

## 'Radical PR' – catalyst for change or an aporia?

Jacque L'Etang traces the history of the 'Radical PR' group, assesses its achievements to date – and looks to the future

### Introduction

This is a story about a group of scholars trying to change the direction of a discipline. There are many alternative endings to the story.

'Radical PR' was the name given to an international gathering of like-minded academics at the Stirling Media Research Institute (SMRI) in July 2008. It was a plunge into the unknown for scholars who travelled to Stirling from Australia, New Zealand, USA, South America, Scandinavia and Europe. What was it all about?

'Radical PR' evolved as a loose concept through a series of overlapping personal relationships among those who had articulated dissatisfaction and frustration with the dominant research agenda in the field of PR over a number of years. The characteristics of this group could be summarised as being among those PR scholars who approached the subject of public relations from multi- and inter-disciplinary contexts, going beyond functional applied work to consider wider issues of the occupation and its social impacts. I shall start by recounting briefly something of the overall nature and preoccupations of the public relations discipline.

### The public relations discipline

Public relations is the occupation responsible for the management of organisational relationships and reputation. It encompasses issues management, public affairs, corporate communications, stakeholder relations, risk communication and corporate social responsibility. Public relations operates on behalf of many different types of

organisation both at the governmental and corporate level, to small business and voluntary sectors. Public relations arises at points of societal change and resistance.

Although in the UK work has been published on public relations since the 1920s, it was not until the late 1980s that degrees were established. Until that date, publications were largely restricted to practitioner texts. In the US, however, academics had been working consistently since the 1950s, largely from a business perspective, publishing student texts. Scholarly research in Germany was on-going from the early 1960s, and often engaged with societal contexts, but on the whole these ideas did not reach or impact Anglophone audiences. US academic research, which integrated organisational sociology and communications, tended to advance the discipline along functional lines, and, in the 1980s a large-scale international project (US, UK, Canada) led to the formulation of a theoretical base focused on effectiveness and excellence. Research that has subsequently emanated from this normative theory has been largely instrumental, applied and quantitative.

### Inter-disciplinarity

The public relations discipline has struggled with its identity since it has been located in many different academic 'homes', including marketing, management, communications, media, journalism. Academic public relations writing reflects that '57 varieties' interdisciplinary context. Those in media studies and marketing tend to see PR as publicity or low-level technical publicity work, rather than a strategic and complex operation with diverse facets in promotional culture. Others in media and cultural studies have seen PR as spin and propaganda, the handmaiden of capitalism and corporate and political paymasters. Some conspiracy theorists have elevated public relations to a hidden, mysterious, dark and powerful force that manipulates the media. Such critiques are instructive, but have a tendency to focus on the media relations side of the work, often in a political context; to assume powerful media effects; and to elevate their authors to morality playwrights. It is not that these views may not be justified to some degree, but they do appear to be built on an unreflexive ideological partisanship that is intrinsically hostile and self-righteous. Irritatingly, some authors have scarcely a nodding acquaintance with either functional or critical work within public relations – as though such a subject and its academics are not worthy of close attention.

The complexity of public relations as a concept and practice really demands multi- and interdisciplinary research that is longitudinal, mixed method, ethnographic and case study-based research in a variety of different sectors of the economy and micro-cultural contexts. Only such collaborative efforts can begin to capture a better understanding of this intriguing practice. At present, there really is a lack of empirical data. My personal view is that activities akin to public relations are intrinsic to organised human society and individual impression management, and that such work takes place 'between the hyphens' in multiple communications. The different academic homes provide part of the story, but like the Indian fable about the six blind men and the elephant, all of them have a valid, but incomplete, perspective.

#### Paradigms in the field

In 1994, Magda Pieczka labelled the US approach to public relations as 'the dominant paradigm'. The dominant paradigm is functional, yet idealistic, largely drawing on literature from organisational sociology, psychology and management to elicit variables relevant to public relations practice. It comprises a not entirely comfortable marriage between the priorities of organisational effectiveness and idealistic ethical communication practice in which public relations practitioners 'balance' organisational and societal needs utilising 'two-way symmetrical communication' – a form of discourse ethics. One of the major difficulties of the dominant paradigm is its failure to account adequately for the role of power, but there are other weaknesses too, including the existence of a limited and somewhat prescriptive research agenda. Within the dominant paradigm there are several sub-themes: relationship management, which focuses on organisations and stakeholder/publics; communitarian, which argues that the appropriate role for public relations is community-building; rhetorical, which argues that the role of public relations as organisational rhetoric is beneficial to societies as it facilitates public debate and helps respective groups to arrive at consensus. Occupational roles and gender have also been a major focus of research, although this has also tended to be quantitative work exploring the role of US middle-class women.

