practice in public relations is persuasion; and that *alternative paradigms* debated are about inter alia professionalism, ethical performance, conflict, chaos and pluralism. Furthermore, an important *paradigm debate* is currently taking place between eminent US scholars (relationships) and European scholars (reflection). However, the real *paradigm struggle* is seen to be between persuasion and two-way symmetrical communication (regarded by some as a *struggle between symbolic* and behavioural relationships). The author's conclusion is that public relations is currently suffering an identity crisis which could, with a number of alternative paradigms available, lead to a *scientific revolution* in the discipline.

1. INTRODUCTION: FROM IMMATURE TO MATURE SOCIAL SCIENCE

Harlow (1975:5) defines social science as “the scientific study of man, both as an individual and as a member of society. It attempts to learn facts about man and establish principles controlling his behaviour, especially his relations with fellow human beings”. Social scholars thus attempt to understand human beings as objects of study. They seek to observe and interpret patterns of human behaviour. Hazelton and Botan (1989:13) regard public relations as a fast-emerging social science discipline. Botan (1989:99-100) sees public relations as an applied social science based in communication.

Public relations as a field of study is regarded by various authors (Grunig, 1990; Signitzer, 1998) as a mature science. Grunig (1989:20) maintains that the current trend, which sets public relations apart from other communication research, is the blending of organisational and communication theories, which has resulted in public relations developing from an immature to a mature science in the United States. In the opinion of Holtzhausen (1995), public relations has become a social science in its own right based on its unique problem definition – the strategic management of the communication between the organisation and its internal and external stakeholders. The development of theories unique to the field, such as a general theory of excellence in public relations and communication management, is a further confirmation of this fact.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In building an argument for the application of the concept ‘paradigm’ to the public relations domain, paradigm differences in the natural and social sciences must be noted.

In the *social sciences*, several contrasting paradigms can be found in any scientific discipline at any given time. Each paradigm may be represented by different theoretical approaches (Jansen & Steinberg, 1991:6-7). Theoretical paradigms are seldom discarded altogether. Some are merely seen as offering new insights that others lack. Social science paradigms each offer a different way of looking at human social life and make certain assumptions about the nature of social reality (Babbie, 2001:43). Social scientists can therefore ground their enquiries in any number of paradigms. None is right or wrong, only more or less useful in particular situations. They each shape the kind of theory created for general understanding. Therefore, the scientific theories that make sense to scientists merely depend on which paradigm they are maintaining.

However, in the *natural sciences*, new paradigms are seen as progressing from a false view to a true one. Therefore, according to Kuhn, single paradigms dominate mature sciences and can only be replaced through a scientific revolution (Grunig, 1989:25). During the 1970s, some schools of thought compared the natural sciences to the social

sciences on the grounds of Kuhn's paradigm theory (Mouton & Marais, 1992:153). Conclusions were reached that the social sciences should be seen as being in the pre-paradigmatic phase of development, since there is no discipline having only one single (dominant) paradigm.

Mouton and Marais (1992:153) do not agree with the latter view and suggest that the paradigm concept be used in a more metaphorical sense in the social sciences. It cannot be compared directly to the natural sciences where the function of problem-solving is central. In the social sciences, there are also other research aims such as in-depth understanding, explanation and analysis.

The problem to be addressed in this research is whether public relations, as a social science, is in the pre-paradigmatic stage of development, or whether the subsequent stages of Kuhn's paradigm theory (normal science, paradigm debates, paradigm struggle and scientific revolutions) can be applied to the public relations domain. In conclusion, the author will either agree or disagree with the views of Mouton and Marais (1992:153), as expressed above.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Primary objective: to explore whether Kuhn's paradigm theory can be applied to the public relations domain.

Secondary objectives:

- To clarify the difference between the concept of 'world-view' and 'paradigm'.
- To explore whether public relations, as a social science, is in the pre-paradigmatic phase of development.
- To investigate whether concepts such as paradigm, paradigm debate, paradigm struggle and scientific revolution can (metaphorically) be applied to the public relations domain.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

This non-empirical study employs conceptual analysis (of the literature on paradigm theory) as the research design. Conceptual analysis is defined by Mouton (2001:175) as an analysis of the meaning of words or concepts through clarification and elaboration of the different dimensions of meaning. The nature of the data is secondary (existing) and textual.

5. PARADIGM THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION TO PUBLIC RELATIONS

5.1 A world-view versus a paradigm

In the public relations literature (and in practice), there is confusion with regard to the difference between 'world view' and 'paradigm'. Some authors use the concepts interchangeably, while others differentiate between them.

Du Plooy (2001:26) defines world view as "attitudes, beliefs, values or views of social reality characteristic of particular social groups". Suppe (1977) regards a world view as a conceptual framework, also called a *Weltanschauung* or a comprehensive mindset. Kearney's (1984:10,47) definition of world view is "a set of images and assumptions about the world...organising principles that have variously been called Gestalten, plans, structures, schemata". A schema is "a subjective 'theory' about how the world operates" (Markus & Zajonc, 1985:145). Grunig and White (1992:34) regard a world view as representing the 'subjective' component of theory – being on a level of abstraction (the meta-theoretical level) other than a theory or hypothesis. Based on these definitions, the author regards the concept of 'world view' as referring to the attitudes, beliefs, views or mindset of any individual or group of people. Such non-scientific beliefs might also be called 'extra-scientific' world views.

