

ASSESSED ESSAY

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Dark Clouds At Noon:



A Critical Assessment of The PR Industry's Current Thinking and Future Direction

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1. Introduction: Not Quite High Noon

Back-slapping all round! The Public Relations industry is prospering. The century-old stripling:

- Is a global business phenomenon (Sriramesh and Vercic 2009);
- Employs over 250,000 in the USA alone (Sullivan 2011);
- Generates multi-billion dollar fees (UCSI 2005; CEBR 2005); and
- Is edging towards full professionalism, evidenced by the then UK Institute of Public Relations' (IPR) 2005 acquisition of chartered status.

It makes PR a highly-desirable career destination.

PR also now dominates Edmund Burke's memorably-labelled 'Fourth Estate' (Carlyle 1908). It has more 'boots on the ground' than conventional media - perhaps by 4:1 (Sullivan 2011; McChesney and Nichols 2010). Its on/offline publishing output probably dwarfs traditional commercial outlets.

In short: "the muscles of journalism are weakening and the muscles of public relations are bulking up - as if they were on steroids," says David Barstow of the *New York Times*¹. "Journalists", he laments, are but "stenographers".

Cue much crowing in the consultancies? Certainly, given traditional enmities, while the ragged remnant of tabloid publishers and journalists 'burned' at the UK Leveson Inquiry (2011-12) some PR old-timers basked in a delicious 'schadenfreude'.

So the sun is shining? All's well? High noon in PR?

Rather, this paper suggests, a difficult 'coming-of-age' is underway. Dark clouds are gathering. Yes: in both individual and business terms, there are many exciting positives. A new operating paradigm (*Section 2.1*) underpins six key trends which, collectively, constitute a working and integrated framework (*Section 2.2*).

However, it is argued, both paradigm and framework exhibit critical flaws: philosophical, disciplinary, professional and strategic (*Sections 3.1-3.4*). These, potentially, are major inhibitors to future industry success.

Redress is proposed in a closing review and seven-point manifesto for development (*Section 4*). Founded in critical realism, this proposition focuses on the practitioner as advocate and describes a new PR2.0 skillset from influencer engagement to service theatre.

For simplicity throughout, the paper refers to 'consultant' and 'client' (embracing respectively in-house PROs and their managers).

¹ Cited by Sullivan (2011).

2. Where The Sun Shines: Reasons To Be (Sort of) Cheerful

2.1. The New ‘Authenticity’ Paradigm

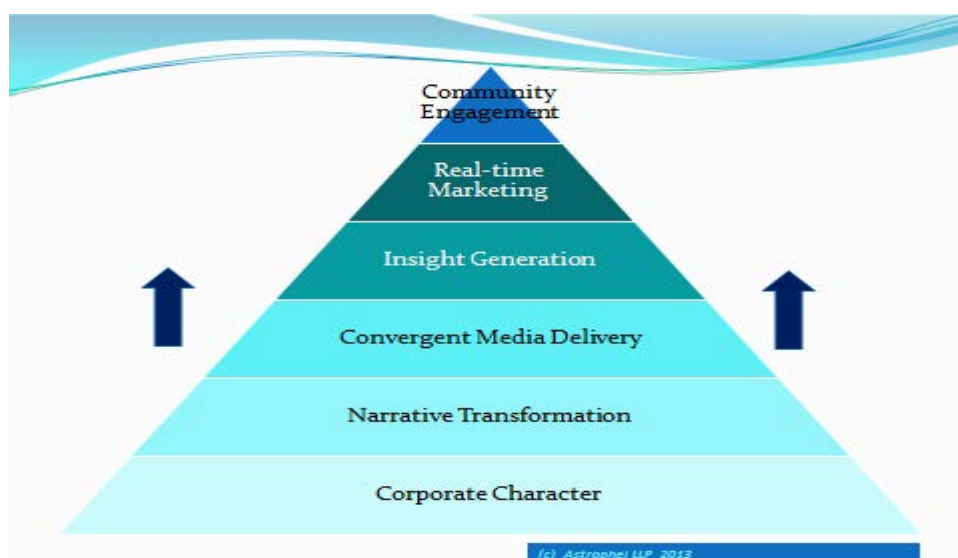
A new if (further below) eclectic, paradigm proposes that PR’s task is to project *authenticity* by managing *social interactions* which sustain and *co-create* a web of value-generating relationships:

