

TOWARDS A GENERAL THEORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The existence of a general theory of public relations is pivotal to the argumentation about public relations as science. A general theory can be expected to supply a framework which includes all the theoretical applications within a scientific domain. This article sets out to cover the theoretical applications made to the field of public relations to determine what the domain parameters of public relations are and whether this can lead to a general theory of public relations. It proposes that public relations is an applied science, governed by theory application at the metatheoretical, organisational and communication levels of public relations practice, and that public relations practice takes place at three strategic levels in the organisation, namely the macro, meso and micro level. The article further suggested that two normative and one positive model of public relations practice exist and that the heuristic value of the general theory is one of its most positive aspects.

This frame is for the photo



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INTRODUCTION

The field of public relations¹ has for many years been subjected to a number of confusing perspectives and statements, especially regarding

¹ An overview of the many definitions of public relations indicates that the J. Grunig and Hunt (1984:6) definition of public relations as the "management of communication between an organisation and its publics" is the most appropriate.

the scientific nature of the field. Some scholars, such as J. Grunig (1990), maintains that public relations is a maturing science and that a general theory² of public relations is emerging. Other scholars such Hazleton and Botan (1989:3-16) and Signitzer (1990:30-33) also refer to the scientific nature of public relations. An overview of literature on the attributes of a science (Holtzhausen, 1995:12-43) holds that the existence of a general theory of public relations is pivotal to the argument that public relations is a science.

Before proposing a general theory of public relations, this article will briefly discuss the domains covered by the field, and give an overview of theory application in public relations.

DOMAIN CONFUSION

There is considerable confusion regarding the domain relevance of public relations. The domain confusion is apparent in an overview of the opinions of many of the eminent scholars in the field. Hazleton and Botan (1989:13) refer to public relations as a rapidly emerging social science discipline. J. Grunig and Hunt (1984:5) support the view that public relations has its roots in the social sciences. Botan (1989:99-100) regards public

relations as an applied social science based in communication. Because communication is a social science, public relations may be studied as an applied communication science. He believes that the focus on skills development keeps public relations from benefiting from a systematic approach to theory development. This sentiment is supported by Toth (1989:29), who says that there are few consistent or theoretical perspectives developing about public relations. Neff (1989:159-172) suggests that the future of public relations is clearly in the field of communication and that there is a clear shift away from journalism as the field of public relations becomes more complex and the demands higher.

Although J. Grunig (1990:3) describes public relations as a subdomain of communication, he admits that there are close relations with behavioural theories of management, organisational sociology and psychology. The current trend, which sets public relations apart from other fields of communication science, is the blending of organisational and communication theories which results in public relations becoming a mature science which exists as a respectable domain of both communication and management science. Pearson (1989:1-27) and Signitzer (1990:30-33) both support the view that public relations is communication management, thereby pointing to the relevance of public relations to the fields of communication and management sciences.

² According to Littlejohn (1989:29) for a theory to be regarded as a general theory its explanation "must be sufficiently general to cover a range of events beyond a single observation".

Signitzer, as well as Schulz (1990:32-33) however also refer to the application of metatheoretical considerations³ to the field. According to them it is mainly the metatheoretical and sociological applications to the field that stress the differences in approach to public relations between the United States and the German-speaking countries.

The domain confusion however serves as an indication that the field of public relations relates to three domains, namely that of communication, organisation and metatheory, which furthermore indicates that the practice of public relations will take place in terms of three functions, namely that of its communication function, its organisational function and its philosophical (or metatheoretical) function.

Public relations as an applied science

From the above it becomes clear that domain identification remains a problem for scholars in the field of public relations and the question can be asked whether public relations will not benefit from being a domain in itself, without any superficial subservience to other domains.

³Littlejohn (1989:23) describes metatheory as a body of speculation that goes beyond the specific content of given theories. This includes philosophical questions about the basic assumptions in a field.

Despite the apparently confusing domain parameters, a synthesis of the above argumentation yields the perspective that all scholars share the view that public relations is an applied science. Furthermore, the science of public relations can be studied at three functional levels of public relations practice as mentioned above, namely a functional level of metatheory, a functional level of communication and a functional level of organisation.

A logical next step will be to expect that the domain of public relations will include theories which are applied to either one or all of these functional levels, and that they should form the basis of a general theory of public relations.

If Littlejohn's (1989:29) definition of a general theory is accepted, a general theory can be expected to supply a framework which includes all the theoretical applications within a particular scientific domain.

Macro, meso and micro levels of public relations practice

J. Grunig (1990) proposes that a general theory of public relations is emerging. He maintains that public relations takes place at three levels, namely the macro level, the meso level and the micro level. At **macro level**, public relations is influenced by aspects of societal culture, the macro environment in which the organisation functions and organisational culture.

At the **meso level** public relations is influenced by the way in which the function is managed within the organisation and at the **micro level** it is influenced by the way in which communication with publics is managed. His proposal for a general theory emphasises the importance of a two-way symmetric approach to public relations which, according to him, is the only excellent way of practising public relations.