The term paradigm is used in a number of ways and for different purposes (Jansen & Steynberg, 1991:6). At a basic level, the term describes a set of assumptions, theories and models that are commonly accepted within a particular field of activity (Collins, 1996). According to Grunig (1989:24), it was Kuhn (1970) who first introduced the term 'paradigm' – since then the most popular term to describe a scientific world view. Du Plooy (2001:19) confirms the use of paradigm as a scientific world view by defining it as "a set of shared basic beliefs about how researchers view that which they study". Babbie (2001:4,42,51) concurs in describing a paradigm as a model or frame of reference that organises researchers' observations and reasoning, and directs their attention in making measurements. Littlejohn (1992:28) also regards paradigms as sets of concepts and variables that a group of scholars believe to be important to study, accompanied by a particular opinion of how these things operate.

Suppe (1977) criticised Kuhn for not stating clearly what he meant by the term 'paradigm'. Kuhn (1970) therefore redefined the term in an enlarged second edition of his book as a mindset or a disciplinary matrix that stands for "the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community" (Kuhn, 1970:175). A paradigm is thus a dominant way of conceptualising a phenomenon, of approaching it methodologically, and of looking for solutions to research problems.

Based on the above definitions, the author regards the term 'paradigm' as representing a scientific world view (i.e. the views of a group of scholars), in contrast to the term 'world view' which is concluded to be an extra-scientific world view (held by any group of people).

5.2 Pre-normal phase of science practice

According to Thomas Kuhn (1962) in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the history of the natural sciences indicates that it is possible to identify the theory or system of theories, which represents the origins of a specific science (e.g. Darwin's evolution theory). However, in the period before such a theory establishes itself, several theories or points of view are accepted. No one theory is seen to be better than the others (Kuhn, 1992:148).

The author is of the opinion that, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the USA and Europe, the press agency, public information and two-way asymmetrical public relations models were widely accepted points of view in the pre-paradigmatic phase of public relations science development. None of these approaches were necessarily regarded as being better than any of the others. Although these models could be regarded as world views held by practitioners, they are also (pre-) paradigms since certain research traditions are relevant and commonly applied to each of them. For the press agency model, the study of *propagandistic techniques* beginning in the 1920s was especially relevant. The public information model is most easily identified in the approach taken to public relations by *journalism schools*, with research on the effects of public information campaigns and the diffusion of innovation being particularly relevant. The scientific study of *attitude change and persuasion* is particularly relevant to the two-way asymmetrical model, along with the study of rhetoric (Grunig, 1989:33).

With the exclusion of South Africa (and to some extent Nigeria), the author regards the African continent as still being in the pre-paradigmatic stage of science development in public relations. Public relations in the rest of Africa has to do with 'getting the message out' or 'spreading the word' (the press agency model); 'giving information' which is characteristic of the public information model; or 'manipulating the audience to agree with the view of an organisation or political party (the two-way asymmetric model) (Rensburg, 2002:18). As stated in the theoretical description above, none of these approaches to public relations are necessarily seen as being better than any other. (The fourth public relations model – two-way symmetrical communication – will be discussed in subsequent sections of this article.)

The author regards the models of public relations, as conceptualised by Grunig & Hunt (1984), as the theory that represents the origins of public relations as a science.

5.3 Normal science practice

As soon as one specific theory is able to solve real empirical problems in the field, the stage of normal science practice is entered into where the focus is on specific empirical and theoretical problems. Kuhn (1970:x) thus defines the concept of paradigm as “universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners”.

Mouton and Marais (1992:148) describe normal science practice as being conducted from within a dominant paradigm – typically where a specific paradigm has become entrenched, resisting any substantial change. During such times, theories and research take a certain fundamental direction. Researchers commit themselves to a specific theory/set of theories, methodology and research techniques as specified by the paradigm. They also commit themselves to certain quasi-metaphysical assumptions and presuppositions.

Kuhn (1970:34-43) relates normal science to puzzlesolving whereby the paradigm determines the ‘rules’ within which the scientific endeavour takes place. A good paradigm defines the problem areas for the researcher and provides clues to possible solutions. The paradigm also indicates which solutions will be acceptable. Kuhn emphasises that during normal science, the researcher’s aim is not to discover new theories – rather, it is a long process of trial and error in searching for solutions to important problems. The central idea suggested by a paradigm may shape scientific thinking for a long time and is often considered the answer to a crucial problem posed by a specific discipline (Jansen & Steinberg, 1991:6-7).

In the opinion of the author, public relations entered a period of normal science in the second half of the 20th century when persuasion became the dominant paradigm – i.e. the manipulation of public behaviour for the benefit of the sponsoring organisation. Such a mindset contains a number of obvious presuppositions about the nature of human beings, the nature of social responsibility, and the nature and purpose of communication. It also suggests the relevance of some obvious communication theories, most notably theories of attitudes and persuasion, as employed by the asymmetrical model of public relations (Grünig, 1989:18-19).