- *First*, authenticity. The PR pendulum is swinging away from the perceptions management of previous generations (Leaf 2012). Authenticity, it seems, will be king. That is, the degree to which one is true to one’s own personality, spirit, or character (Ferrara 1998; Golomb 1995). Indicatively, ‘unauthentic’ has become the most damning descriptor in the PR/media lexicon. Practically, this implies that we move from making the best of ‘what is’ (perceptions) to an activist contribution to what ‘should be’ (authenticity);
- *Second*, social influence theory (‘SIT’) – the physical and virtual impact upon another’s emotions, opinions or behaviours – is to supersede in PR the long-standing transactional presumptions of social exchange theory (‘SET’, Cialdini 2001; Latane 1981). This will require a multi-dimensional sensitivity and understanding which looks quite unlike the daily whirligig of the typical PR firm and its SET trading (in e.g. ideas, stories and more);
- *Third and finally*, co-creation. Beyond traditional relationship management, the advent of social media is stimulating active co-creation between organisations and their stakeholders (Vargo and Maglio 2008). Here PR stands, or teeters, on the threshold of demonstrating active value generation.

2.2 Framework: The New Mediators

This new paradigm underpins and moderates at least six major developments. Collectively the six offer a partly-integrated if (further below) equally eclectic ‘framework’ for future practice (*Figure 1*). It is in effect a blueprint for PR’s revamped Fourth Estate role as the ‘new mediators’.

Figure 1 – The New Mediator Framework



Source: Author (2013).

First, the framework’s foundation and delivering authenticity, **corporate character** is posited the new PR gold standard. Character, famously, was President Lincoln’s ‘tree’ to the mere shadow of ‘reputation’ (Gross 1912). The standard rests on 25-year old work that evidences the power of good business ethics to achieve competitive advantage (Wilkes 1989). It proposes that:

“What an organization stands for is as important as what it sells. It has a ‘corporate character’ — the differentiating attributes that make it a distinct enterprise... the sum of everything its management and employees say and do — the beliefs they hold, values they profess and ways they behave, visible for all to see.” (Dan 2012)

Thus our primary task is to build and promote character rather than to manipulate perceptions. Correctly, the concept assumes that ‘character’ will ‘out’. But it sets aspirations for the PR practitioner’s influence that are far removed from most current daily practice.

Second, character manifests most effectively in **narrative transformation**. The premise of the rhetorical-narrative injunction is psychological. “We live life as a narrative” (Heath 2001:42; Fisher 1987). We are ‘wired’ to learn best from storytelling (Denning 2006; Escalas 2004). Evidentially, narrative is more effective than other techniques in delivering shifts in attitudes and intentions (Lundqvist et al 2013; Escalas 2004; Mattila 2000).

So PR, narrative advocates claim, should abandon the hype of ‘few messages/oft-repeated’. This reached its apogee in the Blair-Campbell years at Downing Street.

But narrative is challenging. It is far more than imitation. It achieves results by transforming character’s impact: “narrative does not show, does not imitate.... (It is) a higher order of relation which has its emotions, its hopes, its dangers, its triumphs” (Barthes 1978). So take, for example, the narrative of David Moyes’ April 2014 downfall as Manchester United manager. Honest, hardworking but ultimately inadequate, “his long, baffled unhappy face – shown on TV whenever United conceded a goal – became the symbol of his team’s malaise” (Kuper 2014, *Figure 2*).

Figure 2: Narrative 1 Moyes 0



Source: www.ibtimes.co.uk

Note further that this was an independent media narrative. It overwhelmed weak club PR storytelling about Moyes as ‘chosen one’. So narrative is far more complex than the grind of message-repetition. It emphasises, particularly in an era of consumption over multiple-platforms,

the need for high practitioner expertise in the “creation of master narrative, the red thread which binds stories together day in and day out” (Peddy 2012).