If J. Grunig's theory is indeed a general theory for public relations, it should be able to accommodate all theory applications on the functional levels of metatheory, communication and organisation, as suggested above, and also accommodate these theories at macro, meso and micro levels. A general theory should however also include other approaches to the field, such as an asymmetric approach.

METHODOLOGY

Through a comprehensive overview of theory applications to the field of public relations, Holtzhausen (1995) aims to establish the parameters of a general theory of public relations and proceeds to supply scholars in the field of public relations with a model for theory application and theory development in the field. The overview covers theory applications at the metatheoretical, communication and organisational levels of public relations practice respectively. A further aim of the study is to broaden public

relations knowledge in South Africa. Against the background of the above argumentation, a number of research questions form the basis of the methodology.

Research questions

Research question 1:

Will an overview of theoretical applications to the field of public relations confirm that public relations takes place at three levels, namely metatheoretical, communication and organisational?

Research question 2:

Will the theoretical overview confirm that theory application takes place at the macro, meso and micro levels of public relations practice?

Research question 3:

Does a general theory, which includes all theoretical applications to the field of public relations, exist?

Research question 4:

Can a general theory of public relations include both a symmetric and an asymmetric approach to public relations?

Research question 5:

Will a general theory of public relations have any heuristic value for public relations scholars?

THEORY APPLICATION IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

The overview of theory applications in public relations (Holtzhausen,

1995:44-129) confirms that it takes place at three levels of public relations practice, namely the metatheoretical level, the communication level and the organisational level. Only theories applied to the field of public relations were reviewed, and not theories which might be useful but have never been applied.

Theory application at the metatheoretical level of public relations

Holtzhausen (1995:44), quoting Littlejohn (1989:23), refers to metatheory as a body of speculation that goes beyond the specific content of given theories, including philosophical questions about the basic assumptions in the field. She states that, as a result, metatheoretical aspects in the field of public relations should play a major role in determining the parameters of the field of study and should explain to an extent what constitutes public relations.

A first step in this direction will be a definition of public relations. An overview of the many definitions of public relations [Cutlip, Center and Broom (1985:4), Aronoff and Baskin (1988:4), Crable and Vibbert (1986:4), Dunn (1986:5), J. Grunig and Hunt (1984:6), Signitzer (1990:31), Pearson (1989:2-27)] indicates the J. Grunig and Hunt definition of public relations as the "management of communication between an organisation and its publics" to be the most appropriate.

Also at the root of defining the field of public relations, is the way in which it differs from marketing. After a comprehensive overview of the view of public relations scholars about this issue Holtzhausen (1995:46-49) comes to the conclusion that there is a distinct difference between marketing and public relations and that this difference lies in the interpretation of the terms "market" and "public". An organisation can choose a market and decide how to deal with it, but it cannot choose a public. Quoting J. Grunig and Repper (1992:117-157) she explains market segmentation as referring to the demand side of the market which bends supply to demand by identifying lucrative segments of the market and developing products to fit those segments. Segmentation techniques in public relations are firmly based in issues management, which again confirms Dewey's (1927) observation that publics arise around issues that have consequences for them. Not only are the segmentation techniques between marketing and public relations vastly different, but also the theoretical approaches to the field.

The theoretical overview further indicated that two world views dominated the field of public relations (Holtzhausen, 1995:50-55). J. Grunig (1989b) identifies four models of public relations practice, of which only one can be regarded as a two-way symmetrical model. He regards two-way symmetrical communication as the only ethical and excellent way to practise public relations. The other

three (press agency/publicity, public information and two-way asymmetrical) support the world view that public relations is equal to persuasion. J. Grunig and White (1992:61) describe the symmetrical world view as normative and idealistic but also believe that it is an effective and realistic theory which supplies practical solutions in actual practice. On the other hand Miller (1989:45-47) describes public relations and persuasion as "two peas in a pod" and says "effective, ethically defensible persuasion and effective ethically defensible public relations (are) virtually synonymous". Kunczik (1994:247) supports this view, and describes symmetrical public relations as "die grosse Illusion" (the big illusion). Hazleton and Botan (1989:6) believe the only way in which the debate between these two opposing world views can be resolved, is if one of its supporters can unambiguously prove that all practitioners support one or the other. Until that happens, it is important to evaluate both approaches in terms of their own presuppositions.

The overview of theory application confirms that the systems theory is the most important metatheoretical approach to public relations (Holtzhausen, 1995:55-69). The systems approach in public relations regards the public relations functions as the bridging subsystem of the organisation which assists the organisation to gain equilibrium between itself and its external and internal publics, e.g. Long and Hazleton (1987:5-12), Pearson (1989:65-94), J. Grunig

(1976), J. Grunig (1979:72-104), J. Grunig and Hunt (1984), Schneider [aka L. Grunig] (1985), Halzelton (1990) and Creedon (1993:157-166). In addition, social theories, e.g. Sri-ramesh and White (1992:597-614) and critical theories were also applied to the metatheoretical level of public relations. In terms of critical theories, feminist theories are increasingly used by scholars such as L. Grunig (1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1995), Toth (1988), Creedon (1990, 1993), Rakow (1989b), Cline (1985) and Hon (1995) to criticise the masculine approach to public relations which was based on competition, hierarchy and dominance. L. Grunig (1992, 1994) sets out to write a philosophy of public relations, which includes a feminist perspective.