Miller (1989:45) views persuasion and public relations as “two Ps in a pod”, both communicative processes exerting symbolic control over the environment. He regards “effective, ethically defensible persuasion and effective, ethically defensible public relations (as) virtually synonymous”. Miller finds it inevitable that organisations/institutions attempt to control attitudes and behaviour in the environment.

Persuasion is a common view in the field of public relations, with many scientists, members of management and practitioners alike believing that it is the most important or even the sole purpose of public relations. This is evidence of an important characteristic of paradigms, namely that they are often difficult to recognise as such because they are so implicit, assumed, and taken for granted. They seem more like the way things are than only one possible point of view among many (Babbie, 2001:43).

Although persuasion is commonly accepted as the dominant paradigm in public relations, it is not the only approach to the field. Other perspectives encountered in literature are discussed in the following section.

5.4 Paradigm debates

A paradigm may dominate for decades, even centuries (Kuhn, 1999). During such periods of normal science, paradigm debates within a field are almost non-existent. According to Kuhn (1993:171): "...normal science and the practice produced in it and by it 'dead ends' because normal science is constructed to regress toward the mean; it does not lead to transformation".

However, when a research community is confronted with totally unexpected new empirical and theoretical problems that the dominant paradigm cannot solve, the shortcomings of the particular paradigm become obvious. The paradigm is now under attack and subject to change. During such times, paradigm debates occur regularly and in some instances turn into a paradigm struggle. (This is the period preceding a scientific revolution). Questions pertaining to the ways in which values emerge, especially the ways in which political, historical, social and economic factors contribute to the ways in which values are formed, are pertinent to paradigm debates (Cottone, 1993:170).

Persuasion has been the dominant paradigm in the public relations domain for decades. In the opinion of the author, this paradigm is now under attack and subject to change because it can no longer solve the problems in the field. Some examples of the different viewpoints emerging in literature that attest to this fact are now provided.

5.4.1 An applied versus a theory-based research and scholarship paradigm

Like other domains, public relations is in an ongoing state of change. It is branching out from a single applied focus driven by the knowledge needs of practitioners to include a new theory-based research and scholarship branch as well (Steyn & Puth, 2000:3; Botan, 1993). These two branches constitute two communities of thought and value within public relations (Botan, 1993).

Some scholars might object to describing these two branches as paradigms in the true sense of the word. However, public relations does have a dominant applied model, based (in the US at least) on a journalistic heritage and business orientation. There are also several competing models of which the symmetrical/systems, the rhetorical/critical, the feminist as well as the social scientific models are based on fairly well-evolved paradigms.

Public relations is thus faced with choices between the assumptions and the values of various paradigms, indicating the start of a paradigm struggle. The more applied branch embodies primarily micro-ethical and economic questions while the more theoretic branch embodies primarily macro-ethical questions and the concerns of liberal scholarship, questions of how public relations is used and what it contributes to society (Botan, 1993).

5.4.2 A professionalism paradigm

Professionalism is an issue that is engaging thinkers in disciplines as diverse as medicine, accounting, politics, education and business (Steiner, 2001:150). Public relations scholars such as Sallot, Cameron and Lariscy (1998) as well as Kruckeberg (1998) have also addressed the issue. The latter argues that public relations is a specialised professional occupation with its own set of values and beliefs, and should not be seen as a subset of other fields of specialisation.

Very few authors critically question the desirability of professionalism. However, Steiner (2001:150) issues a philosophical challenge to those who believe professionalism to be desirable and valuable in its own right:

Professionalism marked by narrowly defined specialist parameters bodes ill for public relations because it marks a narrowing of vision and interest, just when public relations has moved beyond the narrow roles of corporate publicity and corporate writing and just when managers are beginning to believe that communication is a whole-of-enterprise responsibility.

The 'lack of professionalism' in public relations can be regarded as its strength because it must be able to appreciate multiple viewpoints, work with multiple stakeholders, be flexible and pragmatic, take risks and be innovative to perform strategically. The uniformity of thought and conformity of behaviour required by professionalism could reduce the value of the function to management. In order to professionalise public relations, a Kuhnian paradigm will have to be embraced, which will "transform a heterogeneous, flexible, communication-centred occupation into a science characterised by paradigmatic protocols and techniques as well as prescribed values and beliefs" (Steiner, 2001:151).

Professionalism will narrow the vision of public relations, impede engagement with organisational stakeholders, deny human capacities like intuition, feeling and creativity, restrict interpretive and operational freedom, and impose an identity that denies the value of human uniqueness. Strategic communication management is characterised by complexity and diversity. Embracing professionalism might transform the public relations profession into "...a mechanistic one characterised by inappropriately prescriptive protocols and techniques that can be applied mindlessly but that will make little contribution to strategic management" (Steiner, 2001:151-155).

5.4.3 Ethical performance of public relations

Pearson (1989) has provided a model for the ethical performance of public relations where the focal concept for ethical decision-making is based on dialogue. His model supports Grunig's view (2000) that true public relations cannot be achieved until an organisation reaches a level of open, two-way symmetrical communication and change adjustment. Pearson's model (1989) contributes to a behavioural understanding of public relations by showing the direct relationship of social responsibility and the formulation of public policy, allowing an organisation to demonstrate ethical harmony with the social environment of which it is a part.