Third, narrative is consumed over multiple media platforms and delivered via **newly-converged media**. Initially ‘paid, earned and owned’, this convergence now rolls up social and digital media developments in the PPOSE (paid, promoted, owned, shared, earned) formula (Peddy 2012). It further transforms the practice of newly-integrated ‘media’ teams. Of ten targets say, they may buy space in *three*, earn coverage in *five* and deliver the remaining *two* from direct ownership. The route is irrelevant: only the outcome signifies. In sum, agnostic content and agnostic media selection require a new breed of equally *agnostic* practitioner. At Buckinghamshire New University, we dub this transition the ‘New Secularism’ (Davies and Nichols 2010).

Fourth, ‘big data’ offers potential for **insight generation**. To explore, interpret and apply the dynamics of this media convergence. At least, that is, to the extent that advanced analytics keeps pace with data aggregation and generates useful insights as opposed to overload. But it is so far a breathless and losing race (Firestone and Bollier 2010). Few PR teams possess sufficient applied mathematical skills for meaningful correlations. And, for good or ill, others usually make the rules:

“For instance Google conquered the advertising world with nothing more than advanced mathematics. It didn’t pretend to know anything about the culture and conventions of advertising - it just assumed that better data with better analytic tools would win the day. And Google was right.” (Anderson 2008)

Without investment in this type of expertise the new practitioner risks being a mere bystander.

Fifth, but where ‘big data’ is tamed to offer clarity of interpretation, it enables firms to move beyond media presence and engagement into real-time marketing. That is, to take brands deep into customer conversations. Assuming (more below) that PR wins control of this wider space, then it requires:

- A corporate and personal mind-set that embraces and relishes immediacy;
- A practical grasp of customer service, empowerment and content implications – not just how to load up tweets on the hour every hour; and
- An appreciation that social intelligence creates social capital and delivers ROI typically 3% better than offline norms (Meerman-Scott 2013).

Sixth, real-time brand marketing runs in parallel to, and essentially adopts the same ‘engine’ as, transformational community engagement (Bowen et al 2010). This takes e.g. local government or foundation health trust beyond dialogue and into the co-development, or co-creation, of solutions via social media².

Together the fifth and sixth manifesto points have extensive operational and legal consequences. More succinctly, they suggest that new practitioners superannuate old media and themselves become publishers and the new mediators.

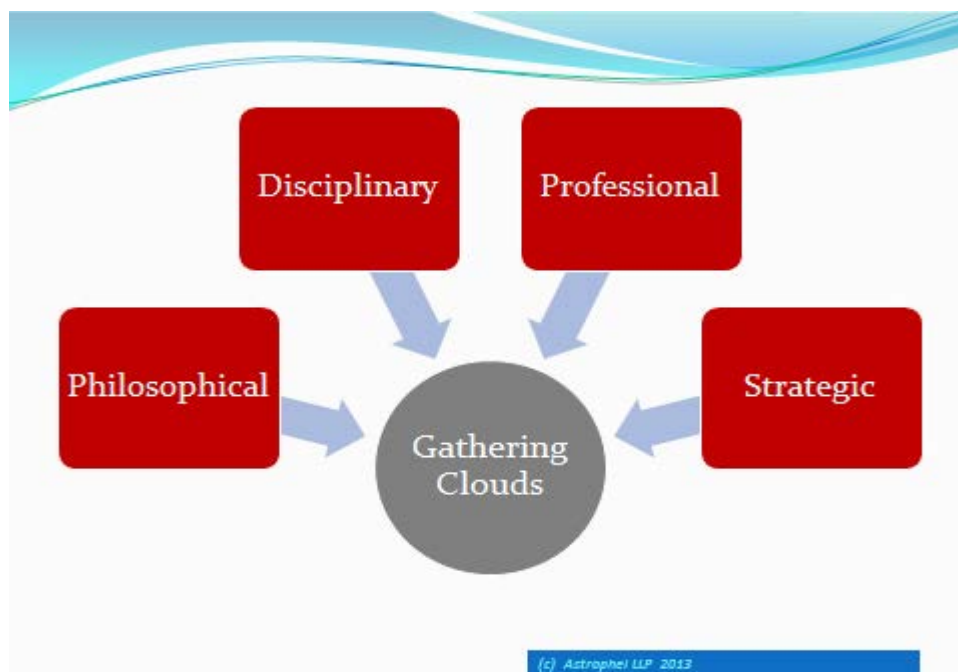
² A framework illustratively rolled out for NHS Suffolk by the Centre for Healthcare Communications Research (CHCR) at Buckinghamshire New University of which the author is deputy director in 2013.

