

# Editorial

## **Crossing (out) the binary divide?**

In the past, much reference has been made to the fundamental difficulties that underlie the practice of public relations or communication management, as it has been referred to more recently. The practice of public relations has fundamental difficulties that are not being ameliorated by the tremendous growth of the profession and its extension into new areas as a result of growing internationalization through globalization. There are both obvious and underlying problems that characterize the study and practice of the field. Underlying problems include the lack of agreement on the fundamental purpose and scope of the function itself. More obvious problems include its lack of scientific status and professionalism, as well as a lack of recognition within the industry. There seems to be general agreement that public relations must achieve professional status before its social role will be broadly accepted as valuable to society and organizational clients will value the counsel of public relations professionals. Currently it would appear as though the closest claim public relations professionals can make to professionalism is being able to influence the choice of the public relations model the organization adopts by becoming part of the dominant organizational coalition.

The International Public Relations Association in its Gold Paper No 7 of 1990 recognizes two schools of thought about education and training for public relations. The one is directed at preparation for technician level, while the other is viewed as preparation for management level, thus necessitating degree-level training and education. The point being that these two approaches represent two fundamentally different approaches to public relations education. These two approaches cannot and must not be regarded as courses that follow on from one another. The focus of these two types of educational programmes differs vastly, and has its origins in the history of public relations education itself.

Public relations education in Europe is regarded as preparation for management-level public relations practice, with an emphasis on developing the reflexive research capability of students. This is achieved through critical public relations research which is grounded in in-depth theoretical knowledge. In contrast, PR education in the USA is largely regarded as preparation for technician-level public relations practice. Consequently the educational model of the USA can be regarded as one in which understanding is achieved by performance rather than through contemplation. It is rather telling that despite a recommendation by an IPRA Report of 1983 that public relations training be combined with education in communication theory, this recommendation had still not been implemented by the American Public Relations Society many years down the line.

These two different approaches to public relations education invariably results in different approaches to the curriculation of public relations education. In the South African educational context, the binary divide between technikon-type training and university-type education has resulted in an educational system which offers training and education at both university and technikon level, but from two different educational approaches. Public relations education at SA universities tends to follow the European model of education, whereas public relations training at SA technikons and technical colleges tends towards the USA model. This is problematic for public relations practice in SA since some graduates will have the required skills to operate at technician level, but not at managerial level, while other graduates may lack the technical skills required at technician level, but have an educational background which is better suited to the managerial level once the relevant practical experience has been gained. In view of the fact that an outcomes-based approach to public relations education necessitates both foundational knowledge and skills in order to foster reflexive public relations practice, the time has come to seriously reconsider the curriculation of public relations training and education at SA tertiary institutions. Failure to do so will render us incapable of resolving the underlying and obvious issues that continue to haunt the educational and professional standing of public relations in South Africa.

**Sonja Verwey**  
**Editor**