Holtzhausen (1995:74-75) concludes that theory application at the metatheoretical level indicates that although the metatheoretical issues were aimed mainly at macro level, there are also important metatheoretical applications at the meso and micro levels of public relations practice. At the meso and micro levels it pertains in particular to the influence of organisational structure and world views for the communication function of public relations. It also suggests a clear theoretical distinction between the Persuasion model and the Excellence model. However, the overview also pointed to the existence of a Mixed model and suggests that most organisations tend to use a Mixed model of public relations practice, with a leaning towards either the Ex-

cellence model or the Persuasion model. The overview furthermore finds that world view and presupposition determine which model of public relations will be practised and that much more world view research is needed to really come to grips with public relations theory and practice in a global context.

Theory application at the communication level of public relations

J. Grunig (1990:8) maintains that the communication research which comes closest to public relations is that which studies the effectiveness of public information campaigns. This assumption is born out by Rokeach (1968:55) who says "public opinion research should not only try to report accurately the state of public opinion but should also try to awaken it and change it", which emphasises a persuasion approach.

As a result of Rokeach's work the first communication research applied to the field of public relations are knowledge gap theories. Knowledge gap theories led to the rejection of the concept of mass publics and to the concept of segmentation of target audiences. Mendlesohn (1969) and Mendlesohn ea. (1973) found that the success of information campaigns depended on the feeling (or lack thereof) of powerlessness which individuals felt in controlling the everyday lives and which determined whether they will aspire to fill the knowledge

gap necessary to the success of information campaigns. Tichenor ea. (1970) determined that the knowledge gap between segments of the population with a higher socio-economic status (SES) and a lower SES increased instead of decreased with information flow. Ettema e.a. (1983) and Gaziano (1984) further researched aspects of the knowledge gap hypothesis.

In sharp contrast to Rokeach's persuasion approach, Bauer (1972) maintains that the success of an information campaign depends on a two-way flow of information. This gave rise to much public relations research based on McLeod and Chaffee's (1973) concept of co-orientation. Knodel (1976), Broom (1977) and Johnson (1989) are but a few scholars who used the co-orientational model to determine the success of information campaigns.

One of the most significant developments in public relations theory and research resulted from the above research, namely the situational theory of public relations as proposed by J. Grunig (1975, 1978, 1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1989a) in a number of studies. The situational theory serves as the basis for the segmentation of publics into apathetic, latent, aware and active publics, and of active publics into all-issue, single-issue and hot-issue publics. The theory has been applied extensively since its inception, amongst other by J. Grunig and Childers (1988), Anderson (1992), Pincus ea. (1993) and many more.

Although rhetorical theories are generally regarded as persuasive (Coombs, 1993:15; O'Sullivan ea, 1989:200), public relations scholars who research public relations from a rhetorical perspective, regards it as an opportunity for dialogue. Rhetorical theories are particularly applied within the context of symbolic management (Toth,1992; Heath,1992a and 1992b; Cheyney and Dionisopoulos,1989) and ethics (Toth,1994; Kuhlman,1994). In a critical rhetorical approach to publics, Moffit (1992) suggests ethnography as a research method to throw light on how individuals receive meaning.

A number of other communication theories are applied to public relations. Van Leuven ea. (1991) propose a type of stage theory to explain communication flow between organisations, media and publics. Hamilton (1989) applies a persuasion model to public relations research in which he combines the basic behavioural and cognitive approaches that attempt to predict human behaviour, while Heath and Douglas (1990) apply involvement theory as developed by Petty and Cacioppo, Salmon and J. Grunig. Vasquez (1994) conceptualises a Homo Narrans paradigm for public relations as a theory-behaviour complex to design targeted messages for segmented publics and conceptualises the principle of microsegmentation.

A number of social scientific theories are applied to the communication level of public relations. Van Leuven

(1989) applies five theoretical models to serve as frameworks for public relations campaigns, working from a persuasion perspective. Salmon (1989) regards public relations as social marketing and questions the ethics of such an approach. Murphy (1989,1991) and Pincus ea.. (1991) analyse game theory in terms of conflict resolution in public relations.

A number of scholars approach the communication level of public relations from a critical perspective. Gandy (1982,1989) essentially applies a Marxist approach to the concept of political economy and information subsidies and suggests an approach which goes beyond agenda-setting to determine who set media agendas, how and why they are set and how they impact on the distribution of power and values in society. Olasky (1989) criticises public relations from its paradigm of "special pleading" on behalf of the client, and urges practitioners to give up this comfortable paradigm to open up news road of research to professionalism. Rakow (1989a) questions the ethics of public information campaigns, which she maintains give institutions power over individuals.

Holtzhausen (1995:100-102) concludes that communication theories are applied to the macro, meso and micro levels of public relations, although the bulk of theory application addresses communication issues at the micro level, where it focuses mainly on the communication process between the organisation and specific

publics and on the communication behaviour of publics. Meso level applications are rare, and focus mainly on aspects of conflict resolution. At the macro level the communication function between organisation and environment are mostly addressed by critical scholars, who question the ethics of public relations practice., and on the concept of symbolic management. The distinction between a Persuasion and an Excellence approach becomes very clear at the communication level of the organisation, Although a number of theories do not clearly support either of these approaches but rather lay the foundation for segmentation techniques. At the macro level, theory applications are severely critical of the Persuasion model. This strengthens the perception that public relations as a discipline is still regarded as persuasive and propagandistic.