5.4.4 Simoes' conflict paradigm

Simoes' perspective recognises conflict in the social system between organisations and their stakeholders, and sees the objective of public relations performance as that of legitimising organisational decisions. Simoes' model, which can be defined as two-way asymmetric, raises the question of whether it is moral to practise public relations, and to persuade others to accept one's own ideas as ethical (Sharpe & Simoes, 1996).

5.4.5 The chaos paradigm

Cottone (1993:167-176) proposes the new science of chaos as a paradigm for a new critical approach to public relations. She criticises the fact that public relations theory development is grounded in the traditional scientific world view and suggests chaos as a dynamic world view that provides a more inclusive and appropriate foundation for public relations theory development. She argues that the deep theory development called for in public relations will not be developed from a normal scientific viewpoint.

5.4.6 Pluralist paradigm

In a narrow view of public relations, the field can be regarded as the study of discourse (messages) between organisations and their stakeholders. In such an instance, both the systems perspective (as represented by Grunig's concept of symmetrical public relations) and the rhetorical perspective (premised on the use of discourse to persuade stakeholders) are applicable. Both are endpoints on a continuum ranging from information exchange (systems) to persuasion (rhetorical) (Heath, 1992:17-36).

Coombs (1993:112-114) posits that a pluralist paradigm undergirds and joins the systems and rhetorical paradigms. According to Smith (1993:112), pluralism is an important concept in political science, referring to the ideal type of government where all parties have equal access to, and equal power in, the policy-making process. Coombs (1993:111-119) criticises the pluralist paradigm by stating that both the systems and rhetorical approaches to public relations assume that ideas freely compete with one another in the marketplace of ideas. They ignore the power relationship between an organisation and its stakeholders, and fail to give the required import to power-based criticisms of the systems and rhetorical perspectives.

5.4.7 How practitioners should approach their work: a micro-level view

Hallahan (1993:198) applies the concept of 'paradigm' in a rather unconventional way to the day-to-day practice of public relations. While researchers examine the paradigm question from the macro-level (focusing on how public relations as a whole impacts on organisations, stakeholders and society), Hallahan sees the paradigm question on the practitioner-oriented, micro-level as being the way in which individual practitioners should approach their work. According to Botan (1993:110), Hallahan (1993) introduces a practitioner/teacher perspective into the question of the paradigm struggle. He uses the term 'paradigm' liberally, linking the notion of a paradigm struggle with the undergraduate classroom and the practitioner's campaign.

Drawing on Kuhn's (1969) classic work on scientific revolutions, Hallahan (1993) outlines seven alternative paradigms of public relations, each with a different focal question for assessing public relations efforts: the process paradigm; plan or programme paradigm; communication/practice style paradigm; organisational/managerial effectiveness paradigm; behavioural paradigm; social problems paradigm; and systems paradigm. Hallahan (1993:203,204) does not advocate any specific approach, but calls for an expanded debate on paradigmatic issues:

Regrettably, none of these paradigms provides a fully satisfactory view of the field. If public relations practice is to advance, public relations people need to engage in more discussion about these alternative perspectives. Educators can play a pivotal role in this process – as researchers directly involved in theory development and testing, and as teachers.

Although Hallahan's (1993) use of the concept 'paradigm' does not conform to the definition of being a 'scientific world view', the author suggests that Hallahan's different practitioner performance 'paradigms' might well be focal questions for communities of researchers. They represent different perspectives for understanding and assessing public relations, with different assumptions, and levels and units of analysis. Within

each, significantly different questions might be asked and different methodologies applied.

5.4.8 *The paradigm debate between US and European scholars*

A debate in the real sense of the word was recently initiated between prominent North American and European scholars as to the purpose of public relations on the different continents, pointing to some fundamental differences. This debate first manifested itself in the literature in the response by European authors Vercic, Van Ruler, Bütschi and Flodin (2001) to an article by American academic Hutton (1999) on the definitions, domain and dimensions of public relations. These European researchers initiated the European Body of Knowledge (EBOK) project in 1998.

The debate continued at the 9th International Public Relations Research Symposium on “The Status of Public Relations Knowledge in Europe and Around the World” (Vercic, Van Ruler, Jensen, Moss, & White, 2002). The main idea of the Symposium was to determine whether there was anything new/special in Europe and/or other countries outside the US regarding the public relations theory, or whether the rest of the world was merely imitating US researchers. Scholars and practitioners from other continents presented papers on the status of public relations knowledge in their respective countries/continents *vis-a-vis* Europe, inter alia Rensburg (2002:35-43); Steyn (2002:126-142); and Grunig and Grunig (2002:25).

It quickly became clear that the Europeans are no longer prepared to blindly follow (new) US paradigms such as relationships. Rather, they are making a stand with regard to their own unique views by entering into a paradigm debate with regard to the European public or reflective approach. The core concepts of, and differences between, these two paradigms are presented below.