Public relations as a practice and as a field struggles with issues of social legitimacy, and connections to propaganda, so ethical issues, especially corporate social responsibility (CSR) are also foregrounded in much literature. The predominant

assumption within public relations scholarship appears to have been that new research will continue to add to that which is already there, rather than strike out on new tracks of discovery. US theory has aimed to build a universal scientific explanation and framework. This ambition has had some stifling effects, particularly on publication. Not only has it been hard for some scholars to get their work published, but it is noticeable that US scholars do not always acknowledge work that takes place outside the US paradigm (Botan and Hazleton 2006; Bowen 2008).

Historically, it has been difficult to articulate critical perspectives from within the field, and, speaking personally, I was very lucky that *Journal of Business Ethics* took some of my early work. It was difficult presenting work at conferences that was different and sometimes negative, both about public relations, and also about existing theory. Perhaps because there was relatively little theoretical work, the impact of a single framework had much greater impact. The dominant paradigm became a taken-for-granted consensus about the research agenda.

A small amount of critical research highlighting the role of power was developed largely in Scotland and New Zealand in the mid-1990s (L'Etang and Pieczka 1996; Motion and Leitch 1996). Contributions included post-colonial (Munshi 1998) and subaltern approaches (Dutta-Bergman 2005) and rhetorical work, which explored public relations practitioners as 'discourse workers'. Postmodernism has become a focus for some conceptualisation (Holtzhausen 2000), and there are promising signs of the emergence of ethnographic work in the field (Hodges 2006). There have been several histories from various cultures and it is fair to say that a sociology of public relations is now an emergent force (Pieczka 2006; Edwards 2006). There have also been some isolated Special Issues. The earliest appeared in the *Australian Journal of Communication* in 1997 'Public relations on the edge' edited by Leitch and Walker (Vol. 24, No. 2, 1997) which constitutes 'what is still the most influential collection from this part of the world' (Petelin 2005).

It was nearly a decade later before any such work appeared in the mainstream public relations journals notably two in *Public Relations Review*: one on 'Global public relations: a different perspective' edited by McKie and Munshi from Waikato, New Zealand (Vol. 31, No. 4,

2005), 'Public relations and social theory' (Vol. 33, No. 3, 2007); and two in the *Journal of Public Relations Research*, one on 'Public relations from the margins' edited by the US scholar Moffitt (Vol. 17, No. 1, 2005) and one on 'Identity, difference and power' (Vol. 17, No. 2, 2005). Nevertheless, scholars operating outside the main frameworks are rather scattered, something that 'Radical PR' hoped to begin to address.

### Research potential

Public relations is present at all political, economic, socio-cultural and technological change in contemporary, post-modern promotional cultures. It engages with cultural beliefs and practices, communicative action, discourse ethics, organisational cultures and climates, formation of public agendas and debates, interest-group activism. Public relations is a diverse affair, present, for example, in music and the arts, technology, sport, tourism, religion, as well as corporate and political worlds. Within cultural studies, public relations has been seen as one of the 'cultural intermediary' occupations. In my view, public relations research should be a priority for scholars of many types and a multi-paradigmatic meeting place for enlightening our understanding of promotional culture.

### Dramatis personae and critical moments

Speaking personally, I had been very fortunate to work with Magda Pieczka for 16 years at SMRI. We collaborated on two books of critical essays (1996, 2006), the first of which caused a strong reaction, but may have played a role in beginning to open up debate about the politics of the PR field. Pieczka, (now at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh) edits the *Journal of Communication Management*. She organised an SMRI seminar in 2000, which was attended by a number of critical scholars, especially from New Zealand. Professor McKie, from the University of Waikato, who has published on PR, chaos, postmodernity and environmentalism, became a regular visitor, and during his stay in 2007, we started to develop ideas that led to Radical PR. I set up a small group or Steering Committee adding to the names already mentioned: Jesper Falkheimer, from Lund, and Professor Jordi Xifra, from Girona.