Theory applications at the organisational level of public relations

The application of organisational theories to public relations places the focus on the communication behaviour of organisation and on the way public relations is practised by organisations.

Ehling (1984,1985) suggests a decision theory which can be used to construct a theory of public relations management. J. Grunig (1984) identifies the communication behaviour of organisations as either problem-

solving or fatalistic by identifying four types of public relations behaviour. His identification of four model of public relations practice, namely the press agency/publicity model, the public information model, the two-way asymmetric model and the two-way symmetric model, has now become one of the basic principles of public relations practice and is probably the most quoted public relations models in the field. He further determined that two independent variables, namely the product/service environment and the political/regulatory environment, determined which of these public relations models will be applied.

J. Grunig (1985), J. Grunig and Theus (1986) and Theus (1991) redefine the organisational communication audit in terms of public relations theory . J. Grunig (1985:5) argues that organisational communication generally takes an "individualistic, psychological approach to theory building, a reflection of the persuasion, attitude-change paradigm.....In contrast, public relations researchers have opted more for a macro-level, sociological paradigm as the basis for their work". Apart from identifying internal publics using the situational theory, these studies found linkages between organisational structure, job satisfaction, organisational culture and ideology and the use of a two-way symmetric system. J. Grunig (1992) concludes that organisations who strive for excellence, will apply a two-way symmetrical system of internal communication.

Furthermore, excellent programmes for employee communication is based on strategic management, an integrated communication function, the managerial role and the two-way symmetric model of public relations. In less excellent organisations, employee communication is not strategically managed but dominated by a technical approach which emphasises the use of publications or other media.

J. Grunig and Repper (1992) conclude that monitoring the environment suggests a crucial role for public relations. Public relations must contribute to organisational effectiveness by contributing to the goals of the organisation. To do this, public relations must be part of the strategic management of the organisation and must manage its own programme in line with the principles of strategic management.

L. Grunig [aka Schneider] is one of the major contributors to the development of public relations theory based on organisational theory and is the first public relations scholar to apply organisational theory to public relations. She (Schneider [aka L. Grunig], 1985) applies the organisational typology developed by Hage and Hull (1981) to determine how the structure and environment or organisations influence the practice of public relations. Her study concludes that the Hage-Hull typology can, under qualified circumstances, be used to predict the public relations behaviour of organisations. L. Grunig (1989)

also melds systems theory with the sociological concept of structure, which implies that no one person in the organisation is as important as the organisation's dominant coalition. For public relations to be really effective, it is necessary for the top public relations practitioner in the organisation to be part of the dominant coalition.

In two studies to determine the most appropriate public relations practice in the handling of activist and environmentalist publics respectively, L. Grunig (1986a, 1986b) applies Olson's (1982) radical theory of pressure groups and Mintzberg's horse-shoe (1983), which suggests that the action of special interest groups might favour either social goals or economic goals. Her findings indicate that organisations take a closed rather than an open stance towards activist groups. Most activist groups took a middle stance between social and economic goals. Her research also suggests that activism poses a real problem for organisations and that their actions might lead to governmental regulation. The lack of success in dealing with activist groups might be ascribed to the virtual absence of use of the two-way symmetrical model. This was the result of untrained public relations practitioners.

L. Grunig, J. Grunig and White (1992) find that public relations contributes to the effectiveness of an organisation by helping the organisation to meet its goals, especially by devel-

oping communication programmes that build quality relations with strategic publics. If communication was managed strategically, it will prevent poor publicity, fines, private suits and penetration of the organisation by activist groups and government. This will provide the measure for determining the monetary value of public relations. Membership of the dominant coalition is vital to effective public relations because this will enable the public relations practitioner to shape the organisation's goals and help determine the strategic publics.

Lauzen and Dozier (1994) and Heath (1990) research the concept of issues management within organisational context, and both studies, as well as Lauzen and Dozier (1992) and Lauzen (1992), confirm that the knowledge levels of practitioners were critical to successful public relations practice in organisations.

A number of social scientific theories are applied to the organisational level of public relations. Prior-Miller (1989) argues that public relations researchers have to understand the root theories from which the various research traditions have grown and proceeds by applying symbolic interactionism, exchange theory, conflict theory and structural-functional theory to public relations. She suggests that a careful study of these four metatheories and their middle-range theories can be the beginning point of new theories which can better explain and predict public relations phenomena.

Everett (1990) suggests an ethnoecological approach to public relations as a link between the cognitive aspects of an organisation, such as culture, and the social components of the environment, such as behaviour. Such an approach suggests that public relations theorists and practitioners are uniquely situated to mediate between culture and the environment in an organisational context. In a similar vein Sriramesh et al. (1992) determine that there exists a relationship between societal and corporate culture and that it does influence public relations practice in the organisation.