3. New Paradigm Critique: Gathering Clouds

This rapidly-emerging new world of PR is, absolutely, an exciting one. It is better by far, most old-timers might agree, to start one’s career now as opposed to 15 or 30 years ago.

But this new flawed framework is beset with clouds. The industry’s response to the great opportunities offered by narrative, social media, customer service and more is at best unconvincing. Its lack of confidence is characteristic of a profession still adolescent by comparison with elder siblings such as law, accountancy and architecture. There are (at least) four major issues (Figure 3):

Figure 3: Challenging The New Mediators’ Framework



Source: Author (2013).

3.1 Identity-Crisis: Philosophy’s Ontological Cloud

This first cloud broods at the heart of the proposed new paradigm. On the one hand, epistemologically, the reversion to the principles of authenticity and to corporate character is classic positivism. This proposes that any knowledge object has its own *independent* essence (Hunt 1991). Existence (or character) follows necessarily from a verification of an object’s properties (Scruton 1994).

Conversely, on the other and practically, the concept of narrative transformation reverts us to the crafted shaping of perceptions, to constructivism³ and to the creation of ‘mythopoeia’. This is aptly hailed in Tolkien’s (1988) eponymous poem:

“Blessed are the *legend*-makers with their rhyme
Of things *not* found within recorded time” (*author’s ital.*).

³ An epistemological position that “individuals create their environments by their own thoughts and actions, guided by their own goals” (Thietart, R-A 2001:18).

This central conflict explains why - for all the recent excellent work (e.g. Watson and Noble 2007, *The Barcelona Principles*) - the industry's evaluation conundrum is unresolved. Understandably: it sails between the conflicting 'Scylla' of a positivist if laudable obsession with numbers (any numbers) and the 'Charybdis' of constructivist daily practice (*Figure 4*):

Figure 4: PR All At Sea



Source: www.creditwritedowns.com

Between these two we are uncertain of what we know or, more accurately, what we ought to know. And so, adrift. Indicatively recent research sought to identify which often carefully-selected factors⁴ representative of PR daily practice associated positively with 'business results'. Only 'strategic planning' attained a significant result. Worse, in a formal multiple-regression it explained only just over 30% of the outcome (Nichols, Penton and Jenkins 2013).

Like Homer's Ulysses, we are hard-pressed!

Doubtless the traditional industry 'status quo' defence will argue, on the model of 'great journalists as squirrels'⁵, that such inter-disciplinary eclecticism is inherent in PR. It is, they may say, a happy mix of art, craft and science. It's ok: so what?

But wiser counsel suggests that we sit on a cracked philosophical platform. And that we are increasingly exposed.

3.2 Disciplinary Difficulties: An Imperfect Storm

When we turn next to the required domain of practitioner knowledge, this philosophical cloud brews an 'imperfect storm'. 'Imperfect' because the scope of the discipline is so confused. Imagine: you have two minutes in an apocryphal lift to instruct an aspiring junior. And you say what?

True there is consensus on process. PR sits (or should sit) in the management faculty, is a social science and requires both professional and academic perspectives (Long and Hazelton 1987). Reflecting the dominant systems-functionalist paradigm (Edwards 2014:124-129; Grunig and Hunt

⁴ These ranged from creativity to techniques and media platform knowledge.

⁵ A concept to which the author was first introduced by his first boss in PR, Peter Smith, then President of the IPR, ~1979.

1984:7-44), it should be systematic and structured (Stacks and Turk 1999). But, accepting also the validity of the critical sociological challenge, PR practice is also part of a much wider societal context and itself a player (L'Etang 2008).

This, however, opens up a potentially vast multi-disciplinary 'territory':

"The educator's role is to bring to bear on public relations, ideas from moral philosophy, epistemology, the philosophy of language, sociology, communications and media studies as well as from some of the more technical subjects such as psychology, management and marketing". (L'Etang and Pieczka 2006:442)

All of this wish-list broadens the mind. It may also equip students to observe, comment and critique. But not all of it – near-universal agreement among the many agency employers the author encounters – prepares for practise. That requires the 'more technical' (e.g. writing, pitching stories and creating events). By analogy the medical practitioner may monitor key topics such as the formulation of healthcare policy, its societal impact and changing ethical standards. But he needs first and foremost expertise. What will the new F1 (junior doctor) actually do on the ward? What specialism will he adopt: from haematology and urology to gynaecology and neuroscience?