5.4.8.1 *Relationships: a new paradigm for public relations in the United States*

In many organisations, the production and dissemination of communication messages is still seen to be the only purpose of public relations. In such instances, effectively crafted messages are regarded as providing solutions to all public relations problems – the latter being evaluated in terms of the “amount of communication produced, rather than measuring the perceptual, symbolic, relational, and behavioural outcomes” (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000:87).

Almost two decades ago, Ferguson (1984:ii) stated that a paradigm focus for the field of public relations “would greatly enhance the probability of productive theory development”. In her view, the central focus of such a paradigm should be on behavioural relationships – meaning that the unit of study should not be the organisation, or the

stakeholder, or the communication process. Rather, the unit of study should be the *relationship* between an organisation and its stakeholders. However, Ferguson did not confine public relations solely to the management of communication within relationships, but specified the need to understand organisations and their stakeholders, and the social environment in which they both exist.

Ledingham and Bruning (1998:62) defined the ideal relationship between organisation and stakeholder group as “the state that exists between an organisation and its key publics that provides economic, social, political, and/or cultural benefits to all parties involved, and is characterised by mutual positive regard”. In the new relationship management perspective, the emphasis is no longer on manipulating public opinion with communication messages (for the organisation’s gain). Rather, it is on combining symbolic communication messages and organisational behaviours to initiate, build, nurture and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and its stakeholders.

This new public relations perspective argues that the practice unfolds within the four-step management process of analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation – representing a conceptual shift to public relations as a management function that utilises communication strategically (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998:55). In this view, the field of public relations is defined in terms of what it is, rather than what it does (as described traditionally). This is an important change in the mission of public relations, because it means that the evaluation of programmes no longer entails the measurement of communicated messages. Rather, it is now the influence of the organisation’s activities on stakeholders’ perceptions of the relationship and the outcomes of such activities on stakeholders’ behaviour that is being measured (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000:87).

Hutton (1999) regards the central concept of the new relationship management paradigm as ‘managing strategic relationships’ where ‘managing’ implies planning, control, feedback and performance measurement; ‘strategic’ implies planning, prioritisation, action orientation and a focus on relationships most relevant to client organisation goals; and ‘relationships’ imply effective communication, mutual adaptation, mutual dependency, shared values, trust and commitment. In accepting ‘managing strategic relationships’ as the overarching definition and paradigm, academics and practitioners alike will have to let go of ‘communication’ as the foundation of public relations. Although communication is a necessary foundation, it is no longer a sufficient foundation (Hutton, 1999:212).

In conclusion, the emergence of relationship management as a paradigm for public relations scholarship and practice has called into question the essence of the field of public relations: what it is and what it does or should do; its function and value within

the organisation and the greater society; and the benefits generated for organisations, their stakeholders and the communities/societies in which they exist. This paradigm also provides a framework to explore the link between public relations objectives and organisational goals (in a way that the organisation's management can understand and appreciate), and for constructing platforms for strategic planning and tactical implementation (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

5.4.8.2 Reflection: a new paradigm for public relations in Europe

Whereas 'relationships' are seen by renowned North American scholars as a new paradigm for public relations on their continent, this is not necessarily the case in Europe. Researchers such as Vercic, *et al.* (2001) regard their two major differences with the North American approach to public relations as being a problem with the translation of the US term 'public relations', as well as the lack of a conceptual dualism between communication and relationships. Based on Deetz (2001:3-46), the Europeans regard communication to be a form of behaviour as well as the essence of any kind of relations. They do not find a debate about 'communication' versus 'relationships' at all relevant. However, there is some question as to what is meant by behaviour. A common approach of European scholars is to regard communication as a specific kind of behaviour, namely behaviour with signs and symbols (Vercic, *et al.*, 2001:380).

Prominent European scholars approach public relations as a way to describe and explain 'organisation' (as other disciplines such as law and marketing are doing). What differentiates public relations from these other functions is the concern it brings for broader societal issues, as well as the fact that any problem is approached with a concern for the implications of organisational behaviour towards, and in, the public sphere. This concern is implicit in all public relations definitions, whether the field is defined as 'relationship' management, 'communication' management, 'image' management or 'reputation' management. It is also fundamental for an understanding of concepts such as 'stakeholders', 'publics' and 'activists'. What might therefore unite the different perspectives on public relations is a common approach to 'organising' and 'organisation'.

Public relations is thus seen to be a strategic process of viewing an organisation from an 'outside' perspective – being concerned with issues and values that are considered publicly relevant, and pointing to legitimacy and public trust in the organisation as central concepts of public relations in Europe (Vercic, *et al.*, 2001:382). In the EBOOK project, this actually emerged as a specific dimension or role named the 'reflective' dimension. Danish scholar Holmström (2000:4, 47) envisions a new business paradigm based on reflection – the ability of a social system to see itself in relation to other social systems and to act on the basis of this recognition to survive in the long term. In this new paradigm, standards for corporate social responsibility are being institutionalised

at present and reflective self-regulation from inside business is encouraged, motivated by perceptions of society as a unity. Since regulation by law has become inadequate, trust and legitimacy become prerequisites for interaction.