Holtzhausen (1995:125-128) finds that the application of theories to the organisational level of public relations offers the strongest support for the concept of theory application at macro, meso and micro levels. Although theory application strongly supports the existence of both the Persuasion and Excellence models, research indicates that organisations overwhelmingly practise persuasive public relations. The overview however also suggests that the Persuasion model is not a successful model for problem-solving, especially at macro level, where the organisation interfaces with its environment. At meso level organisational type influenced the decision whether a Persuasion or Excellence model is used. Few organisations use the Excellence model in its pure form; most opt for a Mixed model or for a Persuasion model. The overview further suggests that, because education in public relations is crucial to its successful

practice, women in senior public relations positions will contribute to an Excellence model because of the dominance of women in public relations education. At micro level J. Grunig's development of the four models of public relations and their relevance to a Persuasion or Excellence model is highly significant. The link between a psychological paradigm and the Persuasion model, and a sociological approach and the Excellence model have important implications for the much neglected area of internal communication.

A GENERAL THEORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

The preceding overview of theory application in public relations gives an indication that a distinct pattern in theory application to the field of public relations exists. This overview is necessary in order to evaluate J. Grunig's (1990) statement that a general theory of public relations is emerging and to determine whether his theory actually is all-inclusive.

Explanation of terminology

A number of terms and aspects of theory building need to be explained before an expansion of J. Grunig's proposal for a general theory can be evaluated.

General theory

A brief mention of the concept of a general theory was made previously.

The generality of a theory refers to its scope. Littlejohn cites two kinds of general theories. One will explain a large number of phenomena and can even cover a whole domain. The other might explain a narrow range of events, but might apply to a number of situations.

Reynolds (1971:133-134) contends that it is very difficult to specifically compare theories because they often describe different circumstances under which they apply. Theories can however be compared according to generality and precision. Precision refers to the accuracy of prediction, while generality refers to the range of different situations to which a theory can apply. Reynolds further argues that if two theories are incompatible but describe the same process, it might be wise to choose the one with more research supporting it. It is therefore clear that J. Grunig's general theory as described earlier in this article, is indeed a general theory. It is broad enough to describe phenomena over a wide range of public relations behaviour, and the theoretical overview indicates that a number of research projects support those findings.

Normative theory

Quoting Massy and Weitz (1977:122), J. Grunig and L. Grunig (1992:291-292) describe the term *normative theory* as a theory which is used to solve problems. Its counterpart is a *positive theory*, which is used to understand problems. A normative the-

ory does not need to prove that an activity takes place according to the way the theory describes it. They say, "Theorists construct a normative theory to provide a model that, if followed, would improve the practice of

velopment and expansion of J. Grunig's general theory of public relations.

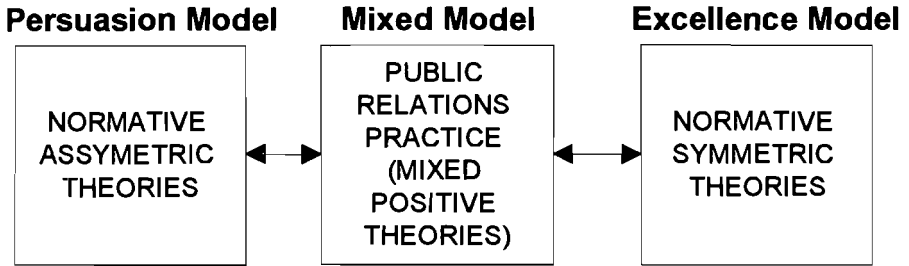


Figure 1 : Theoretical Models of Public Relations Practice

the activity that it models. If that normative theory.....could not be implemented then it would not be a good theory." Therefore, the conclusion can be drawn that although a normative theory is not expected to explain phenomena exactly, it describes the ideal situation, and the extent to which it can be implemented serves as a criterion to measure its success. Positive theories on the other hand describe how phenomena actually occurred and could be evaluated in terms of how they corresponded with reality. According to J. Grunig and L. Grunig a theory can be both normative and positive. While a theory described how a phenomenon should take place, it could also describe how it in actual fact took take place. This distinction, and indeed overlapping, of positive and normative theories, will be important for the further de-

Model

Reynolds (1971:111) describes model building as "a process that will reproduce the same patterns of empirical data that are found in specific concrete situations".⁴ He therefore equates the success of a model in terms of its confirmation of empirical data and of describing, rather than explaining, phenomena. J. Grunig and L. Grunig (1992:286) confirm this and describe the term *model* "as a

⁴Reynolds indicates that a model should not be confused with a causal process theory. A model (also called a simulation) will adopt all empirical data that supports it, without being concerned with why it happened. In a causal process theory, each statement in the process theory must be related to some event in the concrete setting (1971:111).

simplified representation of reality". In terms of public relations they use the term *model* to describe the values, patterns of behaviour and approaches taken by public relations practitioners in the execution of their public relations programmes. It is especially in terms of the meaning of *model* as used by J. Grunig and L. Grunig that it will be used to expand on J. Grunig's general theory of public relations, namely as a *means of explaining why public relations is practised in a particular way and to identify set patterns of practice*.