Falkheimer had stayed at Stirling for several months during his sabbatical in 2006 and collaborated with me and my colleague Jairo Lugo on an article on public relations and tourism; Xifra had published several books on PR in Catalan

and Spanish as well as articles in English. I knew from a week's visit to Girona, that Jordi and I shared much in common and we collaborated on a project for the *American Behavioral Science* Special Issue on Public Diplomacy (forthcoming, 2009). The collaborating institutions were University of Stirling, University of Waikato, University of Girona, Queen Margaret University and the University of Lund.

In liaison with the Steering Group I put together an (unsuccessful) application for network funding from the British Academy. This process, and other similar experiences, emphasise the fact that there are no public relations scholars who sit on national peer review grant-awarding bodies. Neither, to my knowledge, do any public relations specialists sit on any of the national Research Assessment panels. These absences highlight the political economy of public relations academia in the UK. The subject tends to be valued by institutions for its ability to recruit students to applied vocational courses; the discipline's research potential has not been recognised. In a very small way 'Radical PR' was a first step to forming an interest group that could diversify the subject, and subsequently help change perceptions of the public relations field.

### What did 'Radical PR' aim to do?

Our project aimed to set in motion a movement to reform the field of public relations. The practice of public relations is increasingly recognised as central to political and public life and has a massive, sometimes co-ordinated, global impact. However, the discipline of public relations lacks intellectual credibility with other fields. While islands of research and theory exist, there is no formal linkage and no established network to drive radical reformatting, let alone institutionalise it in sustainable form.

We sought to liberate the public relations field from its normative, functional, conformist agendas and realise the potential of public relations research to shed new light on contemporary life and inform cultural practice. Our purpose was to establish a network to redress the problems of isolation and generate new bodies of work to replace the current insular body of knowledge centred on narrow positivism that fails to acknowledge the field's power dynamics. In particular we hoped to leapfrog some of the middle generation and excite and interest those at the beginning of their academic careers. Consequently we were delighted to attract some highly original doctoral students.

Our starting point was to draw together people from a growing international cohort of scholars beginning to explore cultural, sociological, and theoretical aspects of public relations from interdisciplinary perspectives. This was not to be a conference as such, but the beginning of a process that would facilitate networking and engender confidence among those who had often worked alone for years in 'host' departments (such as media or cultural studies or marketing or business). Together we drew up a wish-list of invitees and were overwhelmed when virtually everyone accepted and committed to the project. When we failed to get funding, many dipped into their own pockets to make the (often extensive and expensive) trip to Stirling.

Our initial aim was to create an identity and platform for collaboration to instigate these radical changes. The project was built on the platform of informal contacts, and work in progress in different parts of the world. We aimed to: provide space for the articulation of alternative research agendas; engage a range of multi-cultural scholars from the margins of public relations, and cognate disciplines; and to provide a forum for new academics, and students at the doctoral and post-doctoral level. The initial list of project collaborators was drawn from a cross section of academic generations but aspired to excite and interest those at the beginning of their academic careers and considering a shift into the public relations field.

#### **Rumours of 'Radical PR'**

Our initial idea had been for a small planning seminar, but several months into the initial planning process, something strange started happening. Scholars not on our initial list from institutions in Australia, the USA and elsewhere started contacting us for further information of 'the conference'. It was fantastic to realise that there were many more people than we had envisaged interested in pursuing alternative agendas. We re-worked our concept to allow people to give papers on some specified key themes. These were global in scope, had currency and were designed to catalyse the PR field and its connections with contemporary debates. Our focus on societal impacts rather than organisational need was intended as a powerful corrective to the dominant paradigm in the field. They were:

- PR and nationalism: stateless nations, nation-building, national identity;
- activism and campaigning: activism, anti-racism, corporate social responsibility;

- international relations, diplomacy, intercultural communication;
- public relations as a cultural practice: tourism, sport, religion;
- technology and discourse communities;
- theory developments: 'sociology of public relations'; cultural theory and PR.

#### **'Radical PR' – the event**

Within the time constraints available we endeavoured as a group to spend enough time discussing the nature of alternative research agendas. This was scary, because it meant leaving apparent blanks in the programme to allow group discussion. However, I knew from running an SMRI event the previous year (on intersections between PR, religion, tourism and sport) that one can trust good academics to make such a format work, and even though many people had never actually met previously, there was a sense of camaraderie and shared enterprise. We spent time discussing: What is *not* radical enough in current PR? And went on to debate whether 'Radical PR' was the right label. There was considerable, and ultimately unresolved discussion about the appropriate title. A number were uncomfortable with the term 'radical' and while many other terms were put forward, there was no unanimous agreement. In fact my original concept (before my strategic self wrote the first draft of the research grant application) had been for 'Wild PR'.