The public or reflective approach is broader than the stakeholder approach. In the latter, social norms and values are regarded as being socially constructed and institutionalised through associations with stakeholders. The organisation is thus in the centre, scanning the environment to identify the concerns of its stakeholders and then deciding how to communicate with them (Vercic, *et al.*, 2001). Based on these differences, a true paradigm debate is developing between academics in the United States and Europe. What remains to be seen is whether each continent will practise public relations according to their own paradigms, or whether the current paradigm debate will turn into a struggle across the Atlantic.

5.5 A paradigm struggle in public relations

The paradigm debates described in the previous section do not (yet) represent a paradigm 'struggle' in the real sense of the word. It is the author's view that the struggle currently taking place between communities of public relations researchers as well as between practitioners is that of *persuasive* versus *two-way symmetrical* communication. Closely related to that, mainly in the US, is the struggle between *symbolic* and *behavioural communication relationships*. It must be noted that elements of this struggle are embedded in some of the alternative paradigms discussed earlier, such as the applied versus the theory-based paradigm; Pearson's ethical performance and the symmetrical/systems paradigms (dialogue and understanding) versus the critical/rhetorical and social scientific paradigms (persuasion).

5.5.1 *Persuasive versus two-way symmetrical communication*

Scholars (as well as practitioners) differ in their assumptions about the purpose of public relations and its effects: from the dissemination of information, to manipulation, to the resolution of conflict, to the promotion of understanding (Grunig, 1992:6). Botan (1993) regards Grunig's *symmetrical/systems* view (a more mechanistic systems-centred view, which assumes society, organisations and stakeholders will benefit most by maintaining a state of dynamic equilibrium) as competing with the *rhetorical/critical* and *social scientific* approaches (regarded as a more humanistic, symbol-centred, persuasive perspective). Some even describe the *persuasion* world view (characterised by manipulation) and the *symmetrical* world view (characterised by resolution of conflict and/or promotion of understanding) as representing a paradigm struggle in public relations (Botan, 1989; Grunig, 1989:30). Hazelton and Botan (1989) state that the only way in which this paradigm struggle can be reconciled is if any of its supporters can unambiguously prove that all practitioners support either one or the other.

For a number of years, the paradigm struggle between persuasion and symmetrical communication has been evident on continents/in countries with communities of public relations researchers and a highly developed public relations industry such as the US, many countries in Europe, and in Australia/New Zealand. Although persuasion is the dominant paradigm (among researchers) as well as the dominant world view (among public relations practitioners themselves and among members of top management/other functions such as marketing), there are signs that teams of public relations researchers with expertise in symmetrical, two-way communication are making their voices heard – in academic circles, as well as at practitioners' conferences and in industry publications. There are also some high profile companies in volatile industries that are indeed practising two-way symmetrical communication, led by knowledgeable public relations executives who provide advice to the strategic management team in this regard.

In considering the South African situation, the author regards the dominant paradigm for public relations to be persuasion – influenced strongly by the confusion between marketing and public relations. The latter was attested to in a study conducted by Stroh and Leonard (1999:30), who noted that "...the concepts of communication management and marketing management were often confused or used interrelatedly".

However, persuasion is not the only approach to public relations in South Africa. Small clusters of researchers at different tertiary institutions approach their work from other paradigms such as two-way symmetrical communication (for instance the Universities of Pretoria and Potchefstroom) and development communication (the two above universities and Natal). There are also some high profile companies with knowledgeable top communicators who use symmetrical communication in some of their practices (the so-called mixed motive approach).

The paradigm struggle in South Africa is therefore also regarded as being mostly between persuasion and two-way symmetrical communication – manifested strongly in practice as a fierce struggle between public relations and marketing, but also to a lesser degree in academic writings, theses and dissertations in the field, and discourse at academic conferences.

The author finds it highly unlikely that all public relations practitioners/researchers will support only one paradigm in any country or continent. However, it is not unrealistic to expect that the two-way symmetrical communication paradigm will start winning more support in the new business paradigm being institutionalised at present. This paradigm is characterised by a fundamental shift in the relationship of organisations to individuals and society as a whole, manifested by the "growing complexities of inter-organisational relationships between companies and their stakeholders, which are challenging companies

to find new and different ways to management across once impermeable corporate boundaries” (Verwey, 1998:2).

This trend is already evident in the strong focus on stakeholder relationships that is emerging in advanced economies, as for instance reported on in the RSA Tomorrow's Company Inquiry (1995) in Britain and the King II Report on Corporate Governance in South Africa (Institute of Directors, 2002). The key message is that companies should adopt an 'inclusive' approach and engage in reciprocal rather than adversarial relationships with their stakeholders; follow a partnership approach with employees, customers, suppliers and other stakeholders; and maintain a licence to operate by working actively to maintain public confidence in the legitimacy of their operations and business conduct.

5.5.2 Symbolic versus behavioural relationships

Another view on the current paradigm struggle is provided by Grunig (1993). He regards the struggle as being between those who are concerned only with the quest for positive images – i.e. who use only superficial symbolic activities (what an organisation says about itself) – and those who build substantive behavioural relationships between the organisation and its stakeholders. Wiebe (1963:12) already subscribed to this view more than four decades ago:

Thinking, discussing, and planning about the so-called corporate image too frequently stop with considerations of appearance and too seldom reach into the substance behind the appearance.Perhaps the time has come when progress in public relations research for leading corporations lies less in further refinements of image measurement than in re-examining the nature of the company-public relationships that lie – or might lie – behind the corporate image.