The Excellence Model

J. Grunig (1990) proposes a normative theory of excellent public relations which implies that if it was applied it would give the best (or excellent) results. It is also the most ethical way of practising public relations and is based on a two-way symmetrical approach to communication management in the organisation. The theoretical overview supports the existence of an Excellence approach, as suggested by J. Grunig, as well as substantial research support that it is the best theoretical approach to public relations. Henceforth this theoretical model will be referred to as the *Excellence Model of public relations* and will be regarded as a normative theoretical model of public relations practice.

The Persuasion Model

The theoretical overview however also suggests the existence of another model of theory application, namely one where public relations is regarded as persuasion and control. Although an in-depth discussion of this model will follow when a discussion of public relations at macro, meso and micro levels takes place, it is apparent that this is also a normative theoretical model. Theory application in this model suggests that, if applied, it will result in persuading the publics of the organisation to change according to the needs of the organisation. As a result, the theory holds that public relations practised in this way, will result in it contributing to organisational effectiveness. However, possibly because this theoretical approach has never been clearly formulated as a definite theoretical approach to public relations practice, less research exists to support this model. This theoretical model will be referred to as the *Persuasion Model of public relations* and will also be regarded as a normative theory.

The Mixed Model

The theoretical overview however suggests a third model. The conclusions drawn from the theoretical overview indicates that public relations practitioners apply a mixture of these two models. This mixed model combines the use of public relations theory from both the *Persuasion Model* and the *Excellence Model*.

The theoretical overview further indicates that some theories exist which can apply to either of the two models, depending on the world view of the organisation and that of the practitioner. For example, the systems approach can either be used to learn from the environment and use that knowledge to apply persuasion techniques in an effort to control the environment, or it can use that knowledge to enter into dialogue with the environment and as a result contribute to mutual adjustment between the organisation and the environment.

In both these applications of the Mixed Model, it is suggested that this is a model of how public relations is actually practised. In the example of the systems theory used above, this theory is actually applied in two different ways, depending on a number of factors which will be discussed later. As such the Mixed Model is a positive model of how public relations is in actual fact being practised.

This theoretical model will be referred to as the *Mixed Model of public relations practice* and will be regarded as a positive theory.

Macro level

Grunig (1990) suggests that characteristics of public relations at macro level pertain to issues of organisational structure, organisational culture and some environmental influences. The theoretical and literature overview however suggests a slightly dif-

ferent and extended interpretation of the macro concept.

In an application of the systems theory Long and Hazleton (1987) suggest that public relations uses inputs from environmental supersystems, transform these inputs through the public relations decision process and supplies output through the communication process with target audiences. In this sense then, *macro* will mean environment or environmental supersystems. Long and Hazleton defined four environmental supersystems, namely legal/political, economic, competitive and technological. Their interpretation coincides with that of Pearce and Robinson mentioned before, who described the environment in terms of economic conditions, social change, political priorities and technological developments, thereby adding the concept of society to environmental supersystems. This also coincides with their interpretation of one of the three levels of strategic management, namely the corporate or organisational level where the interests of stockholders and society are reflected.

The theoretical overview further suggests that another supersystem influences public relations practice, namely societal culture, especially as proposed by Sriramesh and White (1992). Culture could however be interpreted as part of the social supersystem, and it will therefore be referred to as the socio-cultural supersystem.

STRATEGIC LEVELS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS	NORMATIVE ASYMMETRIC THEORIES (PERSUASION MODEL)	PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE: POSITIVE THEORIES (MIXED MODEL)	NORMATIVE SYMMETRIC THEORIES (EXCELLENCE MODEL)
MACRO LEVEL (STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT)	FUNCTIONAL LEVELS: metatheoretical organizational communication	FUNCTIONAL LEVELS: metatheoretical organizational communication	FUNCTIONAL LEVELS: metatheoretical organizational communication
MESO LEVEL (STRATEGIC ORGANISATIONAL MANAGEMENT)	FUNCTIONAL LEVELS: metatheoretical organizational communication	FUNCTIONAL LEVELS: metatheoretical organizational communication	FUNCTIONAL LEVELS: metatheoretical organizational communication
MICRO LEVEL (STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT)	FUNCTIONAL LEVELS: metatheoretical organizational communication	FUNCTIONAL LEVELS: metatheoretical organizational communication	FUNCTIONAL LEVELS: metatheoretical organizational communication

Figure 2 : LEVELS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE (A GENERAL THEORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS)

These interpretations suggest an umbrella or macro environment consisting of a number of supersystems which influenced the organisation. It is in this context that the term *macro level* will be used, and the following supersystems will apply at this level: legal/political, economic, competitive, socio-cultural and technological.

As an expansion of and adaptation to J. Grunig's general theory of public relations, issues pertaining to organisational structure and organisational culture will be seen as broader than as described by J. Grunig and will in some instances belong at organisational level. Macro level issues will belong to those supersystems as mentioned above. Against this background the three theoretical models of public relations practice at macro level will now be discussed.

Meso level

J. Grunig (1990:18) describes the meso level of public relations as the managerial level. The theoretical overview overwhelmingly supports this approach and indicates that this level of public relations has, especially in the previous 10 years, received the most theoretical attention. This emphasis mainly falls on the consequences of organisational structures and roles on public relations (J. Grunig, 1990:18).