There were also a number of papers, too extensive to review here, (abstracts are available on the website <http://radicalpr.wordpress.com>) but which included:

- Nilam Ashra: Inside stories: Understanding the daily lives of communication practitioners through discourse
- Rob Brown: Symmetry's consequences
- Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay: Cooperation, co-optation, or capitulation: Factors shaping activist-corporate partnerships
- Pat Curtin: Negotiating the meaning of Corporate Social Responsibility in a globalised context: A textual analysis of Mattel's CSR policies and its response to the 2007 recall crisis
- Christine Daymon: Humanising public relations research
- Kristin Demetrious: Adverse reactions: The negative effects of public relations in the public sphere
- Paul Elmer: Beyond Bourdieu: Body work in the cultural industries, or Bananarama

rebuffed: it ain't only what you do, it's the way you do it, too

- Kate Fitch: Shifting sands: The slippage between publics and communities in public relations
- Caroline Hodges and Christine Daymon: An 'insider' in Mexico: Researching the occupational culture of public relations practitioners
- Øyvind Ihlen: Rhetoric to the rescue: Serving the public interest with rhetorical and critical approaches to public relations
- Julia Jahansoozi and Eric Koper: Exploring public private relations in cocoa research for development
- Ryszard Lawniczak: Transitional PR
- Gustavo A Yepes López: Perception about Corporate Social Responsibility: Colombian case
- David McKie: National projection: Theorising competitive advantages, countries, and strategic leadership
- Margalit Toledano: PR and nationalism: How nation-building challenges shaped strategic communication in Israel
- Jordi Xifra: A public relations approach to stateless nation-building and public para-diplomacy: from 'real public relations' to 'noo public relations'

#### Evaluation – a personal view

There is much still to be done in public relations, both empirically and conceptually. Global issues of poverty, war, financial collapse, avian flu, human rights and the environment all have a public relations dimension in terms of networks of influence, policy and persuasion. Better connections need to be made to historical antecedents, philosophy and public communication. The role of public relations in society, its connections to class, elite organisations such as think tanks, and celebrity could also be better understood. Within organisations, it is hard to understand how public relations practitioners can act as other than propagandists, and it is harder still to understand how best such practitioners can engage with the organisational psyche in order to formulate and project organisational identity externally. Public relations scholarship needs to find time and space to engage in conversations with those from other disciplines, as well as those from practice.

Personally, I really hoped that others would be interested in taking the discipline along new and different paths and to be creative, as an antidote to the predictable organisation-management focus of most of the literature.

The 'Radical PR' event suggested that the discipline may be close to a 'tipping point'. It is apparent that various members of the meeting are continuing with informal exchanges, research and writing projects. However, the organisational side has not fared so well, for example the website slid into disuse, although recently efforts have been made to revive this with some cross-blog postings in which members of the dominant paradigm and others have debated the value of Radical PR and critical theorists (<http://www.prconversations.com/?p=471>). Perhaps the best way of seeing 'Radical PR' is as a critical incident or moment that generated potential. Only time will tell whether it signalled a major junction or a *cul de sac*.

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#### Websites

<http://radicalpr.wordpress.com> <http://www.prconversations.com/?p=471>

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### Note on Contributor

Jacquie L'Etang has been Director of the M.Sc. in Public Relations at the University of Stirling since 1993 and has been teaching PR there since 1990. During the 1980s she worked in public relations at the British Council and at the London School of Economics. She is author of *Public relations: Concepts, practice and critique* (Sage, 2008) and *Public relations in Britain: A history of professional practice in the 20th century* (LEA, 2004), *Sports public relations* (forthcoming) and co-editor and co-author of *Public relations: Critical debates and contemporary practice* (LEA, 2006) and *Critical perspectives in public relations* (ITBP, 1996). She has written 40 book chapters and articles on topics such as: public diplomacy, rhetoric, ethics, corporate social responsibility, professionalism, sport, tourism, health and propaganda. Email: [j.y.letang@stir.ac.uk](mailto:j.y.letang@stir.ac.uk).