Towards the end of the 19th century (when public relations started developing), organisations practised private relations. Managers had personal relationships with people in their communities as well as a personal stake in their well-being. As organisations grew larger during the 20th century, they turned to public relations innovators such as Ivy Lee and Bernays who assisted them in manipulating their communication through the media – building symbolic rather than personal (behavioural) relationships with stakeholders. Olasky (1987) is of the opinion that an organisation's responsibility is to deal directly with those affected by its actions – it does not consist of extra gifts to local charities. Rather, an organisation has to nurture its society and participate in the solution of what its stakeholders perceive to be their own problems (Wiebe, 1963).

According to Sharpe (2000), there is a serious omission in the literature as far as providing a paradigm or definition of public relations as the *behaviours* necessary for the achievement and maintenance of effective stakeholder relationships. Sharpe regards Grunig's two-way symmetrical model as having had the biggest influence in suggesting that public relations should be defined in terms of organisational *behaviour*. Its most important presuppositions are that communication leads to understanding, and that people and organisations must be concerned with the consequences of their behaviours on others and attempt to eliminate adverse consequences. This paradigm implies the identification of ethical presuppositions that lead to the ability to identify the achievement of public relations – not as performance, but as social behaviour.

The responsibility to adhere to the behavioural definition that has been provided by Sharpe (2000) expands on the current management role of public relations professionals. It results in an obligation for continual research and evaluation of the social system and of all areas of organisational performance. It requires a much more active role in evaluating public opinion, in political change, and in influencing management decisions. It elevates the practitioner's responsibility in (i) assisting organisational management to be more interactive in their communication with their social environments and (ii) in facilitating the ability of management teams and employees to change as required to maintain organisational stability and longevity.

Jackson (1993) is also of the opinion that public relations should be concerned with both behavioural and symbolic relationships. What stakeholders think of an organisation is a product of communication as well as their experience with the organisation. Communication – a symbolic relationship – can improve a behavioural relationship, but a poor behavioural relationship can destroy attempts to use communication to build a symbolic relationship. The paradigm struggle in public relations is therefore really between symbolic relationships (image) that are addressed in isolation from behavioural relationships (substance), because the two are as intertwined as the strands of a rope (Grunig, 1993).

To be valued by organisations, public relations practitioners must demonstrate their contribution to the achievement of organisational goals at two levels (Grunig, 1993):

- At micro-level, communication programmes build symbolic relationships with stakeholders, but these relationships cannot solve public relations problems alone.
- At macro-level, organisations need public relations because their behaviour affects stakeholders and publics, and the behaviour of stakeholders and publics affect them. In the long term, organisations must evaluate the quality of their behavioural relationships with stakeholders if they are to determine the contribution that public relations makes to the achievement of the organisational mission and goals.

Signs of an emerging struggle between symbolic and behavioural relationships are a relatively recent occurrence in the United States, as evidenced above in the work of Grunig (1993) and Sharpe (2000). However, an analysis of the European reflective/public approach indicates an acknowledgement of the differences between these views (although not presented as a struggle). This is especially evident in Holmström's (1996) views on reflective public relations as consisting of a reflective and an expressive task:

- The 'reflective' task of public relations (i.e. the task of public relations in inward communication) is to act as a sensor, spanning the boundary between the organisation and its environment. It selects and decodes information from the public sphere and transmits it to the organisation in order to strengthen its self-reflection and balance its *behaviour* in relation to opinions expressed in the public sphere. In this way, the organisation becomes deserving of public trust and earns social acceptance.
- The 'expressive' task (i.e. the task of public relations in outward communication) is seen as widely distributing information (based on reflection) in the public sphere so that the organisation has a socially responsible *image* – strengthening public trust in, and achieving social acceptance for, the organisation; as well as achieving greater understanding and support in those public spheres that the organisation wishes to be in contact.

It is the opinion of the author that, in performing the reflective task of public relations as defined by Holmström (1996), *behavioural* relationships with stakeholders and groups in society are strengthened/enabled. In performing the expressive task of public relations, symbolic relationships are built with stakeholders and groups in society.

In South Africa, the author's own work on strategic public relations also differentiates between symbolic and behavioural communication relationships, specifically in differentiating between the mirror and window functions of public relations (Steyn, 2000; Steyn, 2003):

- The 'mirror' function is defined as the monitoring of relevant environmental developments and the anticipation of their consequences for the organisation's policies and strategies, especially with regard to relationships with stakeholders and other interest groups in society. This is the role of the public relations 'strategist', performed at the societal or macro-level of an organisation. The strategist's activities lead to a strengthening of the organisation's *behavioural* relationships – not only with organisational stakeholders, but also with other groups in society.
- The 'window' function is defined as the preparation and execution of a communication policy and strategy, resulting in messages that portray all facets of the organisation in a transparent way. The window function consists of two roles: the activities performed by practitioners in the role of the public relations

'manager' (developing public relations strategy and policy for the organisation) and the activities performed by practitioners in the role of the public relations 'technician' (implementing the public relations strategy by means of communication plans, programmes and campaigns). Both the manager and technician roles are concerned with building symbolic relationships – i.e. managing the communication on behalf of an organisation to express its *image* to stakeholders and society.