Although the theoretical overview supports J. Grunig's general theory at meso level, it also suggests an expansion of his general theory to an

inclusion of functional levels of metatheory, organisation and communication at meso level. The overview also yields support for the existence of a persuasion model and a mixed model at this level.

It is important to keep in mind where the functional levels are directed at the meso level. Where the functional levels at macro level are directed at the interface between the organisation and its macro environment, as described above, the functional levels at the meso level are directed at the organisation of the public relations function. It will therefore describe how the public relations function is influenced at each of the functional levels.

Micro level

As J. Grunig (1990:6) points out, public relations at the micro level is the area which traditionally receives the most attention from public relations practitioners. The micro level is the level where the actual communication process between the organisation and its publics is implemented. As the theoretical overview indicates, a contributing factor is most probably the fact that this is historically the area where the public relations activity started. Among some practitioners, this still seems the only area of concern to public relations, as the many courses which offered technical training of practitioners proved. Although this approach might not be the correct one, the fact remains that communication or communication

management remains a very important function of the public relations discipline and is most often the level where public relations effectiveness is tested by management. The theoretical overview also indicates that there are other factors which influence the public relations process at micro level, as will be shown in the discussion of the three models.

Functional levels of public relations

The theoretical overview however also suggests a deeper structure of the public relations function, which is replicated at each of the macro, meso and micro levels. This deeper structure is constituted by three **functional levels** of public relations practice, namely a metatheoretical level, an organisational level and a communication level (see Figure 2).

At the **macro level**, the *functional level of metatheory* pertains to the world views and presuppositions of the external environment and those dominant in the organisation, especially as influenced by socio-cultural patterns. It also refers to a number of systems approaches between organisation and environment. The metatheoretical level can also be described as the philosophical level. However, at the macro level a *functional level of organisation* can also be identified. This relates to how the external environment impacts on the organisation and what the organisation's stance towards the external en-

vironment is. It also explains whether the external environment threatens the autonomy of the organisation or not. The third functional level at macro level is that of *communication*. This describes the communication philosophy between the organisation and its environment, and will for example stress power relations in the discourse process between the organisation and its environment, such as proposed by Gandy, Rakow, Salmon and an analysis of postmodern theory (Holtzhausen, 1995:170-219).

At **meso level** the *functional level of metatheory* again stresses world views and presuppositions, but at this level only those of the management of the organisation. It also addresses the value systems of the management, the impact of culture on the practice of public relations, the approach to problem-solving and the attitude towards women practitioners. The *functional level of organisation* will determine whether the public relations function is independent or whether it is controlled by another department, and whether it is regarded as a bridging function between the organisation and its environment. It will also determine whether it is part of the dominant coalition, whether public relations is regarded as a technical or management function and what the status of women practitioners is. At the organisational level, the structure of the organisation, i.e. hierarchical or decentralised, will also have an influence on the public relations function.

Although the *functional level of communication* did not receive as much attention as the other functional levels at meso level, this might be attributed to a lack of awareness of this functional level. This pertained to whether management regarded communication as symmetrical or asymmetrical, and specifically addresses the communication relationship between the organisation and the public relations agency or the public relations department.

The three functional levels also emerged at the **micro level**. As was the case with the other levels, at the *functional level of metatheory*, world views and presuppositions played an important role in determining the public relations process between the organisation and its publics. At micro level it is the world views and presuppositions of the practitioners who plan campaigns and execute the public relations function, which are the determining factors in the communication process. At this level too, the systems approach played a role because the communication process would be different for an open or closed system. This would also determine whether public relations is regarded as functionary or functional and whether an emphasis is placed on conflict resolution or symbolic control over the environment. At the *functional level of organisation* the model of communication, i.e. press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetric or two-way symmetric, would be decided on, as would the approach to internal com-

munication. The *functional level of communication* will determine which communication theories are applied and which segmentation and evaluation techniques are used.

Determining factors for model application

Holtzhausen (1995:141-160) describes which factors determine which public relations model within the general theory is applied in an organisation. These factors are summarised here and translated into a step process.

Characteristics of an Excellence Model of public relations

I. Macro level.

- (1) Strategic environmental management.
- (2) Democratic external environment.
- (3) Tolerant socio-cultural environment, respecting cultural and gender differences and regarding all people as equal (state of dissymmetry).
- (4) Dominant coalition with symmetric world views.
- (5) Participative organisational culture.
- (6) Turbulent, complex environment.
- (7) Open system, prepared to change.
- (8) Responsible, value-driven public relations function.

II. Meso level.

- (9) Symmetric world view and management style.
- (10) People-oriented and innovative approach to problem-solving.
- (11) Public relations is a boundary spanning function, operating as a single integrated public relations function.
- (12) Support for dissymmetric approach to employees.
- (13) Group goal oriented.
- (14) Public relations manager a member of the dominant coalition.
- (15) Organic organisation.
- (16) Strategic organisational management of the public relations function by educated and appropriately trained practitioners.
- (17) Equal opportunity for men and women in public relations.
- (18) Responsible symbolic behaviour of practitioners.