And we are strangely silent on the discipline. The CIPR's excellent reputation-based definition describes our outcomes but not our purpose and activity. It is as if a medical practitioner defined his mission only by a description of the domain of human biology. (Both biology and medicine, of course, are entirely valid subjects of study but they are not proxies).

So back in that lift, you are saying what?

3.3 Professionalism: The Cloud of Anxiety

By extension, the industry today is compliant with most attributes of a professional business service (e.g. Conchar 1998:256). Yet it teeters adolescently on the verge of full professional accreditation and licensing. Both epistemological uncertainty (*above 3.1*) and L'Etang's (2008) existential challenge (*3.2*) are great excuses for hesitation and committees.

Practical PR fudge? Meantime, we must deal with the 'world as is'.

For example, comparatively, it is valid to challenge and debate the current framework of law. But the barrister must continue to practise. And strictly: from ethics and codes to rules and criminal sanction.

But, in our case, how exactly do we sanction or disbar a PR-practitioner? What licence do we revoke? How do we explain 'PR guru' Max Clifford and the 'PR' world of 'kiss-n-tell' (Hattenstone 2014)? How will this all play publicly when the PR manipulators are in the dock at the Leveson-equivalent inquiry of say 2025? How will we plead if it is perceived that 'worse than Big Brother watching you, you are watching Big Brother' (McChesney and Nichols 2010)?

3.4 Uncertain Directions: The Cloud of Strategy

Seeking the road ahead, it is churlish to quibble with even a comma of the CIPR's (2014) excellent statement of mission, vision and values. Some sunny day maybe. But if we have (1) 'envisioned' we

have barely (2) engaged and are yet to (3) transform or (4) optimise our industry - to cite the four-step process of a thorough-going industry transformation strategy (Uhl and Gollenia 2012).

On the contrary, to apply classic ‘marketing myopia’ (Levitt 1960), we focus on the internal workings of the railroad (PR) while the business of transportation (communications mediation) undergoes massive metamorphosis around us. Survival, Levitt advised emotively:

“Is a so-so aspiration.... The trick is to survive gallantly, to feel the surging impulse of commercial mastery; not just to experience the sweet smell of success, but to have the visceral feel of entrepreneurial greatness.” (1960:44).

Excitement, stress, fear? The author sees all of the above on his consultancy rounds. But ‘surging impulse’?

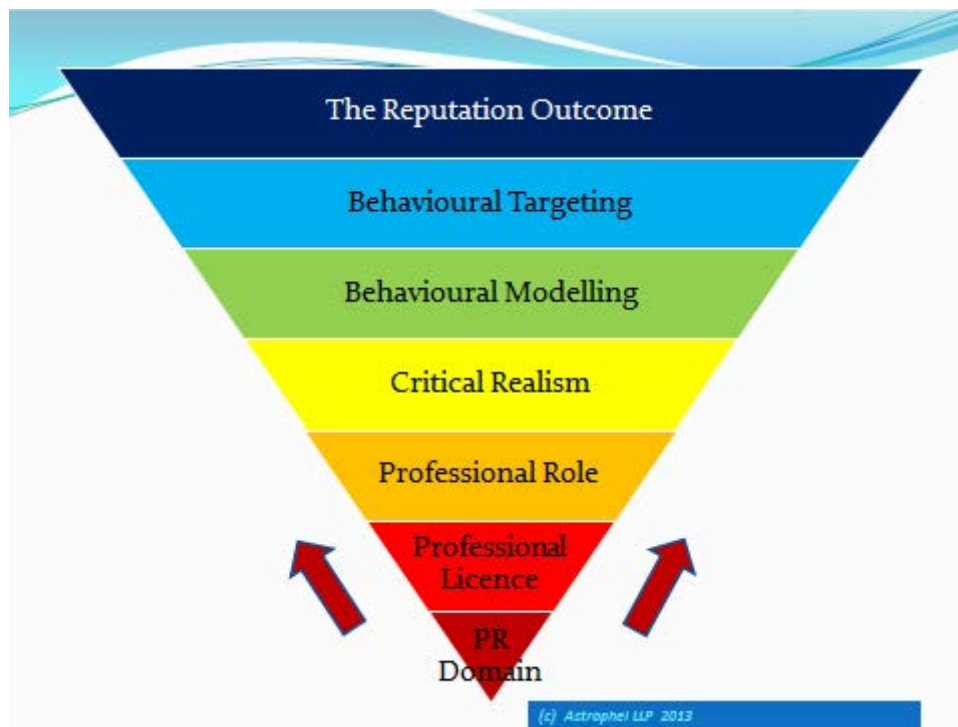
Without such a committed strategy, our communications cousins will eat our lunch. And the litigators the left-overs.