The South African role of the strategist is therefore considered similar to the European reflective task (in performing the activities associated with the mirror function of public relations, i.e. building *behavioural* relationships). Furthermore, the South African roles of manager and technician are similar to the European expressive task (in performing the activities associated with the window function of public relations, i.e. building *symbolic* relationships) (Steyn & Butschi, 2003).

Furthermore, the roles of the public relations strategist, manager and technician demonstrate the contribution of public relations practitioners to the achievement of organisational goals on different levels, deemed important by Grunig (1993). The strategist manages the building of *behavioural* relationships with the most strategic stakeholders and publics on the macro- organisational level – not necessarily doing it personally, but managing the process between management and other organisational members who frequently have contact with the external environment. At the micro-organisational level, practitioners in the role of technician implement the activities that build *symbolic* relationships with stakeholders – managed by a practitioner in the (redefined) role of the manager (functioning at the meso/functional level).

As manifested in the work of Holmström (1996) and Steyn (2000; 2003), symbolic versus behavioural relationships should not be regarded as opposing or mutually exclusive approaches to public relations. Rather, in concurrence with Jackson (1993), public relations should be concerned with building both symbolic and behavioural relationships.

5.6 Scientific revolutions

When new problems involve the core of the scientific communities' commitments to the dominant paradigm, there is a crisis in the discipline, which leads to a paradigm shift, i.e. a new paradigm emerges and supplants the old one. This happens if an alternative paradigm is available (Kuhn, 1999). In the new paradigm, concepts and operations come to be conceptualised in a radically different way, totally different strategies and methodologies are developed to study the same problem and totally different suggestions to solve problems are made. This often requires the redefinition of an entire field of knowledge (Kuhn, 1999; Littlejohn, 1992:28). A scientific revolution can thus be described as discontinuities in the history of a science when an existing paradigm proved inadequate and is replaced by another (Mouton & Marais, 1992:152).

In the opinion of the author, the confusion in the field of public relations (both theoretical and in practice), characterised by the search for an own identity, identifies a pending crisis in the discipline. It is becoming increasingly obvious that a redefinition of the field is required, as evidenced by the different paradigm debates currently taking place, some already turning into a paradigm struggle. These discussions and the questions they pose with regard to the changing purpose of public relations actually signify the first traces of a scientific revolution.

As stipulated by theory, and as seen in previous sections of this article, alternatives to the dominant paradigm of persuasion are indeed available in the public relations domain – the strongest contenders being the 'relationship' paradigm in the US and the 'reflective' paradigm in Europe. Although there are differences between the two, the reflective paradigm can actually be seen as a broadening of the relationship paradigm. Whereas the latter focuses on building behavioural relationships with stakeholders, the reflective paradigm focuses on obtaining legitimacy and trust from society as the 'most strategic of stakeholders' – thereby providing solutions to burning theoretical questions, inter alia with regard to social responsibility, corporate citizenship, environmental sustainability and transparency.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis conducted in this research, the conclusion is reached that Kuhn's paradigm theory can indeed be applied to the public relations domain, if only metaphorically. In this article, the concepts of paradigm, paradigm debate, paradigm struggle and scientific revolution have been applied successfully to the field of public relations.

While the dominant world view for public relations among practitioners and members of (top) management is persuasion, the latter can also be regarded as the dominant paradigm among communities of researchers. However, other approaches to public relations can also be found in the literature, such as professionalism, ethics, conflict, chaos and pluralism.

A paradigm debate was recently initiated between scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, referring to the US relationship paradigm and the European reflective paradigm. However, the real paradigm struggle is currently between persuasion (the dominant paradigm in most parts of the developed world) and two-way symmetrical communication (also known as the fourth public relations model). Another view of the paradigm struggle in the field is that of behavioural versus symbolic relationships.

Based on the discussion of paradigm debates and a paradigm struggle already taking place in the field of public relations, the author suggests that a scientific revolution is

in the making. The two strongest alternative approaches are seen to be relationships (in the US) and reflection (in Europe). Since the reflective paradigm is the broader approach, encompassing both relationships with stakeholders and obtaining legitimacy for the organisation in society, the author suggests reflection as an ideal paradigm for public relations in the future.

Furthermore, the conclusion is reached that public relations can be regarded as a social science, with several contrasting paradigms existing at present (Jansen & Steinberg, 1991:6-7). With regard to the social science theory stating that paradigms are seldom discarded altogether but some merely offer new insights that others lack, the reflective paradigm is seen as evidence of this assumption. It is a broader approach than relationships – encompassing behavioural relationships with stakeholders, but in addition striving to obtain legitimacy in the public sphere.

Finally, the author agrees with Mouton and Marais (1992:153) that disciplines in the social sciences are not necessarily in the pre-paradigmatic phase only because they do not have one single paradigm at any time. In this respect, the social sciences cannot be compared directly to the natural sciences. The paradigm concept should therefore be used in a more metaphorical sense in the social sciences – as was indeed done in this research.

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