III. Micro level.

- (19) Strategic communication management.
- (20) Symmetric world views of practitioners.
- (21) Communication leads to understanding and conflict resolution through a system of mutual persuasion.
- (22) Microsegmentation of publics through the use of the situational theory.
- (23) Feedback from publics used to adapt to environment.
- (24) Two-way symmetric model applied to both internal and external publics.

- (25) Sociological paradigm applied to internal publics, acknowledging social, cultural, gender and historical perspectives of employees.

IV. Effects of Excellence Model.

- (26) Contribution of public relations to organisational effectiveness.
- (27) High job satisfaction among employees.
- (28) Low levels of conflict with publics.
- (29) Contribution to organisational survival through management of the change process.

Characteristics of a Persuasion Model of public relations

I. Macro level.

- (1) Strategic environmental management with the emphasis on control of the environment.
- (2) Dominant coalition with asymmetric, masculine world views.
- (3) Conservative, autocratic and undemocratic external environment.
- (4) Single, dominant cultural and gender perspective.
- (5) Closed system, or open system aimed at environmental control.
- (6) Environmental autonomy, with few legal/political and competitive constraints.
- (7) Public relations used to change behaviour of environment by imposing own value systems
- (8) Autocratic, non-participative organisational culture.

II. Meso level.

- (9) Asymmetric world view and management style.
- (10) Internal orientation.
- (11) Fatalistic or problem-solving organisation.
- (12) Technical public relations staff.
- (13) Information used to manipulate and persuade.
- (14) Autocratic and traditional values.
- (15) Power centrally situated.
- (16) Public relations not a boundary spanning function but a technical function.
- (17) Closed dominant coalition.
- (18) Public relations not part of dominant coalition.
- (19) Women in technician roles, not part of dominant coalitions.
- (20) Hierarchical organisational structure.
- (21) Public relations fall under marketing function.

III. Micro level.

- (22) Public relations practitioners hold asymmetric world views.
- (23) Information from environment used to control and manipulate.
- (24) Exerts symbolic control over environment through a functionary, synchronic approach.
- (25) Use of press agency/publicity and two-way asymmetric models.
- (26) Psychological paradigm for internal publics, stressing the individual rather than the group.
- (27) Communication with employees emphasises media content.
- (28) Consistent positive portrayal of the organisation, with an emphasis on the use of mass media.

(29) Public relations function supports the marketing function.

(30) Use of marketing segmentation techniques.

IV. Effects of Persuasion Model.

(31) High levels of individualism among employees.

(32) High levels of conflict with publics.

(33) High media profile.

(34) High cost of communication, both in terms of litigation and through the use of marketing techniques.

Characteristics of the Mixed Model of public relations

I. Macro level.

(1) Symmetrical and asymmetrical world views.

(2) Public relations as both persuasion and dialogue.

(3) Organisation is an open system.

(4) Mixed stance to activist groups.

(5) Strategic environmental management.

(6) Theories of societal culture.

II. Meso level.

(7) Symmetric and asymmetric world views.

(8) Mixed mechanistic/organic organisations and problem-solving organisations.

(9) Dual approach to symbolic management of the environment.

(10) Open system, using symmetric and asymmetric communication.

(11) Mixed marketing/public relations function.

- (12) Application of social scientific and societal cultural theories.
- (13) Theories of organisational effectiveness.

III. Micro level.

- (14) Use of both Excellence and Persuasion models, depending on environmental circumstances.
- (15) Use of public information model and combination of asymmetric and symmetric models of communication.
- (16) Use of situational theory and VALS as segmentation techniques.

IV. Effects of the Mixed Model.

- (17) Public relations contribution to organisational effectiveness cannot be determined.
- (18) Lack of clear public relations strategy.
- (19) Unsure attitude towards activist publics.

CONCLUSIONS

A number of conclusions can be drawn at the hand of the research questions posed at the beginning of the article.

Research question 1:

The theoretical overview supports the hypothesis that all theory application in public relations can take place at the functional levels of metatheory, communication and organisation. The functional levels are however not always very distinct and might lead to

some overlapping, as in the case of systems theories which address both functional levels of organisation and communication.

Research question 2:

Strong support exists that public relations practice takes place at macro, meso and micro levels. It is also clear that theory application in public relations takes place at these three levels as well.

Research question 3:

The overview supports the existence of a general theory of public relations. It is an extension of J. Grunig's general theory of public relations, and is general enough to provide a framework for all theory application in public relations.

Research question 4:

The general theory can accommodate both a symmetric approach (Excellence model) and an asymmetric approach (Persuasion model) to public relations. It also acknowledges the existence of a positive Mixed model, which implies that organisations use both approaches in actual practice. However, despite the identification of the Persuasion and Mixed models, the theoretical overview overwhelmingly supports J. Grunig's claim that the Excellence model is the best way to practise public relations which contributes to organisational effectiveness.

Research question 5:

The heuristic value of the general theory of public relations is one of its most positive attributes. It guides the process of theory application to the domain of public relations, and clearly indicates which areas of public relations are under-theorised and under-researched. This will hopefully stimulate future research into under-developed areas of public relations.

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