4. Alternative Seven-Point Manifesto: Dissipating The Clouds

It is beyond scope in this paper to address strategic execution comprehensively. Accordingly, working backwards from the desired outcome, this penultimate section proposes key building blocks that address challenges identified in preceding discussion (Figure 5).

First, the **outcome**: reputation is the ‘movie’. The agreed and official CIPR end-game, it aggregates attitudes and behaviours (A&Bs) over time and across multiple stakeholder groups.

Figure 5: From Domain to Reputation – A Seven Point Manifesto



Source: Author (2013).

Second, behavioural targeting: whatever we do in PR has value if (*and only if*) it deepens existing desired A&Bs or secures, nourishes and develops new ones. PR activities are ‘products of the mind’⁶. Their effects are properly measured in A&Bs. More succinctly, the PR practitioner’s task is to ‘create and retain *adherents* profitably’ [to adapt the author’s preferred Nordic school customer-based definition of marketing (Gummesson 2004)].

Third, behavioural explanation: practitioners and clients alike require a total ‘how to’ map and not (current measurement) isolated milestones. Behaviour is more than rational optimisation. It embraces irrationality and often operates under uncertainty (Kahneman and Tversky 1974). Since “the ultimate test of a theory is the accuracy with which it models the causes of a behaviour” (Camerer and Loewenstein 2004:4), we must, like behavioural economists, engage both rational and irrational. Therefore, applying the second Barcelona principle and harnessing advanced analytics, to achieve behavioural explanation we must deploy both quantitative and qualitative tools.

Fourth, a transparent foundation in **critical realism** will accommodate this mixed methodology. We now oscillate uncertainly (and often apologetically) between e.g. authenticity vs. perception and positivism vs. constructivism. Critical realism, by contrast, “recognise(s) social conditions as having real consequences... but that concepts are human constructions” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe 2002:31). A mature profession will present and argue confidently the business case for the *augmented* power of a mixed methodology. One in which, in measurement terms say, advanced content analysis may sit alongside clip-counts, impressions, and even (*heaven forbid*) AVEs. But if (*and only if*) they serve effectively to explain desired attitudes or behaviours.

Fifth, professional role: if, by extension, we are confident in our logic we should cease to agonise about the world ‘as might be’. Intriguingly, our not-quite-grown-up profession lacks a simple noun-descriptor e.g. cleric, engineer or barrister (the optimal analogy). Here the sadly-debased ‘publicist’ substitutes for ‘barrister’, and ‘reputational’ for ‘legal’ in the Bar Council’s (2014) role-definition:

“The role of a *publicist* is to translate and structure their client's view of events into *reputational* arguments and to make persuasive representations which obtain the best possible result for their client.”

Just so. In this ‘world as is’, we are professional advocates. We are persuasive representatives in the court of public opinion. The most heinous reputational ‘criminal’ has rights to representation. It is our choice to accept or decline on grounds of conscience or reputational damage. Illustratively in recent debate former PRCA chair, Sally Costerton explained why her then consultancy, Hill & Knowlton, rejected one questionable Arab state: the author put the case for his continued representation of another.

Sixth, by extension formal and **licensed professional qualification** is now required, at least in the upper echelons. There are at least four compelling reasons:

- A. In line with the CIPR mission etc., it will focus minds, compel structured career paths and improve delivery quality overall;

⁶ This was a memorable phrase of the author’s most famous boss, Sir Clive Sinclair (BBC2 ‘Futures’ Lecture 1982).

- B. As the de facto and increasingly highly-exposed ‘Fourth Estate’, it will provide us with an operating framework, sanction and (hopefully) the foundation of a successful defence at Leveson 2025;
- C. Practically and financially, after 20 years of sideways drift on fees, it will enable us to close the income-gap on professional colleagues⁷;
- D. Existentially, it will allow us to clearly define our domain, to limit substitution and to mitigate the growing risks of commoditisation.

Simply: we cannot afford *not* to make this move.

Seventh and finally, our domain follows the logic of this paper and a deconstruction of the barrister-publicist’s advocacy. In closing, we:

- Re-visit the traditional PR skillset
- Re-base the relevant knowledge domains required,
- Adjust for the moderating impact of current technology and
- Propose a new core PR2.0 competency-set and service lines which will allow us to make truly ‘persuasive representations’ (*Table 1*).

Table 1 – A Straw Man For Tomorrow in PR – PR2.0

| TRADITIONAL PR1.0 SKILLSET | KNOWLEDGE DOMAIN | TECHNOLOGY PLATFORM | PR 2.0 SKILLSET AND SERVICE LINES |
|----------------------------|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| Writing & Content Creation | Narratology, Rhetoric and Literary Theory | Audio, Video and Digital Production | Narrative Design and Production |
| Media Pitching | Social Psychology | Social Interaction Technology (SIT), Social Media | Influencer Engagement |
| Client Handling | Social Psychology and Relationship Management | CRM, Loyalty Modelling | Client Co-Creation |
| Project & Event Management | Business Strategy and Services Marketing | Campaign Planning and PM software | Service Theatre |
| Measurement and Evaluation | Statistic and Analytics | Analytics Tools, Data Mining | Communication Dynamics |
| | | | |

Source: Author (2014).

Full explication requires a further paper. But it may be appropriate in closing to highlight three points.

⁷ Interestingly, when the author abandons the ‘PR Man’ sobriquet and operates as a ‘consultant social psychologist’ alongside medical or legal colleagues, the fee gap largely disappears.

First, as this paper makes clear, knowledge of social psychology and consumer (and other stakeholder) behaviour is fundamental to campaign formulation. Every PR practitioner should possess a basic toolkit e.g. the theories of reasoned action ('TRA' Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) and planned behaviour ('TPB' Ajzen 1990) and, ideally, later developments such as the multiple pathway anchoring and adjustment model ('MPAA' Cohen and Reed 2006). Illustratively, the author's current work with consultancies often confirms a simple TRA as an ideal brainstorm tool to unlock and frame a solution for an upcoming programme. If, historically, the toolkit was always critical, its power – and risk - is magnified by the advent of social media pathways and seeding opportunities. To deploy currently fashionable acronyms:

- To COPE (create once, publish everywhere) is a tempting but not always appropriate blunderbuss; and
- The true MoRAL (monitor, respond, amplify, lead) perhaps far more precise and less dangerous.

Second, narrative is at risk of a Borg-like (Star Trek) absorption into the PR mainstream as Messaging 2.0. Just another bullet-point for the creds. For example, the current respective Coalition and Opposition 'austerity' vs. 'cost-of-living' 'narratives' are but 'message hubs'. They lack the deeper resonance of conflicting inter-generational storytelling. Meantime, in narratology, we waste a massive and transformational tool-kit: the "study of the logic, principles, and practices of narrative representation" (Meister 2013).

Third, "boosting innovation in services is central to improving performance of the service sector... the sector has traditionally been seen as less innovative than manufacturing and as playing only a supportive role in the innovation system" (OECD 2005).

True: PR programmes are sadly still all too often 'one-size-fits-all' prescribed by traditional non-specialist all-rounders. As an industry, we are candidly lamentable at: specialising; classifying and organising our competencies into service line deliverables; and marketing (in some cases at premium prices) our bouquet of services. The five lines highlighted above are indicators only of potential.

And, if we are confident of our character. If we are willing to construct a transformative narrative. If we relish our role as professional advocates...

Then we have high noon within our grasp.

-ends-

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